



# The Methodist Church

Serving locally, connecting the county

[Safeguarding in Lincolnshire District](#)

**September 1<sup>st</sup> 2021**

## **Giving References**

### **Introduction.**

This Policy is necessary to make clear how to deal with requests to give character references.

Giving references as a relative, friend or colleague is often down to personal and individual decisions. ***Giving one on behalf of the church and/or as an office holder, staff member or volunteer within the life of the church, Circuit or District brings*** with it challenges that could make people vulnerable, including the person giving the reference.

In these situations, a reference is associated with the Methodist church and goes beyond the individual writing it and the content included in it.

This has to be balanced against, say, the joy of the church in being able to promote someone's calling into a new role or responsibility against the duty of care in offering facts and information to support processes of justice and law e.g. being a witness in court.

### **Factual references – v- Character references.**

In principal, factual references are the safest and more straightforward to give as opposed to those that require a professional or personal opinion or judgement. However, at times character references are request to assist in certain processes, which require a more holistic view of someone in a given set of circumstances.

### **Characters references.**

#### ***What?***

A character reference is a statement in which a person with knowledge of another provides comment about their personality or behaviour. This is likely to include drawing conclusions about their disposition or presentation. This is different from an ordinary request for a statement of fact, such as when a police officer takes a statement to evidence a crime.

The defining difference is that between known fact of circumstances and personal judgement of character.

If giving a statement in a personal capacity, it should be clearly stated in the statement that it does not represent the opinion of the Church and is done so in a personal capacity only.

## **When?**

Lay office holders, employees or ministers in the church may receive requests in relation to employment, to give evidence in court proceedings or to attend meetings as a representative of the church with statutory agencies (e.g. police, Children's Services or Adult Social Care) relating to safeguarding.

In the majority of legal cases, defence solicitors will be seeking character statements to try to provide evidence of good character. The aim is to balance the prosecution case in court or to influence sentencing if the person has already been found guilty.

However, you may be called to provide character references for employment tribunals, immigration processes (e.g. applications for citizenship or right to remain in the UK) or in relation to employment matters or proceedings. Some parties have also been requested to provide character references during meetings with statutory agencies such as social care relating to safeguarding adults and children.

## **What do I do when asked?**

- Clarify why you are being asked, what is expected of you in providing it and whether it requires facts or judgements/opinion;
- Do not agree or give assurances to any such request, even by statutory authorities, without informing your Minister, Super, Chair of District and/or DSO. This is to help ensure there is clarity and appropriate help and support and no-one is left vulnerable by such a request. ***This is especially important in any request which could lead to someone's court appearance and a possible attendances in court for the giver of the reference;***
- Remember agreement to comply with such a request goes beyond the individual writing it and has associations with the church. Circuit, District and/or Methodist Church i.e. reputational risk is an important consideration.

## **Considerations to be given before a request is accepted:**

### ***The impact on survivors.***

The desire to stand by those who have long association with the Church and are known personally to congregations can be a strong call to action. However, survivors should be able to expect that the Church stands by them in public and private. The words and actions of the Church should clearly acknowledge the impact of abuse on survivors and condemn those acts, rather than seeking to counterbalance what has been suffered and minimize the impact of the application of justice. Many survivors in congregations feel unable or do not wish to share publicly the harm they have suffered. They may suffer further pain and isolation if character references are made by those connected to the Church in a public arena, which seek to present those who are alleged to have carried out abuse in a positive light.

### ***The impact on the individual giving the statement***

While character statements are given with the best of intentions, they are often not based on fact and may over-emphasise positive attributes or behaviours. These comments may not be borne out by very limited interaction with the subject of the statement. Those who give character references should expect that they might be called to provide further detail in court or other environments to

evidence what they have said. They may also expect an impact on their personal credibility if they have made public judgements about character, which are later found to be contrary to the known facts. The evidence of someone connected to the Methodist Church might be given greater weight due to the moral expectations of the public. Great care should be given in providing any public statement of this nature.

### ***The impact on the congregation***

The impact on the congregation The Past Cases Review identified many cases where congregations were torn apart or people damaged by failing to apply appropriate respectful uncertainty to circumstances where safeguarding allegations are made. Where a crusade to support an individual goes beyond appropriate pastoral support, divided opinions may damage communities and isolate individuals. The provision of character references can play a part in this.

### ***Potential for Grooming***

It will be important to recognise that in some circumstances a process of grooming could have taken place in getting someone to offer a reference in a particular way and for a particular purpose. This is especially possible when a church has taken sides over a particular matter and opinions are being openly expressed about people who may then go on to need a reference in some way.

### **References to other denominations, and community organisations.**

This is a common expectation when individuals apply or volunteer for roles across churches and dominations and within or from community organisations.

Once again, factual references should give basic information that is required. If there are any safeguarding concerns known about, advice should be sought from the DSO as to how this information should be passed on, if appropriate to do so.

**Policy to be reviewed August 2022.**