

Appendix B: Discernment

(Forming a Congregational Discernment Team and
Three Recommended Discernment Study Guides)

Part One: Discernment

The People of God, infused with the Holy spirit and assisted by resources and training provided by the Bishop and Commission on Ministry, seek persons whose demonstrated qualities of Christian commitment and potential for leadership and vision mark them as desirable candidates for positions of ordained leadership in the Church. Such persons must be confirmed adult communicants in good standing (TEC Canons III.3.1).

Discernment is a process of reflection that leads a person to understand God's call at a given time or in particular circumstances. Discernment involves listening to God through prayer and meditation, scripture, personal experiences, and other people.

Initial Discernment

A person interested in entering into the discernment process for ordained ministry, first meets with the rector or priest-in-charge of his or her congregation for advice and guidance. Where there is no Rector or Priest-in-charge, the congregation is in transition, etc., the Dean of the Convocation in which your congregation is located will supervise your process, or (in consultation with you and with the approval of the Bishop) will appoint a priest to be your Supervising Cleric during your process.

Items that you and your Supervising Cleric may discuss include, but are not limited to:

- How and why you were identified (perhaps the person who identified you, if it was someone other than yourself, could be included in this conversation to explain why s/he thinks you are called to ordination).
- What ministries, both within the congregation and outside it, you have been involved with as well as your activities in the Convocation and/or Diocese.
- Your understanding of the role to which you have been called
- A brief discussion of the process leading to ordination, including the financial aspects.
- Writing a Faith Journey.

Formation of a Congregational Discernment Team

After you have met with your rector/priest-in-charge and discussed your sense of call to ordained ministry you and your supervising cleric will form a Congregational Discernment Team (Step 2 of the Checklist).

Purpose of a Discernment Team:

- To help the discerner hear more clearly God's call and how this call is played out in the discerner's spiritual journey.
- To be a sounding board for the thoughts and questions being raised.
- To know the person, his/her background, his/her present ministry, his/her understanding of a call and where he/she feels led by this call.
- To help the discerner identify whether or not their call is to ordained or lay ministry and to help them verbalize this call.

Note: The congregational discernment team is NOT a support group or an advocacy group lobbying for the discerner. The team is rather a group interested not only in the discerner but in the life and ministry of the Episcopal Church.

Size and Composition of a Discernment Team:

A recommended size for a discernment team is three to six persons. The discerner suggests some people and the clergy person suggests some. All persons suggested must be acceptable to both the discerner and the supervising cleric. The team should reflect the diversity of the congregation and its ministries. They can have varying degrees of relationship with the discerner. People do not have to have had prior experience with discernment.

It is wise to think of the following as you and the clergy person build the team:
You may want to include:

- Someone from outside the congregation, another denomination or faith.
- Someone from another Episcopal Church.
- Some people who know you.
- Someone who represents the interest of the congregation (Vestry person, etc.).
- People who will challenge you.
- People of integrity – can keep confidentiality.
- A clergy person on the team might be helpful – example, a pastor from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) or the United Methodist Church (UMC).–The clergy person from your congregation doesn't have to be on the team.
- People open to God's movement in their lives.
- People who have the gifts of frankness and courage.

- People who have the welfare of the larger Church always in mind.
- Persons of prayer, humility, confidentiality, and openness to the working of the Holy Spirit within the Church.
- Someone who may have experience in the type of ministry to which you are feeling called.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important issue to consider. It will be necessary to keep this in mind when you are choosing team members. The team will need to have a conversation about confidentiality and make a covenant with one another about keeping the content of the discernment sessions confidential. Why?

Discernment is very personal. The topics discussed can and even should be very sensitive. The team needs to balance sensitivity with inquiry. It is unfair to accept a conversation at a level that does not ask the group and the discerner to struggle. This struggle with and the expression of the deep sense of personal relationship with God and others is central to the practice of creative ministry.

Discernment Team Sessions

Orientation

The first session (2-3 hours) is for introductions and orientation. Team members will introduce themselves and the overall ordination process, including discernment, will be presented. The team is expected to invite a member of the diocesan COM to help with this. The supervising cleric should also be part of this initial meeting. This is a time to get process questions answered and agree on session format. For this first meeting of the discernment team, everyone will need the following materials:

- Diocese of Eastern Michigan Ordination Manual
- A copy of pertinent canons
- A copy of the particular discernment program/plan/guide the group will be using. The discerner and supervising cleric will decide on which discernment process, offered by the COM, best suits the discerner's situation. They may choose to include some or all of the committee in making this decision. The COM of the Diocese of Eastern Michigan recommends one of the following. There is additional information on these three programs later in this appendix.
 1. A study guide using *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* by Suzanne Farnam et al)
 2. A study guide written by Elaine Nocks based on *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* by William C. Placer. This study guide was developed in cooperation with the Fund for Theological Education. The study guide is available online at www.ptev.org/images/uploads/news/Callings%20Study%20Guide.pdf.

Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation is available on Amazon.

3. A discernment process used by other dioceses in Province V (Chicago, Minnesota, and Iowa)

Understanding discernment

It is important that the team understand what discernment is and what type of discernment process the team will use. Some time will need to be spent in dialogue about the general topic of discernment in order to make sure all members are familiar with what is expected and what will happen.

Working as a team

The team will need to spend some time on deciding how to function together as a team. What are the roles that will be helpful to the process with this group of people? Having this discussion at the beginning helps keep the focus of the team on the work to be done rather than on group dynamics that can arise and interfere with the process. There are various roles described below. The team will decide which are important to use.

Possible Roles in a Discernment Team

In the orientation session, the team will also need to discuss and decide upon the structure of the team and how it will operate together. It may be advisable to have defined roles. The roles could rotate through the team or remain with one person for the duration. The team will decide if it needs all of the following roles or just some of them. At the very least, it would be advisable to have a facilitator. The team may be willing to share all the rest of the responsibilities during each of the sessions.

Convener

- Notify people of the sessions.
- Make sure the meeting place is reserved.
- Assign roles for each gathering.

Facilitator

- Keep the session on track and schedule.
- Make sure everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity to speak.
- Observe the tone and spirit of the gathering.
- Know if and when to take a break.

Worship Leader

- Select prayers/devotional material for the session.
- Lead prayers for the session.
- Lead Bible study

Recorder

- If the team decides it needs notes, take the official notes of the session.

- Prepare the report to the clergy and Vestry with agreement from the team.

Process Observer

- Is aware of positive and negative dynamics in the group.
- Calls a break to discuss group dynamics, if necessary.
- Observes the behaviors in the group and suggests changes if necessary.

Setting meeting times and dates

With the exception of the first orientation session each discernment session will be 1½ to 2 hours in length. A discernment process can take from 3 to 6 months.

There is no minimum or maximum time for a discernment process. The team and discerner follow the direction of the Holy Spirit in deciding when discernment is complete. However, if the COM thinks that the process has been rushed they may ask the individual to repeat it or take other additional steps.

This length, of course, may vary depending on the individual and the team. In smaller congregations, people may know each other well enough that some of the discernment has already happened through interactions in daily life. In larger congregations, the team will likely not know each other well enough and the length of time may be longer. It is important that the team decide when the discernment is finished. A consensus will generally emerge and the group will sense when it is finished.

A Suggested Session Outline

1. Gather and check in with each other. This is a brief updating, couple of minutes per person, so that the group knows what is going on with each person.
2. Prayer, meditation, Bible study. The person assigned for this role may decide how the group will pray together.
 - Prayers for self and others.
 - Meditation on scripture or devotional reading and/or
 - Brief Bible study such as the “African” bible study

The use of Scripture has long been a traditional way of helping us to become aware of God’s action and will. Various methods have been used. Be present and open to the scene and to that person’s experience, being sensitive to the insights and movements given by the Holy Spirit. How do these insights increase your awareness of the meaning and role of the Church, the ordained ministry, and prayer and ministry as Christians? How does all this relate to the vision and call of this individual to ministry?
3. Focus for the study session
4. Reflection on the session

5. Closing prayers
6. Reminder about the next session

Asking Reflective Questions, Listening, and Observing

Reflective questions provide the opening for deeper conversation. (List some examples of reflective questions) Asking reflective questions is a technique that the team can develop. This type of reflective dialogue also requires listening in a way to draw conclusions from examples.

The discernment team will want to keep the following attributes and dispositions of the discerner in mind throughout the entire process. These attributes and dispositions will be revealed in a variety of ways in the conversations rather than by asking direct questions about them.

- Communication skills
- Ability to relate to others
- Personal integrity and self-esteem
- Physical health and energy
- Intellectual gifts and strengths
- Sense of own strengths and limitations

Knowing when to end the discernment

There are several ways the team knows the discernment is finished.

- The discerner has reached the clarity he/she was seeking.
- The team feels any progress has stopped and it may be necessary to stop meeting or to take an extended break.
- There seems to be an impasse due to personalities on the team.
- It is discovered that the discerner needs to seek a different type of help.

There should be a consensus before proceeding to the next step. The discerner may:

- Decide to pursue the strengthening of a more clarified call to his/her lay ministry.
- Decide to pursue a call to an ordained ministry.
- Decide to take some time in study and practice in a variety of ministries.
- Decide that there are other issues in his/her life that need more resolution before proceeding.

In any case, the team and the supervising cleric may want to help the discerner develop whatever plans seem to be emerging.

Reporting to clergy and to the Vestry

It is expected that the team will keep the supervising cleric and vestry informed of the process and some sense of what progress is being made. When the process is completed a report will be submitted.

Closure: The Report to the Vestry/Bishop's Committee

When a congregational discernment team reaches closure, a letter needs to be written to the Vestry/Bishop's Committee. This letter may be kept in the discerner's file. If the discerner is called to Holy Orders, a copy of this letter will be forwarded to the Diocesan COM to be kept in the discerner's file at the diocesan office.

The team includes the following information in this letter:

- A statement of the outcome of the discernment process; the conclusion reached about the ministry to which the discerner is called.
- A description of the process used for discernment.
- A statement indicating the relationship between the discerner and the members of the team – how long each member has known the discerner and in what capacity.

Part Two:

Three Discernment Programs Recommended by the Commission on Ministry

The COM of the Diocese of Eastern Michigan recommends one of the following:

1. A study guide using *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* by Suzanne Farnam et al). *Listening Hearts* is available on Amazon. There is also a copy at the Resource Center at the Diocesan Center.
2. A study guide written by Elaine Nocks based on *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* by William C. Placer. This study guide was developed in cooperation with the Fund for Theological Education. The study guide is available online at www.ptev.org/images/uploads/news/Callings%20Study%20Guide.pdf. *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* is available on Amazon. There is also a copy at the Resource Center at the Diocesan Center.
3. “Province V” Discernment Process currently or previously used by other dioceses in Province V (Chicago, Minnesota, and Iowa).

Recommendation 1:

A Study Guide for *Listening Hearts—Discerning Call in Community*

Each member of the Discernment Committee will need a copy of *Listening Hearts*. The appendices include guidelines for discernment groups (similar to what the COM suggests earlier in this appendix). In addition there is an appendix with questions to raise when serving on a discernment committee.

Below are outlines for 7 sessions.

Session One: Listening

Focus: During this first session the structure of the meetings is introduced, including its educational and reflective styles. If members of the group do not know each other, this is a good time to do some basic introductions.

Introductions

Prayer: A Prayer for Quiet Confidence, BCP page 232

Review “Listening Hearts”

What is Ministry? What is the ministry of each member of the Discernment Group? What is the current ministry of the Seeker?

What is Listening? How do you listen for God? How do you know what God wants of you? What are the impediments to the discernment of listening for God? What conditions help us discern God’s call?

You may want to invite visitor(s) who are deacons, priests, and active lay people doing ministry to give a presentation about their ministry and answer questions. Ask them also to share their story of how they discerned their call into this ministry.

Review Appendix 1 Guidelines for Discernment Groups, pages 77-78. The Facilitator should present a schedule of meetings at this point. End the session with five minutes of silence.

Closing Prayer: Prayer of Thomas Merton, *Listening Hearts*, pg. 145.

Session Two: Service

Focus: This session answers in more depth, “What is Ministry from Session One.

Opening Silence closing with
Prayer of Vocation in Daily Work, BCP pg 261

Exercise A

Have individuals in the group list on newspaper print priestly leadership skills & responsibilities as they perceive them. Compare this list with the “Examination of Priest” from the Book of Common Prayer (page 531). The goal of this exercise is to clarify our understanding what priests are really ordained to do. This exercise may be repeated focusing on all of the baptized, deacons, and bishops.

Exercise B

Read aloud with one member of the group taking the role of “celebrant” the Renewal of Baptismal Vows, BCP pages 292-294.

Which of these vows are easy for each member of the group to fulfill? Which are harder, if not impossible? When do you succeed in “seeking and serving Christ in all persons?” Where do you (and the Church) fail? Share personal stories. How do you proclaim by word and example the Good News? Which is easier for you, word or example?

Who have been examples in your local community of servanthood? What qualities do they exhibit? When do you feel called to serve? Whom do you feel you are not called to serve?

Reflect on the Examination in the service of ordination: of a deacon (BCP page 543); of a priest (BCP page 531).

Closing Prayer: Prayer for Social Service, BCP page 260.

Session Three: Mission

Focus: This session continues with the question from Session One “What is the ministry of each member of the Discernment Group” and expands it to include future ministry possibilities.

Opening Silence closing with

Prayer for the Mission of the Church, BCP page 816

Exercise A

Read together Matthew 28

How do you know the Resurrection of Jesus? Who was your Mary, the one who told you of Jesus rising from the dead? Review the three mission questions on the top of page 855 in the BCP.

What is Good News for you? How do you share it? In what ways do you exhibit an Easter attitude?

Exercise B

Reflect on the Seeker’s vision statement. The vision statement is a brief outline of what the Seeker believes God’s calling into ministry is for him/her. This may be vague or detailed, but it gives the group a brief introduction as to where the Seeker is in discernment.

Exercise C

The spouse or partner of the Seeker may be invited to this session to explore future ministry possibilities. This may be a good time to talk with the partner/spouse of the Seeker regarding his/her call to ordained ministry and what that means to the family.

Silence closing with

Collect for the Second Sunday of Easter, BCP page 224.

Session Four: Growth, Transformation, Transfiguration

Focus: This session focuses on spiritual formation and attention to self-health.

Opening Silence closing with

Collect for the Last Sunday of Epiphany

Our Baptismal vows call upon us to “continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in all the prayers.” (BCP page 304). In what ways has each member of the group sought to edify themselves and their faith in Christ? Bible Study? Holy Reading? Retreats? Daily Office? Spiritual Direction? How has your prayer life changed/deepened since your baptism or confirmation? How do you deal with periods of spiritual crisis, dryness, and tedium?

At ordination the ordained promises to “be diligent in the reading and study of Holy Scriptures, and in seeking the knowledge of such things as may make you a stronger and more able minister of Christ.” (BCP page 532)

How does your parish support your priest in fulfilling this vow? Why is this vow necessary for the life and health of the Church?

How have you experienced failure in this life? Disappointment? Tragedy and Grief? Regardless of the completeness of your healing, how have you been changed into someone more resembling Christ through this experience?

Reflect on the Seeker’s Spiritual Journey. What key situations, people, events shaped the Seeker’s journey? What might be the influences of the Seeker’s current vocational passion? Where has growth and transformation occurred?

Silence closing with

Prayer – “O God of Unchangeable Power...” BCP page 291

Session Five: Holiness

Focus: This session focuses on self-awareness and openness. Church leaders sometimes have public roles that force them into living in a “fish bowl.” Church leaders are often faced with issues of conflict management and interpersonal communication styles.

Opening Silence closing with

Collect at Baptism, BCP page 254

Read together Matthew 5:48 and Philippians 3:7-13

What is the Holy Life? What does it look like? Who is perfect? What does it mean to “pattern your life (and that of your family in accordance with the precepts of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?” How is life in the Church a “school for holiness?” Married life? Describe someone in your life who is an example of holiness.

How well do you know yourself? Share a time when you were brought up short and an unattractive part of yourself was disclosed to you.

Are you, the Seeker, aware of your effect on the people around you?

How do you perceive the others in your group? In what ways do they exhibit godliness? To what extent do you buy into the myth that ordination is the ticket to holiness?

How tolerant are you of ambiguity and uncertainty? What is your taste for mystery? In other words, how big is your box for God? How big is your box for your neighbors who differ from you due to race, economic class, health, sexual orientation or gender?

Silence closing with

Collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas Day, BCP page 214.

Session Six: Leadership

Focus: This session focuses on self-awareness and leadership style. There are many leadership styles and there are many settings for ministry. What leadership style matches the leadership needs of a particular ministry setting (e.g. Rector of a corporate-size congregation, a family-size congregation, a hospital chaplain, etc)?

Silence closing with

Collect for the Church, BCP page 816

Read together Numbers 11:16-17, 24-25 and Matthew 9:35-38

How do these lessons characterize leadership? What is the nature of Christ's leadership? Directive? Non-directive? Builder of consensus? Democratic?

How would you characterize the relationship of Jesus to his disciples?

Does your congregation find a focus in its priest? Does it derive its identity from the priest, or its inspiration? Is your church more accustomed to a "top-down" style of leadership or a combination of both? Does the authority of the priest derive from the position/status to him/her by the church or does the authority come from the person? How anxious is the seeker when placed in leadership roles?

What qualities does each member of the discernment group demonstrate that either exhibits leadership or enhances it in others both in the church and in the world?

Silence closing with

Collect for Prayer 29, BCP page 236

Session Seven: Obedience

Focus: During this session, the group, including the Seeker, is wrapping up the previous six sessions. Listening deeply is the focus.

Opening silence closing with

Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, BCP page 225

The word obedience derives from the Latin word “to hear or listen deeply.”

Name/explore some persons in the Bible who are examples of this kind of obedience. Abraham, Sarah, Ruth, Samuel, Jesus, Peter, Paul. In each case, there were some heavy prices to pay for their obedience that preceded whatever reward came to them.

What are the limitations, restrictions, and other realities in the person’s life that must be reckoned with and obeyed? These may take the form of responsibilities and obligations (to marriage, commitments, children, family, self) that must be honored prior to making the sacrifices of the ordained ministry. Ordination never rescues a person from these more fundamental places of faithfulness.

Have the Seeker, the members of the group been faithful in their sacrificial giving to the church in time, talent, and treasure? What challenges and what blessings have resulted in such exercises of obedience?

How has the Seeker displayed commitment in the face of hardship?

Silence closing with

Prayer of St. Chrysostom, BCP page 126.

Recommendation 2:

A Study Guide for use with *Callings—Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*

The Commission on Ministry is presently working toward obtaining a copy of this study guide for inclusion in this manual. For now, this study guide is a PDF file available at

www.ptev.org/images/uploads/news/Callings%20Study%20Guide.pdf.

Callings is divided into four large chapters based on historical epochs in Christian religious thought. The study guide follows the same chronology but clusters the readings into eight lessons based on selected readings from the text.

1. Called to a Christian Life: Vocations in the Early Church
 - a. Lesson 1: Christian Calling as Heroic Commitment
 - b. Lesson 2: Giving Up Worldly Things
2. Called to Religious Life: Vocations in the Middle Ages
 - a. Lesson 3: The Vocation of Daily Discipline
 - b. Lesson 4: Contemplation, Charity and Obedience
3. Every Work a Calling: Vocations after the Reformation
 - a. Lesson 5: Acquiring a Christian Character
 - b. Lesson 6: Personal and Social Awakenings
4. Christian Callings in a Post-Christian World
 - a. Lesson 7: Faith and Work in a Modern World
 - b. Lesson 8: Costs, Courage and Commitment

There is a copy of *Callings* at the Resource Center at the Diocesan Center to look at for those considering this program.

Recommendation 3:

Province V* Discernment Process

Session 1: Getting Acquainted

1. Discerner distributes a written draft of his/her spiritual journey and call.
2. Group establishes overall organization and schedule for the meetings.
3. Group (including discerner) discusses what it is to have a sense of “call” in one’s life – how it is known, sensed, experienced, heard, learned, etc. and how we respond to it.
4. Group becomes sensitive to the following characteristics (especially in the discerner, but also in each other):
 - Communication skills
 - Ability to relate to others
 - Personal integrity and self-esteem
 - Physical health and energy
 - Intellectual gifts and abilities

Session 2: Biography of Discerner

1. Discerner reflects on his/her spiritual journey, giving insight into personality, strengths and weaknesses.
2. Group discusses (with discerner) the significant life experiences that have shaped the discerner’s present identity and life direction.
3. Group becomes sensitive to the discerner’s sense of strengths and weaknesses (limitations).
4. Discerner re-writes autobiography after the session.

Session 3: Insights into Ministry

1. Discerner distributes his/her re-written spiritual journey.
2. Group discusses the distinctions between the ministries of the laity, deacons, priests, and bishops.
3. Group (with discerner) discusses the meanings and differences that distinguish the various ministries.
4. Group becomes sensitive to new ideas, concerns and points of confusion, discovering each other’s understanding of ministry.

**This discernment process was originally from the Diocese of Iowa and used by the Dioceses of Chicago and Minnesota. The Commission on Ministry in the Diocese of Eastern Michigan renamed it the Province V Discernment Process.*

Session 4: Discerner's Present Ministry and Theology

1. Discerner presents a description of his/her current ministry.
 - How is this ministry being validated?
 - How is this different from the ministry of deacon, priest or bishop?
 - Would the discerner's ministry be enriched by ordination?
2. Discerner shares and group discusses how they relate to
 - Prayer
 - The sacraments
 - Scripture
 - Authority
 - Obedience

Session 5: Discerner's Sense of Call

1. Discerner distributes a description of his/her sense of "call".
 - From God
 - From the community
 - In the context of his/her family and friends
2. The group (with discerner) sensitively discusses what had been written, recognizing that the ability to struggle with and express the deep sense of personal relationship with God and others is central to creative ministry. The discerner is challenged to risk and speak deeply about his/her call.

Session 6: What does the Discerner Bring to this Call

1. Discerner presents written insights and reflections on "moral character"
 - What that means to the discerner
 - How what that means shows in his or her life.
 - How the discerner copes with failure to live up to his/her standard of behavior.
2. Discerner's work experiences – how these experiences relate to the discerner's sense of call?
3. What vision does the discerner bring to the future ministry? (To what extent is it open-ended?)
4. Does the discerner have any burdensome financial obligations?

Session 7. Whom Does the Discerner Bring to the Call?

1. Discerner's spouse or partner also attends the session.
2. How does the discerner's family relate to the call?
 - Realistic vision?
 - What is the role of the family in the decision to explore ordination to the priesthood?
 - What about the potential personal and financial stress with the seminary training?
3. Are there other family pressures involved in the decision?

Session 8: Committee Reflection

1. Group meets without discerner.
 - Each committee member brings written observations/reflections to share.
 - An outline of the reflections is prepared to share with the discerner.
2. Group meets with discerner
 - Outline is shared with the discerner
 - Discussion
 - Discerner has the opportunity to discuss areas he/she feel/thinks have been discovered or unexplored.
3. Committee chair drafts letter for the Vestry following the outline prepared in this session; the draft is circulated among committee membership before

Session 9: Final Meeting of the Committee

Committee meets, possibly, over dinner to review comments and suggest improvements for the letter drafted by the chair.

Final Task. Chair presents the letter to the Vestry and responds to their questions.