

RIGHT or WRONG? Preventing scandal

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So many current and former pastors and other church staff people have been in the news lately involved in sexual and financial scandals. What kind of background checks can a search committee legitimately implement to attempt to keep these kinds of scandals at a minimum?

Ministry is a calling of trust, and the public's expectations of ministers are high. Moral lapses are violations of trust. They damage churches and undermine the witness of a community set apart for holiness (1 Peter 2:9-10).

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Scandals involving clergy happen because ministers are human beings, with all of the flaws and temptations associated with humanity, and because churches are naïve. Search committees tend to believe everything ministers say about themselves. This is nice, but not very smart. Ministers hide past mistakes, especially when they are under pressure to find a new place of employment. Wise search committees verify the candidate's

credentials are authentic and he or she is not hiding information that could embarrass a future employer.

At a minimum, search committees should take three steps.

First, contact references. Every candidate should be willing to supply references from prior places of employment. Call every reference. Keep a written record of what they say. Inquire about any time gaps in the candidate's employment history. A word of caution: Any candidate would be a fool to supply a reference who would speak of him in less than glowing terms. Committees need to contact other sources who might know the candidate or details of the candidate's ministry. The most revealing references come from people not listed by the candidate.

Second, do a criminal-records check. This will reveal any criminal activity in the candidate's past for which there is any public legal record. An attorney or law-enforcement official can advise search committees about ways to accomplish this.

Third, conduct a financial-background check. This will reveal a candidate's personal financial activity and whether he or she has a poor credit history.

None of this should be done without the candidate's knowledge and consent. If prospective staff members will not consent to such scrutiny, eliminate them from consideration. They probably are hiding something.

Will these steps guarantee moral integrity on the part of your minister? No. Some moral failures by ministers go unreported by churches that want to avoid public embarrassment for themselves and their offending staff member. The minister surfaces later in a different place, only to perpetuate the immoral behavior there. Baptist polity has no provision to prevent this. No church is immune from scandal, but your chances of avoiding problems are increased if you follow one rule—trust, but verify.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

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