

Directions for Home Parish/Community Discernment Committee

Congregations have an essential role in discerning those in their midst with the gifts for ordained ministry. The purpose of the Home Parish Discernment Committee is to assist the home rector in an initial assessment of an applicant's call, suitability, and capability for ordination.

The selection of the Committee:

- A. The Committee is to be established by the home rector, sponsoring priest, chaplain, or senior warden in the case of a vacant congregation.
- B. It should be composed of 3-5 members who are respected in the congregation or faith community, exhibit emotional and spiritual maturity, and are active in the liturgical life and ministry of the congregation/community. Wherever possible it is desirable that the Committee reflect cultural and gender diversity and have an appreciation for the Anglican ethos.
- C. The rector, priest, chaplain, or senior warden of a vacant congregation appoints a convener who schedules the meetings, chairs each session, and directs the drafting and sending of the letter to the home rector or other establishing authority at the end of the fifth session.

The functions of the Committee:

- A. The Committee meets with the applicant every one to two weeks for about ninety minutes. There are five sessions in all. General directions to guide the Committee through each session are outlined below.
- B. Informal sharing and discussion are necessary ingredients of the discernment process. Since the focus of the Committee is to explore the applicant's call for ministry, at least half of the time allotted for each session should be given to the applicant to share as appropriate.
- C. The Committee should take seriously the importance of confidentiality.
- D. The members of the Committee should endeavor to pray regularly for the applicant and for understanding God's direction throughout this process.
- E. Following the final session the Committee should prepare a letter to the home rector or other establishing authority indicating, at a minimum, whether the Committee believes the applicant appears to have a calling for ordained ministry that should be considered by the diocese or if it appears that the applicant would best pursue his/her call through other lay ministry service.
- F. The evaluation letter from the Committee should be submitted **both to the home rector and to the applicant** no later than December 31st.

Session One: Call and Ministry

Prayer: Prayer 59, *For Quiet Confidence*, BCP page 832.

1. In order to establish a sense of community amongst the Committee, start the first session by introducing yourselves and sharing your initial thoughts about the discernment process.
2. The applicant and each member will share how long they have been part of the parish or faith community and what they value about the ministry, lay or ordained, in this particular community. Share a brief story of how you have experienced God in this parish or faith community.
3. Read the section of the Catechism entitled, *The Ministry*, BCP page 855. Take time to describe your ministry in this parish or faith community. How did it come about? Did you experience a call – either through an inward sense or outwardly through others? What have you discovered about yourself and God’s grace in this ministry?
4. Describe the experience of being on the receiving end of ministry. Who was the minister? Was she/he lay or ordained? What was the impact on your life and faith?
5. Invite the applicant to expand on any of the above as desired and to share the story of his/her sense of call to ordained ministry.

Close: Pray together *A General Thanksgiving*, BCP page 836.

Session Two: The Priests and Deacons We Need

Opening: The applicant prepares and leads a brief devotional of his or her choosing (no more than ten minutes) to begin this session.

The Priests and Deacons We Need

The priests and deacons we need must be committed to knowing and following Jesus the Christ and show strong signs of growth toward maturity as Christians. A priest is a representative of others, calling forth the priesthood of all believers and providing an example of what a faithful life in Christ looks like. A deacon acts out the servant ministry of Christ in the wider community, brings its needs to the attention of the Church, and helps to train and educate others for such ministries.

The Church considers a wide range of factors in identifying persons for ordained ministry. Below are a sampling of the attributes desired of priests and deacons (they are also valuable for lay ministry) which are presented for the applicant and Committee members to reflect upon and discuss during this session.

As aspirants for ordination, the Church seeks persons who:

- **have a sense of inner authority**, a center in God, from which they live and act. They are trustworthy, integrated, and authentic; their words are consistent with their being and their actions. They are emotionally stable and resilient, able to tolerate stress, aware of their limits, and willing, when necessary, to seek appropriate help and support. They have a prayerful, vital relationship with God.
- **have the capacity to understand the Christian faith and tradition** and to articulate it appropriately. They are careful and serious about worship. They cherish the Church's sacraments as our central experience of God's grace given throughout the creation. Among non-believers, they can speak the Good News without embarrassment or condescension. They have a vision of what the world and the particular community of faith might become, and they communicate energy and excitement to inspire others. They call forth gifts and vision, and take delight in wide participation and shared ministry.
- **have a healthy passion for the mission of the church** embracing the Gospel in its liturgical, evangelical, social, pastoral, and prophetic dimensions.
- **have an "Easter attitude."** They have a loving heart with the manifest capacity for compassion, practical caring, and a lived sense of fairness and justice. When life gets tedious and problems enormous and solutions impossible, they expect that something unimaginable may be just ahead, and help others to find it. They are able to hold onto the promise of new life and to awaken that hope in others. They are compassionate, but not indulgent. They insist that Christ's solace gives strength for service, and God's pardon frees us to begin our hard work again.
- **are gifted at building up the body of Christ.** Something about them says to people, "Come and see." They are community-builders, both within the immediate community and beyond it; their words and actions express a genuine interest in and empathy with all sorts and conditions of people and the work they do. Their spirit of warmth and hospitality invites the people around them to be

themselves and to feel at home. They are comfortable with and able to live into the variety and diversity that is the American culture and the Episcopal Church today.

- **are free people**, able to trust God in the midst of uncertainty. They are resilient and flexible. They know that the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, and they expect to be amazed.

In summary, the priests and deacons we need are visibly committed to God’s mission, both locally and globally. The Prayer Book states that the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. Ordained leaders are to be at the forefront of God’s work of justice, compassion and reconciliation. Some might serve in storefront churches, in non-parochial situations, as medical missionaries, or as missionaries with partner churches in the worldwide Anglican Communion and ecumenical settings. Some will present us with entirely new models of ordained ministry. Some will work in congregations that seem to follow more familiar patterns, but are transformed from within by a powerful experience of Christ’s love among them and feel compelled to pass it on.

1. The Committee members and the applicant are invited to discuss and reflect upon the qualities listed. Which of these qualities seem to “stand out” to you? Why?
2. Share a story of someone in your life, lay or ordained, who seemed to embody the above qualities. In what ways did their presence and ministry touch your life and the lives of others?
3. Invite the applicant to explore these qualities in relation to his/her sense of call. Where is there a fit? To which of these qualities is she/he especially drawn? Which ones challenge or concern the applicant?

Closing: Evening Prayer or Compline from the BCP.

Session Three: Spiritual Journeys

Opening: A member of the Discernment Committee prepares and leads a brief devotional of his or her own choosing.

In this session the applicant is invited to share his or her spiritual journey. Beginning with earliest childhood memories and being attentive to particular turning points, the applicant tells the story of his/her relationship with God. What were the roots of this sense of call to ordination and how did this call develop in this person's faith journey? Does the applicant see any connections with Biblical themes and images? Who have been the spiritual guides and mentors for the applicant?

The other members of the group are asked to reflect on where they found points of connection with their own experiences of God in their spiritual journey. What common themes do you encounter?

Closing: Close with one of the Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families beginning on page 136 of the BCP. Use the Devotion appropriate for the time of day in which you are meeting.

Session Four: Leadership

Opening: Sit in silence for a few minutes. Close the silence with the Collect from the Ordination Service, BCP page 540.

Part One

In addition to the desired qualities for ordination addressed in session two, the Church seeks aspirants who have a clear gift for and a history of leadership. The priests and deacons we need must be strong leaders and capable administrators. Whether they are parish priests or chaplains or academics or (as in the case of deacons) employed primarily in a secular field, whether their leadership style is vivid or quiet, they must be able to bring a community to life in Christ.

In the area of leadership, the church seeks aspirants for ordination who:

- **either have the clear potential for or demonstrated capacity for church leadership.**
- **are “authentic” leaders.** They display evidence of experience in leading: as chairs of committees, as starters of new projects, as leaders of youth and children, as participants in administration and functioning of the parish. They are people that others want to be with, learn from, and be led by. They bring energy to their interactions and are able to motivate others.
- **are collegial in leadership style** and capable of sharing ministry with the lay and ordained ministers of the church.
- **have gifts for management:** of their own finances, of the work they do, of the daily joys and upsets of their own lives, of their ministry activities in their parish.
- **have been identified** by their community of faith as a gifted person and are sought out for guidance, leadership, and inspiration.
- **have a healthy sense of self,** manifesting the capacity to be appropriately self-aware, self-affirming, and self-critical with evidence of healthy self-care – physical, emotional, and spiritual.
- **have a mature sense of boundaries** and are able to live in the tension between the need to be authentic transparent and available and the need to set appropriate boundaries.
- **are people of integrity.** They are honest with themselves and others. They are trusted and trustworthy; their words are consistent with their being and actions.
- **have the ability to manifest a sense of humor and joy.**

Discuss the leadership qualities presented above. How does leadership in a church differ from leadership in a secular organization? The applicant is invited to share his or her leadership experience in and outside of the church community.

Part Two

Excerpts from: *An Open Letter, The Deployment Ministry Conference, The Episcopal Church, 2003*

...The needs of our church and congregations have changed significantly over the past twenty to thirty years. We find our congregations struggling with cultural changes over which they have little control and do not fully understand...among these factors, in very broad strokes, are at least the following:

The booming economy that developed after World War II and continued through the Vietnam era no longer exists. The Wall Street boom of the 90's was an anomaly...All too many of our congregations are faced with declining income, increased costs, aging and inefficient facilities and aging populations. These issues are causing significant strain on all the Church's leadership.

We believe that it is also evident that our church today requires new and different leadership skills than thirty years ago. In addition to the traditional skills of preaching, teaching, and pastoral care, nearly every congregation requires the skillful management of assets and resources. Competent business administration is a necessity. For many congregations their very future depends upon the ability of the clergy to lead them in the development of new vision and provide, if not the training, then access to the training to implement these visions. Often these visions are a radical departure from those of even twenty years ago.

Other congregations, though financially solvent, are in decline and require training in evangelism, hospitality, inclusion of newcomers, stewardship, community services, etc. All the while, the litigious nature of our current culture has placed new demands on clergy of even the smallest congregations in the area of supervision of employees.

We appear to have moved into a time in which clergy are less respected and valued today than in an earlier era...the social contract that once countered the small paycheck with great authority and respect no longer exists. For a family of a clergy person there is little compensation for low pay. These changes have been accompanied by a strengthening of the role of the laity. As the laity properly takes more leadership in their congregations, role confusion abounds. There is no clear consensus of what the role of clergy persons is in congregations. The Episcopal Church, to its benefit, has attracted more and more membership from those whose denominational loyalty is not specifically to the Episcopal Church. Parishes and their leadership are now full of people with "congregational" backgrounds or no church background at all which adds to the confusion of role and polity."

1. Discuss the leadership qualities presented above. How does leadership in a church differ from leadership in a secular organization? The applicant is invited to share his or her leadership experience in and outside of the church community.
2. Take a few minutes for each person to share his or her response to the challenges outlined in the "open letter." To what extent have you found these to be true? From your experience of the church and its leadership, which, if any, seem to miss the mark?
3. These challenges invite a new appraisal of clergy leadership skills. Invite the applicant to explore what she or he might bring to the church in terms of leadership skills, experience, gifts, and vision.

Closing: Silence with free prayer offered by members of the group. Close with Prayer 29, BCP page 236.

Session Five: Reflections and Blessings

Opening: The Baptismal Covenant, BCP pages 292ff.

In this final session, the Committee is invited to share with the applicant what they have seen and heard over the last four sessions.

In particular, consider the following questions:

1. How does God's call manifest itself in the applicant's history, gifts, and yearnings?
2. How does this call manifest itself in your particular community of faith (i.e. parish, college fellowship, etc.)?
3. What gifts of leadership does the applicant manifest in your community? How does your community view this person?
4. In what ways does the applicant's life and ministry seem to articulate a call to ordination? Are there signs of alternative calls?
5. How does the applicant nurture his/her life in Christ?
6. In what ways could you imagine the applicant as an ordained person in your community? As your priest/deacon/pastor?
7. Does this seem to be the "right moment" for the applicant to explore ordination or are there life realities, which would signal a more opportune time?
8. Would your community of faith be willing to support the applicant in the ordination process with prayer, financial support as needed and ongoing attentiveness?

Closing: *A Prayer of Thomas Merton*

God, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope that we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore we will trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone.

At the completion of the five sessions, the Discernment Committee is asked to prepare a brief letter (up to two pages) to the home rector or other convening authority with a clear recommendation as to whether the applicant should be considered for admission into the Ordination Exploration Process or for other avenues of lay ministry within the church. The applicant should also receive a copy of this letter. See page 9 for sample letter.

Sample Home Parish Discernment Committee Recommendation Letter

Date:

From: (Name of Church) Home Parish Discernment Committee

To: Rector, (Name of Church)

Subject: Discernment Recommendation for (Name of Applicant)

(Up front there should be a clear recommendation for OR against admission into the diocesan Ordination Exploration Process.) ex: As requested, the undersigned members of the (Name of Church) Home Parish Discernment Committee met with (Name of Applicant) in five informal meetings. After careful and prayerful deliberations we submit the following letter of evaluation regarding (Name of Applicant).

(Following portions should provide supporting rationale for recommendation in first paragraph.) ex: During the course of our meetings and deliberations we have come to believe that (Name of Applicant) has a strong calling for ministry in the Episcopal Church and urge that the diocese help him/her explore where that calling will lead him/her. Some specific areas of interest that led to our recommendation include: *(Comment on areas of significance that emerged during the Committee's deliberations with the applicant. Below are some areas that might be considered.)*

- **Strength of Call.**
- **Ministry Experience.**
- **Capacity for Learning.**
- **Understanding the Rigors and Commitment of Priesthood or Diaconate.**
- **Demonstrated leadership in a church setting.** *(Use additional bullets as desired.)*

(Concluding paragraph that summarizes the Committee's decision.) ex: While (Name of Applicant) has many admirable qualities that support his/her entry into the exploration process, the one that impresses us most is the confident relationship he/she has with God. (Name of Applicant) strongly feels that he/she is being called to ordained ministry. We believe the diocese should do all it can to assist him/her in exploring that call.

Respectfully submitted:

Signed by all members of the Committee.

The letter is to be sent to both the rector and the applicant.