

Parish Discernment Guidelines

To those seeking ordination, Scripture lists certain qualifications (1 Timothy 3.1-16 and Titus 1.5-9) that should be noticeably present in the life of the inquirer. Particularly, they should be sound in the faith. They should have an ability to communicate the Gospel and to teach and disciple others in the faith. Their lives should reflect holiness and discipline which brings honor to Christ and which causes them to be respected by those outside the church. They should demonstrate wisdom and discretion. There should be visible fruit of their faith as well as a public affirmation by their local congregation of their sense of call.

All aspirants will begin their discernment process in conversation with their rector. If, after conversation with the rector, the rector believes that there is good basis for the aspirant to further explore and test their sense of call, the rector will convene a parish discernment committee. The role of the parish discernment committee is to further test the individual's call and to present to the rector with a written summary of their findings and a recommended path forward for the aspirant.

Parishes of DCH may wish to consider the establishment of a standing parish discernment committee that works with the rector to discern the call of all aspirants. In any case, the parish discernment committee should be composed of 5-8 persons. The rector may wish to include a vestry person as a member of the discernment committee. The committee will need a chairperson and a recorder. Because of the importance of the work undertaken by the parish discernment committee, the rector will orient the committee to its task.

It should be made clear that for an effective process of discernment, the committee must create a climate for honest conversation and genuine care. Confidentiality is expected.

Aspirants should prepare and present a 10-minute biblical reflection at the beginning of each meeting, including the first meeting. The texts for the five meetings are:

- First meeting, 2 Timothy 3.16-17
- Second meeting, John 3.16
- Third meeting, Ephesians 2.8-9
- Fourth meeting, Hebrews 4.15
- Fifth meeting, 1 Corinthians 10.31

Finally, a written summary of the discernment committee's work and recommendation will be presented to the aspirant and to the rector. With this information in hand, the rector will make a decision as to whether the aspirant should move forward in the process. In either case, the summary of the parish discernment committee with a letter from the rector will be submitted to Ben Bowman (bbowman@adhope.org) at the Office of Leadership Development.

If the rector feels that the aspirant should not proceed with the process, it will be necessary for him to assist the aspirant to discover and engage in a challenging, satisfying form of lay ministry in his/her areas of gifting.

Meeting 1

This should be an introductory meeting in which the rector introduces the aspirant and, if married, his/her spouse to the parish discernment committee. The following elements should be a part of this first meeting:

1. The rector should introduce the aspirant, spouse, and parish discernment participants to each other. He should give an overview of the discernment process, giving particular attention to our Anglican understanding of ordination as well as the role and responsibility of the parish discernment committee.
2. Exploration vs. inquisition – get a clear understanding of the difference. (Some of the questions asked throughout this process may seem intrusive, but are a necessary part of the process).
3. Discuss any questions about the exploration process.
4. Arrange a schedule of meetings so that all participants are able to be present.
5. Nominate a chairperson for the committee who will be tasked with overseeing scheduling and leading meetings.
6. Nominate a recorder who will keep written minutes of each meeting and transmit the final report to the Office of Leadership Development.
7. Have the aspirant prepare a Spiritual Autobiography, of not more than 10 pages, to be distributed at least 3 days prior to the next meeting.

Meeting 2

At this meeting, the aspirant should verbally present their Spiritual Autobiography.

1. The committee should be listening for the aspirant's ability to clearly articulate their conversion to Christ and a simple presentation of the Gospel.
2. Based on the Spiritual Autobiography, the following questions might be helpful to stimulate discussion:
 - In what ways has Christ shown Himself sufficient in this person's life?
 - What challenges has the aspirant faced? What challenges currently exist in this person's life? How does their faith inform their understanding of these challenges?
 - How does he/she respond to pressure?
 - What ministry experiences have they had? How have those experiences shaped their understanding of the Christian faith?
 - What ministries are they currently involved in? What joys and challenges are presented by those ministries?
 - How does he/she tie together the "secular and sacred" realms of life?

Meeting 3

The following dimensions of calling are to be explored:

11. What is the aspirant's understanding of the Christian ministry?
 - How does he/she view the ministry of the whole Body of Christ?
 - How does he/she differentiate between the ministries of lay and ordained persons?
 - What is pastoral care?
 - Why do they believe that they are called to be ordained?

12. What further growth is needed and does this person have the capacity to achieve such growth?
 - What is his/her academic record?
 - What evidence is there of his/her continuing commitment to learning and intellectual growth?
13. In what ways do you see/experience the person as one who is growing in the Christian faith?
 1. How well does he/she understand the basics of the Christian faith (BCP pp. 845- 862)? Of Anglicanism (BCP 867-876)?

Meeting 4

This meeting is used to explore aspects of the aspirant's emotional health, relationships, and leadership capabilities. The spouse should be present at this meeting as well.

The following questions will assist the group:

1. Have the aspirant describe their family life – family of origin as well as their current family situation. What joys and sorrows emerge? How does he/she deal with family conflict? Did he/she come from a divorced family? How did he/she process the emotional disruption of divorce? How are his/her relationships with their parents, siblings, spouse, children?
2. Have the aspirant describe his/her relational life with their friends, neighbors, classmates, colleagues. Is it easy or difficult for him/her to make friends? Does he/she have a mixture of old and new friends? Does the inquirer have any perception about how he/she is perceived by others?
3. Would the aspirant identify himself/herself as a “feeler” or a “thinker”? How are his/her thoughts and feelings expressed in a family, ministry, school or work setting?
4. Has he/she ever sought personal or marital counseling? For what matters? In what ways did counseling benefit the aspirant? What did he/she learn about himself/herself, and their spouse if applicable?
5. If married, then invite the spouse to be involved in the above discussions. Additionally, it might be helpful to have them recount their courtship, their marriage and their family life. What difficulties have they faced? What joys can they articulate? What challenges do they face? How did the decision to explore ordination arise? What are their spouse's thoughts and concerns regarding the possibility of ordination? Is she/he supportive?

The following will assist the group in exploring the person's capacity for leadership:

1. Has the aspirant ever led someone to Christ? Have they personally disciplined anyone? Give examples.
2. How has the person exercised leadership? How does he/she motivate others? Can he/she give any examples?
3. Is the aspirant able to identify a variety of leadership styles? Can he/she verbalize their preferred leadership style? Can he/she identify circumstances that challenge them as a leader?
4. How does he/she function in a small group setting? In a large group setting? Amongst peers?
5. What positive experiences has the aspirant had with those in positions of leadership? What negative experiences has he/she had with those in positions of leadership?
6. Does the aspirant evidence leadership in school, work, or church settings? How?
7. Can the aspirant identify personal/professional failures? How did he/she, practically, handle those failures? What insights were learned from those failures? What leadership skills were developed in response to their failure(s)?

Meeting 5

This meeting will focus on whether the aspirant is called by God to the ordained ministry. The following questions will aid the group:

1. Is the person confusing a calling to Christian ministry with a calling to ordination?
2. Are his/her primary interests congruent with the basic function of an ordained person?
3. Are his/her innate abilities commensurate with the demands of the ordained ministry? While asking the questions and listening to the answers the discernment committee should consider whether they can envision this person as a priest in the church? Can they envision this person as their priest?

A Meeting of the Parish Discernment Committee

This meeting is for the committee only. The committee will decide if they wish to recommend the aspirant to the rector. Broadly speaking, the committee will want to evaluate the aspirant with respect to the following categories:

- Character (is the fruit of conversion evidenced in their life?)
- Charism (do they evidence gifting for the ordained ministry?)
- Calling (can they articulate a sense of call? Do you discern a call?)
- Capacity (do they evidence the capabilities necessary for ordained ministry?)
- Competency (do they evidence skills/intellect necessary for ordained ministry?)

In addition to the interactions and questions of the previous weeks the committee may find the following evaluative questions helpful:

- How aware is the person of his/her own feelings?
- How well, and in what ways, does the person express strong positive and negative feelings?
- When dealing with feelings, do physical gestures and movements (body language) match the words spoken?
- To what extent is the person aware of and comfortable with his/her own sexuality? How well integrated is his/her sexual identity with other aspects of life?
- Are there any indications that the person aspires to the ordained ministry as a way of solving his/her personal or vocational problems/disappointments?
- Does the person have a level of maturity and ability to adapt that is commensurate with his/her age level?
- Does he/she show initiative, self-confidence and enthusiasm?

Concluding Meeting with Rector

Finally, a written summary of the discernment committee's work and recommendation will be presented to the aspirant and to the rector. With this information in hand, the rector will make a decision as to whether the aspirant should move forward in the process. In either case, the summary of the parish discernment committee with a letter from the rector will be submitted to Ben Bowman (bbowman@adhope.org) at the Office of Leadership Development.

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