

Selection, training and screening for clergy and church workers

Well respected American psychiatrist M. Scott Peck opens his book “The Road Less Travelled” with the following observation:

“Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths.”

Assuming Peck is right, does screening and selection of people make life more difficult? You may well have experienced that such decisions have placed great demands on your emotions and intellect as you’ve grappled, reflected and prayed about a person’s character.

However, I am conscious there are many of you in the room today likely more experienced than myself. I hope that I might today be able to provide a few insights from my own experience that may make difficult selections of candidates a little easier. And I emphasise easier, because some selection decisions will never be easy.

Now I particularly mentioned M. Scott Peck because he was as I say, a well-respected psychiatrist. In trying to make the screening and selection process less difficult and more effective, I’m going to suggest to you that a psychiatrist or psychologist (such as Janiene Wilson) should play an important role in your screening and selection processes. This is because these two professions have a particular expertise for understanding a person’s character. That is, determining whether a person may have mental disorders or illnesses. But more on that later.

So in broad terms today I’m going to:

1. identify risk factors, both in the screening and selection processes, and risk factors in candidates themselves; and
2. give some examples of good practice.

However, before I go into the practical issues that face selecting suitable candidates (and I’m going to concentrate today on the selection of formation training candidates), I want to briefly touch on the importance of having a safe ministry culture deeply embedded in your church. Because this is an essential foundation for a sound screening and selection culture.

So an important question - How do you create a safe ministry culture?

There is valuable material I'm sure you're already familiar with, including the 10 Child Safe Standards written by the Royal Commission and the 10 National Principles for a child safe organisation from the Human Rights Commission (based on the RC findings).

Rather than go over material you are likely familiar with, I'm going to provide some personal observations in relation to creating safe organisations.

Firstly, can I suggest that winning hearts and minds is a critical part of creating a safe ministry culture. For this to happen, leadership is required that:

1. accepts the truth of the terrible harm and trauma that is caused to people who are sexually abused by clergy or church workers;
2. Leaders must have a clear understanding that sexual abuse (including child sexual abuse) is a serious crime and that offenders must be held to account;
3. Leaders must acknowledge when our churches fail to protect someone, and that those abused will be treated compassionately and fairly if they seek justice from the church for what has been done to them.

So these three understandings must be firmly held by the church leadership, and well and regularly communicated to the people of the church. Through such communication, the foundation is laid to win the commitment of clergy and church workers to create and improve the systems and procedures that are necessary to ensure our church organisations are as safe as we can reasonably make them.

The final point I'd make about church leadership is that leaders must:

1. expect high standards of behaviour from clergy and church workers (codes of conduct) and enforce those standards if breaches occur; and
2. leaders must have a clear expectation of clergy and church workers that they will, at all times, be respectful of others in their dealings. Love thy neighbour and enemies. This is a very difficult standard to meet.

The second element to creating a safe ministry culture is effective policy.

The following are Anglican policy approaches (both National and diocesan) that have gone hand in hand with the above hearts and minds approach in

establishing, consolidating and improving the safe ministry environment of the Anglican Church. I confirm my belief that to truly have an effective screening and selection process, it must be supported by having in place this safe ministry culture/environment.

By way of brief background, for ACSQ, the need to greatly improve safety for our children arose from failures highlighted in court action and the media in the 1990s. Time doesn't allow me today to provide you a full account of this, but out of its significant failings, our Diocese began the journey of putting in place measures that would help ensure, in particular, that children in the Diocese would be safe.

The following is a brief chronology of key policies that have been adopted at either a national or diocesan level:

1. 1990s allegations of sexual abuse are first formally heard by the Church.
2. In 2004:
 - The *Professional Standards Canon* is adopted by the Australian Anglican General Synod which enables examination of a person's fitness for office if facing an allegation such as sexual misconduct. Such a process may lead to a clergy person being deposed.
 - A national code of conduct for clergy and certain lay ministers.
 - New screening measures, including the National Register Canon.
3. In 2005:
 - The diocese adopts a Child and Youth Risk Management Strategy.
 - Blue Card Policy.
 - Child protection guidelines for parishes.
4. In 2008 - Rigorous Screening and selection processes manual adopted.
5. In 2009:
 - Child protection audits for parishes commence.
 - Psychological assessments for all ordinands commence.
 - Safe Ministry Checks/Questionnaires commence.
6. In 2013:
 - Student protection audits in ACSQ schools commence.
 - Mandatory Professional ethics and human sexuality training for all clergy commences.

7. In 2016 – Mandatory child protection training for church workers working with children.
8. In 2017 – *Safe Ministry to Children Canon* passed by General Synod and adopted by Diocese – covers, screening, selection, child protection training and management of persons of concern.

Through the implementation of these policies, the diocese has over some 20 years gradually embedded and improved safe ministry practices. This has seen clergy and church workers overwhelmingly support these policies through their safe ministry practice.

So, with a comprehensive safe ministry policy regime in place, screening and selection processes will be all the stronger.

So I want to turn again to one of the most important roles a leader has – selecting the right people and in particular, those who wish to enter into formation training

From experience (and to emphasise I don't have the added responsibility of deciding if a person is to be selected for ministry), the reason candidate selection may be difficult is twofold. Firstly, when a candidate, because of certain information arising, faces additional scrutiny. This will almost certainly and understandably make the candidate feel their character is being questioned (which of course it is). So this creates a potential for strong feelings. The second feature of this kind of circumstance is that the candidate will rightly wish to be dealt with justly. So if you mix the issues of justice and fairness and calling into question a candidate's character, it is a process that is ripe for strong emotions, and at times may make it difficult for cool reason and objectivity to prevail in the selection process.

To assist in holding an objective approach, the following are matters to consider.

Risk Factors to look for in the candidate seeking to enter into formation

Scales of Justice Approach – What weighs for the suitability of the candidate and against?

Determining whether a person is suitable means looking at objective criteria for suitability and making an assessment about the person against those criteria.

This will normally mean giving more weight to some criteria than others. For example, if a candidate has been convicted of an offence and sentenced to imprisonment, this factor will be given large weight in any suitability decision, and may well tip the scales against the candidate despite many other criteria weighing in the candidate's favour.

So criteria to consider include:

1. Misconduct issues that may have a bearing on how the candidate might interact with others e.g. a bullying finding against the person.
2. Misconduct issues that might call into question the person's integrity e.g. dishonesty, offence/transgression.
3. If there has been past misconduct:
 - How long ago was it?
 - Was the misconduct serious?
 - Was it a one-off incident?
 - Was any disciplinary or legal action taken?
 - Were there consequences of the misconduct (for the candidate or others)?
4. How the person responded to allegations made against them:
 - Was their response at the time appropriate?
 - How does the person view their misconduct now?
5. If the candidate wasn't transparent (fault by omission) in their application about past misconduct issues:
 - How serious were those issues?
 - What explanation does the candidate have for not being candid?
 - Did the Candidate provide false or misleading information?
6. Are there any mental health related issues – alcoholism, drug taking (prescribed or non-prescribed) – what evidence is there that the person is managing these conditions – relationships, work etc.?
7. What does the psychologist say about the candidate's mental health or character?
8. Has the candidate previously been refused ordination?

9. Has the candidate previously had an adverse risk assessment?
10. Were any of the candidate's reference checks unsatisfactory?

Very important – obtain independent verification of qualifications and important matters wherever possible. Effective processes must be in place to bring out the above information.

Risk Factors to look out for in in the selection process

1. Need to ensure that confidentiality and privacy are maintained based on a needs to know basis.
2. Process must be transparent and provides procedural fairness – that is, the candidate has the opportunity to comment on information that may see them not selected.
3. Conflicts of interest must be managed at all times. If you are close to the person, if you are able to withdraw from the selection decision, do so.
4. All persons in the selection process must understand their role and the role of others.
5. Needs to be good communication between those involved in the selection process.
6. Obtain candidate information as early in the process as possible so that there is adequate time for experts and decision makers to deliberate on information about the candidate.
7. Ensure that key matters are covered:
 - a. Blue Card and National Police check;
 - b. Questionnaire that goes to suitability issues;
 - c. Psychological assessment/s – general personality; psychological wellbeing; tertiary study capacity; psychosexual history/maturity.
8. Properly qualified assessor – preferably registered psychologist.
9. Ensure as early as possible that all information is provided to the psychologist.
10. Ensure widest possible search for information is made and that policies support this.
11. That your decision maker has all the key information.

Conclusion

1. Effective safe ministry policies are essential.
 - a. Policies must be underpinned by a culture that recognises in particular that children and vulnerable people are to be respected, and deserve to be provided a safe environment within our communities.
2. Leadership is critical marked by integrity, tenacity and wisdom.
 - a. Clear understanding that sexual abuse is a serious offence.
 - b. Clear understanding of terrible long term trauma caused by child sexual abuse:
 - i. If you wish to have a better understanding of trauma, I highly recommend American psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk's book "The body keeps the score".
 - ii. If you didn't hear witnesses give evidence at the RC, transcripts are still available. Their harrowing accounts give you a real insight into the price paid by those sexually abused as children.

And be inspired by Christ. He led the way for us by showing great love and care for children and the vulnerable, at a time when such folk were not generally well cared for.

So if life is difficult as Peck suggests, perhaps we should ensure that when a difficult selection decision arises, when necessary, we make the difficult decision that a candidate is not suitable. Such a decision may see our people safer.

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