

Choosing a Minister

by Neil Prott, May 2001

[Each denomination has its own technical terminology for the process, the office-bearers involved, the prescribed meetings, etc.]

What happens when a minister announces that he will be leaving the church? That largely depends on the preparation that has gone on beforehand.

In some cases, there has been a smooth transition to a new ministry because people have known what to do and calmly taken the necessary steps.

Other churches have been left in disarray. Their selectors have been under pressure to find a replacement as soon as possible. Various parties in the church voice their opinion about the kind of man who should be invited. Denominational authorities have their say and the selectors can feel the pressure.

However, the appointment of a pastor calls for a careful and balanced approach. He will no doubt have a considerable impact on the future life and direction of the church. The desirability of preliminary study, instruction, and discussion, are only too obvious. Those who want to promote biblical ministry will find pure gold in: Charles Bridges' "The Christian Ministry", and Richard Baxter's "The Reformed Pastor", both published by Banner of Truth Trust. The latter is available on the Internet and may be downloaded.

The traditional method of choosing a minister has involved the selectors and/or interviewees in travelling many kilometres. The former will probably want to hear him preach, either in his home church or in theirs. In the interview it is not easy to recollect all the right questions on every occasion.

For the sake of both the minister and the congregation to which he may be invited, it is helpful to follow a kind of checklist so that the important issues can be discussed. If at all possible, more than one sermon should be heard, and on different days. One can hardly judge a man's typical preaching if one happens to hear him after he's had a sleepless night, for example.



A Resource paper from
The Anglican Church League
www.acl.asn.au

SOME SELECTOR-NEEDS

'KINGDOM MENTALITY'

It is a great temptation for selectors to be absorbed with the needs of their own church. A larger view of God's work will allow them to have a positive approach to their circumstances and their task. If a minister is nominated and declines, a 'kingdom mentality' will guard against frustration and/or hasty reaction.

Christ is Lord of His Church. He has guaranteed its future. Our responsibility is to obey His Word and depend on Him for guidance in a given situation. Any dialogue with a pastor should not be seen as an attempt at extraction, but as a cooperative exercise in discovering God's will for all concerned.

REALISM AND HONESTY

Selectors need to prepare themselves by honestly evaluating the present situation in the church and identifying strengths and weaknesses.

What are the valuable ministries that are going on?

At what stage is the congregation generally, in terms of their own spiritual growth?

What is the spiritual calibre of the present 'lay' leadership?

What percentage of regular church attenders meet at other times for Bible Study and prayer?

How much support is there likely to be for a pastor who will teach the word of God faithfully and systematically?

For the sake of all concerned (including themselves), the selectors need to be realistic and honest in explaining the situation to a prospective minister.

Firstly, they need to be sure that they have understood the church themselves. Secondly, they need to explain all the relevant facts to the minister being interviewed. In a case where this does not happen, both church and minister can expect problems further down the track. The minister may feel deceived and find it difficult to trust the leaders in the new church. The selectors and others may be disappointed to discover that the new man does not 'fit' their church situation.

FAR-SIGHTEDNESS

Selectors should understand the current situation. They should also be looking ahead.

What are the patterns of change in the community?

Which sectors of the population are growing or declining?

What new initiatives should be taken for Christ?

PREPARATION

(a) Prayer. Selectors have a very important task. They need more than their own wisdom. Personal and congregational prayer is vital when a new pastor is needed.

(b) Fact-finding. As already indicated, selectors need to know what they are talking about. They should take the opportunity of assessing the life and progress of their church and its impact in the community.

(c) Discussion. **The importance of unanimity among the selectors cannot be overemphasized.** If they cannot agree on important issues, that same division can be expected in the wider congregation. Many issues can be clarified in discussion with one another before initiating discussion with a prospective pastor.

The same unanimity should be prayed for in relation to the submission of a name for invitation to the church. For both the church and the incoming minister it is much better if all the selectors have agreed. Of course, this will not always be the case.

SOME THINGS TO REMEMBER –

- There is a wide range of information that might be shared with a prospective minister. It is also possible to formulate an exhaustive (and exhausting) list of questions for him to answer. Clearly, it is necessary to restrict the exercise in both aspects to what is really important.
- There is no perfect minister, any more than there are perfect selectors or perfect churches.

- Most good pastors are 'in process' – i.e. they are fully occupied in their ministries, and often pursuing long-term goals where they are. Patient persuasion might be needed to encourage them to leave such appointments to take up a new one.
- When a negative decision is reached about a particular minister, it would be courteous to post a brief note about the decision, and thank him for the time given to discussion.

Selectors need the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon, and the perseverance of Paul.

SELECTORS IN DIALOGUE

Most selectors will know what they are looking for in terms of a man's personal qualities. The following suggestions are aimed at maximising the usefulness of discussion with a prospective minister. The information might be sent to the minister beforehand so he can select certain items for discussion.

Some details can be found in the *National Church Life Survey* and in denominational yearbooks. Community information can be taken from Shire Council statistics, the Internet, and local knowledge.

It is helpful to have ready a succinct description of the congregation to launch the conversation.
e.g.

"The basis of ministry in our church is the Bible, and we try to shape all our policies and programmes by its principles. Our people enjoy good sermons and Bible Studies and expect a high standard of teaching. We are committed to local and world mission."

INFORMATION FOR THE PROSPECTIVE MINISTER

(Each selector might work through the sheet at home, and then all could meet to arrive at a consensus before the discussion with the minister.

In some cases, it might be helpful for him to receive this material beforehand. Extra space will be needed for some responses.

(These comments should be deleted from the material given to the minister and the following rewritten as appropriate)

THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Community profile:

Urban / semi-rural / rural

Declining / static / developing

Age range / av. income / types of occupation / political preferences / ethnicity

General level of education (familiarity with books)

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Ethnic factors (if any):

Main community meeting-places (e.g shopping-centres, clubs):

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THE CONGREGATIONS

Location(s) / Time(s)

Ratio of old/young people in each:

Numerical Size(s)

State: retrogressive/stagnant/growing (Reasons)

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Percentage attending Bible Study Groups weekly

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Attitude to authority: Excellent Good Fair Poor

State of the work among:

men

women

youth

children

Any serious divisions or moral issues unresolved?

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Weekly Giving Total

Percentage of church attenders who give 10% of their income or more

..... %

Other sources of income if any (and amounts)

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Previous year's Income

Previous year's Expenditure

Explanation (if any):

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Weekly programme:

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

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Commitment to evangelism

Vision and / or Mission Statement

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Unreached goals

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List church organisations & explanation of their nature, specific aims, effectiveness in achieving those aims.

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Have one or more actually become ineffective or redundant?

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Do the church members accept the fact that the whole church (not just the minister) is to do the Lord's work?

MINISTRIES

Outline of ministries by members of the congregations

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Details re preachers/service leaders/various pastoral ministries/etc.

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Expectations of selectors / Church Council re the sharing of teaching and evangelistic ministries

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CURRENT PROJECTS

Special short-term ministries or programmes

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Land acquisition

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Building construction (new, proposed, or alteration to existing buildings)

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POLICY

How is this determined?

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OUTREACH WITH THE GOSPEL IN THE COMMUNITY

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FOREIGN MISSIONS

Outline interest and commitments

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SUPPORT FOR PASTOR

Salary

Allowances (Travelling, books, entertainment, phone, electricity, etc.)

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Housing

Secretarial help

Courses & Conferences (time & money for these

Encouragement to keep studying the Scriptures

Other support

DESIRES or STRONG EXPECTATIONS re WIFE'S ROLE

i.e. on part of church leaders. (There will usually be disagreement about this at the wider level.)

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QUESTIONS to be asked of MINISTER

1. Your conversion & call to the ministry

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2. Your academic career and theological training

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3. The main aim of your ministry

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4. Your attitude to the Bible

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5. Do you think of yourself as a pastor, or a teacher?

(This question is designed to uncover any wrong idea – cf. Acts 20)

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6. What you see to be the main priorities in your ministry? (There is no pat answer for this one.)

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7. How do you plan your preaching? ("Whole counsel of God"? cf. Acts 20)

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8. What has been the approx. percentage of your topical and expository preaching over the last year?

T % E %

9. Outline your views on the status and function of women in the congregation.

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10. Your wife's attitude to your ministry, and role

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11. Present policy on baptisms/weddings, etc

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12. Views on finance and fund-raising

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13. Opinions on the selection and training of leaders in the church, and delegation of significant Word ministries such as preaching, leading of services, Bible Study Groups, etc.

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14. Position on 'the Charismatic movement'?

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15. What would you like to see happen re the planting/multiplication of congregations?

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16. Do you have any questions to ask us?

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