



Parish Discernment Committee Handbook

The Bishop and the Commission on Ministry expect that the aspirant has been in dialogue with his/her priest for a considerable period of time prior to coming before the Parish Discernment Committee. The role of the discernment committee is to enthusiastically present to the bishop a person whom they see as called to the ordained ministry. They are not to present someone whom they hope will be turned down by the bishop.

The parish priest should explore ordained and lay ministry with the person. He will suggest some reading for them to do together to help with the discernment. Recommended possibilities might include: "The Christian Priest Today" by M. Ramsay, "The Good Shepherd" by L. Newbigin or "II Timothy" by J. Stott or "The Servant Church" by John E. Booty, or "II Timothy" by Stott if the perceived call is to the permanent diaconate. If the priest then feels that the aspirant clearly evidences a call to ordained ministry he will then report the fruit of this time together and request the Bishop's permission to convene the Parish Discernment Committee.

The committee should normally be composed of 6-8 persons, fewer are permissible in the case of small missions or church plants. A vestry/bishop's committee person should be a member of the group. This person would act as a liaison between the two groups. The committee will need a chairperson, a recorder and a chaplain.

It should be made clear that this is an exploration and a journey in which all members will be involved. The committee must create a climate for risk taking and caring and of course confidentiality is expected. The purposes of this group will include spiritual friendship as well as a discernment for call and life.

Meeting #1 (Orientation)

1. All meetings open and close with prayer.
2. This should be a get acquainted meeting in which the priest should introduce the aspirant to the committee. It is moderated by a member of the COM to ensure that the group gets off to a good start and is clear about the connection of its works to the larger Diocese.
3. Discuss questions about the exploration process.

4. Exploration vs. inquisition – get a clear understanding of the difference. *(Some of the questions asked throughout this process may seem intrusive, but are a necessary part of the process).*
5. Arrange a schedule of meetings so that all are able to be present.
6. Have all the members prepare a brief **Faith Journey Statement** to be presented at the next meeting. *(The aspirant will also prepare one and this will be useful for the preparation of a more detailed **Spiritual Autobiography** required later on in the process).*

Meeting # 2

At this meeting, the aspirant should not be the main focus of this meeting, but just another participant in the group.

1. The chair should lead the group into each sharing their faith journey. Each person will be given a paper on which they will draw a line with peaks, valleys, and plateaus illustrating their individual journey.
2. Each member of the group must share their information with honesty.
3. Next, using the same paper, each person is to draw a line illustrating his/her life within the church.
4. Discuss how these lines relate to each other.
 - What were the major events in your journey so far?
 - When did Jesus become real to you? What was most important about that?
 - How did the Church reveal Christ to you?
 - Where does this journey suggest God is leading?
5. As a group discuss:
 - Were there times when an experience in the church spoke powerfully to an event in your life?
 - Were there times when what was going on in the church seemed irrelevant to your life?
6. The aspirant and the group share what they have learned.

Spiritual growth describes our personal relationship with God, rather than with the Church, and it relates to all of our experiences in life. Between now and the next meeting, look at that relationship.

- Do you have a monologue or dialogue with God?
- What facilitates your relationship with God?
- What interferes with it?

At the conclusion of this meeting, the aspirant will distribute to each member of the committee a written autobiographical statement of no more than 5 pages. Members are to read this and come prepared at the next meeting to interview the aspirant and hold discussions based on this statement.

Meeting # 3

In this meeting the focus shifts to the aspirant. This is where there may be a feeling of inquisition. To avoid this, all persons in the group are asked to share their views and experiences as much as possible to foster an atmosphere of mutual exploration.

*The focus of this session is on **Ordained Ministry** and **Discipleship**.*

Based on the Spiritual Autobiography the following questions might be helpful to stimulate discussion:

1. What pressures have there been in this person's life?
2. What pressures are currently in this person's life?
3. How does he/she respond to pressures?
4. Ask them to describe their relationship with money.
5. Explore the areas of primary involvement for this person: work, home setting, church, community.
6. Explore this person's current ministries in those areas.
7. How do they tie together the secular and sacred realms of life?

The discernment committee is judging the aspirant's fitness for ordination, but at the same time, much can be learned from our collective viewpoints on most of the questions asked. While opinions and judgments are being made, a sense of Christian life and learning is vital if these meetings are to be productive for all concerned.

1. Christian **Ministry** Questions
 - How do they view the ministry of the whole Body of Christ?
 - How do they differentiate between the ministries of lay and/or ordained persons?
 - What do they understand is the role of a priest?
 - How do they understand the ordained minister's central task in pastoral care? (Solving other people's problems? Giving answers? Helping one come to a resolution of one's problems?)
2. What further growth is needed, and does this person have the capacity to achieve such growth?
 - What is their academic record?
 - How open are they to questioning, self-exploration and reality testing?
 - What evidence is there of their continuing commitment to learning and intellectual growth?
 - Are they confident they would find satisfaction in a demanding, graduate-level, course of study?
3. Spiritual Growth and Maturity Questions
 - How well does he/she understand the basics of the Christian faith? (Review ACNA Catechism)

- Do they give evidence of having a personal relationship with God? On what basis do you conclude this?
- What spiritual disciplines do they employ and how?
- How does their spirituality make itself manifest to you?
- Are they still questioning, searching and probing the mysteries of the faith?

Meeting # 4

*This meeting is used to explore the aspirants **gifts for Christian ministry**. The first step is for the aspirant to complete the assessment found in "Discover Your Spiritual Gifts the Network Way" in advance of this session. This resource comes with evaluation sheets for three separate individuals (chosen by the aspirant) to report their observation of their gifts for ministry. These should be completed by individuals with a capacity for meaningful input. These also need to be completed in advance of this session. All the results are then to be shared with the committee.*

The following questions will assist the group in exploring the aspirant's gifts for ministry:

1. General Ministry Questions

- What seem to be the aspirant's gifts for ministry?
- How do these assessment results compare to your experience of their ministry?
- How do these gifts align with what is required for ordained ministry?
- Do you see other gifts for ministry not identified by this assessment (i.e. Passions, Abilities and Experiences)?

2. Teaching and Speaking Questions

- What is their experience of teaching/instructing others?
- What kind of teaching style are they characterized by?
- What is your experience of the effectiveness of that teaching style?

3. Evangelism

- Have they led someone to Christ?
- How have they shared their testimony with others?

4. Serving Ministry Questions (for those pursuing the Diaconate)

- What is their experience of serving others?
- What kind of serving ministries are they characterized by?
- Do they respond naturally to the needs of others and the opportunities for service those needs suggest?

- What is your experience of the effectiveness of their service to others?

Meeting # 5

This meeting is used to explore two major aspects of the aspirant's life. These are emotional health and relationships.

The following questions will assist the group in exploring the aspirant's

Relational health:

1. How sure is the person of their own feelings?
2. How well does the person express strong positive and negative feelings?
3. When dealing with feelings, do physical gestures and movements (body language) match the words spoken?
5. To what extent is the person aware of and comfortable with their own sexuality? How well integrated is their sexual identity with other aspects of life?
6. Are there any indications that the person aspires to the ordained ministry as a way of solving personal problems?
7. Does the person have a level of maturity and ability to adapt that which is commensurate with their age level?
7. Relational Questions
 - How would you describe their people skills? Strengths? Weaknesses?
 - How would you describe their personality type?
 - How do they relate to individuals? To groups?

The following will assist the group in exploring the person's capacity for

Leadership:

1. Do they show initiative, self-confidence and enthusiasm?
2. Can the person motivate others? Can they give any examples?
3. Are they aware of and at ease with a variety of leadership styles and able to use them as the situation indicates?
4. How does the person function in inter-personal relationships?
5. How comfortable are they with being a person in whom authority rests. To what extent are they ready to claim and use the authority appropriately?
6. How has the person's leadership already been evidenced in prior or current lay ministries in school, work, or church settings? How has it been received?

Servant Leadership: (for those pursuing the diaconate)

1. Do they demonstrate initiative, self-confidence and enthusiasm?
2. How does the person function in inter-personal relationships?
3. How comfortable are they with being a person in whom authority rests?

- To what extent are they ready to claim and use the authority appropriately to lead others into servant ministry?
4. How comfortable are they being primarily in the role of a servant?
 5. How has the person's servant leadership already been evidenced in prior or current lay ministries in school, work, or church settings? How has it been received?

Meeting # 6

This meeting will focus on whether the aspirant is called by God to the ordained ministry.

The following questions will aid the group:

1. Is the person confusing a calling to Christian ministry with a calling to ordination? Is this a renewed passion for discipleship or a call to ministry?
2. What has led them to the sense that this is a call to ordination? People? Circumstances? Experiences? Do these connect and affirm one another?
3. Are their primary interests congruent with the basic function of an ordained person?
4. Are their innate abilities commensurate with the demands of the ordained ministry? (See *Appendix II* for a list of the characteristics being sought in candidates for the Priesthood.)

*While asking the questions and listening to the answers the group should consider whether they can envision this person as a Priest/Deacon in the Church? Can they envision this person as **your** Priest/Deacon? Would you welcome that?*

Meeting # 7

This meeting is for the committee only.

The committee decides if they wish to present the aspirant to the Rector. Can you certify that you believe there is a clear call to ordained ministry and a basic gifting to successfully exercise an ordained ministry. There is no presumption that the formation process is complete. Nonetheless, there must be the reasonable expectation that it can be successfully completed.

The written summary by the committee should provide the assessment and basis for its conclusion in each of the areas considered during the process. Those would be:

Their **Spiritual Journey**, Understanding of **Ordained Ministry**, Life of **Discipleship**, **Gifts** for Ministry, **Relational Health** and **Leadership Abilities** or **Servant Leadership Abilities** in the case of one discerning a call to the permanent diaconate

Meeting # 8

The written summary will be presented to the aspirant and will then be given to the parish priest. If the aspirant is endorsed by the rector, a copy of this summary will be submitted to the bishop.

If the committee feels that the person should not proceed with the process, it may be necessary to assist the person to recognize and value a challenging, satisfying form of lay ministry in his or her areas of primary involvement, i.e., job, family, community, and/or parish, rather than in the ordained ministry.

Remember to support the person in the coming months whether or not that person is presented to the bishop.

The Rector now involves the Vestry in the process as this group will have to make recommendations of the aspirant several times in the coming years and they should begin now to share in that journey. This report, to degree it is well done, is an essential step in that process.

Discerning Candidates for the Priest in the 21st Century

The Influence Factor—Do they influence others (especially to follow Jesus Christ)?

The Capacity Factor—Do they have the potential to grow and develop?

The Attitude Factor—Do they *desire* to grow and develop themselves in and with Christ?

The Winsome Factor—Are they winsome in communicating the Gospel and their walk with God.

The Passion Factor—Are they self-motivated and a self-starter?

The Teamwork Factor—Do they work well with others?

The Support Factor—Do they add value to others?

The Creative Factor—Can they find possibilities in seeming impossibilities?

The Discipleship Factor—Do they presently have a good grasp of the Bible and a regularly study it and share what they learn with others? Do they have a deep prayer life? What Spiritual disciplines do they presently practice?

The Leadership Factor—Are they presently discipling, pastoring or evangelizing others?

The Gospel Factor—Can they articulate the gospel with clarity and conviction?

The Travel Factor—Can they and their spouse or family travel light?

The Entrepreneurial Factor—Do they show any signs of having an entrepreneurial attitude?

**This list provides a range of factors that we believe increasingly will be needed of those entering the priesthood and being successful in leadership in the church. Of course, few aspirants will have all of these traits. Members of the Discernment Committee will need to look for questions or angles to discover if a significant number of these factors are present in the aspirants that come before us.*

Appendix II The Role of the Deacon- Sermon: The Rt. Rev. J. Alberto Morales

The permanent diaconate was dormant in the Church's life for centuries, being revived in the late 1950s. As it evolves in our own time, the original notion of service prevails. The candidate for ordination will assert that what is involved is not merely being of service – helping in one capacity or another.

Rather, their call is to form within themselves the heart of a servant – modeling themselves after Jesus – “who came to serve and not to be served.” Thus, by whom they are in all circumstances, they attempt to read the needs and situations of others and be there for them as one who serves in light of these needs. Their master becomes the one before them, to whom they are called to respond with the very gift of themselves.

Deacons are ordained to exercise their role as agents of the Diocese in close collaboration with the Bishop; they are creatures of the Bishop. Thus, like priests, they are assigned by the Bishop to minister to a local parish, and, in doing so, to bring about unity – seeking to generate unity throughout the Diocesan community as we are fashioned into one mind and one heart.

Demonstrating this broader role of service, deacons take on ministries beyond a particular parish. In cooperation with the Diocese, deacons engage in such diverse services as chaplaincies, involvement with rural life, work with the homeless, with those in chronic poverty, with the communication outreach of the diocese, and with other diocesan programs as charged by me, their Bishop. They will devote their significant natural and developed talents to the work of the church as true servants of the Kingdom.

The second role which is attributed to the deacon is that of ministry of the Word. In the ordination rite to follow, the candidate will be presented with the Holy Bible and told:

*Receive this book as
a sign of the authority given you
this day to speak Gods word to
His people. Build them up in His
truth and serve them in His name.*

Like the prophets of old, deacons are invited to consume this Word of God so that, having digested it, this Word will infiltrate every fiber of their being.

Then, in the spirit of the 72 disciples, they are called to go forth and proclaim the coming of God's Kingdom. This is done by them explicitly in preaching, in teaching the doctrine of the church, in Bible Studies and prayer

meetings and other ministries of training the people of God. Implicitly, it occurs by their witness in the secular world through compassion, advocacy of social justice, living by ethical standards that bespeak an underlying foundation of reverence for the life and dignity of every human person. In short, the deacon is called to be a leader in Evangelization – “To make Jesus Christ known and loved in our times, by choosing to live out the Gospel at every moment.”

The third role of the deacon in unison with that of Minister of Service and Word is that of Minister of the Eucharist. The deacon has an assigned, formal role in the celebration of Mass. While he or she performs a function at Eucharist, the far more important consideration is symbolic. What deacons express by their close association with the Eucharistic celebration of faith is the attachment of themselves to Jesus in the expression of the paschal mystery. For with the Son of God, the deacon is willing to die to self and become one with Jesus in the return gift to the Father – a reality that is made present in each celebration of Mass and which especially authenticates the deacon as Servant.

St. Augustine highlighted this reality as it was witnessed by St. Lawrence, an early deacon martyr of the Church. In a homily, Augustine stated:

“As you have often heard, Lawrence was a deacon of the Church of Rome. There he ministered the sacred blood of Christ; there for the sake of Christ’s name he poured out his own blood.”

Saint John the Apostle was evidently teaching us, about the mystery of the Lord’s supper when he wrote:

“Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so we ought to lay down our lives, for the brethren.”

Lawrence understood this, and, understanding, he acted on it. Just as he had a portion of the gift of self at the table of the Lord so he prepared to offer such a gift. In his life he lived Christ, in his death he followed in his footsteps.” (Sermon 304)

We welcome Joy, ordained to the Sacred Order of Deacons today.

She is a gift to the Diocese of Quincy. Her particular role as a member of this Body is inspiring to us all – encouraging us, each in his own way, to re-dedicate ourselves to the vital, irreplaceable role that Christ has entrusted to each of us.

I had a fresh insight into what the impact of the presence of the Church, of God's Body can be in our turbulent world which can breed discouragement because of its secular and amoral culture.

On my return trip home from Puerto Rico from the Caribbean, I was seated next to a young man. I always try to travel with my black clergy shirt. He asked me where are you heading. I responded, to Peoria Illinois. He told me that he was born in Bloomington and now they live in Miami.

As our conversation deepened, he asked me, whether I believed in God. Very definitely, I assured him. When I asked him the same question, he demurred and shrugged his shoulders. I asked him, then, what the Church meant to him – he smiled slightly, and said; the Church, indeed its Believers, are those who give Hope.

We have to be people who radiate Hope – we need to bring this great gift to others and enable them in some fashion to see beyond their discouraging, limited circumstances to an appreciation of their personal value.

We are grateful to this deacon, to her brothers and sisters already ordained to this Order, to her family and spouse, those who are married – for being dedicated to their particular role in the Body of Christ so that this body, Christ alive in our world today, indeed all of us together, may be the vehicle of Hope for our brothers and sisters in the human family.

Appendix III

What we are NOT looking for in people seeking ordination:

Someone who wants to “help people.” We have secular counselors and social workers, and we don't need to ordain people for that purpose. If the aspirant's primary desire is to visit the sick and minister to the poor and needy, he or she might be called to be a permanent deacon instead of the priesthood.

Someone who simply wants to lead worship. While the priest is in charge of the liturgy, Sunday morning is only a small part of the priest's week.

Someone who sees the priesthood as “the next step up.” Some people apply secular standards to the faith, and assume that as one grows in his or her faith, he or she progresses from a lay person, to a Sunday school teacher, to a vestry person, to a warden, to a deacon, and then to a priest. The priesthood is not a “step up” in ministry.

Someone who is relatively new in their faith, or recently converted. While we give thanks for budding new Christians, Jesus says you will know them by their fruits. We need to be able to see some fruits of existing ministry.

Someone who would make a good assistant. Again, we need identifiable leaders. Leadership is one of the gifts of the Spirit, and the gift of leadership is not given to everyone. If ordained, our applicants will probably serve as assistants at first, but we are looking for potential rectors. We in the Church don't need to ordain someone who might make a good assistant, but would make a poor rector. We need to find and affirm people who have vision, ideas, passion, drive, and the desire to lead parishes and missions.