

## Guide for Sponsoring Clergy (2/2025)

**References.** Title III (Ministry) of the Canons of the Episcopal Church establishes the ecclesiastical requirements for ordination to the diaconate or the priesthood. Each diocese implements the requirements of the canons in ways appropriate to its ministry context. In the Episcopal Church in Delaware, our local implementation of the canonical requirements is reflected in *Roadmap to Holy Orders* and associated materials.

**Background.** In the Episcopal Church, clergy and members of a congregation or faith community discern together in order to nominate individuals to the bishop for possible ordination to the diaconate or the priesthood. By nominating a person for ordination, a congregation formally commits itself to contribute financial, spiritual, and practical support during the period of time in which that individual is preparing for ordination. The canons require that the clergyperson in charge of the individual's congregation ("sponsoring clergy") must approve and support the nomination in order for the process to move forward. (NOTE: In most circumstances, it is not appropriate to begin the nomination process when a congregation does not have a permanent Rector, Vicar, Priest-in-Charge, or regular supply priest in place.)

**The Bishop's Expectations of Those Seeking Ordination.** Our Bishop has identified several essential traits to look for and foster in those seeking ordination in the Episcopal Church. First, those seeking ordination should have a thorough knowledge of and devotion to the Holy Scriptures and the Book of Common Prayer. Familiarity with other resources (i.e., other forms of worship authorized by General Convention, such as the *Book of Occasional Services* and *Enriching Our Worship*) is also encouraged. Second, those seeking ordination should have a lively faith, regular spiritual disciplines, and a desire for holiness in all aspects of life. Third, those seeking ordination should be healthy, emotionally resilient, and spiritually mature individuals who relate well with others and have demonstrated capacities for leadership. Fourth, those seeking ordination should have the ability to thrive within the professional and organizational structures of the Episcopal Church and to maintain collegial relationships with other clergy, staff, lay leaders and diocesan officials. Finally, the person seeking Holy Orders should pursue classes and licensure for lay worship leader and lay preacher through the Stevenson School for Ministry.

**Sponsoring Clergy Roles.** The task of sponsoring clergy is not only to render a judgment about an individual's qualifications and readiness for seeking ordination as a deacon or priest, but also to facilitate the congregational discernment process. It is the obligation of sponsoring clergy **not to recommend** individuals who are not well-suited to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. Giving such an individual the "benefit of the doubt" is inappropriate and potentially harmful. It often leads to painful experiences further in the ordination process, after an individual has invested

considerable time, money, and emotional energy in pursuing ordination. If a sponsoring clergyperson discerns an individual should not continue in the process, the individual should be assured of the Spirit's movement in this person's life and redirected towards lay ministries and other forms of community involvement better suited to this person's particular gifts and skills. These exploratory discussions should not end on a negative note, leaving the individual with an incorrect impression that non-ordained service is not as vital, fulfilling, or important as ordained service. If the sponsoring clergy has difficulty engaging in the conversation, they should seek counsel from the bishop.

**Pastoral Responsibilities.** Sponsoring clergy should care and advocate for the individual seeking ordination, as well as spouses and other family members, during the exciting, challenging, and sometimes stressful period of discernment that precedes further formation. This may be enhanced by appointing a "shepherd" or other pastoral support team. This is a time in which it can be helpful for the individual to explore new areas of ministry as part of the individual's discernment. These ministries may be at the congregational and/or diocesan level. For example, if an individual has not yet served as a licensed lay minister (Catechist, Eucharistic Minister, Eucharistic Visitor, Evangelism Facilitator, Healing Minister, Preacher, or Worship Leader) discernment is an appropriate time to explore these ministries further. Individuals may also consider teaching an adult education class, working with children's and youth ministry, participating in ministries of justice and mercy, or learning about church governance by attending Vestry/Mission Committee meetings. For the aspirant to do this work, Safe Church Training and Unconscious Bias Training should be completed first.

**Requirements for Sponsoring Clergy.** The clergyperson tasked with leadership of a congregation usually is the first person contacted by an individual considering a call to the ordained ministry. Once the individual initiates contact by declaring a desire to pursue ordination, a sponsoring clergyperson must initiate the following steps:

1. **Hold a series of formal meetings with the individual to begin a process of serious discussion and exploration of the perceived call to ordained ministry.** Depending on the clergyperson's knowledge of the individual and the ability of the individual to articulate a sense of call, these meetings may last anywhere from several months to a year. The purpose of these discussions is to give the clergyperson the opportunity to assess the intellectual, moral, emotional, and spiritual capacities of the individual before moving forward in the ordination process. Specific topics that should be addressed in these meetings are:
  - A. The individual's familiarity with the Episcopal Church's canons regarding ordination (found in Title III) and with Roadmap to Holy Orders and associated materials.

- B. The baptismal vows undertaken by every Christian person, as well as the ordination vows for the Diaconate and the Priesthood. Individuals should be encouraged to spend time in prayer with the Baptismal Covenant and with the ordination vows for each order, paying specific attention to the aspects of the vows that seem most fitted to the individual's sense of call.
  - C. The individual's familiarity with the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. If the individual does not already have a strong grounding in these areas, the clergyperson should provide reading and self-study recommendations, as well as referrals to educational resources such as EFM (Education for Ministry; in-person and online options available) and the online continuing education courses offered through the Stevenson School for Ministry.
  - D. The individual's history with the Episcopal Church. If the individual is relatively new to the Episcopal Church and needs further grounding in the Anglican tradition, the clergyperson is encouraged to introduce the person to *The New Church's Teaching Series* and/or the videos available through ChurchNext ([www.churchnext.tv/library](http://www.churchnext.tv/library)). If the individual has not been confirmed or received in the Episcopal Church, the sponsoring clergyperson must inform the person that the discernment process cannot move forward until the individual has been confirmed or received.
  - E. The individual's personal experience of the Episcopal Church. Clergy should inquire as to the breadth of worship experience and ensure individuals understand that ordination is undertaken not for a specific congregation, but for the Episcopal Church as a whole. Deacons and priests must be able to function in a range of congregations, some of which may be very different from the individual's home congregation. During discernment, individuals should be encouraged to explore other Episcopal churches and learn about different modes and styles of worship.
  - F. The individual's understanding of the demands of the ordination process and the stresses it will place on work and family life. Those seeking ordination should be aware that in almost all cases, additional education and training will be required. This will likely involve financial costs, as well as travel and work away from family. There are also other costs associated with applying for Holy Orders (e.g., the background check, physical examination, and psychological examination).
2. **Accompany the individual to the Day of Discernment.** The Day of Discernment is offered-periodically throughout the year **Attendance at the Day of Discernment is mandatory for both sponsoring clergy and those seeking ordination.** If the sponsoring clergyperson cannot attend the Day of Discernment

with the individual, the sponsoring clergyperson should notify the bishop as soon as possible. With the Bishop's permission, the sponsoring clergyperson may then appoint another clergyperson from the sponsoring congregation (preferably, someone who already has a pastoral relationship with the individual) to accompany that individual to the Day of Discernment. If there is no other clergyperson from the sponsoring congregation available, a senior warden may be appointed. No individual is eligible to be invited to meet with the COM by the Bishop until after that individual has attended a Day of Discernment. The Day of Discernment is intended to help all members of the Episcopal Church deepen their understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit and the many ways one can be called to serve in the Church. During the Day of Discernment, presentations on lay ministries, the priesthood, the diaconate, and religious orders active in our diocese will be provided. There will also be an overview of the ordination process (including handing out an application packet and a copy of *Roadmap to Ordination*). Spouses and family members are welcome to attend the Day of Discernment. Contact the Office of the Bishop to RSVP for the Day of Discernment.

3. **After attending the Day of Discernment, arrange for the individual to participate in a Parish Discernment Group** (please see Guidebook for Discernment Groups). The Chair or a member of COM should be present for the first meeting.
4. **Send a written letter of recommendation to the bishop concerning the individual's readiness to enter the ordination process.** In this letter, the clergyperson must do ALL of the following:
  - A. Describe the clergy person's pastoral knowledge of the individual and the individual's family situation, and the clergyperson's understanding of the individual's perceived call to ordained ministry.
  - B. Assess the individual's ability to make an honest self-examination and to receive feedback from others while discerning a call to ordained ministry.
  - C. Describe the individual's spirituality, faithfulness in worship, reception of the sacraments, knowledge of the Scriptures, prayer life, understanding of the Church's faith, qualities and experience as a leader, loving interaction with others, and sense of social responsibility.
  - D. Describe the individual's character, ministerial aptitudes, and specific gifts and talents that would contribute to the individual's ministry and to the Church as a whole.

- E. Identify potential areas and/or needs for further growth and development if the individual is made a postulant.
  - F. Specify the individual's involvement in the life of the sponsoring congregation, including length of time known, length of congregational membership, and activities within the congregation.
  - G. Include reports from others whose resources may have been used in your initial evaluation, including the parish discernment group and the vestry endorsement.
5. **Ensure the formal (written) report from the Parish Discernment Committee is completed and presented to the vestry** in support of the individual's nomination. Use the specific form ("Endorsement of Application for Admission to Postulancy") to communicate the congregation's official support of the bishop making the individual a Postulant.
  6. **Contact the Office of the Bishop** to schedule an initial meeting between the bishop and the individual. **This meeting may not be scheduled until the individual's file is complete.** "Complete" means that all application materials (including recommendations, the Sponsoring Clergy's Letter of Introduction to the Bishop, the Parish Discernment Committee's report, the vestry's endorsement of Application for Admission to Postulancy, the background check, and the medical and psychological examination reports) have been received by the Office of the Bishop.
  7. **The bishop meets with the individual.** The individual may bring someone for pastoral support (e.g., sponsoring clergy, spouse, or friend), but the meeting will be between the bishop and the individual. Provide spiritual support to the individual before and after the meeting. After the Bishop has met with the individual and reviewed this person's file, the bishop will decide whether or not to invite the individual to a Discernment meeting with the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee to further explore a call to ordained ministry.
  8. **If the Bishop invites the individual to a meeting with the Diocesan Commission on Ministry,** provide spiritual support to that individual both before and after the meeting. (NOTE: In order to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest, sponsoring clergy who serve on either the Commission on Ministry or the Standing Committee should recuse themselves in the individual's meeting.)
  9. **If the Bishop Does Not Invite the Individual to a meeting with the Commission on Ministry,** provide spiritual support to the individual with particular attention

to affirming this person's ministry gifts and redirecting the individual to lay ministries (whether at church or in the world) for which the individual is best suited.

10. **If after the Commission on Ministry meeting, the bishop makes the individual a Postulant**, stay in touch with the individual during the time of formation for ordained ministry.
11. **Guide the vestry in correctly completing the Endorsement of Application for Admission to Candidacy form** at the appropriate time (generally, once the individual has been given a date for a candidacy interview with the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee). Arrange for the form to be sent to the Office of the Bishop.
12. **Guide the vestry in correctly completing the Endorsement of Application for Ordination to the Diaconate form** at the appropriate time (generally, once the individual has been given a date for an ordination interview with the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee). Arrange for the form to be sent to the Office of the Bishop.
- ~~13.~~ (For Priesthood Only) **Guide the vestry in correctly completing the Endorsement of Application for Ordination to the Priesthood form** at the appropriate time (generally, once the transitional deacon has been given a date for an ordination interview with the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee). Arrange for the form to be sent to the Office of the Bishop.

#### **Appendix A -- The Ordination Process (Up to Admission to Postulancy) Individual's Personal Discernment**

(The individual experiences a personal sense of call to ordained ministry and/or other people encourage the individual to consider pursuing ordained ministry.)



#### **Individual's Meetings with Sponsoring Clergy**

(Sponsoring clergy meets with the individual to explore and assess the individual's sense of call. It is expected that these meetings will take place over a period no shorter than six months.)

**Individual's Attendance at a Diocesan Day of Discernment**

(At the Day of Discernment, the individual will receive an application packet and a copy of *Roadmap to Holy Orders*. After attending a Day of Discernment, the individual should begin completing the Application for Holy Orders and all associated paperwork. This can be done at the same time as the next step begins.)

**Parish Discernment Group**

At least two members of the Parish Discernment Group must be from a neighboring Episcopal Church. The Parish Discernment Group's written report goes to the individual, the individual's sponsoring clergy, the individual's vestry, and the bishop.)

**Vestry and Sponsoring Clergy Nominate Individual for Postulancy**

(The individual's vestry completes the Endorsement of Application for Admission to Postulancy form. In addition to signing the Endorsement, the sponsoring clergy writes a Letter of Recommendation to the bishop.)

**Individual Meets with Bishop**

(The bishop will review the entire application and all associated paperwork, including reports from required medical/psychological examinations and background check **prior to** their first meeting with the individual and sponsoring clergy. After that meeting, the bishop will decide whether to invite the individual to a discernment meeting with the COM.)

**Attendance at a Meeting with the Diocesan Commission on Ministry**

(Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee meet with the individual to explore the aspirant's call to ordained ministry, and make a recommendation to the Bishop regarding postulancy.)

**Bishop's Decision Regarding Admission to Postulancy**

(The bishop notifies the individual, sponsoring clergy, Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee of the decision regarding admission to postulancy.)