

**The Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee**  
**Parish Discernment Committee Guidelines**

*Prior to the first meeting of the Parish Discernment Committee, the Rector/Vicar meets with the Applicant and asks him/her to write a 5-7page double spaced Autobiography to be distributed at the first meeting. (This is not to be merely a Spiritual Autobiography, but should speak to the major events of one's life.)*

*The Rector/Vicar will have convened a group of seven laypersons prior to the first meeting of the Committee.*

*For this first meeting, the Rector/Vicar should have copies of the following forms for distribution:*

*Parish Discernment Committee Guidelines (this form) for the lay convener of the group*

*The Basic Assumptions from the Vocational Discernment Manual (a copy is found attached to these guidelines)*

*The list of desired Attributes (a copy is found attached to these guidelines)*

*The Applicant's Autobiography (not merely a Spiritual Autobiography) 5-7 pages double spaced*

**Meeting 1: Task:** To define the task of the Parish Committee on Ministry, stressing responsibility, care, and confidentiality

1. The parish Rector/Vicar will facilitate this initial meeting, which is held without the Applicant present, and will lay out expectations for the Discernment Committee.
2. Members of the Committee introduce themselves, sharing the particular gifts they bring to the Committee. The Rector/Vicar may wish to express his/her reasons for the appointment of each individual to the Committee as a part of this introduction.
3. The members discuss the process of discerning.
4. The group is introduced to an understanding of the four orders of ministry, using the Basic Assumptions section of the Vocational Discernment Manual (group exercise).
  - a. How is ordained ministry related to the ministry of all Christians conferred in Baptism?
  - b. In what ways would you see the ordained life "set apart" from the ministry of the Baptized?
  - c. How do these understandings relate to your own life and ministry?
  - d. How will these understandings relate to the Applicant and his/her gifts and calling (in general)?
5. The Rector/Vicar introduces the Applicant (without the Applicant being present) and distributes a brief biographical sketch provided by the Applicant. **This is to be a 5-7 page AUTOBIOGRAPHY of the applicant AND NOT MERELY A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY.**
6. In preparation for the next meeting, the Committee studies the biographical information and the list of desired Characteristics provided by the Diocese.
7. The Committee may request further information or clarity from the Rector/Vicar.

8. Before the next meeting, the Rector/Vicar discusses with the Applicant the plans for future Parish Discernment Committee meetings and the Basic Assumptions section of the Vocational Discernment Manual, utilizing the above questions.

**Meeting 2: Task:** To introduce the Applicant to the Committee and to begin to form a community of sharing and trust

1. The chair of the Committee summarizes the first session (Task I) with the Applicant present.
2. Committee members introduce themselves to the Applicant, sharing some of their stories and their investment in this process.
3. The Applicant introduces him/herself in a similar way, focusing on what brings the Applicant to this point in his/her spiritual journey.
4. The Committee members ask clarifying questions of the Applicant regarding his/her introduction.
5. The Committee schedules the next meeting to review the Applicant's autobiography and address any issues that surface for the Applicant and/or the Committee members.
6. The Committee ascertains if the Applicant has previously been part of a discernment process at the parish or diocesan level.

**Meeting 3: Task:** To focus on the Applicant's understanding of Christian ministry and call to ordained ministry

1. The Committee and the Applicant discuss issues that arise from a study of the Applicant's autobiography and personal story.
  - a. How has the Applicant's vocation been shaped by teachers, parents, clergy, books, experiences, etc?
  - b. Does the Applicant articulate his/her sense of call with clarity? Passion?
  - c. What has moved the Applicant to seek ordination?
2. The Committee discusses with the Applicant the four-fold ministry of the Church and the Applicant's clarity about Christian ministry.
3. The Committee and the Applicant discuss how the Applicant's gifts and vision best fit the call to Christian ministry. Can the Applicant begin to articulate his/her understanding of ordained ministry and what the Church will require of him/her?

**Meeting 4: Task:** To focus on the Applicant's ability and willingness to grow. The Committee discusses the following questions with the applicant:

1. Does the Applicant seem to be growing in the Christian faith?
  - a. How has personal/spiritual growth been apparent in the past?
  - b. Are there issues that seem to inhibit growth?
  - c. What is the potential for continued growth?
  - d. How has the Applicant grown in the discernment process? How has he/she progressed over these meetings in articulating his/her sense of call?
2. How does the Applicant take care of, order, balance himself/herself?
  - a. Does he/she have a spiritual director?
  - b. Does he/she have a rule of life, a prayer life, and a spirituality that is life giving?
  - c. Does the Applicant strike the Committee as a person of prayer?
  - d. How does the Applicant feel about himself/herself?
  - e. What would the Applicant identify as emotional strengths and weaknesses, and how do they affect his/her present ministry?

**Meeting 5: Task:** To focus on the Applicant's gifts, talents and resources in relationship to our mutual understanding of the Church's ministry.

1. The Committee and the Applicant discuss how the Applicant's gifts, skills, current ministries, lifestyle, commitment and vision best fit the call to Christian ministry.
  - a. What priestly or diaconal ministries has he/she shown in the parish?
  - b. In what ways could the Committee and the Applicant envision the Applicant as a priest or deacon?
  - c. Is the Applicant someone the Committee would actively recruit?
  - d. What are the Applicant's strengths and weaknesses, the areas needing growth?
2. The Applicant describes the resources God has uniquely given to him/her that can be developed into the ministry of priesthood or diaconate. The Committee discerns whether it concurs with the Applicant's assessment. Such things to be considered are:
  - *A maturing Christian faith* that reflects an understanding of Christ's presence, conveying a sense of being called to service, of sharing the Gospel, living in the Spirit, showing love and exhibiting openness to the whole body of Christ's people in ecumenical engagement.
  - A disciplined pattern of private and common prayer; and the ability and willingness to speak in a personal way of his/her experience of God and Jesus Christ are also important indicators of a maturing faith.
  - *A sense of vocation for the ordained ministry*, ability to articulate a call, a beckoning, recognized as from God and what the applicant believes he/she has to offer to the Church; ability to articulate past and present personal history of ministry.

- A sense of self: self-knowledge, psychological health, self-care.
- Personal integrity: authenticity, trustworthiness, and dependability.
- Intelligence: an intellectual grasp of concepts and practical applications and the implications of them.
- Spiritual depth: a tended relationship with God in Christ.
- A loving heart: the capacity and inclination to be close to and care for others.
- A sense of the fitness of things: sound judgment and clear boundaries – personal, ethical, and communal.
- A loyalty to the institution of the Church: a healthy respect for the traditions and authority of the Church from a position of challenge as well as from a position of support.
- The potential to express one's faith theologically, the ability to think reflectively, and to articulate that understanding within the context of an Episcopal faith tradition.
- A commitment to continuing personal, professional and spiritual growth and study.
- An awareness of the power of sacrament, word and liturgy: a willingness to become a symbol bearer.
- Humility: an understanding and acceptance of his or her own humanity and of one's ultimate dependence on God.
- A sense of humor.
- A mature sense of appropriate Christian sexual behavior.
- An ability to manage finances: personally and in a corporate setting.
- A tough skin: resiliency, adaptability and the ability to receive feedback.
- Leadership: taking initiative, articulating vision, taking risk and motivating others to accomplish the mission of the Church:
  - o the ability to handle conflict,
  - o the ability to deal with people,
  - o the ability to engage and participate in community/group, and
  - o the ability to delegate responsibility
- Communication:
  - o the ability to communicate with presence and poise while functioning with people, both one-on-one and in groups
  - o the ability to express oneself simply, clearly and directly, and
  - o the capacity to organize thoughts and actions and to establish goals and direction.

The Committee additionally discerns with the Applicant:

- If the Applicant is able to be formed at this point in his/her life for ordained ministry.
- If the Applicant has an awareness of how his/her life will change as an ordained person in complexity, representing both God and the Christian faith, as a public figure and an object of public scrutiny, and the professional demand placed upon him/her in an ordained vocation.
- If the Applicant is mobile enough to attend a residential seminary away from the Memphis area, and mobile enough to serve where he/she is needed following formation after seminary in a placement anywhere in the Diocese.
- If this is financially possible for the Applicant and his/her family.
- Mandatory retirement age for Ordained Clergy in the Episcopal Church is 72 years of age. If the Applicant is discerning for the Priesthood, is there a potential for longevity of service to the Church? How long will this person be able to serve with the assumption that seminary is a three year process?

**Meeting 6: Task:** To reflect on the leadership roles the Applicant presently lives out  
The Committee and the Applicant consider the leadership roles in which the Applicant is presently engaged.

- What does the Applicant identify as strengths and weaknesses in these leadership roles?
- How does the Applicant function in groups and relate to a wide variety of people?
- What alternatives might the Applicant have in mind if leadership as an ordained person does not work out?

**Meeting 7: Task:** To meet with the Applicant to share what has been learned from the process and how the Applicant envisions, as a priest or deacon, meeting the needs of the Church today. The Committee and Applicant discuss the Applicant's written responses to the following questions (submitted prior to the meeting):

- What have you learned about yourself as you have explored the possibilities of ordained ministry in The Episcopal Church with your Rector/Vicar and Parish Discernment Committee?
- What about other professions you may have explored or experienced in the past?
- What are the needs of the Church as you see them, and how do you envision yourself responding to them through ordained ministry?

**Meeting 8: Task:** To complete the Parish Discernment Process written report of the Committee's observations and findings about the Applicant. This is to be submitted to the Rector/Vicar.

**Note:** If the Applicant is to continue in the process during the current year, the Rector/Vicar will need to submit this report, along with his/her confidential evaluation, no later than the next upcoming **May 1<sup>st</sup>**.

**Note:** As the Committee writes its evaluation using the following form, please bear in mind that it will be submitted to the Bishop's office. The Committee's candid thoughts are necessary and appreciated.

TO: The Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee

RE: Parish Discernment Program

*To be completed by the Parish Discernment Committee:*

Parish/City\_\_\_\_\_

Applicant's Name\_\_\_\_\_

*(Thank you for engaging in this process of reflection with an Applicant in The Diocese of West Tennessee's Vocational Discernment Program. Your honest comments are appreciated by the Bishop and the Commission on Ministry as the Vocational Discernment Process continues. Please feel free to offer additional comments at the end of the questions.)*

What is your evaluation of how sensitively and maturely the Applicant has engaged in vocational conversations with the Committee? How open is the Applicant to the process? Has she/he progressed over the meetings in being able to articulate his/her sense of call? In what ways? What have you observed about how she/he responds to difficult questions? Has the Applicant taken responsibility for taking the conversation forward? What changes have you seen over the course of the meetings?

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Members of the Parish Discernment Committee

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**\* Please submit this report to your Rector/Vicar. If the Applicant is to continue in this process during the year, the Rector/Vicar will need to submit this report, along with his/her confidential evaluation, no later than May 1<sup>st</sup>.**

## I. Basic Assumptions from the Manual for Discernment of Ordained Vocations

The most basic of our assumptions is that **Holy Baptism is the “ordination” of all believers** and that **the call to Ordained Ministry is rooted in this prior ordination of the priesthood of all baptized Christians.** Therefore, those seeking ordination do not seek a fundamentally different ministry; but seek to exercise their baptismal ministry in particular ways.

**All baptized persons are called to minister in Christ’s name.** From among the myriad options for ministry available, each baptized person is expected to explore those options most appropriate to that individual through a process of discernment within their respective community of faith. Growing out of this process of exploration, a lifelong commitment to Christian Formation is necessary to equip the individual in their respective ministries, either lay or ordained.

It is the Church’s role to help individuals in identifying their gifts in serving Christ’s mission in the world. It is the role of the Bishop, the Commission on Ministry and the local discernment communities of faith to assist all persons in sustaining their Christian commitment and in discerning those persons whose gifts for leadership and service mark them as potential leaders in the church, either lay or ordained.

The exercise of ordained ministry is set apart from the general baptismal ministry in at least three notable ways:

- 1) their ministries become **more complex**, in that the ordained person represents not only God and the Christian faith but also the particular communities in which the person is serving;
- 2) their ministries become **objects of public scrutiny**, in which the ordained person, their families, their activities, their relationships and their struggles to live the life of faith are offered up for public view and as examples of Christian living; and
- 3) their ministries become **professionally demanding**, in which they are held accountable both by their congregation and by their bishop for their performance of their ministerial duties.

Ordination is a call to **holiness of life**. It is a being “set apart.” While being set apart like this is fraught with challenges and difficulties, men and women so called are able to not only to survive the demands but also enjoy the ordained ministry, while serving God and their neighbors and while growing in the knowledge and love of the Lord.

As with the discernment of a call to baptismal ministry, **discernment regarding a call to ordained ministry begins in and requires the support of the discerning person’s local community of the faith.** The process of formal discernment of a call to ordained ministry may be initiated in several ways with an applicant approaching his or her rector. In recent years that step has been seen almost exclusively as the responsibility of the applicant. The way in which an applicant for ordination is identified is when someone goes to his or her rector and says, "I want to be a priest." or "I want to be a deacon." Clearly that self identification will continue.

**However, a new emphasis needs to be placed on recruitment.** With the clergy of the local parish or mission seeing special gifts for ministry in a member of his or her worshipping community, the initiative for recruitment from the local community of faith’s side is becoming more the norm. Clergy and laity are being encouraged to recruit high quality, well-suited people for lay and ordained ministries.

In whatever manner the discernment begins, both the individual discernor and the local community of faith are needed to explore and support application to take next steps in a process of discernment for ordained ministry to the Whole Church. It becomes the responsibility of both the individual seeking to discern and of the clergy and lay leadership of the local community of faith to explore in detail the specific expression of baptismal ministry to which the discernor is exploring a call.

## I. Desired Attributes in future Ordained leaders from the Manual for Discernment of Ordained Vocations

The Church considers many factors in identifying persons for ordained ministry. In recruitment for the discernment process, both the **character** of those who will be ordained and the **mission of the Church and its leadership** should be considered. We are a missionary church, and clear commitment to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ, evident in both word and action, is essential.

We are a church that calls for authentic leadership. It is vital that persons in discernment for ordination need to have a history of demonstrated competency, age-appropriate maturity and personal gifts as leaders in their church and secular environments. Therefore, two factors need to be clearly stated and seriously considered in the recruitment of persons for ordained ministry as a priest or deacon.

The first is what the Church seeks in terms of the **Personal Character** of those who will be its ordained representatives. While not a complete list, it is intended as a starting point:

- A sense of self: self-knowledge, psychological health, self-care.
- Personal integrity: authenticity, trustworthiness, and dependability.
- Intelligence: an intellectual grasp of concepts and practical applications and the implications of them.
- Spiritual depth: a tended relationship with God in Christ.
- A loving heart: the capacity and inclination to be close to and care for others.
- A sense of the fitness of things: sound judgment and clear boundaries – personal, ethical, and communal.
- A loyalty to the institution of the Church: a healthy respect for the traditions and authority of the Church from a position of challenge as well as from a position of support.
- The Potential to express their faith theologically, the ability to think reflectively, and to articulate that understanding within the context of an Episcopal faith tradition
- A commitment to continuing personal, professional and spiritual growth and study.
- An awareness of the power of sacrament, word and liturgy: a willingness to become a symbol bearer.
- Humility: an understanding and acceptance of his or her own humanity and of ones ultimate dependence on God.
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- An ability to manage finances: personally and in a corporate setting.
- A tough skin: resiliency, adaptability, and the ability to receive feedback.
- Leadership: taking initiative, articulating vision, taking risk, and motivating others to accomplish the mission of the Church.
  - The ability to handle conflict.
  - The ability to deal with people.
  - The ability to engage and participate in community/group.
  - The ability to delegate responsibility
- Communication:
  - the ability to communicate with presence and poise while functioning with people, both one-on-one and in groups,
  - the ability to express oneself simply, clearly and directly, and
  - the capacity to organize thoughts and actions and to establish goals and direction.

The second factor has to do with the **Mission of the Church in and for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century** and suggests additional qualities the Church seeks in its leadership in order to live out its mission in this and the next generation:

- **Leadership:** The *potential* to energize struggling congregations into dynamic and growing congregations.
- **Diversity:** As the Church in the United States seeks to serve and proclaim the Gospel in an environment of ever-increasing diversity, the ordained leadership itself must reflect this environment in order to effectively proclaim the Gospel locally and throughout the world.
- **Mobility:** Church leaders must be willing and able to serve where needed; those called to the priesthood need to be willing to leave The Diocese of West Tennessee for formation and potentially for a future call. They may well be expected to relocate to a ministry site that is not back in their “hometown” during the time of post-seminary internship. This possibility must be addressed seriously by the person going through discernment for ordained ministry in the Church.
- **Potential for Longevity of Service:** To be good stewards of and make best use of the resources of The Diocese of West Tennessee, those called to the Priesthood should be able to serve the Diocese and The Episcopal Church for many years.