

# The Episcopal Diocese of Maine

*Strengthening Communities of Faith for God's Mission*



## Manual and Guidelines for Discerners and Discernment Committees

## Introduction

Where is God calling me? Where might I best serve God?

The process of discerning ministry in the Diocese of Maine is designed to help a person best answer the Spirit's call for the sake of the common good. In this process, more attention is paid to what benefits the Body of Christ than to the aspirations of the individual. Discernment is often less about personal fulfillment and more about the Church selecting its leaders. Discernment involves both listening to a private call and evaluating and defining the leadership needs of God's people. All ministry takes place in a community context, through relationships with others with whom we share God's life. Therefore, discerning and defining a call to ministry must always involve the community of faith recognizing an individual's sense of call.

The Prayer Book defines priestly ministry as the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the celebration of God's blessings and the reconciliation of sinners with God and each other. This kind of ministry is not restricted to the ordained alone. In fact, the Baptismal Covenant places the responsibility to perform such ministry on the shoulders of all the baptized because:

All baptized persons are called to ministry in the church and in the world. Specific orders of ministry exist to provide distinctive focus, vision, and leadership for all people in their various ministries; none is "better" or "superior / inferior".

There are elements of Episcopal, Presbyteral, and Diaconal charisms for ministry present in everyone. Some are especially called to embody one of them to help lead and invigorate the full ministry of all.

***Lay Ministers*** are called, trained, and formed, to a distinctive ministry that brings Christ into the workplace, the home, the community, and the church. Christ bearers the laity, as Christ bearers, is to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world, and to create and sustain the worshipping community. The task of the laity is to accomplish that work in the world and in the church which serves God's purposes of justice, peace, human dignity, and the integrity of all creation.

***Lay Professionals*** work for a stipend in the church and are commonly (but not limited to) educators, youth leaders, administrators, secretaries, organists, and music directors.

***Members of Religious Orders and Communities*** are called and formed to live under vows and the discipline of a distinctive community. Each order exercises a particular charisma and mission, as well as their own process for helping individuals discern a call. Some live in a traditional monastic community while others live as seculars in the world.

***Bishops*** are called, trained, formed, and ordained to a distinctive ministry on behalf of the larger church. The mission of the bishop, as shepherd of diocese, is to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the whole church. Bishops act in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the whole Church, proclaim the Word of God, ordain others to continue Christ's ministry, and build up the whole of God's Kingdom by showing love and openness towards other denominations and faiths. They are the pastors of the clergy and administrators of the business of the diocese in their charge.

***Deacons*** are called, trained, formed, and ordained to a distinctive ministry directly under their Bishop, in the church and the world. The mission of the deacon, as herald of the kingdom of God, is to lead in reaching out to the poor, the sick, the suffering, the marginalized and the helpless. Deacons bring the world's needs into the Church and the Servant Church into the world; and they assist the bishop and priests in public worship and the administration of God's Word and Sacrament.

***Priests*** are called, trained, formed, and ordained to a distinctive ministry on behalf of the community of faith. The mission of the priest, as pastor to the people of God, is a call to service, of sharing the Gospel and celebrating communal worship, to living in the Spirit as Christ bearer, and showing love and openness to the whole body of Christ's people. A priest is a leader who embodies initiative and vision; can motivate others and to energize churches into dynamic and growing congregations; has the ability to deal positively with the institution, as well as with interpersonal conflicts.

## **Guidelines for Parish Discernment of Call to Ministry**

All baptized persons are called to minister in Christ's name, to identify their gifts with the help of the Church and to serve Christ's mission at all times and in all places.

Title III, Canon I, section 1(a)

The Church refers to our various ministries as "vocations," both lay and ordained, because the Latin term *vocare* means literally, "to call." Since the local parish is most often the spiritual and pastoral home of individuals called by God to lay or ordained ministry, the congregation plays a vital role in the exploration, discovery, and discernment of how we are called to use our gifts to the glory of God, for our own deepening faith in Christ, and in the service of others. While we hear God individually, God's voice is clearer in community. Given this, a congregation is a foundation for a local discernment committee to be formed, to assist a person in exploring God's call for his or her life.

***The discernment committee shall be a group:***

- Consisting of four or five persons selected by both the nominee and member of the clergy or other leader exercising oversight and the vestry/bishop's committee.
- Consisting of one member who has previously sat on another such committee (when available).
- Representative of a cross section of the local congregation.
- That does not include the member of the clergy or other leader exercising oversight as a part of the meetings.
- That does not have anyone in formation for Holy Orders (priest or deacon) on the committee.
- Trained by Commission on Ministry (COM) designated person(s) (normally two COM members will train groups regionally).
- That meets for two or three hours a minimum of nine times over at least a six-month period.
- That journeys with only one person in discernment at a time.
- Grounded in prayer and committed to pray for one another on a regular, ongoing basis.

- Faithful and consistent in their attendance.
- That works in complete confidentiality.
- Willing to ask difficult and challenging questions of the person in discernment and of each other.
- That probes the answers and doesn't assume that the initial answer is the final answer.
- More interested in good questions than clear answers.
- Familiar with the Baptismal Covenant in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 304-305
- Committed to mutual listening, or open to listening to all members of the group.

**Discernment Group Promise of Confidentiality**  
*Parish or Mission Discernment Committee*

Signing below is a reminder to maintain confidentiality regarding all that occurs within the context of your call to discern a vocation. By having the promise in writing, the committee makes confidentiality an explicit expectation rather than implicit, and it serves as a reminder and a safeguard.

Confidentiality is important in establishing a trusting relationship. It is understood that things shared in the Parish or Mission Discernment process are held in confidence and will not be shared outside the group. By my signature, I agree to this statement.

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*Signature of Participant*

*Date*

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## **Parish or Mission Discernment Group Procedures**

## **1. The Training**

Once a committee has been selected, the person in discernment contacts the Archdeacon to schedule a training session. It is essential that all members of the committee are present for the training. If a member is difficult to pin down for a meeting time, this should signal a person's inability to make a commitment to the group and a replacement member should be chosen.

If the person in discernment is not initially seeking ordination but wants discernment for what lay ministry they might do to serve their community, the discernment group may be formed and trained without going through the bishop. However, if during the process ordination is discerned, the process needs to be suspended until the person in discernment can meet with the bishop.

### ***At the training session, the designated trainer(s) will:***

- Remind the group that a commitment has been made to the discernment process and their regular attendance is expected.
- Distribute copies of these guidelines and the report form for individual use and note keeping during the meetings.
- Distribute copies of Susanne Farnham's "*Listening Hearts*" (Morehouse) for the committee and person in discernment to read and use throughout the process.
- Encourage particular attention to Chapter 4, pp. 25-32.
- Make sure everyone on the committee understands their task: that is an open, honest, and candid exploration in the context of a praying, believing, and caring community; it is not an "inquisition".
- Emphasize that it involves listening to the Spirit, thus times of silence are indispensable.
- Discuss the matter of absolute confidentiality and ask each member sign the Confidentiality Statement.

- Familiarize the committee with the Ordination Rites and the Outline of Faith on Ministry found in the Book of Common Prayer (pp.510-555 and pp. 855-6 respectively), in case questions arise regarding the ordained ministry.
- Help the group establish a convener.

### *The Role of the Convener:*

- Oversee the meetings and the schedule.
- Liaison with the Archdeacon who will serve as a proactive guide to the committee. The Archdeacon and convener will check-in regularly and the Archdeacon will assure that the procedures and expectations for discernment groups are followed.
- Occasionally remind the committee of the importance of confidentiality. Note: If an outstanding problem should arise, particularly one involving “safe church” issues, the convener should talk with the bishop immediately.
- At the end of each meeting, excuse the person in discernment and ask the committee to summarize what was heard.
- Prepare and submit a final report, with the assistance of the committee, to the Member of the Clergy or other leader exercising oversight and to the bishop.
- Shred all notes and other written materials concerning the discernment process excepting the final report.

## **2. The Committee**

Once trained, the committee should meet to get acquainted with one another and the process. The members of the group need to be able to talk openly with one another, particularly about their own faith journey. After opening with prayer, the committee members ask one another the following questions:

- Does anyone have strong feelings that might hamper the process of discernment? These might be feelings around ordination, personality conflict, the person in discernment, and other personal issues. Putting these strong feelings on the table up front will help to diffuse or manage them.
- Who is Jesus for you?
- What happens when you pray?
- What is it that God appears to be doing in your life?
- What other matters need to be shared to establish a solid working relationship?
- Close with prayer.

### **3. The Discernment Process**

Each meeting should open and close in prayer, followed by a reading of the Baptismal Covenant (BCP, pp. 304-5).

At the first and final meetings, the Baptismal Covenant should be read completely and explored. At the intervening meetings, one section from the Covenant should be considered, for example at the second meeting read and discuss belief in God the Father: at the third meeting, belief in the life, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus, and so forth.

At the first meeting with the person in discernment, ask them to state the reason the committee has been formed, and re-visit this question from time to time at ensuing meetings asking, “where are you now with that?” and “are you getting any clarity?” This is also an appropriate time for the person in discernment to share their spiritual autobiography with the group.

See “*Listening Hearts*”, Chapters 8 and 9 on support and accountability.

In addition, the committee should occasionally share what they think they are called to do, and whether they are getting any clarity.

The person in discernment should be given the opportunity at the beginning of each meeting to share what has come up since the previous meeting and how he or she has interacted with the previous discussion.

The committee should meet from time to time without the presence of the person in discernment to clarify the committee's process. Meeting without the nominee is a necessary part of the process. This should be made clear to the nominee at the first meeting.

If a meeting should stall, explore the silence. Also review Appendix 1, "Guidelines for Discernment Groups", p. 71 for meeting ideas.

Over the period of meetings, the list of questions at the end of these guidelines should be explored. The questions asked should be:

*caring   probing   concise   imaginative*  
*intuitive   evocative   scriptural   reflective*

Pause between responses and a new question to honor and heed what is being said.

***Some ways to build community and open ideas for exploration at a meeting include:***

Have a conversation addressing the following questions:

- ⊗ Who are you?
- ⊗ What is your life like?
- ⊗ What energizes you?

Use the following four questions from the Quakers:

- ⊗ What was winter like when you were a child?
- ⊗ How was your house warmed?
- ⊗ When was God first a warm reality in your life?
- ⊗ How is God now warming your life?

Refer to questions from "*Listening Hearts*", especially Appendix 2, pp. 89-95.

## **4. The Report**

An in-depth report that makes a recommendation for baptismal ministry is to be prepared for submission. It needs to be forthright with affirmations, concerns, and areas for growth.

It is recommended that the committee make use of the process of consensus when writing the report. Consensus seeks a general agreement among the committee through prayer, discussion, and listening, not through voting. A consensus does not mean that complete agreement has been met, but that nothing said in the report is objectionable to a given member. In other words, a member may disagree but can live with what is written.

The discernment reached may recommend a person pursue a particular ministry, lay or ordained; or it may state that the committee could not reach a discernment—it may be a “we don’t know” response which recommends the person wait and re-enter another discernment process sometime in the future.

Using the “questions to ponder” provided as a guide, the committee prepares a summary report for the Member of the Clergy or Priest-in-Charge and for the bishop. The committee is urged to be candid in their report since the person in discernment, the Member of the Clergy, and the bishop will rely on its contents for their evaluation and guidance of the person’s call to ministry.

If ordained ministry is discerned, the report will be shared with the Vestry and Commission on Ministry. The person in discernment will then meet with the Vestry or Bishop’s Committee and Priest-in-Charge of the Parish and ask for their endorsement. They will then interview with the bishop and apply to be named a Postulant. If the Bishop accepts the application, the COM is notified, and the person will be scheduled for an interview. If COM accepts the application after a successful interview, the bishop may name the person a Postulant pending the successful completion of screening requirements (medical, psychological, background). The person then enters the Deacon Formation program.

## **5. The Final Meeting**

The spouse, if applicable, should be invited to the final meeting to share in and respond to the discernment of the committee.

The written report is to be shared with the person (and spouse) and talked about openly within the group. Be intentional and allow plenty of opportunity for open discussion and for clarification of possible misconceptions.

During this meeting, it is advised that the group revisit the question asked at the second meeting when the committee was established: Does anyone have strong feelings that might hamper the process of discernment? Only this time, ask if these feelings have changed; and if so, how.

Find a way to bring closure to the group. This might include:

- Sharing how each member was impacted by the process.
- Re-visiting all the questions asked at the initial “establishing the committee” meeting.
- Consider if there is anything the group, or individuals in the group, feel called to do in response to the discernment process.
- Explore if an ongoing support group for the person in discernment is desired.
- Consider concluding with a liturgical rite. Particularly appropriate is “A Form of Commitment to Christian Service” found in the Book of Common Prayer on page 420.

Finally, close with prayers of thanksgiving and dedication.

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## **Discernment Committee Report Guide**

Questions marked with an \* should be given careful consideration in the Discernment Committee's report. See also "*Listening Hearts*" Appendix 2, pp. 89-95.

What is it that God appears to be doing in this person's life?

In what way does the community affirm what God is already doing in this person's life?

What it is that God appears to be doing in your community of faith?

\*What skills does this person propose to offer to God for the purpose of service and the building up the body of Christ?

\*In what ways is this person willing to make personal sacrifice in order to serve God and others?

\*Does this person tend to monologue or dialogue with God? How about with others?

\*What is this person's sense of self? Does this person seem: confident? doubting? aware? needy? dependent? on God? on others? Does the inner life connect or harmonize with the outer life?

What things facilitate his/her relationship with God? What things interfere with his/her relationship with God?

Has this person recently had a conversion experience? If so, how is this person sorting his/her religious experience from a call to ministry?

What energizes or motivates this person?

\*How does this person envision living out the Baptismal Covenant differently as lay person or as an ordained person? What is his/her understanding of baptismal ministry?

\*How does this person exercise servant ministry now? How would it be different if ordained?

\*How does this person understand the ordained ministry? What seems to be drawing this person toward ordained ministry?

Is this the person that the faith community has identified for ordained ministry?

(Not, does this community affirm what this person claims God is saying to him/her.)

How does this person regard the ordained ministry? As a profession among others? A way to earn a living? A privilege to be earned? A duty to be fulfilled? A grace to be accepted? A way to love God? A channel for serving others? A route to self-fulfillment?

\*Why is this person in a discernment process?

Is this person's sense of call: clear and emphatic? subtle and obscure? open and evolving?

How does this person's daily life impact their sense of call? (see *"Listening Hearts"*, p. 9)

Call encompasses what we do and who we are. Is this person seeking a balance of doing and being, of action and prayer, as s/he seeks God's call? (see *"Listening Hearts"*, p. 11)

\*If applicable, how does this person describe their marriage or other significant relationship? How does the spouse/significant other appear to perceive his/her call?

\*What is this person's history of family, education, work, church experience, and what do they suggest about possible ministries?

\*Is there anything in this person's past or present that may be an impediment to his/her ministry?

How has this person grappled with issues around their family of origin?

Is this person able to articulate their spiritual journey? Summarize their spiritual autobiography. Does this person make diligent attempts towards reconciliation in broken relationships or serious differences in their past? Is s/he able to release the situation when attempts at reconciliation fail?

\*How does this person respond when hard questions are asked or uncomfortable challenges are posed? How does this person respond to obedience? waiting? reciprocity?

What happens when this person prays? Who is Jesus for this person?

\*In what ways does this person channel God's love? How have you experienced God's love through this person?

How does this person distinguish and/or meld God's voice from other persistent voices such as culture, peer pressure, career, ego, self-interest? (see *"Listening Hearts"*, p. 31)

\*Describe this person's listening skills. Does s/he listen carefully, not at all, selectively?

\*How does this person answer: What is the next step God wants me to take?

\*Does this person have the resources in time and funds to pursue the Diaconate or Priesthood?

\*Is this person able to recognize and live with appropriate boundaries in areas such as leadership, finances, sexuality, and sense of responsibility?

\*In what ways does this person bridge the faith community to the world?

\*In what ways does this person gather and/or nurture the community of faith? What amount of time does this person have for a new ministry?

\*How does this person live out his or her discipleship in the world?

\* What gifts have you seen in this person?

\*What about the poor, the hungry, the sick, the oppressed?

\*Where do you see this person's growing edge? What weaknesses have you seen in this person?

\*Does this person tend to work better alone or in groups? How is this person perceived when working with others?

\*Other

## **What about Lay Ministry opportunities in the church?**

*Parish Examples:*

- Parish Leader
- Pastoral Care
- Intercessor/Contemplative
- Eucharistic ministry:
  - Preacher          Worship Leader Catechist
  - Healer          Eucharistic Minister/Visitor
- Arts ministry:
  - Musician          Artist
  - Drama/Dancer    Writer/Poet
- Children/Youth (0-20 years) ministry
- Senior (80+ years) ministry
- The religious life, monastic/first order, secular or third order/oblate,
  - or as an Associate

*Outreach Examples:*

- What about Lay ministry opportunities in the world such as:
- Missionary service
- Teaching in a church school or college
- Working in or running a shelter
- Running for a political office
- Doing pro bono work (legal, tax, financial, art, maintenance, etc.)
- Raising a foster child
- Urban ministry
- Rural ministry
- Ethnic ministry, especially American Indian ministry

**What about Ordained Ministry opportunities in the church?**

- Deacon
- Priest

**Discernment Committee Recommendation**  
*Signature Page*

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*Convener*

*Date*

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*Member*

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