

Finding your Gifts

A Process for Discerning a Call to Ministry within the Parish
Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan

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Steps in Parish Discernment for Ordination or Lay Ministry

1. Applicant desires to spiritually explore a call within his or her community of faith.
2. Applicant meets with the person canonically in charge of their parish for recommendation to begin discernment process.
3. If the applicant may be seeking ordination, the person canonically in charge notifies the bishop and chair of the Commission on Ministry. The COM Chair will generally identify a liaison on the Commission on Ministry who will serve as a resource for the application. Members of the parish committee shall be named by the person canonically in charge, assisted by the applicant and the Vestry.
4. Committee names a convener and recorder, sets the meeting schedule and outlines the process.
5. Parish discernment: During this initial phase of discernment (usually about one year in length,) the individual, with the assistance of the discernment committee looks closely at their life calling, reflecting thoughtfully and prayerfully while experiencing the input and support of one's Congregation or community of faith.
6. At the end of the discernment process, the Committee makes a determination on the applicant's call completing a "Statement of Recommendation." In the case of a recommendation for ordination, a "Letter of Support" is requested from the vestry which shall be signed by two thirds of the members of the vestry. The letter of support shall be forwarded to the Bishop. In addition, a Discernment Narrative detailing committee members' findings shall be supplied to the bishop. A letter of recommendation from the person canonically in charge is also required.

For more specific information on the steps of the ordination process as it pertains to priestly ministry, please see **"A Guide to the Diaconal Ordination Process and its Requirements in the Diocese of Western Michigan"**

For more specific information on the steps of the ordination process as it pertains to priestly ministry, please see **"A Guide to the Priestly Ordination Process and its Requirements in the Diocese of Western Michigan"**

Establishing a Parish Discernment Committee

As Saint Paul teaches, there are many roles to be performed within the Church and the world and many gifts dispersed among us that may equip us to perform those roles. Each of us, if we make the effort to become aware of our abilities and gifts and be intentionally open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, will discover that we have been given specific ways through which we can live out our part in the common ministry. Being open to God's call does not always lead to ordination; many opportunities exist within the church that allow for the expression of ones valuable gifts and do not require official sanctioning or ordination. Other ministries require licensing by the diocese such as Eucharistic Ministers, Eucharistic Visitors and Worship Leaders.

When someone in a parish today begins to sense that she or he is called to ordained ministry, we look to the community - the congregation - to affirm the calling. For this reason, in the Episcopal Church, anyone who wishes to be ordained must first be an active member of a parish or ministry community and must be sponsored for ordination by the priest and vestry of that parish or community.

When a faithful church member approaches his or her priest and the members of a *Parish Discernment Committee*, that person is offering to make him or herself vulnerable by inviting others to consider some of the very deepest hopes, thoughts, works, gifts and limitations of his or her life. Making such an offering takes great courage, and the person who does so must be treated with the utmost respect and care.

At the same time, the role of the Committee is to test how a particular applicant's gifts can be best used within the Church. All ministries make use of our gifts. Ordained ministry requires certain specific gifts and abilities, including insight, openness, patience, compassion, strength to endure in difficult times, teaching, prophecy, leadership, guiding others to awareness of the presence of God in their lives, and skill in developing a congregation. Each individual brings different combinations of gifts, including some which are unique or nearly so. Members of a *Discernment Committee* are asked engage in a journey with the applicant to both to identify those gifts and to consider how they can be used to empower the Church. The end result of this journey may be either an affirmation of the call to ordained ministry or to the continuation of the call to lay ministry. Helping an individual recognize and embrace a genuine lay ministry, originating from baptismal vows, is of equal or greater importance than guiding a person to ordination.

Purpose of a Parish Discernment Committee

- To help the applicant hear more clearly God's call and how this call is played out in the applicant's spiritual journey.
- To walk with the applicant, to support and encourage the questions.
- 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.

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

Recommended Organizational Guidelines

- A. A discernment team should consist of 5 – 7 members, including the applicant.
- B. Members of the team should be selected collectively by the rector, COM liason, and vestry, or vestry and person canonically in charge. The COM liason should not serve on the parish discernment team.
- C. Members should be committed to the goals of the discernment.
- D. The discernment team should meet a minimum of six times over a period of several months, or until they have collectively reached a spiritual conclusion.
- E. Members of the discernment committee should be comfortable expressing their faith journey verbally.
- F. Meetings should begin and end with prayer and start with spiritual meditation through scripture.

Suggestions for Composition of the Committee

- A. Some people from outside the congregation, another denomination or faith.
- B. Someone from another Episcopal Church.
- C. Some people who know the applicant
- D. Someone who represents leadership within the congregation (Vestry person, etc.).
- E. People who will challenge the applicant
- F. People of integrity who can keep confidentiality.
- G. 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). Parish clergy should not be members of the committee.
- H. People who can articulate their own vocation and ministry in the context of the work of the Church.
- I. People open to God's movement in their lives.
- J. People who have the gifts of frankness and courage.
- K. People who have the welfare of the larger Church in mind.
- L. Persons of prayer, humility, confidentiality, and openness to the working of the Holy Spirit within the Church.

Procedures for the Parish Discernment Committee

The following outline is designed to assist in the discernment process with your applicant. It consists of six to eight meetings over a period of at least six months.

1. The convener, appointed by the rector, conducts all meetings, helps the group to follow the agenda, makes sure meeting times are known by all the members, and starts and finishes meetings on time. The applicant should not be asked to run meetings. If the convener is unable to attend a meeting, s/he should appoint someone else to convene for that meeting. The applicant should not fill that role.
2. The clerk or recorder keeps a record of each session and provides them to the Committee for further reflection when writing the discernment narrative. This job can be rotated among several members of the Committee.
3. All members are to be involved in this exploration and journey.
4. It is important to open and close your meetings with prayer. This may be shared by members of the Committee. You may want to use the following Bible passages to guide you in the discernment of gifts: Matthew 5: 1-11; 1 Corinthians 12: 1, 4-14; Ephesians 4: 7, 11-16; Romans 12: 1-8; Acts 4: 1-13. These could be read aloud as the group begins to meet and discussed as a way of becoming clearer concerning spiritual gifts.
5. How the group is working together is a very important part of this process. You are encouraged to use some method at the end of each meeting to keep abreast of how the group sees its work progressing. Ask what helped and what hindered, what to continue doing, what to delete and what to add to how you work together.
6. Remember, that although your work is primarily focused on the applicant, this is an opportunity for mutual discernment. Each member of the Committee is asked to participate in the offering of one's own journey of faith. It is not unusual for a member of a Committee to discern a new call or to feel affirmed in how one's gifts are being offered through this experience.
7. This process is confidential-Committee members should limit all discussions concerning the process to the meetings themselves. Problems, concerns, etc., should be discussed as a group.
8. Questions asked of the applicant or of one another are to be open and honest which is more difficult than it may sound. This means giving no advice, no "why don't you . . . ?" No "Here's what happened to" This process should not be burdened by the personal agendas of the Committee members, no matter how loving or helpful they may seem. Only ask real, honest open questions.

Example: Rather than asking, "Have you ever thought that it might be your mother's fault?" (which is a question that is advice in disguise), an open honest question is one that the questioner could not possibly know the answer to. "Did you ever feel like this before?"
9. Ask questions that are brief and to the point.
10. Trust your intuition in asking questions, even if it seems a little odd. Example: "What color is your present job and what is the color of the vocation you are discerning?"

11. It is important that if a Committee member's questions are not honest and open that the convener and/or other members remind that person of the ground rules.

12. Sometimes one may not feel ready to answer a particular question and it is important to let the question rest until such a time that it can be answered. Those kinds of questions have a wonderful way of working on the person long after the initial asking.

13. Your time together should be relaxed and gentle. The Committee is not an inquisition nor is it a cross-examination. Leave time between questions for reflection and assimilation. Do not be afraid of silence in the group. Trust it and honor it. Resist the temptation to fill the silence simply to fill it. Silence in a group may mean that something important is happening. Be present to one another

14. Please be mindful that discernment is primarily about listening to the Spirit. In discernment, we are letting go of the pretense that we know what is best for another and we learn to trust the inner stirrings and wisdom of the Spirit in our own lives. You are not looking for the "right" answers. You are seeking to hear what the Spirit is "saying" through your questions, reflections, etc.

15. The suggested amount of time for each session is 90 minutes.

Discernment Listening Guidelines

“Discernment means distinguishing the voice of God from other voices that speak to us.”

“Discernment is a prayerful, informed, and intentional attempt to sort through these voices to get in touch with God’s Spirit at work in a situation and to develop a sense of direction in which the Spirit is leading.”

1. Take time to become settled in God’s presence.
2. Listen to others with your entire self (senses, feelings, intuition, and rational faculties).
3. Speak for yourself only, expressing your own thoughts and feelings, referring to your own experience. Avoid being hypothetical.
4. Do not challenge what others say.
5. Do not interrupt.
6. Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking.
7. Pause between speakers to absorb what has been said.
8. Listen to the group as a whole—to those who have not spoken verbally as well as to those who have; generally, leave space for anyone who may want to speak a first time before speaking a second time yourself.

These are guidelines, not hard and fast rules. Discernment does require the safest possible environment, where people can freely explore their deepest thoughts and feelings without fear of being challenged.

Discernment is not about persuasion. It is about listening with one’s heart for the guidance of the Spirit.

From Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations, Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, R. Taylor McLean, Morehouse Publishing, 1996, pp. 55-56

(You may find that you will need two meetings to get through a session. It is important to take your time and not hurry through this process. Rushing the process is not discernment!)

Suggestions for SESSION ONE

- The Convener begins the meeting with prayer. You may want to begin with some centering/silent time to enable everyone to make the transition from where they have been up to that point and to become present to the task at hand. (See prayers in BCP pages 832-833 and/or the following prayer.)

Thomas Merton Prayer

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

- Introduce yourselves. Share some things about your life, your work, things that important to you, your relationship with the church, etc. Please be sure to share why you are on this Committee and how it feels.
- Go through the Procedures #5-14 again so everyone understands the “ground-rules” for your time together. (You may want to do that at each meeting as a reminder.) Spend some time clarifying/discussing these procedures so they become part of the group’s thinking and acting.)
- Discuss other things the group thinks important: meeting times, necessary absences, confidentiality, how to tell others what you are doing without “feeling secretive” to parishioners and still maintain confidentiality. In general, what do we need to know about each other and the task to work together?
- Discuss what your sense is of discernment. (Remember that you are the first of many discerning groups who will ask questions of the applicant.)
- Ask each Committee member to prepare a faith pilgrimage statement, a brief statement made by each individual regarding his/her life in relationship with God. Identify and describe some of the stepping stones you have taken in your faith journey. One or two people could share at each meeting. (This includes the Convener)

Questions for Reflection for all the members of the Committee before next meeting: Without consulting other sources, write down your responses to the following questions:

1. What is ordination?
2. What is the ministry of a priest or presbyter?
3. What is the ministry of a deacon?
4. What is the duty of all Christians?
5. What gifts and skills do you have to offer in ministry?

- Take a couple of minutes to review how your time together was. Ask each person what was good and what was not so good about how the group worked. Ask what helped and what hindered, what to continue doing, what to delete and what to add to how you work together. (Recorder should note the comments and the Convener should use these in the next meeting.)
- End with prayer.

Suggestions for SESSION TWO

- Convener or appointed person opens the time with prayer.
- Check in for a few minutes about how people are doing.
- Remind people of the listening guidelines for your time together. (p.8)
- Ask the applicant to share with the group his/her spiritual autobiography. How s/he got to this particular place in life. (Listen reverently and do not interrupt the sharing. You are learning about the applicant and it is important to honor that person's journey.) If you would like clarification about something, you might ask, "could you tell me more about . . .?"

- **READING:**

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. Ephesians 4: 11-13

- Spend some time as a group discussing the reflection questions given last week. How does the applicant view the ministry of the whole Body of Christ? How does the applicant differentiate between the ministries of the laity and the ordained?
- Read those portions of the Catechism concerning ministry and ordination, found in The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 856, 860.
- What gifts and skills are necessary for the kind of ministry a deacon is called to live?
- What gifts and skills are necessary for the kind of ministry a priest is called to live?
- How is the applicant already (or not) exercising the ministry of a deacon/priest?

- **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION** for next meeting

Prior to the group's next meeting, the applicant should interview a deacon and a priest (neither of whom should serve in the applicant's congregation) and ask them the questions listed below. Answers will not be shared with the Committee but rather the applicant's reflections on what was learned. It would be good for the applicant to explain how the interviews are being used when making arrangements for the interviews. The time needed will range from one to two hours.

Interview Questions:

1. How did you experience your call to ordained ministry and how has your understanding and experience of that call changed, grown, or focused over time?
2. Describe the ministry of a deacon, as you understand it.
3. Describe the ministry of a priest, as you understand it.
4. Describe the process of vocational discernment that led to your ordination. What in/during that process helped clarify for you and the Church that your call to ordained ministry was that of the diaconate/priesthood?
5. Tell me about a few of your experiences of greatest learning and growth while you were preparing for ordination.
6. Tell me about a few of your experiences of greatest learning and growth since you were ordained.
7. What is the most difficult aspect of ordained ministry for you? For your household?
8. What has been the “cost” of ordination for you and your household? What have you and your household sacrificed in order to respond to this vocational call?

- Ask for one or two volunteers to be ready to share some aspect of his/her faith journey at the next meeting.

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Take a couple of minutes to review how your time together was. Ask each person what was good and what was not so good about how the group worked. Ask what helped and what hindered, what to continue doing, what to delete and what to add to how you work together. (Recorder should note the comments and the Convener should use these in the next meeting.)

- End with prayer.

Suggestions for SESSION THREE

- Convener or appointed person opens the time with prayer.
- Check in with one another about how things are going.
- Review listening guidelines (p.8)
- Ask those that volunteered to share an aspect of his/her faith journey.

• READINGS:

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way. But not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. II Cor. 4: 1, 5-12

- Ask the applicant to reflect (not report) on his/her interviews. What was stirred up as s/he listened and remembered the interview? Listen only at this point. After a period of silence to reflect on what the applicant has shared.
- The Committee members respond by sharing their own reflections on what the applicant has said. ("What stood out for me in what you said was . . .")
- Explore what the economic, personal and emotional impact would be for the applicant and your household should you be ordained.
- Consider: the effect of ordination on your household's income during your training and preparation for ordination, during your working life, and after your retirement;
- The public nature of the role and the stresses that ordination will put on you and your household; your age-its positive and its negatives for ordination. (The Discernment Committee is seeking evidence that the applicant is responding to God concerning the ordained ministry. Is the applicant confusing a response to Christian service with a response to ordination? Are the applicant's primary interests congruent with the basic function of an ordained ministry? Are the applicant's innate abilities commensurate with the demands of the ordained ministry?)
- Ask for 1 or 2 volunteers to be ready to share some aspect of his/her faith journey at the next meeting.
- In closing, spend some time reflecting back to the applicant what stood out for you in the course of your time together. Then take a couple of minutes to review how your time together was. Ask each person what was good and what was not so good about how the group worked. Ask what helped and what hindered, what to continue doing, what to delete and what to add to how you work together. (Recorder should note the comments and the Convener should use these in the next meeting.)
- End with prayer.

Suggestions for SESSION FOUR

- Convener or appointed person opens with prayer
- Check in
- Review listening guidelines. (p.8)
- Ask those that volunteered to share an aspect of his/her faith journey.

READING:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. Mark 6: 30-31

Ask the applicant to begin the conversation by sharing about four aspects of his/her relationship with God.

1. Describe your prayer life for the group.
2. How has your relationship with God changed over time?
3. Who is Christ in your life?
4. Who has been an important role model for you in the faith?

After a period of silence and reflection

- The Committee shares their reflections on what the applicant has said. ("What stood out for me in what you said was. . .") Members may want to share some of their own insights to the questions.

The applicant then continues to talk about the intersection of his/her faith and daily life.

1. Share how, specifically, you take care of yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually.
 2. Share how you are still questioning, searching and probing the mysteries of the faith.
 3. Share how you understand stewardship; personal financial responsibility; tithing; personal stewardship of time and leisure
- After a period of silence and reflection

- The Committee shares their reflections on what the applicant has said. ("What stood out for me in what you said was. . .") (The Discernment Committee is looking for how the applicant is growing in the Christian faith. How well the applicant understands the basics of the Christian faith? Does the applicant give evidence of having a personal relationship with God? Is the applicant conversant with the persons of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?)

- Questions for Reflection for next meeting for everyone

1. Make a list of your strengths

2. Make a list of your weaknesses.

3. Make a list of your “growing edges”.

4. What do you find difficult in your relationships with others?

5. How do you react to people in positions of power and authority?

6. How do you react to being in a position of power and authority?

7. How do you react to being in a powerless situation?

- Ask for one or two volunteers to be ready to share some aspect of his/her faith journey at the next meeting.

- In closing, spend some time reflecting back to the applicant what stood out for you in the course of your time together. Then take a couple of minutes to review how your time together was. Ask each person what was good and what was not so good about how the group worked. Ask what helped and what hindered, what to continue doing, what to delete and what to add to how you work together. (Recorder should note the comments and the Convener should use these in the next meeting.)

- End with prayer.

Suggestions for SESSION FIVE

- Convener or appointed person opens the time with prayer.
- Check-in
- Review listening guidelines
- Ask those that volunteered to share an aspect of his/her faith journey.

READINGS:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. Romans 7: 15, 21

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8: 38-39

- Committee members are invited to share some of their insights into the questions for reflection. Example: Take the one that was the most challenging for you.
- The applicant shares with the group what has emerged as s/he reflected on their strengths and weaknesses. Following a period of silence to reflect on what has been heard

Members share their reflections with the applicant. (“What stood out for me in what you said was . . .”)

- The applicant then responds to the following questions:
 1. What are your “growing edges?”
 2. What are your “goals” for further spiritual growth?
 3. What skills do you already have and what skills would you like to develop?
 4. How do you learn best?

Following a period of silence to reflect on the applicant’s responses

The group shares their reflections with the applicant. (“What stood out for me in what you said was . . .”)

- The applicant then responds to the following questions:
 1. What “pushes your buttons”/makes you really angry?
 2. What conflicts have you had in your life and how have you handled them?
 3. What frustrates you? Delights you?
 4. Talk about a time in life when you felt like a failure. Have you found grace in that experience? Following a period of silence to reflect on the applicant’s responses

The group shares their reflections with the applicant. (“What stood out for me in what you said was . . .”)

The Discernment Committee is seeking to determine how aware the applicant is of his/her feelings?

How well does s/he express strong positive and negative feelings? When dealing with his/her feelings, do physical gestures and movements (body language) match the words spoken? To what extent is s/he aware of and comfortable with his/her own sexuality? Are there any indications that s/he aspires to the ordained ministry as a way of solving his/her personal problems? Does s/he have a level of maturity and ability to adapt which is commensurate with his/her age level?

- Ask for one or two volunteers to be ready to share some aspect of his/her faith journey at the next meeting.
- In closing, spend some time reflecting back to the applicant what stood out for you in the course of your time together. Then take a couple of minutes to review how your time together was. Ask each person what was good and what was not so good about how the group worked. Ask what helped and what hindered, what to continue doing, what to delete and what to add to how you work together. (Recorder should note the comments and the Convener should use these in the next meeting.)
- End with prayer.

Suggestions for **SESSION SIX**

- Convener or other appointed person opens with prayer.
- Check in
- Review listening guidelines. (p.11)
- Ask those that volunteered to share an aspect of his/her faith journey.

READING:

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." Luke 22: 24-27

- Ask the applicant to describe what kind of ministry s/he is presently doing in the parish and in former parishes.
- Ask the applicant if s/he has served in any leadership roles in current or past parishes? Current or past dioceses? Current or previous communities in which s/he has lived?
- Ask the applicant to describe his/her relationship with people in his/her life who have authority over him/her. Describe a situation that has been tense and/or difficult. Describe a situation that has been respectful and/or mutual.

Following a period of silence to reflect on the applicant's responses

The group shares their reflections with the applicant. ("What stood out for me in what you said was . . .")

- As you consider ordination, how do you understand the power and authority that come with that office? Tell us about what it might be like to claim and use that authority appropriately. Tell us how that authority could be claimed and used in an inappropriate way?

Following a period of silence to reflect on the applicant's responses

The group shares their reflections with the applicant. ("What stood out for me in what you said was . . .")

The Discernment Committee is seeking to determine the applicant's capacity for leadership. Does s/he show initiative, self-confidence, enthusiasm? Can s/he motivate others? Is s/he aware of and at ease with a variety of leadership styles and able to use them as the situation indicates? How does s/he function in interpersonal relationships? How comfortable is s/he with being a person in whom authority rests? To what extent is s/he ready to claim and use that authority appropriately? What is this person's experience with and attitudes towards racial and ethnic minorities? Can you envision this person as your priest?

- Ask for one or two volunteers to be ready to share some aspect of his/her faith journey at the next meeting.

- In closing, spend some time reflecting back to the applicant what stood out for you in the course of your time together. Then take a couple of minutes to review how your time together was. Ask each person what was good and what was not so good about how the group worked. Ask what helped and what hindered, what to continue doing, what to delete and what to add to how you work together. (Recorder should note the comments and the Convener should use these in the next meeting.)

- End with prayer.

Suggestions for SESSION SEVEN

Suggestions for Preparing Your Evaluation

- This session happens individually. Rather than the regular meeting, each member of the Committee (and the applicant) are invited to use that time to prayerfully recollect and reflect on the vocation of the applicant.
- Find a comfortable and quiet place where you won't be interrupted. Spend some time quietly being present to God. Ask God to guide your recollections and reflections.
- Read the notes recorded from every session and spend some time reflecting on that session and its revelations in the greater light of the sessions taken as a whole. Jot down any insights, images, thoughts, concerns, etc. that arise as you remember and reflect on each session in turn. If a phrase or a passage of scripture comes to mind, find it in your Bible and spend some time asking how the passage might be related to the discernment work at hand. At all times, seek to do this work with an attitude of complete openness to God's possibilities for the applicant.
- Once you have finished your work of recollection and reflection, stop for a moment and pay attention to your inner state. You may want to set the work aside for a time before continuing your preparation work. When you are ready, turn to the questions that will guide the group through the process of writing the Discernment Narrative.
- Take your time with each question. After you have written your response to each one, stop to notice your inner state. Is there a sense of peace and "rightness" about what you have written? Is it complete/whole or does something more need to be written?
- When you have completed your responses to the questions, set your work aside. Think of each person in the Committee and give thanks for their gift to you and to the group.
- When you gather for the final meeting, bring along your responses and your Guidelines. THE DISCERNMENT NARRATIVE (To be done by each Committee Member)

We suggest that you begin this session with a time of silence and prayer. The following prayer for the Church is found in the ordination liturgies of The Book of Common Prayer.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up and things which had grown old and being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

Questions for each Committee member regarding the applicant

The members of the Committee all answer each of the following questions individually, which will provide the structure for the Discernment Narrative. For those in discernment about the diaconate, the Bishop and COM have asked the Committee to please give a very specific description of the applicant's present ministry and what s/he is passionate about.

1. How do the ministries, gifts, skills, and requirements of a deacon/priest "line up" with what the applicant is already doing in his/her life? Be specific.

2. How would ordination affect the applicant's closest relationships? (Economically, professionally, emotionally, and otherwise.) Be specific.

3. What issues of power, authority, obedience, and accountability may be present for the applicant as we consider the possibility of ordination? How well does the applicant know her/himself? Be specific.

4. What issues of health and self-care (physical, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, etc.) may be present for the applicant as we consider the possibility of ordination? Be specific.

5. Describe the applicant's spiritual life and relationship with Christ; its maturity, depth, change over time, discipline (its form, content, and "personality".) Be specific.

6. Describe the applicant's current and potential relationship with the requirements of the canons and the ordination vows. Be specific.

7. The Church's needs and expectations are for leaders who bear special qualities of Christian commitment, leadership, vision, and responsiveness to the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. Indicate whether such qualities are emerging in the Group's sense of the applicant's vocation. Be specific.

8. What spiritual, intellectual, and moral qualities for ministry have emerged in the applicant as the group has engaged this part of the discernment process? Be specific.

9. Are there other things you would like to report?

FINAL SESSION – Working Through the Questions Together

(Although the applicant is not present for this session, inviting him/her to come after the session might be a good way to have some time to share together how the process has been, to thank one another for what each has offered to the times together and to pray together.)

- Begin your session with Thomas Merton’s prayer, used in the first session:

My Lord 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 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.

- Begin to work through each question. The Convener might find it helpful to use newsprint as a way of capturing the consensus or divergence of the group as you move through each of the questions in turn.
- Following this meeting, it is the convener’s job to draw all the responses together into one Narrative which should then be signed by all the members of the Committee and the applicant
- The Discernment Narrative needs to be sent to the Bishop’s Office. A copy of the Discernment Narrative will be given to the applicant within two weeks of the group’s final meeting and a copy should be sent to the rector or person canonically in charge.
- Since the Committee will disband after the writing of the Discernment Narrative, it is important that the group is intentional about this ending. You may want to have a meal together, perhaps a Eucharist. There should be ample time allowed for each member of the group to say “thank you” to each other member of the group for the gift they were in this process. Please remember that the Convener is responsible for consolidating the individual responses into one narrative from the whole Committee.

All the members of the Committee and the applicant should sign the Narrative.

Please send narrative to:

The Rt. Rev. Whyne Hougland
Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan
535 South Burdick Street
Kalamazoo, MI 49007-5200

The Convener should collect all of the notes/minutes from your sessions and shred them to protect the confidentiality of all involved.

Resources: Bound With Cords Of Love, The Rev. Ann Kidder, 2002, the Diocese of Maine; Guidelines for the Parish Lay Committee -Diocese of Atlanta; Diocese of Western North Carolina; The Clearness Committee by Parker Palmer; Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations, Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, R. Taylor McLean, Morehouse Publishing, 1996.



Statement of Recommendation

Form 1
Last updated 7/2013

The Parish Discernment Committee makes the following recommendation concerning applicant:

Applicant's name _____

We recommend for Christian ministry in the following order (choose one)

- Priesthood
- Diaconate
- Laity (specify particular callings) _____

We make this recommendation

- With no reservations
- With reservations

Signed (All members of the COMMITTEE)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Date: _____

Chairperson: _____

Applicant Signature

Date

Please attach the signed discernment narrative to this form.



**CERTIFICATE OF VESTRY SUPPORT (FORM 2)
FOR NOMINATION TO HOLY ORDERS IN
THE DIOCESE OF WESTERN MICHIGAN**

To the Bishop, Commission on Ministry of The Diocese of Western Michigan, from (Name of Parish) _____, on (Date) _____.

We, whose names appear below, certify that _____ is a confirmed adult communicant in good standing of this Parish. We declare that, in our opinion, this person possesses such qualifications as would be fitting for admission as a Nominee for Holy Orders. This judgment is based on our personal knowledge.

(To be signed by Rector or person canonically in charge, and at least two-thirds majority of the Vestry.)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Attestation of Clerk or Recording Secretary:

I hereby certify that the foregoing certificate was signed at a meeting of the Vestry Of (Name of Parish) _____, (City) _____, Diocese of Western Michigan, duly convened at on the day of (Time) _____ (Day) _____ (Month) _____, (Year) _____, and that the names attached are those of all (or a two-thirds majority of all) the members of the Vestry.

Clerk/Secretary of Vestry

RESOURCES:

A Short List of Questions for Use in the Discernment Process

This list may be used as a resource for additional questions and individual work in the discernment process.

- A. What are the needs within this Episcopal community of faith?
 - 1) How do I respond to each?
 - 2) How do I know I am doing what God has committed me to do? or was it just me?
 - 3) Is my effort enough? Or did I listen correctly?
 - 4) How is God using me anyway?
 - 5) How is Christ lifted up in addressing these needs?
 - 6) What vision has God given me to address any or all of these needs,
 - a. individually ?
 - b. as a body of Christ?

- B. What are the needs within the community at large ?
 - 1) How do I respond to each?
 - 2) How do I know I am doing what God has committed me to do? or was it just me?
 - 3) Is my effort enough? Or did I listen correctly?
 - 4) How is God using me anyway?
 - 5) How is Christ lifted up in addressing these needs?
 - 6) What vision has God given me to address any or all of these needs,
 - a. individually ?
 - b. as a body of Christ?

- C. What gifts has God given me that are
 - 1) Used most often?
 - 2) Hardly ever used?
 - 3) Might be enhanced as a spiritual lay leader?
 - 4) Might be enhanced as an ordained person?

- D. How do I approach the Gospel with others?
 - 1) What do Christ's teachings mean to me?
 - 2) How do I articulate the Gospel to others?

- E. What does worship mean to you?

- F. Describe the miracle of the Eucharist and what it mean to you?

Gifts Appropriate to Lay Ministry

A Biblical model for lay leadership

Nehemiah began his life as a “servant leader” having been appointed royal cup-bearer at the palace of Shushan in the days that Judah was a province of the Persian Empire. He may be the ideal role model for lay leadership. He was decisive, well organized, a wise overseer of other people, a good administrator, and a skilled project manager who knew how to get things done. He also had all the biblical qualifications for *spiritual* leadership: godly character, a consistent testimony, a burning zeal for the Lord, a desire to serve, and a commitment to honor God in all that he did. His prayer life was exemplary.

Nehemiah himself was not a priest, a scribe, an expert in the law, a theologian, or a teacher. He apparently had no special training to do what he ultimately did. He was simply a model of hard work, practical ministry, and compassion, rebuilding Jerusalem while working alongside his people.

Nehemiah teaches us that whoever we are, whatever our background or training, and whatever our position in life—God has gifted us and called us to use our gifts as servants.

Lay ministry in the Diocese of Western Michigan

Lay ministers are called in the Book of Common Prayer to “take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church. There are four opportunities for formal lay leadership within the diocese:

- Lector
- Lay Reader
- Eucharistic Minister
- Eucharistic Visitor

Lector (non-licensed)

The function of Lectors, is to read the Lessons in the Church’s liturgy as appointed to do so by the celebrant or officiant. It would appear that only in exceptional cases should the lessons be read by a deacon or priest.

Qualifications for Lectors

1. Baptism
2. Appointment to that function by the celebrant or officiant
3. Ability to read clearly, audibly, and with the sense of the passage

Lay Reader (licensed by Bishop)

Lay Readers function in the same role as a lector with the exception that they are licensed by the Bishop to lead public worship under the direction of a Member of the Clergy in charge of the Congregation.

Qualifications for Lay Readers

1. Baptized member in good standing in the congregation in which they intend to serve.
2. Completed all training and passed examination.
3. Demonstrates ability to lead public worship.
4. Licensed by the Bishop upon completion of training.

Eucharistic Minister

A person licensed to administer communion is best described as an “extraordinary minister of the Sacrament”. Eucharistic Ministers may function during the administration of Holy Communion. They may, if the Celebrant desire, assist the Deacon in oblations, or if there is no deacon, the Eucharistic Minister may do oblations.

Qualifications for a Eucharistic Minister

1. Baptized member in good standing of the congregation in which they intend to serve.
2. Completed training.
3. Licensed by the Bishop.

Eucharistic Visitor (Visitor of the Sick and Shut-in)

A Eucharistic visitor is a person licensed to carry the Sacrament to the sick and shut-in as an “extraordinary minister of the Sacrament”. The ministry of the Eucharistic Visitor is to carry the Sacrament directly from the principle Sunday Eucharistic Celebration to the sick or the “shut-in” so that they may receive communion from this Eucharistic Celebration. This ministry does not take the place of clergy visitations.

Qualifications for a Eucharistic Visitor

1. Baptized member in good standing of the congregation in which they intend to serve.
2. Demonstrates pastoral sensitivity.
3. Completed training.
4. Licensed by the Bishop upon completion.

The Discernment of a Call to Diaconal Ministry

Through their ordination vows, deacons place themselves under orders to follow Jesus and to be obedient to the bishop, who gives them the mandate to encourage, support, and develop servant ministry in this diocese.

Three aspects of Call

A deacon has the ability to articulate the proclamation of servant in the Gospel and has leadership skills and the willingness to lead others into servant ministry. Deacons are not simply those who exercise servant ministry as baptized Christians. Rather, deacons are those who call and empower the laity to exercise servant ministry.

A deacon has the courage to be a prophetic voice to the Church concerning the needs of the powerless and voiceless in the community. She or he has the mental ability and competence for ordained ministry, and understands that the diaconate is a life-long discernment of ministry. This process involves continuous prayer, openness to change, willingness to study, and the active quest for personal growth.

The diaconate is a distinct order and is not a stepping-stone to the priesthood. Likewise, the diaconate is not to be seen as a reward for faithful service as a Reader, Eucharistic Ministers, Warden or member of the Vestry. Nor is it to be seen as a reward for a pre-existing servant ministry. The individual aspiring to the Sacred Order of Deacons must clearly articulate and demonstrate that he or she is called to the order of ministry which is integral to the church leading the laity into lives of servant ministry, *diakonia*.

Signs of Call

FIRST, a person identified with having a vocation to the diaconate would be recognized by him/herself and by the Church as meeting three fundamental requirements:

- 1) The exercise of a servant ministry in the world.
- 2) The desire and capacity to call, equip, empower, and enable the baptized to the practice of servant ministry as required of each person through baptism.
- 3) The desire and capacity to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.

SECOND, a person with a discernible vocation evidences many, if not all, of the following qualities:

- 1) a strong commitment to and deep love for Jesus Christ and the Church;
- 2) an ability to articulate his or her faith;
- 3) a confirmed adult communicant in good standing with the understanding of his or her ministry as a baptized person;
- 4) a spiritual life marked by the holy habits of worship, prayer, the study of scripture, and proportional giving;
- 5) a vocation to serve and enable others to serve;
- 6) empathy for the powerless;
- 7) a history of satisfactory employment (if applicable) and interpersonal relationships;
- 8) a willingness to undertake extensive preparation, including theological education, spiritual formation and practice of ministry;
- 9) a clear understanding of the ministry of a deacon;
- 10) a willingness to serve God through the leadership of the diocesan bishop.

THIRD, a person with a discernible vocation to the diaconate would be recognized both by her/himself and by the Church as being called to live the vision statement for diaconal ministry noted at the beginning of this booklet. Deacons are often at work in risky places and at the margins, responding to the needs of the poor,

the weak, the addicted, the sick, and the lonely, thus enabling them to discover the presence of God in their world. Deacons are called to engage the issues of justice, mercy, poverty, family and the environment. Increasingly, the role is one of opening doors of opportunity, encouraging others to take risks, and serving as agents of change.

NOTE: The ministry of a deacon is a ministry served under the Bishop on behalf of the Church in Western Michigan. Though a local context can provide fertile ground for a sense of call to ministry, ordination is rarely, if ever, to a specific location. One is ordained for the whole church. Thus, though the Customary does allow for the possibility of a Deacon continuing to serve in the parish where the Deacon was raised up for ordination, a true sense of call to the Sacred Order of Deacons must also involve a willingness to serve elsewhere in the Diocese, with the strengthening of the total ministry of the church being the focus and goal.

Gifts Appropriate to the Priesthood

1. A sense of "call"

- An openness to holiness as present in sacrament, the community, the gospel and Creation; an ability to communicate that awareness to others
- A personal, spiritual desire to live in communion with others as an ordained leader and specific to the Episcopal tradition
- A desire to preside at the sacraments with an awareness of both mystery and presence
- An ability to articulate this calling

2. A desire to spread the Gospel

- A desire to proclaim the good news of Christ and share one's faith
- An awareness of and honesty about one's own story and Christ's presence on the journey
- A desire to invite/shape a community into the living of the gospel good news

3. A gift of leadership

- The desire and ability to empower others to live into their baptismal calling and ministries
- A sense of vision, held in community and guided by the Spirit; ability to give voice to that vision, inspiring communal participation in it
- An ability to see the big picture and think in systems terms
- The personal qualities of authenticity, humility, strength and trustworthiness
- The ability to be a "non-anxious" presence
- A willingness to take risks and encourage change
- The abilities to problem solve, plan, delegate, and follow through
- An intellectual curiosity and commitment to "life-long learning" and formation
- A willingness to be accountable to the parish, the bishop and the diocese

4. An active prayer life and spiritual maturity appropriate to one's age

- Is grounded in the teachings of Scripture and committed to the study of Scripture
- Practices a rule of life with personal prayer, meditation and reflection
- Seeks out opportunities for personal growth and an increased knowledge of self
- Displays an awareness of the challenges, pains, healings and joys of their personal journey; is able to articulate and interpret their story to self and others
- Practices good stewardship of resources

5. A pastoral inclination

- Listens well
- Demonstrates compassion and a desire to be present to those who are hurting
- Articulates a concern about the well-being of others and a desire to help them seek wholeness
- Relates well to a diversity of types and ages of people
- Is sacramentally present as representative of God's people

8. Personal Health

- Is physically healthy: practices well-being of body, mind and soul; passes the medical examination as required by canons
- Demonstrates emotional health and stability: articulates easily personal strengths and limitations; has sought out the support of professional support when needed; keeps healthy boundaries; passes the evaluation as required by canons

- Maintains stable relationships with: spouse/partner, colleagues, community of faith, family and friends
- Demonstrates financial responsibility: has managed personal finances with integrity and does not carry unmanageable personal debt



To the convener: please give us your feedback!

This discernment guide is a new piece designed to help parishes through the intense process of helping fellow Christians more clearly understand the call that God is making to them. Your comments on this guide will help us make it better and improve future outcomes.

Your Name _____ Parish _____ Date _____

1. Did this piece help you accomplish what your committee had set out to do?

2. Which elements of this piece were most useful?

3. What elements of this piece were least useful?

4. What do you think should be added or changed?

5. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?

When completed please mail to:

Commission on Ministry
c/o Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan
535 S. Burdick St., Suite 1
Kalamazoo, MI 49007

Thanks!