Discernment and Formation Process

Discernment and Formation for Leadership Ministries

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:4-9

Discernment and formation for leadership ministry, whether lay or ordained, is rooted in prayer. In the Diocese of Virginia, we believe that prayerful spiritual discernment, both personal and in community, should be normative for all members of the Church. Therefore our process of formation for ministry begins with spiritual discernment.

The Formal Diocesan Discernment Process

I. First Steps
The formal process of discernment for ministry begins when a person experiences a sense of call to lay or ordained ministry and expresses that sense to a priest (usually a priest serving the church in which the person worships). After the conversation between the person, hereafter called an Aspirant, and the priest, hereafter called the Presenting Priest, writes a letter to the Canon to the Ordinary expressing support for the Aspirant to attend a Discernment Retreat.

A. Discernment Retreat
Discernment Retreats are typically offered three times a year (early spring, summer and fall). Retreats typically begin on Friday afternoon and go through lunch on Sunday. They are held in Richmond, usually at Richmond Hill. The goals of the Discernment Retreat are:
- To introduce the art of individual and group spiritual direction
- To introduce the importance of working with a spiritual director
- To review The Episcopal Church’s understanding of orders of ministry
- To outline the steps in the discernment process
- To begin or continue the work of discerning a call to ministry

B. Reflection and Discernment following a Discernment Retreat
After attending a Discernment Retreat, the Aspirant spends time reflecting on and processing what was experienced at the retreat. The Aspirant also engages in conversation with the Presenting Priest. The Aspirant is encouraged to spend some months in reflection following a retreat before taking any further steps.

II. Expanding the Community of Discernment

A. The Diocesan Spiritual Discernment Facilitator
If, after the Discernment Retreat and a period of prayerful reflection, the Aspirant desires to continue in discernment, the Aspirant conveys that desire to the Presenting Priest. Should the Presenting Priest concur, the priest writes or e-mails the Canon to the Ordinary, expressing support for the Aspirant to enter a time of discernment in the parish.
The Canon then appoints a Diocesan Spiritual Discernment Facilitator to the parish. Diocesan Spiritual Discernment Facilitators are men and women, lay and ordained, who have been selected and trained for the work of group discernment. Many of them are spiritual directors.

The Aspirant, Presenting Priest and a member of the Vestry of the church meet with the Diocesan Spiritual Discernment Facilitator to learn about the discernment process and begin the work of parish based discernment.

B. Parish Discernment Committee
After the initial meeting, a Parish Discernment Committee is formed with the support and guidance of the Facilitator. The Facilitator trains the members of the Committee in a day-long training retreat and supports them in their work.

A Parish Discernment Committee usually includes 6 to 8 members, including the Aspirant. The Presenting Priest is not a member, since the Priest has a separate role in the discernment process. There is not a specified number of sessions for the work the committee does with the Aspirant – it takes as long as it takes.

The Parish Discernment Committee focuses on basic questions such as:
- What is the Aspirant’s relationship with God?
- How is God calling the Aspirant to ministry?
- To what kind of ministry does God seem to be calling the Aspirant?
- What stands in the way of responding? What is the price of responding? What are the blessings of responding?

C. Reflection and Discernment following work with a Parish Discernment Committee
When the Aspirant and Parish Discernment Committee discern that their work is completed, the Aspirant meets again with the Presenting Priest to reflect on the experience and to consider next steps. The Committee does not make a formal report to the Presenting Priest, the Facilitator, or the Canon. The Committee does offer reflections for the Aspirant regarding current ministry and possible next steps.

D. Appointment of a Contact Person and Beginning of the Application Process
If after completing work with the Parish Discernment Committee and spending time in reflection, the Aspirant desires to continue in discernment of a call to ordained ministry, the Aspirant conveys that desire to the Presenting Priest. Should the Presenting Priest concur, the priest writes or e-mails the Canon to the Ordinary, expressing support for the Aspirant to begin the process of applying for Postulancy to the Diaconate or Priesthood. A Contact Person from the appropriate committee (Committee on the Diaconate or Committee on Priesthood) will then be appointed to work with the Aspirant in the application process.

III. Directions the Aspirant might pursue as a result of a formal discernment process
A. Religious Orders
B. Lay Leadership
C. Diaconate
D. Priesthood

A. Religious Orders
Christians have a long history of living together in community, dedicating themselves to prayer and worship. The Episcopal Church has a wide range of religious orders, some traditional orders, some more contemporary communities.

Traditional religious orders
Members are committed for life, holding all possessions in common and taking vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience. The Conference of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas recognizes 23 orders, differing in size, composition and mission.
Contemporary religious communities
Although similar to traditional religious orders, many newer religious communities do not require celibacy or mandatory vows. In many communities, members have the choice of living individually, in small groups, or with their families. Some contemporary communities include Richmond Hill, Brotherhood of St. Gregory, Community of Celebration and Community of the Paraclete.

The Diocese of Virginia does not have a formal process for supporting Aspirants in entering religious orders. Aspirants interested in pursuing this direction can find further information about religious orders, both traditional and contemporary, at www.orders.anglican.org/caroa or on the Diocese of Virginia website www.thediocese.net/Ministries/Serving_the_Church/Religious_Life/

B. Lay Leadership
According to the Catechism in The Book of Common Prayer, “The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.”

What Kind of Lay Leaders serve the Church?
St. Paul wrote in the Letter to the Ephesians, “The gifts Christ gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.” (Ephesians 4:11)

In the church today, evangelists include lay preachers who can reach and talk with those who are not part of a church community. Teachers include Christian educators, children/youth/adult formation leaders, EfM mentors, Catechists, teachers of religion, bible, theology. Pastors include pastoral care givers, hospital visitors, crisis counselors, small group ministry leaders and pastoral counselors. Prophets include people who speak hard truths to the church and to the world.

Other lay ministers are administrators, including parish administrators, hospital administrators, vestry members, delegates to Annual Council, deputies to General Convention, Executive Board or Standing Committee members and chairs or members of Commissions or Committees; Healers, including health care professionals, parish nurses, peacemakers; Spiritual Leaders, including spiritual directors, Diocesan Spiritual Discernment Facilitators and those who help others uncover and use their gifts.

Aspirants interested in these ministries work directly with their presenting priests and parish discernment committees. A formal diocesan process is not required to become a lay leader. However, training and support are offered through the process of licensure for some lay ministries and through the Episcopal Leadership Institute (ELI) for laity.

Licensed Lay Ministries
Some lay ministries require a license from the bishop. These include lay Preachers, Eucharistic Ministers, Eucharistic Visitors, Pastoral Leaders, and Catechists. The process for becoming a licensed lay minister begins with a conversation with the parish priest, who must support and sign the application for licensure. More information is available on the diocesan website at http://www.thediocese.net/Resources/Clergy_Resources/

Episcopal Leadership Institute (ELI) for Laity
ELI is a one-year program of leader development. Small classes of ELI students meet in quarterly 3-day retreats that focus on the theological, historical and scriptural bases for leadership, on leadership development and on collaborative reflection. Between sessions, participants develop ministry projects with individualized reading assignments, reflection papers and collegial feedback. Additional information and application materials for the Episcopal Leadership Institute for Laity can be found online at:
C. The Diaconate
According to the Catechism in The Book of Common Prayer, “The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.”

By virtue of our baptism, all Christians are called to make Christ’s redemptive love known through servant ministry. Deacons are ordained to exercise this ministry, particularly to the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely. Deacons model servant ministry in their daily life and work, and are icons of servant ministry through their liturgical roles in worship. At all times, by their life and teaching, deacons are to show Christ’s people that in serving others they are serving Christ himself. It is also the special responsibility of deacons to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. Deacons entrust their gifts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to empower others to name, claim and engage fully the work God gives us all to do. Those who sense they might be called to ordination as a deacon demonstrate servant ministry in the world, either in an institutional setting or in other forms of service, and their calling is clearly rooted in their faith and recognized in their actions.

Diocese of Virginia Deacons’ School
*Important Note – The Committee on the Diaconate is currently working to revise and strengthen the formation and training program for Diaconal Ministry in the Diocese of Virginia. The revised program will not be in place until January 2014. Discernment processes for those exploring a call to diaconal ministry will continue during this time of reshaping the program.*

Formation for Diaconal Ministry typically takes three years from the time one begins formal preparation until ordination.

*Please note: Since this program is undergoing revision, each component will not necessarily continue exactly as described when the new program begins in January 2014. Postulants will be notified when significant changes are made in the requirements of the Deacons’ School.*

The Deacons’ School
The Deacons’ School is a cooperative project with the Diocese of Southern Virginia. The School is a series of nine quarterly retreats, meeting in January, April, July and October in with the first cycle beginning in 2014 through January of 2016. Each retreat begins with supper on Friday evening and runs through mid-Sunday afternoon. Each weekend retreat includes 16 hours of classroom time where the learning experience includes individual and group assignments, presentation of homework, in an atmosphere of worship and shared community. There will be students from both dioceses in the School. Each student will have the opportunity to make connections between their passion for ministry and the required course work, ministry, and networking experiences, enabling each student to develop and accomplish a Capstone Project showcasing they learning and preparation for Diaconal ministry.

During the three months between each retreat there will be significant reading as well as presentations or other homework to prepare. A student in the Deacons’ School should expect that they will need to study between eight and ten hours per week. Prior to each retreat, there will be required reading and an assignment to prepare for that next retreat. After the retreat, there will be an assignment to complete the work of the retreat. Instructors will be available between classes for assistance via electronic communication, and a class might agree to an additional evening electronic meeting at some time during the three intervening months.
Prior to the first retreat in January 2014, each student must read the entire Bible (a good NRSV Study Bible with Apocrypha) and prepare a journal with their questions and reflecting on their interaction with the scriptures. Even if one has previously read the Bible, it must be read anew, as if for the first time. The journal may be accomplished in a variety of ways and must be approved by the instructor for the first retreat.

**Leadership with A Servant’s Heart and the Capstone Project**

The major function of deacons is to interpret the needs of the world to the church and to interpret the graces of God experienced in the church to the world. Those admitted to the formation process for diaconal orders in the Diocese are expected to demonstrate a servant’s heart through a ministry of inviting the Church into fuller service to a population in need. The Capstone Project will empower each student to embrace their passion for ministry while developing and accomplishing, in a parish setting, a ministry of leadership inviting their assigned parish to identify a need in the community and ministry to meet that need. The Capstone Project will be undergirded by learning in the required canonical areas and will be presented to the learning community, integrating the connections between the coursework, the parish ministry experiences and the deep learning of the candidate.

**One year Practicum in a Parish**

During the second year of training in the Deacons’ school, students will do a directed practicum in a parish. This practicum period enables students to experience a wider breadth of the church as they work, learn and grow in a parish other than the one that raised them up for ordination. It also strengthens their ministries as they accomplish their Capstone Projects. During the practicum period, students meet weekly with their supervising priest for theological reflection and practical training. Students also meet monthly with a lay committee that supports and challenges them in their formation.

Further information about and application forms for the Diaconate in the Diocese of Virginia are available at [www.thediocese.net/Ministries/Serving_the_Church/Diaconate/](http://www.thediocese.net/Ministries/Serving_the_Church/Diaconate/)

**Additional training** is required by the Canons of the Church in:
- The Prevention of Sexual Misconduct and Child Abuse
- The Civil requirements for reporting and pastoral opportunities for responding to evidence of abuse
- The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, particularly Title IV (Ecclesiastical Discipline)
- The Church’s teaching on racism

Specific ways to meet these requirements are offered or recommended in the Diaconal Formation Institute.

**Oral and Written exams** are administered by the Diocesan Board of Examining Chaplains after three semesters in the Diaconal Formation Institute. These exams cover the core competencies required by the Canons of The Episcopal Church, namely:
- Academic studies including the Holy Scriptures, theology and tradition of the Church
- Diakonia and the diaconate
- Human awareness and understanding
- Spiritual development and discipline
- Practical training and experience

** Ember Day Letters**

Each person in formation for ordination writes a letter to the Bishop four times a year, during Ember Weeks (see a liturgical calendar to determine when these are), reflecting on academic growth and personal and spiritual development. The Bishop reads these letters and responds when there is a particular or special need. Ember
Day letters may also be sent to the Committee on the Diaconate Contact Person and/or to the Canon to the Ordinary as a way of sharing the journey and keeping in touch.

**D. Priesthood**
According to the Catechism in The Book of Common Prayer (page 856), “The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.”

**Typical formation for Priesthood includes the following pieces.** These pieces are required but may be put together in different ways by different Aspirants, depending on their past education and experience.

**Academic studies** leading to a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) Degree from an Episcopal Seminary or other accredited seminary. The Master of Divinity is a graduate degree that usually takes three years to complete. The Bishop must approve a student’s selection of seminary. Episcopal seminaries require that a student be a Postulant for Holy Orders before beginning the M.Div. program. Under special circumstances, an alternative education and training program may be approved by the Bishop.

**Field Education**
The Diocese of Virginia requires four semesters of field education in a parish or other institution, under the supervision of a trained priest supervisor and with the support of a lay committee. Students work and learn in the parish or other setting an average of 12 hours a week.

**Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE)**
Clinical Pastoral Education is a form of theological education that takes place outside of the classroom and in a setting where ministry is being practiced. Students from the Diocese of Virginia are required to complete one unit of CPE. Most complete this requirement during the summer after the first year of seminary. More information about CPE can be found at [http://www.acpe.edu/](http://www.acpe.edu/).

**Mid-Atlantic Parish Training Program (MAPTP)**
This is a parish based training program, typically done during the summer after the second year of seminary. Students work full time in a parish for 8 weeks, under the supervision of a trained supervisor and with the support of a lay committee. The MAPTP Guidebook can be found here: [http://www.thedioceste.net/Ministries/Serving_the_Church/Priesthood/](http://www.thedioceste.net/Ministries/Serving_the_Church/Priesthood/).

**Ember Day Letters**
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**General Ordination Exams (GOEs)**
General Ordination Examinations are taken in January of the last year of seminary. These exams seek to determine competency in seven areas named in the Canons of The Episcopal Church:

- The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments
- Church History
- Christian Theology
- Christian Ethics and Moral Theology
- Studies in Contemporary Society
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- Liturgics and Church Music
- Theory and Practice of Ministry

Exams are read and graded by members of the General Board of Examining Chaplains of The Episcopal Church. They are then read by a member of the Diocesan Board of Examining Chaplains paired with a member of the Diocesan Committee on Priesthood. If a student’s work is found insufficient in one or more areas, the diocesan readers typically ask for additional work through which the student may demonstrate competency. Such work is completed before Ordination as a Transitional Deacon. While GOEs are important and are to be taken seriously, the Commission on Ministry of the Diocese of Virginia views them as diagnostic rather than determinative.

**Additional training** is required by the Canons of The Episcopal Church in
- The Prevention of Sexual Misconduct and Child Abuse
- The Civil requirements for reporting and pastoral opportunities for responding to evidence of abuse
- The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, particularly Title IV (Ecclesiastical Discipline)
- The Church’s teaching on racism

Training in these areas is offered at most Episcopal seminaries.

### IV. Glossary

- **Junior** – a first year seminary student
- **Middler** – a second year seminary student
- **Senior** – a third year seminary student

- **Commission on Ministry (COM)** – a Commission appointed by the Annual Council of the Diocese to advise and assist the Bishop in the design and oversight of the process for discernment, assessment and formation for ministry.

- **Committee on the Diaconate (COD)** – a subcommittee of the Commission on Ministry that oversees the process of discernment, assessment and formation for the diaconate.

- **Committee on Priesthood (COP)** – a subcommittee of the Commission on Ministry that oversees the process of discernment, assessment and formation for priesthood.

- **Diocesan Board of Examining Chaplains (DBEC)** – a group of clergy and lay persons appointed by Diocesan Council to examine and certify that all candidates for holy orders are competent in the areas required by the Canons of The Episcopal Church.

- **Standing Committee** – a committee of 12 people (6 clergy and 6 lay), elected by the Annual Council of the Diocese as a council of advice to the Bishop and to oversee specific canonical (Church governance) areas. The Standing Committee interviews all who are recommended for Candidacy or for Ordination and must approve them before Candidacy or Ordination may be conferred.

- **Postulancy** – A formal period of exploration of and decision about a call to holy orders. Postulancy is granted by the Bishop, after having received a recommendation from the appropriate committee of the Commission on Ministry. In a typical process, formal education and formation for ordination begin after postulancy is granted.
Candidacy – a time of continued education and formation in preparation for ordination. The Bishop grants Candidacy, usually during the second year of formal preparation, on the recommendation of the Commission on Ministry, the Standing Committee, the Presenting Priest and the Vestry of the presenting congregation.

VII. Further Information

Further information about and application forms for the Priesthood in the Diocese of Virginia are available at www.thedioce.se.net/Ministries/Serving_the_Church/Overview/

Further information about the Commission on Ministry and the committees that work with the discernment, formation and ordination processes is available at www.thedioce.se.net/Diocesan_Community/Committees_and_Commissions/Ministry/

The Canons of The Episcopal Church are available at www.thedioce.se.net/Governance/Constitution_and_Canons/

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