



Discernment: Exploring the Church

As part of discernment, we ask all seekers to expand their perspective of the Church beyond their own church's walls. This work will look different for each seeker, but take its shape from this guide. We hope this work will bring you joy as you explore Christ's Church and seek your place in it.

Prayer & Support

- Strengthen your prayer life.
 - Expand your use and knowledge of the BCP; pray the daily offices.
 - Experiment with different forms of prayer.
- Find and meet regularly with a spiritual director.
 - [Richmond Hill](#); [Shalem Institute map](#); Catholic monasteries and religious houses; ask your priest for suggestions.
- Find and meet regularly with a therapist (recommended, not required).
 - We believe therapy is path towards wholeness for all, not just a path towards healing for some. We recognize it can be cost prohibitive, but therapy can play an essential part in self-care, self-awareness and discernment.

Study

- **Scripture:** Use a study Bible, an NRSV with Apocrypha
- **Prayer Book:** Read, mark, and inwardly digest the [Baptismal](#) and ordination vows in the BCP ([priest](#), [deacon](#)). Return to them often as discernment unfolds.
- **Required reading:** “[Transforming Vocation](#)” by Sam Portaro | “[Praying Shapes Believing](#)” by Leonel Mitchell & Ruth Meyers | Draw regularly from the [Becoming Anti-Racist Reading & Resource List](#) | Handouts from the discernment retreat | St. Phoebe School for Deacons website ([saintphoebeschool.org](#))
- **Suggested reading:** “[Practicing Resurrection](#)” by Nora Gallagher | “[Joan Chittister: Essential Writings](#)” Kownacki and Synder, editors | “[Let Your Life Speak](#)” by Parker Palmer | “[The Sacred Journey](#)” by Frederick Buechner | “[Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed](#)” by Suzanne Epting | “[Being Called, Being Gay](#)” by Gregory Millikin

Observation

- Visit at least five Episcopal Churches (or 15 if visiting virtually) and reflect on differences and similarities using the guide below.
- Increase your involvement and/or get involved in a new church-related ministry.

Conversation

- Talk to *at least* seven Church professionals outside of your parish about their work and personal life using the guide provided below. This should include at least one priest, one deacon and one layperson.

Writing

- As a spiritual discipline, keep a journal on your faith, journey, and call. You might pick out readings/questions from this guide: [Circles of Light](#). This is just a suggestion to provide some structure to your journaling, not a formal piece of our process, and we don't recommend following the process outlined in Circles of Light from start to finish.



Discernment: Next Steps after Exploring the Church Before the Discernment Committee

Working towards expanding your perspective of the Church should take some months to complete. Once you, the seeker, feel you have completed this work, have a conversation with your presenting priest to unpack what you have discovered, and discern together if the time is right for you to begin the next phase of discernment: the parish discernment committee.

Once your presenting priest feels it's appropriate for you to take the next steps, two things should happen: 1.) your presenting priest should email [Sarah Kye Price](#) requesting that you be assigned a discernment facilitator and; 2.) you should submit a resume and report to [Sarah](#) on the work you've done since the discernment retreat.

If you are completing this as part of the [Young Priest Initiative](#), submit the resume and report to your contact with YPI, who will update you on the next steps in the process.

The **resume** should detail your education, job history and church experience. For work experience, be sure the resume is written in plain English rather than your field's jargon and that it highlights experience relevant to Church leadership. For the church experience portion, be sure to answer:

- When/where were you baptized?
- When/where were you confirmed?
- How many churches have you been a member of and for how long? Describe each church.
- What ministries are/were you involved with?
- What formal theological education or training do you have? (E.g., EfM, seminary education, Eucharistic Visitor training)

The **report** on your work since the discernment retreat should answer the following questions:

- How has your prayer life changed?
- How has your understanding of the prayer book changed?
- What did you read from the reading list?
 - What in the reading was most powerful for you?
 - What did you struggle with or question?
 - Was there anything not on our reading list you found particularly helpful?
- How many conversations did you have with church professionals? Who were they?
- How many churches did you visit? Which ones?
 - If you would like to send some of your writing on the conversations/church visits, we'll be happy to have it, but it's not required.
- Anything else you think we need to know.

The resume and report don't need to be extensive, but should provide a coherent outline of your discernment. Four pages is a good length—one page for your work resume, one page for your church experience, and two pages on your discernment work since the retreat.

The resume and report are informational rather than evaluative. They will help us find the right discernment facilitator. Once assigned, you should share the resume and report with the discernment facilitator so they can best serve you and your committee (the diocesan offices don't share the documents directly, in the event that you later updated/added to the documents).



Guide for Conversations with Church Professionals

Some Direction

- **Talk to at least seven Church professionals** outside of your home church. This should include *at least* one priest, one deacon and one lay professional.
 - Those in discernment for the diaconate should speak to at least three deacons serving this diocese (the Ven. [David Curtis](#) can provide a list of deacons available to talk).
 - Please don't ask to interview bishops; there are too few to make this a sustainable request.
- **Get suggestions.** Ask your presenting priest for recommendations, asking for a variety of leaders.
- **Use the questions below**, plus a few of your own.
- **Take 30 minutes or so.** Your conversation should last about 30 minutes. It can be longer, but remember to be respectful of the person's time.
- **Take notes.** If the person is comfortable with it, take notes during the conversation. If not, write down your thoughts afterwards.
- **Respect confidentiality.** Respect the person's wishes if they would like any part or all of the conversation to be kept in confidence. Ask the person if you're not sure if something is sensitive.
- **Talk face-to-face.** It's preferred that you have these conversations in person or via videoconference. It's OK to send the questions ahead of time, but a part of this exercise is getting a sense of the person, which is difficult to do over the phone, and even harder over email.

Questions

1. What does it mean to you to be a [priest/deacon/lay professional]?
2. What about your ministry brings you the most joy?
3. What about your ministry is the most difficult?
4. How is the [priesthood/diaconate] different from your perception of how it would be before ordination? *Or, for lay professionals:* How is working for the church different from your perception of how it would be?
5. What impact has your ministry had on your personal life and family?
 - a. This doesn't have to be overly personal. Consider topics like how their ministry affects their rhythm of life, where their family lives, how they're perceived outside of church.
6. What do you think the role of [priests/deacons/lay professionals] will be in the future?

Afterwards, Reflect On...

- What did you hear that resonated with you? What did you struggle with?
- Where did you see yourself reflected in the views and the experiences of the people you talked with?
- How does this person's leadership style seem to compare to what you've experienced in the church? How does their leadership style compare with your own?
- How does their ministry context compare to your home church?
- What surprised you?



Guide for Visiting New Churches

Some Direction

- **Visit at least five* new Episcopal churches** and write a reflection for each using the guide below. These should not be churches you've visited before, or at least they shouldn't be churches you're very familiar with. They don't all have to be in the Diocese of Virginia, but some should be.
 - ***If visiting virtually, seekers should complete 15 parish visits.** The visits don't all have to be Sunday services, but at least five should be.
- **Get suggestions.** Ask your presenting priest for suggestions on churches to visit, or consult the "[Find a Church](#)" tool on the diocesan website.
- **Seek diversity.** Seek out churches that seem different from yours. We hope you will make an effort to step out of your comfort zone.
 - Some ways churches differ: racial makeup and economic status of parishioners; size; political/theological beliefs; liturgical style; urban/suburban/rural; the role of leadership in the church.
- **Take notes.**
- **One caution:** It's OK to say you're visiting as part of your vocational discernment, just don't give anyone the idea that you're a member of a search committee scouting out their priest!

Guide for Written Reflection

1. What are the basic ways the church compared to your home church? (E.g., location, size, architecture.)
2. Liturgy
 - a. What aspects of the worship resonated with you? What did you struggle with? Why?
 - b. What was unfamiliar to you?
 - c. What was the sermon about? Who preached it? What was the delivery style?
 - d. What was the priest's style in celebrating the Eucharist?
 - e. What was the music like?
 - f. How are the laity involved in leading worship?
3. The Congregation
 - a. What are the basic ways the congregation compares to your own? (E.g., age, dress, racial makeup.)
 - b. How would you describe the congregation beyond those basic observations?
 - c. Describe how those in the pews participated in the service. (E.g.: Were they reverent? Joyful? Did they sing?)
4. The Leadership
 - a. Who's on staff at this church? How many clergy serve there?
 - b. What seemed to be the relationship between the rector and the congregation?
 - c. How does this compare to your church?
5. What ministries are held up in the bulletin or in the announcements?
6. How would you describe the values/mission of this church? How does that compare to your home church?
7. How would you describe the neighborhood/community where the church is located? How would you describe the church's relationship/involvement with that neighborhood/community?
8. What was your greatest takeaway from this church?
9. Can you imagine yourself as a leader in this church?