

**Commission on Ministry**  
**Guidelines for Discernment Committees (DCs)**  
**for Persons Seeing Ordination to the Priesthood or the Diaconate**

**Role of the Committee**

The Discernment Committee is charged with helping an Aspirant discern the nature of his/her call to ministry. The Committee is formed under the supervision of the Commission on Ministry ("COM") and the Aspirant's priest, in consultation with the Aspirant

The work of the Discernment Committee is to provide an environment in which the Aspirant and its members may freely and openly discuss the Aspirant's call to ordained ministry. The Discernment Committee and the Aspirant must treat all of their meetings as confidential to this end.

Secondly, the Discernment Committee serves as a support system for the Aspirant in his/her discernment process. In that context, they should encourage the Aspirant to engage in a process of profound and honest self-examination and prayerful discernment regarding ordination, and should uphold and support an Aspirant's decision either to pursue ordination or to live out his/her ministry calling without ordination. The Discernment Committee also should work to evaluate the Aspirant's qualifications for ordained ministry, and to help the Aspirant gain greater self-awareness and a deeper understanding of the Aspirant's call to ministry, whether ordained or not.

The Priest, in consultation with the COM, should select persons for the Discernment Committee who have a good understanding of their own ministries and who understand that a call to ministry does not necessarily mean a call to ordination. A chair for the group should be appointed by the Priest as the person who will convene the group for its work with the Aspirant on a regular basis, serve as the DC's principal contact with the Diaconal/ Priesthood Ordination Committee representatives should any guidance be necessary during the discernment process, and ultimately oversee the writing of a 4-5 page evaluation report at the end of the discernment process. Members of the group should have good listening skills, good pastoral skills, and a thorough understanding of the expectations, duties, and responsibilities of deacons and priests as they are presently being lived out in the Diocese of Newark and the wider Episcopal Church. DC members should also have a clear understanding of the different orders of the church, and clarity in the differences between the roles of priests and deacons. The DC should include members that represent the diversity of the diocese or community that is raising the Aspirant up. The DC may not include members of the Aspirant's family, the Priest, members of the local priest's family, or anyone whose participation may represent a conflict of interest or the appearance of such a conflict.

Prior to the first working meeting of the DC, all members should become familiar with the service for the Ordination of a Deacon in the Book of Common Prayer (pg. 543), and that of the Ordination of a Priest (BCP pg. 524 ), review the national church canons governing the ordination process to the diaconate/ priesthood in the Episcopal Church, and should read Ormonde Plater's introductory book , *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons*, which provides a sound basis for discernment for those seeking ordination to the diaconate or the priesthood.

The COP/COD will assign a representative who will continue to serve the local DC as a resource throughout the DC's work.

At the midpoint of the discernment process (after four or five DC meetings with the Aspirant), the Chair should contact the COP/COD representative to seek guidance if it is needed and generally check in with the COP/COD regarding the progress being made in discernment work. After a minimum of ten (10) meetings held over the course of at least ten (10) months, the DC group shall submit a report of 4-5 pages in length to the Priest, with a copy to the Aspirant. If the Priest and Vestry subsequently nominate the Aspirant, copies will be provided to the COM. This report should follow and address each area of discernment as outlined in the series of questions that follow and focus on the Aspirant's strengths and challenges. The report is to be submitted to the Priest and Vestry at least six weeks before the desired Nominee Conference for Priesthood or Diaconate, according to the schedule available on the Diocese of Newark website.

The COP/COD relies heavily on this written report when it meets with the individual Nominee at the Nominee Conference; not addressing all of these points may lead to the individual not being invited to attend a Nominee Conference.

If the Commission on Ministry or the Bishop does not accept the Aspirant as a Nominee or Postulant, the Discernment Committee, along with the parish clergy from the sponsoring congregation, must be prepared to provide pastoral care and help as the Nominee discerns how to live out his/her call in lay ministry. If the Nominee is accepted for Postulancy, the group should continue to provide a support network as the hurdles of diaconal/ priestly education and formation, Postulancy, Candidacy and ordination are faced.

This ongoing support must be intentional, using correspondence and periodic meetings throughout the process.

The work of the Group does not end until the Nominee has been ordained, or has begun a lay ministry journey.

### **Guidelines for Use by the DC for People seeking Ordination to the Priesthood or Diaconate**

The following guidelines are intended as an aid to a Discernment Committee in their role to explore an applicant's call to ordained ministry as well as helping to clarify his/her understanding of his/her call and spiritual journey to date. These guidelines have been divided into five separate but interrelated areas. The areas are concerned with a discernment of the Aspirant's faith development and vision of the church, specifically the Episcopal Church and leadership skills. Initial questions, which may be used directly or modified in conversation with the Aspirant, are in bold type. Those in non-bold type are to be considered by DC members thoughtfully and used to form questions arising from such reflections.

The group should consider that its role is to listen carefully and reflect on what they hear, with the goal of assisting the Aspirant to decide about the discernment of a call. While the ultimate decision must be made by the Aspirant, the Discernment Committee may decide to voice its support or lack of support for the decision in the submitted written report referred to above.

## I. Self Knowledge and Awareness

- **Where do you see your strengths and weaknesses?**
- **How have you become aware of these? As you become aware of your needs, how do you take care of them? Where do you seek to set limits? What are your priorities?**
- **How do you manage your time?**
- **Are there behavioral patterns handed down from your family of origin that affect you? Where do you put red flags for yourself?**
- **Are you aware of all of the requirements of time and education for diaconal ordination?**
- **What have you done successfully in Servant Ministry? What have you learned from any failures?**
- **How do you see yourself functioning differently as an ordained deacon/ priest? Do you see your ministry changing if you are not ordained a deacon/ priest?**
  
- How does Servant Ministry express itself in this person's life?
- Is there an ability to reflect on one's own life and have a perspective of how he/she relates to others and God?
- Is the Aspirant able to articulate and integrate knowledge and experience appropriately?
- Is this person aware of and equipped for becoming an ordained deacon/ priest? Will he/she be able to handle the time and education commitments?
- Can this person verbalize and communicate with skill appropriate to his/her age and experience? Does this person understand personal authority without either arrogance or abrogation of responsibility for self?
- Is this person trustworthy and a person of integrity and authenticity?
- Can this person be flexible and vulnerable while respecting and knowing boundaries?
- Does this person clearly understand the roles of the other orders of the church?
- Can this person articulate a vision of their future place as a "bridge between the church and the world"?
- Do this person have a vision of herself / himself in the future role of deacon/ priest?
- Does this person know what feeds him/her spiritually?
- What are the future ministries that this person will seek to serve? How will ordination help to enable him/ her to be more effective than now?

## **II. Leadership Skills**

- **Discuss a time where you were able to take responsibility when there was a difficult decision to be made. What was that like for you?**
- **What vision(s) do you have of the church and where might there be a risk for you if you chose to follow that vision?**
- **How do you see yourself developing leadership skills in others? Can you describe a time when you succeeded? When you failed? What was that like for you?**
- **What kind of leadership style is most comfortable for you? Have there been instances when your favorite leadership model needed to be modified? In what way? Why? What was that like for you?**
- **How do you deal with conflicts as they arise?**
- Has this person exhibited an ability to learn and use failure as well as success?
- Has this person demonstrated an ability to lead? Have they exhibited an ability to inspire others and enable others to serve?
- How does he/she overcome personal weaknesses and enhance his/her strengths?
- Does this person exhibit a non-anxious presence?
- Does this person exhibit a secure self that evaluates situations realistically?
- Could this person lead others to find their own place in their Ministry?
- Does this person have an entrepreneurial spirit? Is he/she able to engender a new vision in a changing age and for a changing church?
- Does he/she listen with interest, insight, and compassion?
- Is there evidence of any authority problems or idealization of the roles of men or women that might become a problem?
- Has this person demonstrated leadership in serving others and in inspiring others to serve the church and society?
- Would you be comfortable working for this person?
- Would you be comfortable having this person as your deacon or priest ?

### **III. Faith Development**

- **Please tell me a little about your faith development. Where has your discernment led you? Where are you now? What questions continually surface in your faith journey?**
- **How would you articulate your faith to a non-believer? To a friend?**
- **How is your faith best put into action?**
- **What motivates you to wish to serve the church and the communities around you? Who is Jesus Christ for you?**
- **Describe your prayer life. If this is an ongoing commitment, what has it meant to you? Are there times when this has presented difficulties for you? How have you reacted?**
- **Describe your study habits?**
- **What nourishes and refreshes you spiritually? Mentally? Physically?**
  
- What moves this person to wish to serve others? Is it ego?
- Does this Aspirant have an awareness of and sensitivity to the sacred? How does this person experience the Holy?
- Does this person have a passion that says THIS matters? That you matter? That the Gospel is worth living for and indeed worth dying for?
- Can this person appropriately articulate the faith that he/she professes? Does this person see discernment and growth as on-going?
- Does he/she see this process as a learning experience and an adventure, or as a means to an end?
- Does this person have a sense of humor? Can he/she see laughter as a mark of trust in God's continual presence in our lives, and see humor as sacred and spiritual?

### **IV. Awareness of the Episcopal Church Tradition**

- **Describe your experience as a member of the church as a whole and of the Episcopal church, specifically. What draws you to it? What turns you away? How many different liturgies have you experienced? How many congregations?**
- **What service/servant ministries are lacking now in the Episcopal church?**
- **What creative ministries are needed?**
- **What do you see as a deacon's/ priest's role in the church right now? Will this role change in the future?**

- Has this person experienced a variety of parish settings? Has there been enough exposure to the diversity of people who belong to the Episcopal church or has this person simply become comfortable - in love with his/her own church? In short, is there a need for more breadth and knowledge of the Episcopal tradition?
- Does this person have a tendency to idealize the church or the role of the ordained orders?

## **V. Ministry**

- **How do you feel about changing parishes and serving in parishes where the Bishop feels you are needed more?**
- **What is your understanding of parish ministry?**
- **What is your understanding of non- parochial ministry?**
- **What role do you see yourself playing in the church?**
- **How do manage your time?**
- **What is your vision of the church of the 21st century? What servant ministries will be most needed?**
- **Where do you see yourself making a difference in the church?**
- **Do you have a dream?**
- **Do you have a plan?**
- Does this person have an energized and creative vision of the church in the 21st century?
- Is she/he aware of the changes that will need to occur for the church to continue to thrive and flourish? Is there joy and energy to pursue a vision in the face of day-to-day adversities?
- Is this person ready to leave their home parish to serve where they are needed in the diocese at the direction of the Bishop?
- What would this person change or do differently in the existing ministries of the Episcopal Church?
- Can he/she articulate why they feel a call to serve outside of their home parish and why they feel they could do this better as an ordained person instead of a lay person within the tradition of the Episcopal church?

## **VI. Resources**

### ***Discernment and Leadership (for both Priesthood and Diaconal Aspirants)***

*The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* – Elizabeth Liebert

*Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well, Based on Ignatian Spirituality* – Pierre Wolff

*Leadership Next: Changing Leaders in a Changing World* – Eddie Gibbs

### ***Diaconate***

*Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons* – Ormande Plater

*The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* - James Barnett

*Servant Ministry* - The Rt. Rev. Richard Grein

*Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* - Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward

*Deacons in the Episcopal Church: Guidelines on their Selection, Training and Ministry* Ormonde Plater

### ***Priesthood***

*Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* - Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward

*Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons* - Ormonde Plater

*Clergy Moms: A Survival Guide to Balancing Family and Congregation* – Allison M. Moore

*What to Expect in Seminary: Theological Education as Spiritual Formation* – Virginia Samuel Cetuk