

Commission on Ministry
Guidelines for a
Discernment Committee

GUIDELINES FOR A DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE

The Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas

The following guidelines have been developed to help the Church and an individual to discover a call to ministry. Any call is uniquely individual in nature and comes through an individual relationship with God. In order for the person to formally respond, the call should also be recognized by the Church, which must be able to test and affirm the call.

The process of discerning a call involves a great deal of prayer, time, study, and thoughtfulness by the individual and by the Church. The process of discernment may lead to a more effective ministry in one's daily life, licensing for a liturgical/congregational ministry, or ordination. Regardless of the outcome of the discernment process, both the individual and the Church are strengthened by such careful listening to God and to one another.

The Discernment Process

Every baptized person is a minister and has been given gifts which are to be used to further the Kingdom. The Church provides episcopal guidance, the diocesan Commission on Ministry, the priest, and the Discernment Committee to help a baptized person to discern what his/her gifts are and how those gifts may best be used to further God's kingdom. The Church is to help each baptized person to live into the ministry to which God has called her/him.

The formal discernment process begins with visits between a person and her/his priest. If the call seems to be to ordained ministry, a visit with the bishop is necessary before a discernment committee is formed.

The *Discernment Committee* is an advisory group for the Vestry, the Priest, and the Nominee. The Priest and the Nominee work together to determine the makeup of the committee. Members of the committee should reflect the diversity of the congregation in age and history in the congregation and with the Nominee. Others not members of the congregation may also be asked to be a part of the committee.

Many people who are asked to be on a Discernment Committee say with reluctance, "What do I have to offer? Who am I to judge?" The basic qualifications are within each of us in our life experiences and in the Christian commitment we offer. Members of the Discernment Committee must be willing to be open, honest, confrontive, supportive, and candid in the context of a caring community. No committee member should ask a question that she/he is not willing to answer.

The Discernment Committee is to ask the difficult and challenging questions of vocational discernment. Normally this process will take a minimum of six months, involving between six and eight sessions and should be a mutual exploration of ministry and its meaning. It will begin with an Orientation Meeting, which will be facilitated by a member of the Commission on Ministry.

Throughout the time of the meetings with the Nominee and the Discernment Committee, close communication with the priest is advised. The Discernment Committee will have the support and

guidance of a Commission on Ministry Liaison. The COM Liaison will ensure that communication with the Nominee, the Vestry, and the Priest be maintained throughout the formal discernment and formation process. Upon conclusion of its work, the Discernment Committee presents its recommendations, with a summary report of its work to the Vestry. The Priest and Vestry have the responsibility of making recommendations about the Nominee to the Bishop.

What Do We Mean When We Talk About Ministry?

From the Catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer*:

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?

A. The ministers of the Church are the lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

A. The ministry of the lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

Q. What is the ministry of a bishop?

A. The ministry of a bishop is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as apostle, chief priest, and pastor of a diocese; to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the whole Church; to proclaim the Word of God; to act in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the world and the building up of the Church; and to ordain others to continue Christ's ministry.

Q. What is the ministry of a priest or presbyter?

A. The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.

Q. What is the ministry of a deacon?

A. The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

Q. What is the duty of all Christians?

A. The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God.

From the Examination in “Ordination of a Priest (BCP, 531):

“As a priest, it will be your task to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to fashion your life in accordance with its precepts. You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. You are to preach, to declare God's forgiveness to penitent sinners, to pronounce God's blessing, to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood, and to perform the other ministrations entrusted to you. In all that you do, you are to nourish Christ's people from the riches of his grace, and strengthen them to glorify God in this life and in the life to come.”

From the Examination in “Ordination of a Deacon (BCP, 543)

As a deacon in the Church, you are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. You are to assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, and you are to carry out other duties assigned to you from time to time. At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.”

Procedures for the Discernment Committee

The following process is designed to assist the Discernment Committee in working with the Nominee. It consists of at least six to eight meetings over a period of at least six months. The committee will need to have a Convener, a Recorder and a Chaplain.

- **The Convener** schedules the meetings, notifies the members of the meetings, chairs and facilitates the meetings.
- **The Recorder** is responsible for the report from the Discernment Committee to the Priest and Vestry. This means that the Recorder will need to make sure that all appropriate areas are covered and that notes are kept about the work of the committee and the Nominee's responses.
- **The Chaplain** makes sure that meetings are opened and closed with prayer and appropriate Bible study is included in the work of the committee. Should conflict arise, the Chaplain should be willing to help the committee negotiate the tensions in healthy ways
- **The Vestry Liaison** reports general progress to the vestry, without breaking confidentiality. The liaison's primary role is to be a vestry member with firsthand experience and input during the discernment committee process.

Ongoing evaluation is an important step in this process. One simple way to do this is to list what was helpful and what hindered the process at the end of each session. The COM Liaison may be a resource person for the committee, providing guidance on additional resources and/or areas to explore.

Resources for the Discernment Committee include *The Book of Common Prayer* (particularly pages 832-33, the Catechism section concerning Ministry, the Baptismal Covenant, the Examination sections within the ordination services), I Corinthians 12:1, 4:14, Ephesians 4:7, 11-16, Romans 12:1-8, and Acts 4:13. (Other resources on P. 11)

Group Norms

- Confidentiality
- Don't offer advice.
- Bring questions/concerns/etc. to the whole group (i.e. no one on one conversations about discernment outside the group). A nominee or committee member who has concerns may contact COM Liaison or COM Orientation Leader for help.
- Commitment to process (don't miss meetings)
- Seek the fruit of the Spirit:
 - "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."
(Galatians 5.22-23)
- Other norms may be agreed upon by the group.

OUTLINE OF MEETINGS

Session I (1–1½ hours)

The Discernment Committee, the Nominee, the Priest, and the Commission on Ministry Liaison attend the Orientation Session. At this meeting:

- The Guidelines are reviewed, including roles, responsibilities and resources.
- The Recorder, Convener, and Chaplain are appointed.
- Introductions are made.

Before Session II, the Nominee should provide copies of her/his spiritual autobiography to the Discernment Committee. A copy of the spiritual autobiography should also be sent to the COM Liaison.

A spiritual autobiography is the story of significant events, people, and places that have influenced your relationship with God. As you write your autobiography, consider these helpful prompts:

- What are your early memories of the role of religion or spirituality in your life?
- How has your understanding or experience of God changed in your lifetime?
- What incidents or experiences have been turning points in your spiritual journey?
- What have been your most profound religious experiences? Where have you felt God's presence in your life?
- When have you felt God's absence in your life? Or, when have you turned away from God?
- What are the personal practices that have supported your journey?
- Who are the people who have influenced your faith?
- How have you experienced God's call?

The autobiography should be approximately 2000 words. Your spiritual autobiography will be an important piece of your discernment. It's a good idea to ask your priest or a close friend to help you edit for clarity, as well as spelling and grammar.

Also, before Session II, each Committee Member should make a spiritual timeline. Samples are provided on P. 15–16, at the end of this booklet.

Session II: Getting Acquainted

Scripture selection: Nominee's choice

For this meeting, the Nominee will select a text that has been pivotal in their spiritual journey to share with the group, and briefly share what meaning that text holds for them.

Conversation:

Each Committee Member chooses one point on his/her timeline to present to the group (10 mins.) In this exercise, Committee Members show that they are willing to disclose something of themselves to the group before they ask the Nominee to do so in greater depth. After the timeline events are presented, the Nominee distributes copies of his/her spiritual autobiography and reads it while the committee members follow along. Questions for clarification or elaboration may be asked.

Sessions III–VIII (1–1½ hours each)

After reading and hearing the spiritual autobiography, the Discernment Committee and Nominee explore the following areas. These topics and questions are suggestions. They are not exhaustive. Discernment Committees may add or subtract questions as appropriate to the Nominee.

1. Topic One: Exploration of Gifts for Ministry

Written assignment for the nominee (to be submitted to committee members one week prior to the session): In 500 words, discuss the gifts that you possess that you believe will equip you for the ministry to which you feel called. Also, what are your areas of weakness or uncertainty?

Scripture Selection: Romans 12:1-13 (Read and briefly discuss: What do you hear? What insights does this passage offer us for this meeting?)

Conversation:

- What are your spiritual gifts? How have you identified those gifts?
- Tell us about a time when you have used one of your spiritual gifts. What was the need, and what was your action? How did your use of this spiritual gift impact others? Who benefitted?
- Tell us about a time when you enabled another's spiritual gifts.
- How have you used your spiritual gifts to help build the Church?
- How have you been a leader? How would others describe your leadership style? What has it been like to get others to follow your leadership?
- Tell about a time when you created something new... a new ministry or group or project. Whose idea was it? Did you get help from others? How did it turn out?

- What are the gifts that you know you do not possess? What are the gifts that you think are there, but that you would like to develop further?

2. **Topic Two: The Mission of the Church: What is our Purpose?**

Written assignment for the nominee (to be submitted to committee members one week prior to the session): In 500 words, describe an experience of reconciliation in your life or in the life of someone close to you. Did this impact your understanding of God and the Church, and if so, in what ways?

Scripture Selection: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 (Read and briefly discuss: What do you hear? What insights does this passage offer us for this meeting?)

Conversation: “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” (Book of Common Prayer, 855)

- Talk about a time when you were in a relationship that was broken. How did it break? Did you seek reconciliation? If so, how? How did that work out?
- What are some ways that you have participated in the Church’s mission of reconciliation?
- Frederick Buechner defines call as an intersection of “where our deepest gladness meets the world’s deepest need.” What is your deepest gladness? Where does your gladness meet a need in the world? How have you already been engaged in this call? Where do you see that intersection in the future?
- The Outline of the Faith also says that the duty of all Christians is “to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God” (BCP p. 856). How have you fulfilled these duties? How has that changed over time? Tell about your journey of stewardship – how you give of your time, talent, and money.
- Review the promises all Christians make in the Baptismal Covenant (BCP p. 304-305). Looking at each of the five “discipleship questions,” give examples of how you have lived out those promises in your life so far. Which of the promises do you feel you’ve followed most faithfully? Which ones are most difficult for you? What are the things in your life that prevent you from being faithful to these promises?

3. **Topic Three: One Body, Many Members**

Written assignment for the Nominee (to be submitted to committee members one week prior to the session): In 500 words, discuss what it means to you to be a member of the Episcopal Church. Include how long you have been a member of this Church, and why you choose to be a member of this Church.

Scripture Selection: 1 Corinthians 12:4-28 (Read and briefly discuss: What do you hear? What insights does this passage offer us for this meeting?)

Conversation: Review the various orders of ministry as described in the Catechism (BCP p. 855-856)

- Tell about your experience as a layperson in the church. How have you “represented Christ and his Church,” bearing witness to Christ to others, participating in reconciling work in the world, and participating in the life of the church. How has this been satisfying, or not?
- Describe ways that you have been a servant to those in need. What were those experiences like? What did you learn?
- Tell about a time when you were in conflict with someone who had authority over you. What was the problem? What did you do? How was the situation resolved? What did you learn?
- What are some indications of being called? To any particular vocation? To the ordained ministry?
- Tell about a time when you experienced grace – a gift that you did not deserve or earn, but received anyway. What did you gain from that experience?
- When you reflect on your current sense of call to ordained ministry, what are your fears? Why?
- How might God use some of your “deficiencies” for good?
- How have people in your community responded when they hear that you are discerning for ordination? Who has supported you? Has anyone been surprised? If so, why? Has anyone reacted negatively? If so, why?
- Tell about your life in the Episcopal Church. If coming from another tradition, what drew you to the Episcopal Church? What do you see as the main differences with your former tradition? Have you participated in the Episcopal Church beyond your home parish?

4. Topic Four: Counting the Cost

Written assignment (to be submitted to committee members one week prior to the session): In 500 words, discuss the timing of this potential endeavor. What makes this a good time to begin a new educational process, and a new career pathway? (If applicable, the nominee may wish to invite their spouse or partner to attend this session. This is optional.)

Scripture Selection: Matthew 10:5-16 (Read and briefly discuss: What do you hear? What insights does this passage offer us for this meeting?)

Conversation:

- Describe a time when you chose to make a significant change in your life. What was your goal? What did you sacrifice in order to achieve that goal? How did you manage the stress related to the change? What did you learn from that experience?
- What do you imagine you would have to give up in order to pursue ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church? How do you feel about those potential sacrifices?
- Talk about the potential roadblocks between you and the possibility of ordination (financial, health, relocation, etc.) How will you navigate these roadblocks?
- (If there is a spouse) How does your spouse feel about this call? In what ways is he/she supportive? Is he/she willing to make changes (financial, moving for seminary, etc.)?
- What is your educational background? How did you do as a student? How do you feel about going through an educational process again?
- Describe an experience when you were disappointed. What happened and how did you respond?
- Describe an experience of conflict. What happened and how did you respond?
- What do you do regularly to take care of yourself? Are there any persistent struggles that affect your wellness?

After exploring these topics, the committee and nominee should discuss whether there are any topics that require further discussion, or any important areas left untouched. The committee and nominee may schedule additional meetings as needed.

Session VII (1–1½ hours)

The Committee meets without the Nominee to complete the Report to the Vestry and Priest. The COM Liaison may be invited to this meeting if the committee feels it needs help, but the Liaison need not be present.

The final session should be scheduled to include the committee, the Nominee, the Priest, and the Commission on Ministry Liaison. **The Nominee, Priest, and COM Liaison should be sent a copy of the draft report at least one week prior to the meeting.**

Written assignment for the nominee (to be submitted to committee members, the Priest, and the Commission on Ministry Liaison one week prior to the final session): In 500 words, discuss what you have learned about yourself and your call in this discernment process.

Session VIII (1 hour)

The Committee, Nominee, Priest, and COM Liaison meet to review the Report to the Vestry. Revisions may be made, using feedback from the Nominee, Priest or committee members. The Discernment process is brought to closure.

After completion of the report, a copy should be given to the Nominee, Priest, and vestry. A copy should also be sent to the Bishop's Office. An updated spiritual autobiography and the nominee's final written assignment (what was learned in the discernment process) should also be sent to the COM Liaison and to the Bishop's Office.

OTHER RESOURCES

"Discernment," by Frank Rogers, Jr., *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy Bass, editor, Jossey-Bass
Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed, Susanne Watson Epting, Morehouse Publishing,
2015

Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All, L. William Countryman, Morehouse
Publishing, Harrisburg, PA, 1999

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

REPORT OF THE DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE
To the Priest and Vestry

(Name of Nominee)

(Name of Church)

(Date)

(COM Liaison)

The findings of the Discernment Committee follow (use additional pages if necessary):

What is this person's understanding of Christian ministry?

How is this person growing in the Christian faith?

Describe the current and past ministries of this person.

What is this person's capacity to learn?

What is the status of this person's physical and emotional health?

Describe this person's leadership style and roles.

How do you experience this person's ministry?

What do you believe is this person's call to ministry? Do you believe the call is to ordained ministry, and if yes, to which order? What evidence do you see in this person's life to support your conclusion?

What obstacles or weaknesses are present that may prevent this person serving fully and fruitfully as an ordained minister of the Church?

What additional training, skills, and resources does this person need to respond to this call?

Recommendation:

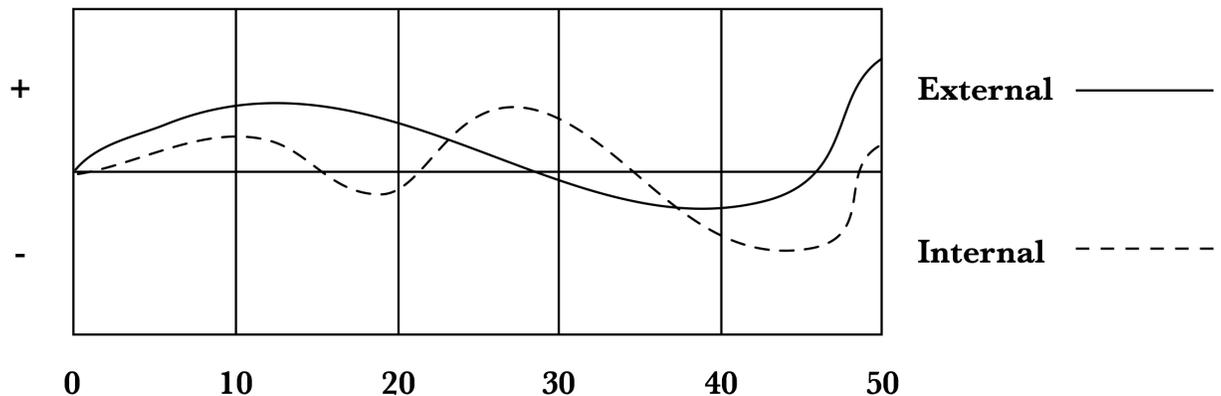
Signed: _____
Discernment Committee Convener

Received by: _____
Priest Sr. Warden

Spiritual Timeline Examples

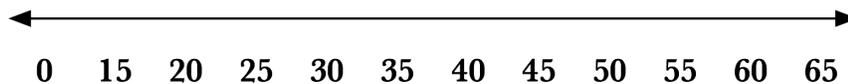
Example 1

1. First, take some time to reflect quietly on your life using a “lifeline.”



- a. The “external” line describes the events of your life and your experience of what your life was like: Did you feel that you were growing, that you were angry, lonely, etc.?
 - b. The “internal” line describes your spiritual life.
 - c. Put X’s on the external and internal lines to mark important and/or meaningful experiences in your life.
2. After you have done your timeline, you can share what you are comfortable sharing with your committee.
 - a. You do not have to share events that are private.
 - b. Sharing our stories with one another is a way we begin to build a caring community.
 - c. Each story is personal, and each person is unique.
 - d. Sharing with the group is a way we may experience the power of God’s love.

Example 2



1. Use a timeline to divide your life into meaningful time segments and transitions.
2. Describe each time segment with a phrase, metaphor, movie, song title, or book title to represent the major theme or issue of that time in your life.
3. Share with the group what and how you segmented your life in that manner.

DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE ROLE ASSIGNMENTS:

Convener: _____

Recorder: _____

Chaplain: _____

Vestry Liaison: _____

Group Norms:

- Confidentiality
- Bring questions/concerns/etc. to the whole group (i.e. no one on one conversations about discernment outside the group). A nominee or committee member who has concerns may contact COM Liaison or COM Orientation Leader for help.
- Commitment to process (don't miss meetings)
- Fruit of the Spirit
"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."
(Galatians 5.22-23)

Other norms:

Meeting Schedule: