



# ROADMAP TO HOLY ORDERS

Guide  
For Sponsoring Priest  
Congregational Discernment Group

2020

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN DELAWARE  
Commission on Ministry  
913 Wilson Road  
Wilmington, DE 19803-4012



Greetings in Christ!

We are grateful that you are willing to assist those discerning a call from God.

This manual provides you, the sponsoring rector/sponsoring priest/sponsoring priest, or you as members of a congregational discernment group guidance for your important role.

This manual also describes what happens in the process that leads from initial inquiry to ordination. It is a long process with several stages involving many people. Many questions, some of them very difficult questions, have to be raised and answered fully and honestly. The shape of this process reflects the seriousness with which we take Christian ministry, and the great importance of the discernment needed to provide the church with able and well-trained leaders.

The Episcopal tradition understands that a call to ordination comes in the context of the Christian community. Sometimes it is the community that first discovers a potential deacon or priest among its members and asks that person to begin discernment. Sometimes it is the person who first feels a call and looks to the community to test it.

The Commission on Ministry (COM) works with both aspects of a call. We help individuals use the resources of their faith and diocesan communities in clarifying a call. We also strongly encourage local congregations to recruit potential leaders who have the particular gifts needed in the Episcopal Church in Delaware.

No document can provide all that is necessary. The COM stands ready to respond to your questions and together with you discover the best path forward.

*Commission on Ministry*

2020

## Guide for the Sponsoring Priest

### The Role of the Sponsoring Priest

The sponsoring priest is an advisor and mentor, and a guide in deciding when it is time for the next step. The sponsoring priest should maintain a strong pastoral role with the inquirer/ aspirant throughout his or her or they journey of discernment, whatever direction it may take. In the early stages of conversation with an inquirer, there are three broad questions that the sponsoring priest should focus on:

- What is the evidence that the inquirer is called not to a committed and disciplined lay ministry but to Holy Orders?
- What particular gifts does the inquirer bring to ordained leadership in today's Church? How have these gifts been demonstrated already within and beyond the congregation?
- What work needs to be done to make the inquirer better known to the congregation, to address weaknesses and to develop gifts before she or he is ready to meet with a discernment group, and to be nominated to the diocesan bishop and the Commission on Ministry (COM) for a final decision?

As discernment moves forward, it becomes the responsibility of the sponsoring priest:

- to help the inquirer/ aspirant decide if and when it is appropriate to enter the formal diocesan process
- to discuss how the required education and training might be managed
- to begin pastoral conversations with the inquirer's/ aspirant's family members, helping them to consider the implications of this possible change in their lives
- to identify any personal or family-related problems which may be part of this person's history and should be addressed
- to recognize that there may come a point when the best answer is neither "yes" nor "no" but simply "Not now – wait"
- to follow through on the whole process, whatever the formal outcome, by providing support for the inquirer/ aspirant and assuring that the gifts for ministry that have been discerned are recognized and put to use
- to write a one or two-page report to the vestry recommending nomination if applicable.

It is important for you to guide those coming to you for discernment in understanding the distinct orders of deacon and priest, as well as their expression in non-traditional forms, such as college and healthcare chaplaincies and other specialized ministries. If you are less familiar with the calling and duties of a deacon than you would like, the COM or the Archdeacon can provide you with information. If there is a deacon in a nearby congregation, you may wish to contact him or her, and, at the appropriate time, suggest the aspirant confer with him or her.

### Special Cases:

**Impact on Individual when the Parish Priest Leaves the Sponsoring Parish** – The COM recognizes that parishes and missions are dynamic entities and those parish priests may, in due course, leave a congregation while it is in the process of sponsoring a person for ordination. As there are required processes of discernment within the congregation (involving the parish priest as well as the lay leadership) and documents of support required by the parish priest and vestry of a nominee, postulant or candidate, such departures can have a significant impact on an individual in the process.

The national canons provide that another priest of the diocese “acquainted with the nominee and the parish” may fulfill the role required for supporting and approving the individual in the process (e.g., when the required written sponsorship certificate is submitted). This priest could be the interim rector/sponsoring priest or, in certain circumstances, another priest in the diocese who is approved to assist in this situation.

**Conflict of Interest Relationships** – If an aspirant is a spouse, partner, or child of a priest in the sponsoring congregation, is employed by the congregation, or holds a key lay position (such as senior warden), the sponsoring priest must consult the bishop before recommending the inquirer himself or herself to contact the bishop before forming a discernment group.

## Instructions for a Congregational Discernment Group

O God, you led your holy apostles to ordain ministers in every place: Grant that your Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may choose suitable persons for the ministry of Word and Sacrament, and may uphold them in their work for the extension of your kingdom; through him who is the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever.  
*Amen.*

(Prayer 'For the choice of fit persons for the ministry', BCP 1979)

### Overview

Once an inquirer/discerner has been made an aspirant (i.e. has received permission by the bishop to begin formal discernment for Holy Orders), the work of discernment begins at the aspirant's local parish. The rector/sponsoring priest (or priest-in-charge/vicar, etc.) of the aspirant's parish will assemble a Congregational Discernment Group (CDG). The CDG is made up of approximately 5-7 members of the parish, at least one of whom is a member of the vestry one of whom should also be a member of another congregation. The purpose of the CDG is to assist the rector/sponsoring priest and vestry in deciding whether or not to nominate the aspirant for ordination (Canon III.6.2/III.8.2). The following also applies.

- Those appointed to the group should reflect diverse backgrounds and have differing perspectives but demonstrate the ability to listen and to learn from others.
- They must have room in their schedules for at least six to eight regular meetings (about ninety minutes each) over three to five months. The Commission on Ministry (COM) seeks assurance that a CDG can commit the time that is necessary for this phase of the discernment process.
- It is the policy of the diocese that employees of the inquirer's congregation may not be members of the inquirer's CDG. No one who is currently a postulant or candidate for Holy Orders may be a member. Close friends and relatives of the inquirer should not be asked to serve on a discernment group.
- A COM liaison is appointed and must meet with the group at its start for orientation. The liaison consults with the lead of the CDG regularly and should be kept informed about progress. The liaison supports the group, not the individual inquirer. The CDG is required to meet with the liaison to review its experience.

The CDG gives the local church a voice in the discernment process and demands significant investment on the part of both its members and the one being interviewed. We value the judgment and intuition of our laity, and not only because they will likely know the aspirant in ways the bishop and rector/sponsoring priest/sponsoring priest may not. We know through faith that the Holy Spirit has been given to all the faithful, and the work of discernment is a work in which we all share and for which we are all responsible as a church. While the CDG does not have absolute authority to confirm or deny a vocation, its ability or inability to nominate an aspirant for ordained ministry tells us much about the discernor, and whether or not it is prudent to proceed in further discernment leading towards ordination.

## **A Word on Discernment**

Much prayer and listening goes into Christian discernment and is done best by those who have themselves been well-formed in the Christian faith, especially in the Scriptures (Phil 1:9-10; 1 John 4:1; 1 Cor 12:10; Heb 5:14). The church's job in discernment is not to settle on its judgment, but to seek out the mind of God, who sees all and even discerns "the thoughts and intentions of the heart... before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Heb 4:12-13).

As Holy Scripture tells us in many places, the Lord calls certain kinds of people for Christian service, as was the case with the calling of David to be King of Israel. Jesse's oldest son Eliab was impressive. The prophet Samuel thought to himself, "'Surely the LORD'S anointed is before him.' But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart'" (1 Sam 16.7). And we would do well to follow St. Paul's counsel as he reflects on the connection between his apostolic ministry in relation to the identity of Jesus.

Christ: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer" (2 Cor 5.16). We have to go deeper than the surface, seeking not merely human wisdom, but participating in the wisdom that comes from God to discern the aspirant's place in the Body of Christ. This wisdom only comes through prayer, a meditation on God's Word, and a heart that is open to the will of God.

What is it we are seeking to discern when we interview an aspirant for Holy Orders? To begin with, the obvious, successful aspirants are healthy individuals. They will be emotionally intelligent, reasonably bright, and able to connect meaningfully with others, possess sound character, and exhibit an appropriate confidence and leadership potential. The deeper work of discernment will look for additional qualities: familiarity with Holy Scripture, a steadfast belief in the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith, and a commitment to our doctrinal

inheritance as expressed in the Book of Common Prayer; it will look for evidence of a life of prayer (both corporate and individual), a servant's heart, a love of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, and an unusually strong affinity for the sacraments and the altar. The aspirant need not be perfectly formed or knowledgeable at this point; but the right commitments, character, and talents must be present from the very beginning. Your role is to discern whether or not these are in place, and whether or not the aspirant is likely to grow into a vocation as an ordained minister in Christ's Church.

For more descriptions of the ordained minister's call and character, see 1 and 2 Timothy, especially 1 Timothy chapters 3 and 4, and 2 Timothy chapters 1 and 2. One should also consult the ordination services from the BCP for deacons and priests, including the Litany for Ordinations, found on pages 525f in the Book of Common Prayer. Pay special attention to the vows for each order, and the bishop's exhortation to each. Looking back to the ordinals in older editions of the BCP, both PECUSA and Church of England teaches us much about our tradition's understanding of Holy Orders as well.

## Resources

- *The Book of Common Prayer*. NY: Church Publishing Co. 1979.
  - The Baptismal Covenant, pp. 304-305.
  - Examination of a Bishop, pp. 517-519
  - Examination of a Priest, pp. 531-532
  - Examination of a Deacon, pp. 543-544
  - An Outline of the Faith, or Catechism, pp. 845-862
- *Being a Deacon Today: Exploring a Distinctive Ministry in the Church and in the World*, Rosalind Brown. Morehouse Publishing, 2005
- *Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed*, Suzanne Watson Epting, Morehouse Publishing. 2015.
- *Discerning the Will of God: An Ignatian Guide to Christian Decision Making*, Timothy M. Gallagher, OMV. Crossroad Publishing, 2009
- *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, Suzanne Farnham, Morehouse Publishing, 1991
- *Make Decisions That Matter: Discerning God's Hope for Us*, Sandra Hold, SPCK, 2004
- *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*, Elizabeth Liebert, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2008.
- *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations* Farnham, Suzanne G., et al., Morehouse, 1996.
- *Selecting Church Leaders: A Practice in Spiritual Discernment*. Charles M. Olsen and Ellen Morseth. The Alban Institute, 2002

- *The Servant Church: Diaconal Ministry and the Episcopal Church*, John Booty, Morehouse, 1982

## The Work of Discernment

The members of the CDG will meet several times over at least three to four months (in exceptional circumstances), usually six.

### Please note:

- Only active members in good standing in the parish may be invited by the rector/sponsoring priest to join the CDG. Preferably CDG members should not be new Episcopalians, and they should be highly regarded by their fellow parishioners for Christian faithfulness and sound judgment.
- Every aspirant has the bishop's explicit permission to discern. In other words, you will not meet with a discernor who has not gotten the bishop's permission to discern.
- The nature of the questioning should be appropriate to the work of discernment, not intense examination or inquisition! Remember, we are helping each find his/her/their place as a member of the Body of Christ.
- You are developing a special relationship with the aspirant, who will share very personal and private information. All discussion must be confidential, and it must be understood that these meetings are a safe place for both the aspirant and the group members.
- No member of the CDG should talk to the aspirant about the substance of the meetings apart from the context of the meetings themselves; outside interactions should be simply of encouragement and support.
- Typically, the aspirant is a regular attendee of the parish. Observations on the aspirant's interactions with other members of the congregation and involvement in liturgy and other ministries should be part of the discernment process.
- Each member of the CDG must commit to attending all of the meetings. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to make an informed judgment on whether or not to nominate the aspirant.
- The rector/sponsoring priest [priest-in-charge, vicar, or sponsoring priest is also applicable] is encouraged to attend the first two sessions for the sake of introduction, and perhaps lead off the initial meeting with some thoughts on Christian discernment, and at the second meeting serve to facilitate introductions and hear the aspirant's story. After these introductory sessions, the rector/sponsoring priest should absent him/her/themself for the remainder of the meetings.



## **Procedural items:**

- Keeping in mind the spiritual nature of discernment, each meeting should begin in prayer. Useful prayers include the collects (prayers) provided “For the Ministry (Ember Days)” (p 205-206/256-257 in the BCP); other useful prayers are those for Proper 8 (p 178/230), Proper 10 (p 179/231), Proper 19 (p 182/233), or the Prayers for Guidance (p 832).
- Each member of the CDG should have a copy of this guide and all other necessary materials from the very beginning of the process.
- The CDG should select a chair for the group.
- Each member of the CDG is encouraged to take notes, and a secretary should be appointed to keep a record of all meetings. All notes and records should be kept and available for the rector/sponsoring priest and vestry, and then be destroyed when they are no longer needed. These notes are useful even if an aspirant is not nominated.
- At the end of each session with the aspirant, the CDG dismisses the aspirant and privately comes to a mutual understanding of how the session went, what was learned, and what questions or concerns they will carry over for later sessions.
- Before adjourning, the group needs to look ahead to the next meeting and agree upon the necessary preparation. It will be necessary to do some reading, research, and contemplation on each topic before each meeting.

## **Initial Organizational Meeting (CDG without Aspirant)**

In this meeting, the CDG discusses the fundamental materials laid out above and reviews the process for the following sessions, outlined below. The group should discuss the nature and gravity of the work of discernment, and the CDG’s role in the overall process. The group commits to pray for the aspirant and the discernment of the group as a whole. The group is encouraged to take notes during all sessions. Several questions have been provided to spur your thoughts; they are not intended to be exhaustive and are not even necessarily suitable questions for you to ask the aspirant. The rector/sponsoring priest may wish to give guidance and counsel re: the work of Christian discernment and what to expect in the following meetings.

## **Meetings with Aspirant**

There should then be a minimum of six meetings (see earlier 6-8 meetings each about 90 minutes in length) with the aspirant, each session falling under one of the three categories: *The Aspirant as a Christian*, *The Aspirant as Potential Deacon/Priest*, and *The Aspirant’s Health*. We strongly urge you to discuss each item in the order listed below. Each numbered item approximately represents a distinct meeting, though in some cases it may work to discuss two or three items in one session. Some items may require more than one session. The goal is for the group to believe they have heard the aspirant adequately on each. Each topic informs the final decision of whether or not to nominate the aspirant. Questions are not limited to those listed herein.

## *Aspirant as a Christian*

### **1. The Aspirant's Story**

In this initial meeting, the CDG should begin with the individual members introducing themselves. The goal is to set the aspirant at ease and to feel a sense of familiarity and support.

**Please note:** the aspirant should provide the CDG with a brief autobiography and a resume before the meeting.

Be sure to express:

- a) the goal of the CDG (i.e. to help the aspirant find his/her/their/they place in the body of Christ and an appropriate ministry), resulting in a recommendation for or against the nomination to discern a vocation to Holy Orders
- b) the nature of the meetings, i.e. supportive and encouraging, yet necessarily probing and testing
- c) the confidentiality of all discussions.

Get to know the aspirant. Focus especially on his/her/their/they faith, though not exclusively. Get her/him/them talking, draw her/him /they out, etc. It is especially appropriate at this meeting to ask the aspirant to explain the Gospel in one or two sentences.

*Questions for your notes:*

- Did he/she/they have a supportive and healthy family background? Was he/she/they raised as a Christian?
- Did he/she/they come to faith early or late?
- Are there any past indiscretions that could taint or even compromise a future ministry?
- Is his/her/their current household a Christian one, or mixed? Does the spouse (if applicable) support this search for a vocation?
- What does the aspirant have to say about his/her/their sense of vocation? Do you get a sense that this is a result of the person's faith or the circumstances of his/her/their life?
- Do you get a sense that this person is called to ordained ministry, specifically?

### **2. The Vocation of All Christians**

In many ways, the emergence of a strong sense of call to Christian service is simply part of growing in Christian maturity. All Christians are called to service; all Christians are priests, reconciling the nations and all creation to God (Ex 19:5-6; 1 Peter 2:5). We Episcopalians have perhaps neglected this truth through a tendency to clericalism, which privileges the clergy as the real professionals, a more spiritual class of Christians. And while we hope our clergy are indeed exceptionally devout Christians, our Lord calls all to radical faith and powerful ministries.

The body of Christ needs well-formed Christians serving at every level of the church: within the parish, within the diocese, and among the communities in which we live. In this session, engage this issue directly. Get the aspirant talking in greater detail about his/her/their sense of vocation. The Body of Christ has many members, with diverse functions (1 Cor 12; Eph 4), and if the aspirant has a calling that does not involve Holy Orders, you could be instrumental in helping steer him/her into a very meaningful life of Christian service, distinct from ordained ministry but no less fulfilling and effective.

*Questions for your notes:*

- Keeping in mind the previous meeting with the aspirant, do you have a sense of the nature of her/his sense of vocation? How specific is it?
- What are the aspirant's favorite words to express this sense of vocation? What does this word choice tell you?
- Listen carefully to the focus of the vocation. Does the aspirant talk about himself/herself/themselves primarily, or about ways to serve others? Does he/she/they express a desire for personal fulfillment or the health and well-being of the Body of Christ? These two foci probably should not stand alone... if so, something could be amiss. Rather they should inform and invigorate one another.
- Is there any mention of a desire to be obedient to our Lord, or does the vocation seem more self-generated, i.e., a 'logical step' or a 'good idea'?
- In what ways does the aspirant currently serve his/her/their parish? Do these ministries seem well-suited and satisfying? (If the aspirant isn't currently engaged in at least a volunteer ministry, take note!)
- Get the aspirant to tell about a time when he/she/they shared faith with someone he/she/they suspected was not a Christian.
- The goal of the CDG is not to discern whether or not the aspirant has a ministry, but to discern whether that ministry is lay or ordained. There are many opportunities to minister as a Christian in the Episcopal Church in Delaware, and beyond. Be familiar with these: serving within the parish, community outreach and service, various diocesan groups and commissions, lay catechist, and evangelist, etc. Think of these and other options as possible outlets for this sense of vocation. Could the aspirant's vocation be to one of these valuable Christian ministries? The burden of proof rests with him/her.

## *The Aspirant as Potential Deacon/Priest*

Select one of the following versions of session 3, according to which order the aspirant is discerning.

### **3a. The Vocation of the Priest**

This session is, as its title indicates, a discussion on priestly ministry specifically. Our ability to discern a priestly vocation will be severely limited by an inadequate understanding of what it is we're trying to discern! If the aspirant does indeed maintain that he/she/they is called to the priesthood, then try to draw out and better understand what informs that sense of vocation. This is not the time for pointed questions or sharp admonitions, but gentle prodding and even a loving challenge or two can certainly be appropriate at this stage.

*Questions for your notes:*

- Simply put, does the aspirant talk about his/her/their sense of vocation in terms of Word and Sacrament? Is he/she/they a steward of the Mysteries? Is he/she/they salt?
- Is he/she/they able to articulate the Gospel coherently, and does he/she/they have a vision for how that ought to manifest itself in parish life?
- Does he/she/they look forward to all the aspects of priestly work, such as preaching, teaching, liturgy, pastoral care, and parish leadership? Are there any areas of ministry for which he/she/they seems to be especially reluctant? It is important to be especially aware of his/her/their disposition to the altar and pulpit.
- Would you like this person to become your parish priest? Why or why not?

### **3b. The Vocation of the Deacon**

This session is to be on the nature of the diaconate. If the aspirant does indeed maintain that he/she/they is called to the diaconate, then try to draw out and better understand what informs that sense of vocation. This is not the time for pointed questions or sharp admonitions, but gentle prodding and even a loving challenge or two can certainly be appropriate at this stage.

*Questions for your notes:*

- Does the aspirant talk about his/her/their sense of vocation in terms of service in the name of Christ? Is he/she/they dedicated to bringing the light of the Gospel and the presence of Christ to the darkest of places, or is the sense of vocation simply born of a desire to help people?
- Does the aspirant possess the potential to motivate others to serve? Does he/she/they possess the people skills required to organize and enable others?
- Is the aspirant able to articulate the Gospel effectively, and is he/she/they able to make the connection between Gospel and servanthood?
- Would you like this person to become your parish deacon? Why or why not?

#### **4. The Gifts Required for Church Leadership**

Expectations of what makes for a successful ministry have changed over the years. It was once thought the minister was to be a helping professional, then the emphasis changed to the servant, or wounded healer. Most now describe the successful minister as a leader.

There is something to all of these, of course, but the leadership paradigm lends itself well to many aspects of parish ministry in today's Western world. Keeping in mind our Gospel mandate which never changes, engage the aspirant in a conversation about past leadership experiences, and perhaps gauge the response to imagined scenarios, keeping the following qualities in mind:

##### *A. Vision*

The leader needs to be able to articulate a vision for the institution and be able to convey that vision to others in a way that captures their imagination and motivates them to work towards achieving it. Such a vision puts first things first and rises above immediate challenges, reminding folks of the big picture and why they came to the organization in the first place.

*Questions for your notes:*

The aspirant need not yet possess this vision in its entirety, but does indeed need to be the sort of person who is capable of both 1) seeing the big picture, and 2) motivating others to share this vision. Does this describe our aspirant?

##### *B. A Commitment to Change*

While the Gospel never changes, the Christian leader knows that proclaiming our timeless faith in a constantly changing world requires the ability to assess the landscape as it shifts, and find the most effective means of proclaiming the Gospel in a particular place at a particular time. And what's more, the leader needs to possess the skills to bring the parish along with him in this creative adaptation.

*Questions for your notes:*

- Does our aspirant seem to be perceptive of trends and movements in our culture?
- Is he/she/they able to connect facets of the Gospel with the felt needs of society?
- Is he/she/they committed to results, and an attitude to do what it takes to bring the Gospel to all?
- Does he/she/they seem able to equip and bring others along with him/her in this pursuit?

##### *C. Ability to Provide a Supportive and Nurturing Environment*

Fostering a supportive and nurturing environment within the parish enables the leader to ask for the creative flexibility outlined above. The supportive leader looks out for the well-being of the flock, especially leaders within the parish; likewise, he/she/they happily delegates ministry responsibility to those who are ready to serve and gives them space to flourish and grow in their Christian service.

*Questions for your notes:*

- Does our aspirant possess the strength and security needed to encourage others to thrive?
- Is he/she/they patient and supportive?
- Is he/she/they able to be focused on the mission at hand, more mindful of seeing the parish holistically realize its potential rather than concerned with her/his success?

## ***The Aspirant's Health***

### **5. Habits of Personal Prayer**

The entire Christian life, when lived well, is oriented to God and thus characterized by constant prayer (1 Thess 5:16-18).

*Questions for your notes:*

- Do you get a sense the aspirant possesses this orientation? Is he/she/they comfortable talking about his/her/their private prayer life?
- What is her/his private rule of prayer?
- Does he/she/they pray the Daily Office regularly? Does he/she/they read Scripture devotionally? Listen closely both to what he/she/they says and doesn't say.

### **6. Habits of Corporate Prayer**

Church attendance is an important gauge of active faith and Christian maturity (Heb 10:23-25).

*Questions for your notes:*

- What is the aspirant's record of church attendance?
- Does she/he attend any services during the week, or is it exclusive to Sundays?
- Related topic: does the aspirant support his/her/their parish through faithful financial giving?

### **7. Family Life and Emotional Health**

The aspirant's spouse (if applicable) or significant person of choice should be present for at least a portion of this meeting.

*Questions for your notes:*

- Does his/her/their home life reflect the order and love you'd expect to see in a healthy parish?
- Do the members of his/her/their family speak well of him/her? Again, are they supportive of his/her/their growing sense of vocation?

- Is there anything you find troubling or unsettling about the aspirant? Does he/she/they put you at ease, or perhaps on edge? Do you sense any instability or fragility in his/her/their temperament?
- Confidence and pride are quite different. How would you characterize the aspirant in this regard?
- Again, does he/she/they inspire your confidence and trust? Is he/she/they someone you could see yourself following?
- A more practical question: what is the aspirant's financial debt load?

## Wrapping Up

### 8. Concluding Session with Aspirant

If the group feels a need/desire to tie up any loose ends, it might very well be useful to meet with the aspirant one last time reflecting on the process as a whole, ask any unanswered questions, or follow up on an unsatisfying response from a previous meeting. If the group has decided ahead of time to recommend the aspirant to the vestry, this might be an appropriate time to share the news.

#### **Final Meeting: Preparing the Recommendation (Without Aspirant)**

In this concluding session without the aspirant, the group comes to a consensus on the aspirant's vocation, writing a recommendation to the rector/sponsoring priest and vestry of the parish on whether or not to nominate the aspirant.

**If you are unable to recommend the aspirant for Holy Orders**, please draw up a report of your reflections and concerns, and give these, along with the result, to your rector/sponsoring priest. We strongly advise that your parish priest share the results with the aspirant in person, ideally with the chair of the CDG present. Effort should be made to affirm the aspirant and encourage him/her to explore ways to discern and deepen his/her/their lay ministry.

**If you do recommend the aspirant** be allowed to go further in the discernment process, the group should draw up a report of its findings, including any notable concerns, and share these with the vestry. The rector/sponsoring priest and chair of the CDG, if not the rector/sponsoring priest with the entire CDG present, should share the news with the aspirant, along with much encouragement and well-wishes.

# The Role of the Vestry

The final step in the congregation's work of discernment is taken by the vestry.

As the elected representative body of the congregation, the vestry has canonical responsibility for discernment and nomination for ordination.

In deciding whether to nominate the inquirer (thus becoming a nominee), the vestry will consider:

- the discernment group report addressing the questions listed in *Form A and related items of note*
- a written recommendation from the rector/ sponsoring priest/ sponsoring priest to nominate the inquirer (separate from *Form C*)
- the inquirer's autobiography and ministry statements
- interviews with the inquirer, with representatives of the discernment group, or with both together

After careful consideration of the above, the vestry makes one or the other of these determinations:

- to nominate the inquirer for admission for Holy Orders.
- not to recommend the inquirer at present. In this case, the application process goes no further and the chair of the discernment group notifies the liaison accordingly. The inquirer may, however, at a later time, in new circumstances, ask that discernment begin again.

A Vestry nomination also includes:

- a pledge to contribute financially to the applicant's preparation, as required by Canon III.8.2 (See section VII. Financial Costs).
- a commitment to remain involved in the inquirer's formation for ordained ministry, as appropriate.

Upon the vestry's acceptance of the recommendation, you are now able to nominate the aspirant, and the following steps should be taken:

1. The chair of the CDG writes a letter to accompany the completed *FORM A*
2. Report of the CDG from the sponsoring parish
3. The vestry completes *FORM B* (Nomination of an aspirant by the sponsoring congregation's vestry and Statement of Financial Commitment)



4. The parish rector/sponsoring priest completes *FORM C* (Rector/sponsoring priest's Recommendation of Nominee)
5. The aspirant completes *FORM D* (Letter of Acceptance of Nomination)

*See forms document on The Episcopal Church in Delaware website.*

Completed original forms should be submitted to:

The Episcopal Church in Delaware

Attention: Executive Assistant to the Bishop

913 Wilson Road

Wilmington DE 19803-4012

(302) 256.0374 | [www.delaware.church](http://www.delaware.church)

Copies scanned/sent/mailed to Chair, Commission on Ministry, [com@delaware.church](mailto:com@delaware.church)

We are grateful for the time, care, and effort you have invested in this ministry. The responsibility is weighty but of vital importance to the well-being and future of the Episcopal Church in Delaware and the church.

**A document adapted and edited with the permission of the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas TX.**

# Overview of the Discernment Process

## The Roadmap to Holy Orders

The road to ordination begins and ends with the bishop. Along the way, however, many others are involved in the work of discernment, including your parish priest, your parish, and at the diocesan level. This work involves four distinct steps: aspirancy, postulancy, candidacy, and ordination. This process typically takes three years from nomination to ordination.\*

### Important Notices:

- Before embarking on discernment, familiarize yourself with the relevant portions of the most current Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church (III.5-9), as well as the ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer.
- Anyone wishing to pursue ordination in the Episcopal Church in Delaware is required to agree with and abide by the historic faith and practice of the Anglican/Episcopal tradition as found in the Book of Common Prayer (1979), and conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.
- Please note, you may begin the discernment process before reaching the minimum age for ordination, but you must be 24 years of age before the date of your ordination to the diaconate.

The following portion of this document is a summary of the discernment process from beginning to end. Where rector/sponsoring priest is written, presume that priest-in-charge, vicar, or sponsoring priest is also applicable.

Use this document as a checklist. Though it contains valuable information, please note that it is not exhaustive and may be changed at any time, and additional requirements may be added. Consult the COM. All forms referenced in this document may be found on the diocesan website.

\* Timing and formation requirements may be slightly different for those who have completed substantial amounts of seminary before beginning discernment. For those already ordained in another church who wish to become an Episcopal priest and/or deacon, guiding documents are on the diocesan website

# Beginning the Journey

## Becoming an ASPIRANT for Holy Orders

Discernment begins informally with those who know you best: your family and friends, your priest, and other members of your parish. When the time is right, you begin your first steps as an inquirer as follows:

- Have an intentional conversation with your rector/sponsoring priest about beginning formal discernment. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Plan to attend a diocesan discernment retreat and Holy Orders orientation, if you have not already (consult the website for dates). Attending the retreat is not a commitment to discern, but rather an opportunity for you and your spouse (if applicable) to explore the idea of beginning formal discernment. This retreat is required for all who wish to move forward in discernment. Date of Attendance: \_\_\_\_\_
- Schedule a meeting with the bishop through the assistant to discuss your interest in beginning formal discernment. This first meeting is one-on-one, just you and the bishop. Be sure to introduce yourself to the canon to the ordinary if you haven't already. Date Scheduled: \_\_\_\_\_
- You become an aspirant if/ when the bishop approves you to engage in formal discernment. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Notify\* both the COM and your rector/sponsoring priest of the bishop's decision. Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## The Road to Nomination

Once you've been made an aspirant, discernment officially begins at the parish/congregation level, where a group will work with you to determine whether or not to nominate you to pursue Holy Orders at the diocesan level. Your relationship with your parish is a vitally important part of the work of discernment, and you will need their support to continue formal discernment.

- Your rector/sponsoring priest convenes a Congregational Discernment Group (CDG). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Write a spiritual autobiography (minimum five pages, see Form E for guidance) for the CDG before they meet. Date submitted: \_\_\_\_\_
- Meet with your Congregational Discernment Group (CDG) for the necessary period of time, usually around six months. Date begun: \_\_\_\_\_; Date completed: \_\_\_\_\_
- When their interview process is complete, your CDG submits a report along with their final recommendation to the parish vestry (FORM A). Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- If they decide to nominate you, the vestry submits their nomination to the bishop through the Mission Support Office (FORM B) along with a copy of FORM A. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Your rector/sponsoring priest submits\*\* a recommendation(FORM C). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- If nominated by your parish and supported by your rector/sponsoring priest, you write a letter to the bishop accepting their nomination (FORM D) and you become a nominee. Our church's canons require that your letter contains the following information:
  1. your full name and date of birth,
  2. length of time you've been resident in the diocese,
  3. evidence of your baptism and confirmation,
  4. whether or not you've previously been nominated or applied for postulancy in any other diocese,
  5. description of your discernment process thus far from your point of view, and
  6. indication of all degrees you've earned and certified areas of specialization, together with copies of official transcripts and/or certifications awarded. Date submitted: \_\_\_\_\_
- Send us a digital headshot photo for your file. Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Once you become a nominee, discernment moves from the parish/congregation to the diocesan level, where you discern with and gain the support of the COM. You are not likely to know many members of the COM if any. The COM is made up of both clergy and lay members from across Delaware, and their role is 1) to discern for themselves and confirm your vocation sensed by the bishop and affirmed by your vestry, and 2) to observe whether or not you are internalizing all that you are learning and experiencing in discernment and formation. Their role is to make a recommendation to the standing committee and bishop that you be approved for the various stages leading up to ordination and ultimately for ordination itself. While their function is to advise the bishop, your time in discernment with the COM is a vital part of the process and should be engaged accordingly. The first step in progressing towards ordination is, again, being granted postulancy.

## The Road to Postulancy

The road leading to postulancy is a time of more intense and focused discernment.

- Complete the Application (FORM E). The application is extensive and requires several essays. Please allow considerable time to complete. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Complete Release of Information (FORM F). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Complete Release of Information to Applicant Only (FORM G). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Complete the Financial Statement (FORM H). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Complete the Nominee Agreement (FORM I). Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- The chair of the COM will send you an official invitation to interview. Your rector/ sponsoring priest and your spouse/ partner (if applicable) will accompany you in this interview. Date Letter Received: \_\_\_\_\_

***Scheduled Date for Postulancy Interview with the COM:*** \_\_\_\_\_

After your interview, if the COM recommends you for postulancy they will direct you to complete the canonically required medical and psychological exams [III.8.5(k), III.8.7(a), III.6.5(j)] and a comprehensive background check. Complete a:

- Background Check (FORM J). The cost of this is \$\_\_\_\_\_. You are responsible for the expense, though you may ask your parish to consider a contribution. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Life History Questionnaire for Mental Health Examination (FORM K) Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Behavior Screening Questionnaire for Mental Health Examination (FORM L) Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Mental Health Examination (scheduled through the Mission Support Office). The cost for this exam is expected to be borne by you with the support of your parish/congregation. If assistance is needed, consult the Chair of the COM. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Medical Examination (FORM M). To be scheduled with your own doctor. You are responsible for the cost. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- You submit evidence of your Safe Church training. Date of Submission: \_\_\_\_\_

NOTE: The canons of the Episcopal Church require the background check and the mental and medical health examinations to have been completed within thirty-six months (three years) of your ordination to the priesthood and/or diaconate. Any of these more than three years old at the scheduled date of your ordination will need to be done again.

After the bishop receives and reviews the results of the medical and psychological examinations, the bishop will review the COM’s recommendation and make a judgment on whether or not to grant you postulancy. If you are made a postulant, the bishop may invite you to discuss any developmental recommendations the COM may have given. At this point you will also develop a plan for your theological formation\*\*\* and training with the bishop and in consultation with the COM. You will also be assigned a member of the COM as a liaison, to provide support and encouragement along the way.

***Date Postulancy Granted by the Bishop:*** \_\_\_\_\_

NOTE: Once you become a postulant, your relationship with the bishop becomes closer and more formal. The bishop will need to be made aware of any significant life changes, including things such as the need for a new job, a desire to get married, etc., as these can have a significant impact on discernment and formation.

## The Road to Candidacy

The road to candidacy is a time focused on your continued theological and spiritual formation. The interview for candidacy is an opportunity to check in with you, the discerner, making sure you are 1) demonstrating the same qualities that were evident at your postulancy interviews, 2) still confident and growing in your sense of vocation, and receiving suitable formation.

- Complete any supplemental requirements or conditions specified by the COM and the bishop that may have been given.
- Write the bishop four times a year, during the Ember Days. **DO NOT NEGLECT THESE LETTERS.** They are canonically required and important both for informing the bishop as to your progress and well-being and as an indicator of your active engagement in the ordination process. Failure to submit letters can result in corrective action, and continued disengagement can result in being removed from the discernment process.
- Before your interview, submit any of the following which will have been completed by the time of the interview:
  1. Documents/evaluations from your completion of one unit of Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE-CPE is preferred) program. (In some cases a CPE-equivalent experience may be approved, or a rigorous and challenging missionary experience. The bishop must approve any alternative.)
  2. Letter of reference and any other relevant documentation from a ministry practicum or field education experience or parish internship
- Submit proof of Anti-Racism training and education on Title IV Disciplinary Process.  
Date Submitted: \_\_\_\_\_

If your process is on the timeline of a three-year residential seminary, in your second year your parish vestry completes and submits their Reaffirmation for Candidacy for Holy Orders (FORM N). (NOTE: The length of postulancy could be different, depending on the nature of your approved discernment process and formation. Please consult with the COM regarding the timing of your application for candidacy.) Date Submitted: \_\_\_\_\_

- Once the Mission Support Office (the diocese) receives (FORM N), you write a letter to the bishop applying for candidacy (FORM O). Be sure to include in the letter, the date you were admitted as a postulant. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Submit an update to your spiritual autobiography, reflecting on your development and growth since your application for postulancy. Date Submitted: \_\_\_\_\_

NOTE: If all necessary materials are not submitted promptly, your interview could very well be postponed to a later date.

***Scheduled Date for Interview with the COM:*** \_\_\_\_\_

If the COM votes to recommend you for candidacy, the standing committee will interview you as well. Their approval is required before you can be made a candidate. Beyond getting to know you, their canonical responsibility is to ensure that you are being adequately and properly prepared for ordained ministry according to the canons of the church and according to our bishop's standards and expectations.

***Scheduled Date for Interview with the Standing Committee:*** \_\_\_\_\_

NOTE: Your rector/sponsoring priest/sponsoring priest accompanies you in this interview. Your spouse/partner will not be needed at this interview.

If the bishop accepts the recommendation of the COM and the certification of the Standing Committee, you will be made a candidate for Holy Orders.

***Date Candidacy Granted by the Bishop:*** \_\_\_\_\_

## **The Road to Ordination – Transitional Diaconate**

As candidate,

- Complete any supplemental requirements or conditions specified by the COM and the bishop.
- Continue to write the bishop four times a year during the Ember Days.
- Continue your formation, which should be at or nearing completion.
- Submit your most recent seminary transcript(s) or educational program record to the Mission Support Office. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Submit any outstanding items related to ministry practicum/field education/internship, CPE/mission experience, etc.
- Complete and pass Diocesan Ordination Exams, if any, or General Ordination Exams (GOE) Date: \_\_\_\_\_ [This step may be taken during your time as a Transitional Deacon.]
- Request endorsement for ordination to the diaconate from your sponsoring congregation/parish (FORM P). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Write a letter to the bishop requesting ordination to the diaconate, being sure to include the dates you were admitted to postulancy and candidacy (FORM Q). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- The COM may interview you. Scheduled Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- The Standing Committee will interview you. Scheduled Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If the bishop concurs with the recommendation and approval of the COM and Standing Committee, he will approve you for ordination to the diaconate and schedule your ordination (in most cases no sooner than 18 months from the date of your nomination).

Diaconal ordinations are typically performed at \_\_\_\_\_. The format and content of any invitations must be approved by the Mission Support Office before mailing. Consult the bishop regarding guidelines for ordinations.

***Date Approved by the Bishop for Ordination to the Diaconate:*** \_\_\_\_\_

***Scheduled Date for Ordination to the Diaconate:*** \_\_\_\_\_

## **The Road to Ordination - Priesthood**

If you are on the road to priesthood, you must be a deacon for an absolute minimum of six months. Once you are ordained a deacon and are placed in a parish, the parish in which you currently minister as a deacon takes over as your sponsoring parish, as they are in the best position to observe your ministry and continued discernment towards the priesthood.

- Request endorsement for ordination to the priesthood from the vestry of your sponsoring parish (FORM R). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Your rector/sponsoring priest writes a final letter of recommendation. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Write a letter to the bishop requesting ordination to the priesthood, being sure to include the dates you were admitted to postulancy, candidacy, and the date you were made a deacon (FORM S). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- The COM may interview you. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- The Standing Committee will interview you. Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If the bishop concurs, the bishop will schedule your ordination to the priesthood in consultation with your rector/sponsoring priest (if applicable). You and your rector/ sponsoring priest are responsible for the planning of your ordination service. As with ordination to the diaconate, the format and content of any invitations must be approved by the Mission Support Office before mailing. Again, consult the bishop regarding guidelines for ordinations.

***Date Approved by the Bishop for Ordination to the Priesthood:*** \_\_\_\_\_

***Scheduled Date for Ordination to the Priesthood:*** \_\_\_\_\_

## **The Road to Ordination – Vocational Diaconate**

If you are on the road to the diaconate you must,

- Request endorsement for ordination to the diaconate from the vestry of your sponsoring parish (FORM P). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Your rector/sponsoring priest writes a final letter of recommendation. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Write a letter to the bishop requesting ordination to the diaconate, being sure to include the dates you were admitted to postulancy, candidacy, (FORM Q). Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- The COM may interview you. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- The Standing Committee will interview you. Date: \_\_\_\_\_



If the bishop concurs, the bishop will schedule your ordination to the diaconate in consultation with your rector/sponsoring priest (if applicable). You and your rector/sponsoring priest are responsible for the planning of your ordination service. The format and content of any invitations must be approved by the Mission Support Office before mailing. Again, consult the bishop regarding guidelines for ordinations.

***Date Approved by the Bishop for Ordination to the Diaconate:*** \_\_\_\_\_

***Scheduled Date for Ordination to the Diaconate:*** \_\_\_\_\_

REMINDER: The canons of the Episcopal Church require the background check and the mental and medical health examinations to have been completed within 36 months (three years) of your ordination to the priesthood and/or diaconate. Any of these more than three years old at the scheduled date of your ordination will need to be done again. This is the case for ordination to the priesthood, even if you were ordained recently to the diaconate.

NOTES:

- \* Notify - notification is acceptable by email.
- \*\* Submit - all original submissions are to be sent to the bishop's executive assistant and copies scanned and emailed to the Chair of the COM [[com@delaware.church](mailto:com@delaware.church)] unless otherwise noted - please check carefully

The Episcopal Church in Delaware  
913 Wilson Road  
Wilmington DE 19803-4012

- \*\*\* Plan for your theological formation - for those seeking the Vocational Diaconate whose formation/education is not a residential/formal seminary the following applies: the plan will be developed in consultation with the bishop, COM, and Archdeacon, put forth in writing and signed by the postulant/candidate, bishop, Archdeacon, COM chairperson, and sponsoring priest. Progress under the plan shall be evaluated by the mentoring clergy and will be reported to the COM in writing.

Completed original forms should be submitted to:

The Episcopal Church in Delaware  
Attention: Executive Assistant to the Bishop  
913 Wilson Road  
Wilmington DE 19803-4012

(302) 256.0374 | [www.delaware.church](http://www.delaware.church)

Copies scanned/sent/emailed to Chair, Commission on Ministry, [com@delaware.church](mailto:com@delaware.church)