

Executive Reference Checks & Clearances In The Presbytery Of Donegal

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a part of the process for discerning calls to ministry is the Executive Reference Check (EP Ref Check). This is the conversation that takes place between Executive Presbyters (or the designated Executive Reference Check person) during the pastoral search process.

Reference Checking and Conversations for Calls in The Presbytery of Donegal

When a pastor search committee is ready to advance a potential candidate beyond initial conversations, the Executive Presbyter is requested to conduct an Executive Reference Check. The EP or designee contacts the EP or reference check designee in the presbytery where the potential candidate is a member. (In cases where the person is not yet ordained, this may involve the chair of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry as well.) The attached reference check script is used. Reference checks can result in several outcomes. The final question in the EP reference check is always “what may I share with the PNC, and is there anything you would prefer that I not share?”

- ❖ **Green light reference checks** indicate that the person is cleared to take a new pastorate without significant reservations. Generally, the EP providing the information will give clearance to share the information with the PNC. The Donegal EP will then share the green light with the PNC with a synopsis, and provide more detailed feedback as appropriate to the PNC after they have conducted their own reference checks, in order not to skew those results.
- ❖ **Yellow Light Reference checks** indicate significant areas for conversation between the PNC and the potential candidate, and for conversation between the presbytery’s Connecting Our Ministry Committee and the potential candidate. A yellow light in a reference check does not mean that this is not a call, but it does mean there are areas to talk about and resolve. Examples of yellow lights might be areas such as willingness to live in a manse, or a person desiring to live beyond a reasonable commute distance, or someone who was in a pastoral relationship that was dissolved, and who has been working for better emotional and mental health. Within the boundaries of confidentiality and legality, the PNC will be provided information for further conversations. A value remains not to skew the work of the PNC as they conduct their own interviews and reference checks.
- ❖ **Red Light Reference Checks** indicate that there is good reason not to proceed with the potential candidate. The reasons for the red light may be a variety of serious issues, and often may involve litigation that constrains what the Executive can and cannot say. The PNC will be informed that a potential candidate has received Red Light Reference Check and advised to move on to other candidates.

❖ **EP/Connecting Our Ministry(COM) Conversations with a potential candidate**

Proactive candidates will often contact the Executive Presbyter for perspective on the congregation and presbytery. When it appears the person and the person should have more conversation, the EP will encourage direct communication.

Connecting Our Ministry Conversation: Fit Between Person and Position

Before a Minister of Word and Sacrament may be invited to be the candidate for a pastoral position, there must be a Fit Between Person and Position conversation with a group designated by COM. This conversation will cover the Minister of Word and Sacrament's story of Call -- to the ministry in general, and to the particular position. It is the opportunity to converse as colleagues, and for COM to offer perspective on the opportunities and challenges of the call. If the call includes other pastoral colleagues on the staff, the other Minister of Word and Sacraments may be included for all or part of the conversation.

The COM FIT conversation will also include a conversation about the parameters of the Minister of Word and Sacrament's relationship with the PC(USA), in particular in circumstances where the Minister of Word and Sacrament is a member of the Presbytery of Donegal, and will not be proceeding to the Examination Commission. The presbytery requests that Minister of Word and Sacraments accepting calls to a congregation in the Presbytery of Donegal agree that they intend to remain a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA) and to explain any circumstances where that might change. This portion of the conversation is also the opportunity to declare any scruples with regards to PC(USA) polity and the essential tenets of reformed theology. Should denominational affiliation appear to be an issue for either the potential candidate or the congregation, the COM may request a meeting with the session for more conversation before proceeding with the call.

If further conversation is needed about whether this is a Call, the COM may ask to meet with the potential candidate and the PNC in order to clarify match between the person and the congregation.

At the conclusion of the conversation, the COM group will issue a written report to the person, the PNC and COM on whether the person has been cleared to proceed with the call, and to make suggestions for further conversation between the person and the PNC. Examples for further conversation might include the scope of the position description, timing arrangements for start-up, or encouragement for new pastoral colleagues to work with a coach on covenants for healthy communication and relationships in the congregational system.

The Examination Commission: Examination for Ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament and for Membership in The Presbytery of Donegal

The Administrative Commission for Examinations conducts on behalf of the presbytery examinations for presbytery membership and/or installation for all Minister of Word and Sacraments seeking

admission to the presbytery. In addition, the Commission conducts examinations for ordination for candidates receiving a call from a church in Donegal Presbytery. The Commission conducts the final examination for fit between person and position as the final test of the suitability of the call. The Examination Commission Process and the Topics for Examination may be found on the presbytery website under Documents/Entering the Presbytery.

Background Checks

State and Federal Criminal background checks and child abuse clearances are required for all persons serving in pastoral positions in the presbytery. The Presbytery conducts a general background check and bills the PNC. Changes in PA State Law require that copies of the following clearances must be on file with the Presbytery Office before a Minister of Word and Sacrament can begin work in the presbytery.

- Act 114 FBI Criminal History Report (with fingerprints)
- Act 151 Pennsylvania Child Abuse Clearance
- Act 34 Pennsylvania Criminal History Check

Preparing for The Executive Reference Check When a Member of The Presbytery is Seeking a New Call

When a Minister of Word and Sacrament decides to circulate a Personal Information Form (PIF) in search of a new call, she or he is encouraged to schedule an appointment with the Executive Presbyter to discuss the content of the Executive Reference check when a presbytery of potential call conducts one.

The EP and the Minister of Word and Sacrament will collaborate together in developing the narrative that will form the basis of the ref check narrative. The EP Reference Check Script used in the presbytery for potential calls in the presbytery will be used as the basis for this conversation.

As far as possible, there will be mutual collaboration in the development of any “yellow light” matters for conversation with a PNC and a new presbytery.

In situations in which there are concerns to report that may limit call opportunities for the Minister of Word and Sacrament, at least one representative of the Connecting Our Ministry Committee will be involved in this conversation, with consultation with the Stated Clerk and the presbytery attorney for legal counsel when warranted. When the self-narrative of the Minister of Word and Sacrament and the COM/EP narrative have a variance, the Minister of Word and Sacrament will be provided with a script of the content of the EP Ref Check when one is requested.

When the situation is a “red light” situation that will result in the Minister of Word and Sacrament not being recommended for a call, the full COM will be involved in this decision, with counsel as appropriate

for the best course to address the issue within PC(USA) policy. Every effort is made in such circumstances to provide a plan for remediation and continued evaluation of the circumstances.

When a Minister of Word and Sacrament is encountering difficulties in a call that might lead to dissolution, the COM will work with the Minister of Word and Sacrament and the session in order to address concerns. In some situations, the COM might find that the Minister of Word and Sacrament needs to address self-issues in the areas identified as crucial for healthy sustainable pastoral ministry: spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, leadership and management (from the book *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* by Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie). In these cases, the COM will attempt to refer the person for coaching and/or counseling using the Employee Assistance Program or other behavioral health coverage provisions. While referrals cannot be mandated in PC(USA) polity, the Executive Reference check may make a refuse to accept a referral an item of concern.

When the reference check might a yellow or red light, the Minister of Word and Sacrament will be provided with written documentation of concerns, decisions, and remedial recommendations.

Script for Executive Presbyter Reference Check in Donegal Pby

Person Conducting Check:

Date:

Subject of Ref Check:

Person Talked to:

Presbytery:

Intro:

- Why is this person seeking relocation?
- *At this point it is often wise to describe the ministry setting in which the person would be serving, starting with "Let me tell you a little about the church they've applied for . . ."*
- What are your general impressions of this person?

Strengths

- How would you describe her/his leadership style?
- What are his/her strengths in ministry?
- Can you briefly tell me about a couple of situations when these strengths have been exhibited?
- What would this person need from the presbytery or other resources to thrive in this position?
- Examples of ways this person connects with mentors/coaches/developmental opportunities?
- How happy and hopeful is this person?

Challenges/Weaknesses

- What are her/his less strong areas/weaknesses/challenges?
- What is his/her greatest potential for difficulty?
- Examples of times this person has struggled? How did he/she handle the situation?
- Are you aware of any rumors or allegations of sexual misconduct, financial mismanagement, addiction, poor judgment, lack of administrative skills, emotional or anger difficulties or any other red flags?
- Are there or have there ever been, to your knowledge, any allegations or charges filed/sustained against having to do with sexual harassment or misconduct?
- Are there any significant financial issues? Does the person have any outstanding loans to the presbytery or the congregation?

Adaptive Leadership/Conflict Transformation

- Examples of ways this person has led change in creative, adaptive ways?
- What are examples of the healthiest ways this person responds to conflict?
- What are the least healthy ways this person responds to conflict?

- When does the person lead collaboratively, and when does the person take charge?

Relationship with the Presbytery and the Denomination

- Is this person happy in the PC(USA)?
- Does his/her congregation pay per capita?
- Does his/her congregation contribute to “unified mission?” do they designate? How is their financial mission support and overall mission engagement?
- Do you know of anything that might cause this person to want to withdraw from the denomination?
- When the person disagrees with denominational policy, what do they do?
- How has this person been involved in the life of the presbytery? Where would you most like to deploy them in presbytery leadership?

Personal/Family Life

- Where on the scale of balanced living would you place this person?
- Is this person available to move with a couple months’ notice? Is there anything about family circumstances we should know about?

Ep’s Personal Recommendations

- If you had a church in your Presbytery considering this person as pastor, would you support that? If you had it to do over again, would you want this person to be a member of your Presbytery?
- Are there any questions I should have asked, and how would you have answered if I had asked it?
- Is there anything you have told me that you would rather I not share with the PNC? (Make clear that all information will be shared with the EP and Stated Clerk)