

tabernacle : penarth

purpose: to reflect God's love in our church,
community and world.

exploring a call

a guide for those conducting meetings and interviews
with those who feel called to fulltime ministry and an
explanation of the calling process at Tabernacle

Tabernacle has always had a reputation as a sending church when it comes to discerning and releasing people to fulltime pastoral ministry, youth work and overseas missionary work. We have a long tradition of sending women and men to serve God in other places and we take seriously the task of helping people to discern the Lord's call on their life.

Interviewing potential new ministers is one of the nicest jobs you can be asked to do for Tabernacle so there is no need to worry about it! True it is a responsibility to undertake this important work on behalf of the church but it is just one stage in a long process of discernment that will eventually involve not just the whole congregation of Tabernacle, but representatives of the local association, colleges and other churches.

The process of exploring a call to ministry is outlined in our policy document "called to serve—exploring a calling to ministry". Get hold of a copy of this policy document and read it. This is the guide that the candidate will be using as they move through the process at Tabs. Tabernacle has appointed the Global Mission Group (GM) to take a lead role in helping people discern their calling. This group belongs to the Mission Hub and is headed up by one of the elders. Their job is to facilitate people discovering their vocation and make appropriate recommendations to the Leadership Council and church meeting. GM do not have the final say on who is commended for ministry and they do not decide which names are brought to the church meeting for consideration. However, the church meeting will always take seriously their recommendations and appreciates the work that they do behind the scenes in helping people to explore their calling.

Broadly speaking the process of discernment at Tabs is broken down into seven stages which are:

- We recommend that the candidates speak first of all to family and close friends who know them well. Are they surprised by this sense of vocation or do they bear witness to it in their spirit? Are they supportive of the call and the sacrifice that will be needed to see it through? Have they sensed the call on the individuals' life themselves in the past?

- The next step is to speak to the senior pastor. Sometimes candidates skip this step but as the pastor will be one of the people filling in a reference form at a later date and steering the process through the church meeting, they should be included in the process right from the very beginning. The pastor will pass the name of the candidate to the Mission Hub elder and he will convene the GM sub-group.
- GM will meet with the candidate on several occasions to talk and pray about the candidate's sense of calling. If the candidate is married, engaged or in a long-term relationship then their partner will be invited to attend early on in the process. Whilst it is not essential they do so, it is very helpful and reassuring to the church if they can. During this time the pastor's and GM might recommend areas of ministry to explore in the life of the church at Tabs or in the wider Baptist family. The candidate will find themselves being asked to take on more "servant tasks" such as washing up after coffee or doing security and welcome duties. Seeing how the candidate responds to being asked to do these "behind the scenes" jobs is an important part of discerning their servant heart and their willingness to do less glamorous jobs. There is an old saying which goes, "If they are too good to push a broom they are probably not good enough to preach the gospel!"

GM will encourage the candidate to read, to pray and to undertake appropriate local training. The pastors will most likely invite the candidate to preach on two or three occasions at Tabs and give their names to other churches for invitations. They will be asked to lead worship and preside at communion at least once. They will find themselves being invited to accompany the pastors on visits to other churches or to hospitals or funerals and will also find themselves being called upon to come to the front of the church during services to pray with the sick. During this time we are watching the candidate to see their willingness to undertake these tasks, the attitude they approach them with and how other people respond to them. Keep an eye out for people you know who are going through the discernment process as they serve around the church.

This part of the discernment process could take several years. We warn candidates from the outset that there is no such thing as a fast-track to ordained ministry and that getting to the next stage could take some time.

- In due course GM will bring the name of the candidate to the Leadership Council (LC) along with their recommendation on how to proceed. LC will note the recommendation of GM and schedule an item on the next available church meeting agenda. At that church meeting the candidate will be asked to share their faith story and the story of their sense of calling. There may be questions from the church meeting and the church will join the candidate in prayer. Once the candidate has made their presentation and answered any questions, they will be asked to absent themselves from the meeting. We would normally also ask immediate family members to leave the meeting to allow a full and frank discussion to take place.
- Following the first church meeting there will be a pause of at least two months before the members are asked to make a decision. Members will be invited to go away and pray for the candidate and their family and to start asking God to speak to them. If they have questions or need clarification on any point this is the time to seek that . At the next suitable church meeting after time has passed for everyone to wait upon God, the church will be asked to make a decision. Although it is normally clear at this point what the sentiment of the church meeting is we normally hold a secret ballot in accordance with the requirements of our constitution.
- If the church meeting agrees, the next step is to explore the candidate's sense of calling with the wider Baptist family. The candidates name is given to the Regional Ministers who will guide the candidate through the next stage of the process. The

candidate will meet with them and will need to formally apply for training at a Baptist college (if offering themselves for pastoral or youth ministry) or to BMS if offering themselves for overseas ministry. At an appropriate time the Regional Ministers will arrange for the person to go to selection committee or conference or to the selection procedure for a mission society. They will make a commendation to BUGB or BMS and the local association as to whether the candidate should proceed with training. Once the candidate has been commended by the association they will be able to accept a place at college and begin their training. This is normally for three years but can take a variety of forms and may take longer. Whilst the candidate is in training they are still exploring their vocation and it is not yet guaranteed that they will be ordained or sent overseas.

- The last step in the process for those seeking to minister in Britain is when a church calls the candidate to be their pastor or minister. Once they have accepted a call from a local church and been ordained they begin the Newly Accredited Ministers process (NAMS). On successful completion of this course they will find themselves being put on the Accredited Ministers List—finally!

This process is long and complicated but involves one of the most important decisions that the individual will make in their lives. As a church we have a serious responsibility to work with the candidate to discern their calling. We will not even consider someone for ministerial training until they have been an active member of Tabernacle for 2 years. If we say “No” to someone going forward for training it is very hard on them and we will need to support them as the family of God. However, saying “Yes” to someone who is not called to ministry is much worse! The task of ministry can be brutal and wearing and unless a person has a clear sense of God’s call on their life it can be a serious mistake. We want to get this right!

Questions to Candidates

As we move through the process we want to be asking a number of key questions. As an interviewer you will meet with the candidate on several occasions and should be asking the following questions amongst others. There may be other questions to ask as well but at the end of this list are the questions we DO NOT ask.

Calling

- Does the candidate have a clear faith story? How and when did they become a Christian? Do they have a clear testimony of how God has been working in their life?
- When and where was the candidate baptised? If the candidate was not baptised as a believer the pastors need to be told this immediately as this has serious implications on the process.
- What makes them believe they are called to ministry? Do they have a clear sense of God's specific call on their life?
- What is it that God is specifically calling them to? Pastoral ministry? Evangelism? Youth work? Overseas ministry? Chaplaincy or sector ministry? Or the local church?
- What do friends and family say about this sense of calling? How has the candidate felt that their calling has been affirmed?
- Is the candidate sure that the call of God on their life is for now? Sometimes there is a period of waiting between being called and stepping into that ministry. Many Biblical characters had a call put on their life in childhood or at birth but had to wait decades before that calling was fulfilled.
- Why does the candidate feel they are specifically being called to recognise Baptist ministry rather than some other type of ministry or secular work as a Christian? We are all called to serve; why is it the candidate particularly believes that this is as a Baptist pastor or missionary?

(Note: At this stage the candidate may be asking us to explore a sense of calling with them. They may not be clear to what or where God is calling them, just that they know He is. We commit ourselves to journeying with them and exploring the call even if it takes several years. We will journey with the candidate for as long as they want us to and they may see this process as part of the discernment.)

Experience

- What experience of ministry has the candidate already had? How are they seeking to develop this experience?
- If the candidate has a strong sense of calling on their life, how have they sought to be obedient so far? Are they already ministering in some way? If not, why not?
- What work or study are they currently doing? How do they like it? If they are not recommended for training, will they carry on doing what they are currently doing or seek to change direction?
- In what ways does the candidate see their experience of secular work as relevant to their future ministry? What have they learnt in life so far that will be helpful going forward?
- How have the experiences of joy or pain formed their character and personality and how will they help or hinder a future ministry? What have been the formational events in their lives, both good and bad?

Gifting

- What does the candidate feel they are already good at and in what areas do they feel they are weak? How are they seeking to reinforce and build on their gifts and address weaknesses?
- What do other people tell them they are good at?
- Do they have a sense of those gifts in their life which are natural or innate and those that are being grown and developed by the Holy Spirit? How much are they relying on their own natural ability and how much on God's grace?
- What do they like doing best? What do they dislike most?
- What do they think they will enjoy most about ministry? What will they like least?
- How do they think they will cope with having to do jobs they don't like or are fearful of?
- Does the candidate understand the difference between maintenance models of ministry and missional models of ministry? What is their understanding?
- Do they show a developed sense of mission both at home and overseas?
- How have they attempted to be missional in their own lives so far?
- Who was the last person they personally led to Christ? How did it come about? What is the story? Is this a regular occurrence or a one-off?

Temperament

- How would you describe the candidates temperament? Try disagreeing with them over something they say and see how they react!
- How do they feel they deal with criticism and conflict?
- Do they seem self-aware about their own strengths and weaknesses?
- How does the candidate feel they will deal with conflict as a minister? How will they handle people who make life difficult?
- How do they think they will cope with people who are argumentative, mentally ill, angry or grieving?
- How have you as an interviewer seen evidence of how this person handles disappointment or conflict during their time at Tabernacle?
- If this person is not recommended for ministerial training what will they do instead? How will they seek to fulfil the sense of calling on their life in alternative ways?

Questions we don't ask

- We don't ask women whether they are planning on starting a family/having babies/having more children.
- We don't ask women what childcare arrangements they will be making if they go into training or into ministry.
- We don't ask single people about their marriage plans. The calling is on the individual, not on their spouse, partner or future spouse. We are discerning God's call at this point, not what their future wife or husband thinks!
- We don't ask candidates about their sexuality. This matter will already have been brought up by the pastor in the initial stages of the process and addressed with the candidate. Concerns or difficulties will have been dealt with before the candidate gets to this stage of the process.
- On occasion a candidate's spouse does not share the sense of vocation and may not even be a Christian. Whilst this poses special challenges for someone going forward it is not an automatic bar and so we do not need to discuss it at this point. This is a pastoral matter and will be dealt with by the pastors before the candidate reaches this stage of the process.
- We do not ask the candidate how they will afford to go into training or ministry. If the church commends the person for training and the association and union agree with that commendation, we will discuss finances at that point. If God calls He will provide and we should not overly concern ourselves with the means at this point.