

## **Parish Discernment Group for Deacons**

The following information identifies the role of and guidelines for the Parish Discernment Group for those investigating if God is calling them to be ordained deacons.

### **Role of the Group**

The Parish Discernment Group is charged to help an aspirant discern the nature of his/her call to ministry. The Group is formed by the aspirant's rector/vicar/priest-in-charge. It is intended to supplement the one-on-one discernment discussions that the aspirant will have with a second priest (or deacon, if available).

The work of the Discernment Group is to provide an environment in which the aspirant and Group members may freely and openly discuss the aspirant's call to diaconal ministry. The Group, and the aspirant, must treat all of their meetings as confidential to this end.

Secondly, the Discernment Group serves as a support system for the aspirant in his/her discernment process. In that context, the Group should encourage the aspirant to engage in a process of profound and honest self-examination and discernment regarding ordination, and should uphold and support an aspirant's decision either to pursue ordination or to live out his/her ministry calling without ordination. The role of the Discernment Group is NOT to evaluate the aspirant's qualifications for ordination, but rather to help the aspirant gain greater self-awareness and a deeper understanding of his or her call to ministry, whether ordained or not.

Rectors/vicars should select persons for the Discernment Group who have a good understanding of their own ministries and who understand that a call to ministry does not necessarily mean a call to ordination. Members of the Discernment Group should have good listening skills, good pastoral skills, and a thorough understanding of the expectations, duties, and responsibilities of deacons. Group members should also have a clear understanding of the different orders of the church, and clarity in the differences between the roles of priests and deacons. The Group should include members that represent the diversity of the diocese.

Prior to the first meeting of the Discernment Group, all members should become familiar with the service for the Ordination of a Deacon in the Book of Common Prayer (Pg. 543) and should read Section III of the Report of the Task Force on Total Ministry describing the role of the deacon.

After an appropriate amount of time, the discernment group shall draft a brief report to the Rector, Wardens and Vestry of the sponsoring church. The report should state generally, without divulging confidential information, if the group feels that the aspirant is ready to attend the Aspirancy (Pre-screening) conference or if more discernment is needed at this time. This report will also be available to the COM and the Bishop.

The Group's work does not end with the postulancy conference. If the Commission on Ministry does not accept the aspirant as a postulant, the Discernment Group must be prepared to provide pastoral care and help as the aspirant discerns how to live out his/her call in lay ministry. If the aspirant is accepted for postulancy, the Group should continue to provide a support network as the hurdles of diaconal education and training, candidacy and ordination are faced.

This ongoing support must be intentional, using correspondence and periodic meetings throughout the process.

The work of the Group does not end until the aspirant has been ordained, or has begun a lay ministry journey.

## Guidelines

The following guidelines are intended as an aid to a Parish Discernment Group in their role to explore an applicant's call to ordained ministry as well as helping to clarify his/her understanding of his/her call and spiritual journey to date.

These guidelines have been divided into four separate but interrelated areas. The first two areas are concerned with a discernment of the aspirant's faith development and vision of the church, specifically the Episcopal Church. Initial questions, which may be used directly or modified in conversation with the aspirant, are in bold type. Those, in non-bold type, are to be considered by Group members thoughtfully and used to form questions arising from such reflections.

It is both urged and recommended that the Group members use all their questions to search for the truth, come whence it may and cost what it will. Hidden agendas in questions should be studiously avoided. It is fully expected that the Group leave the decision of discernment of a call to the aspirant. However, a negative recommendation for the applicant to proceed is still possible based on a perception of the applicant not yet being ready to proceed.

Several books may be used to help the Group and the aspirant in their work. Some are listed below:

*The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*- James Barnett

*Servant Ministry*- The Rt. Rev. Richard Grein

*Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*- Suzanne G. Franham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward

*Deacons in the Episcopal Church: Guidelines on their Selection, Training and Ministry* - Ormand Plater

## I. Self Knowledge and Awareness:

- Where do you see your strengths and weaknesses? How have you become aware of these?
- As you become aware of your needs, how do you take care of them? Where do you seek to set limits? What are your priorities?
- Are there behavioral patterns handed down from your family of origin that affect you? Where do you put red flags for yourself?
- Are you aware of all of the requirements of time and education for diaconal ordination?
- What have you done successfully in Servant Ministry? What have you learned from any failures?
- How do you see yourself functioning differently as an ordained deacon?
- Do you see your ministry changing if you are not ordained a deacon?

How does Servant Ministry express itself in this person's life?

Is there ability to reflect on one's own life and have a perspective of how he/she relates to others and God?

Is the aspirant able to articulate and integrate knowledge and experience appropriately?

Is this person aware of and equipped for becoming an ordained deacon? Will they be able to handle the time and education commitments?

Can this person verbalize and communicate with skill appropriate to his/her age and experience?

Does this person understand personal authority without either arrogance or abrogation of responsibility for self?

Is this person trustworthy and a person of integrity and authenticity?

Can this person be flexible and vulnerable while respecting and knowing boundaries?

Does this person clearly understand the role of the deacon, as well as the other orders of the church?

Can this person articulate a vision of their future place as a "bridge between the church and the world"?

Do they have a vision of themselves in the future role of deacon?

Does this person know what feeds him/her spiritually?

What are the future ministries that this person will seek to serve? How will ordination help to enable them to be more effective than now?

## II. Leadership Skills

- Discuss a time where you were able to take responsibility when there was a difficult decision to be made. What was that like for you?
- What vision(s) do you have of the church and where might there be a risk for you if you chose to follow that vision?
- How do you see yourself developing leadership skills in others? Can you describe a time when you succeeded? When you failed? What was that like for you?
- What kind of leadership style is most comfortable for you? Have there been instances when your favorite leadership model needed to be modified? In what way? Why? What was that like for you?
- How do you deal with conflicts as they arise?

Has this person exhibited an ability to learn and use failure as well as success?

Has this person demonstrated an ability to lead? Have they exhibited an ability to inspire others and enable others to serve?

How does he/she overcome personal weaknesses and enhance his/her strengths?

Does this person exhibit a non-anxious presence? A secure self that evaluates situations realistically?

Could this person lead others to find their own place in "Servant Ministry"?

Does this person have an entrepreneurial spirit? Is he/she able to engender a new vision in a changing age and for a changing church?

Does he/she listen with interest, insight, and compassion?

Is there evidence of any authority problems or idealization of the roles of men or women that might become a problem?

Has this person demonstrated leadership in serving others and in inspiring others to serve the church and society?

Would you be comfortable working for this person and/or having this person as your deacon?

### III Faith Development

- Please tell me a little about your faith development. Where has your discernment led you? Where are you now? What questions continually surface in your faith journey?
- How would you articulate your faith to a non-believer? To a friend?
- How is your faith best put into action?
- What motivates you to wish to serve the church and the communities around you?
- Who is Jesus Christ for you?

- Describe your prayer life. If this is an ongoing commitment, what has it meant to you? Are there times when this has presented difficulties for you? How have you reacted?

- Describe your study habits?

- What nourishes and refreshes you spiritually? Mentally? Physically?

What moves this person to wish to serve others? Is it ego?

Does this aspirant have an awareness of and sensitivity to the sacred? How does this person experience the Holy?

Does this person have a passion that says THIS matters? That you matter? That the Gospel is worth living for and indeed worth dying for?

Can this person appropriately articulate the faith that he/she professes?

Does this person see discernment and growth as on-going?

Does he/she see this process as a learning experience and an adventure, or as a means to an end?

Does this person have a sense of humor? Can he/she see laughter as a mark of trust in God's continual presence in our lives, and see humor as sacred and spiritual?

#### IV Awareness of the Episcopal Church Tradition:

- Describe your experience as a member of the church as a whole and of the Episcopal church, specifically. What draws you to it? What turns you away? How many different liturgies have you experienced? How many congregations?

- What role do you see yourself playing in the church?

- What service/servant ministries are lacking now in the Episcopal church?

- What is your vision of the church of the 21st century? What servant ministries will be most needed?

- Where do you see yourself making a difference in the church? Do you have a plan or a dream?

- What do you see as a deacon's role in the church right now? Will this role change in the future?

- How do you feel about changing parishes and serving in parishes where the Bishop feels you are needed more?

Can he/she articulate why they feel a call to serve outside of their home parish and why they feel they could do this better as an ordained deacon instead of a lay person within the tradition of the Episcopal church?

Is this person ready to leave their home parish to serve where they are needed in the diocese at the direction of the Bishop?

Has this person experienced a variety of parish settings?

Has there been enough exposure to the diversity of people who belong to the Episcopal church or has this person simply become comfortable - in love with his/her own church? In short, is there a need for more breadth and knowledge of the Episcopal tradition?

Does this person have a tendency to idolize the church or the role of the deacon or other orders?

Does this person have an energized and creative vision of the church in the 21st century? Is she/he aware of the changes that will need to occur for the church to continue to thrive and flourish? Is there joy and energy to pursue a vision in the face of day-to-day adversities?

What would this person, as a deacon, change or do differently in the existing servant ministries of the Episcopal church?