

Parish Discernment Committee Handbook

Guidelines for Assisting Others in Discernment for Ordination



The Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh

Adopted by the Commission on Ministry

Welcome to the Parish Discernment Committee

You are about to gain a window into God's amazing work of calling people into ordained leadership. The word "discern" means "to perceive or detect." Spiritual discernment comes through prayer, Scripture, and taking counsel together. In this case, the Parish Discernment Committee (PDC) assists the Rector and Vestry in discerning whether an individual is called to ordained ministry. It is the understanding of this diocese that a call to ministry comes out of community. You are the people who have seen this person the most and know them the best. Therefore, your input is vital.

Often the PDC is a standing committee, appointed by the Rector. In some cases, a PDC is called together on an *ad hoc* basis for one individual. It may also be appropriate for the Vestry to serve in this capacity. If this is the first time your church has established a PDC, please contact the Bishop's Office for guidance and assistance.

The PDC:

- Normally includes 4-8 lay people
- Normally includes a Vestry member (or 2)
- Does not normally include a clergy person

Committee members are active members of a congregation who:

- Have a lively faith in Jesus Christ which they can articulate
- Have a heart for the mission of the Church
- Pray regularly and agree to pray for the discernment process and the people in it
- Can listen carefully to God and to others (discernment)

Responsibilities of committee members:

- PRAY for yourself, the other committee members, and the Aspirant
- Respond in a timely fashion to communications from the PDC Chair
- Read the Aspirant's materials and be prepared at PDC meetings
- Attend PDC meetings

Ways to pray:

- For the Aspirant and PDC members to be able to hear God's call and will
- For unity and wisdom
- For discernment on the part of Aspirant and PDC members
- For the Holy Spirit's presence during the conversations

Overview of the Ordination Discernment Process

There are four phases to the ordination discernment process. The PDC does its work in the second (Aspirancy) phase.

Exploration Phase (takes place at the parish level)

- The Rector meets with the individual 2-3 times; this is called the Rector's Careful Inquiry.
- If the Rector agrees with a sense of call, the individual meets with the Bishop. If the Bishop gives him/her permission to proceed with the process, he or she is called an Aspirant (as they are aspiring to ordination).

Aspirancy (starts at the parish level, then transitions to the diocesan level)

- Once the Bishop gives permission to proceed, the Parish Discernment Committee is convened. If the PDC has little experience, they are encouraged to invite the Canon to the Ordinary to orient them to their work. It is most effective to include the Rector and Vestry in this meeting.
- The Parish Discernment Committee meets with and interviews the Aspirant.
- The PDC writes a report and sends it to the Rector.
- If the Rector and the PDC are supportive, the Aspirant meets with the Vestry. The Rector and Vestry must sign a recommendation form before sending the Aspirant to the Diocese.
- If the Vestry recommends the Aspirant, a follow-up interview is scheduled with the Bishop.
- After completing all requirements (see the [Ordination Manual](#)), the Aspirant then goes before the Commission on Ministry (COM) for a postulancy interview.
 - The Commission on Ministry (COM) is an advisory committee of lay people and clergy from around the Diocese who advise the Bishop on ordination related matters. It functions like a PDC at the diocesan level and conducts postulancy interviews throughout the year.
- If approved by the Bishop on a COM recommendation, the aspirant is now a Postulant.

Postulancy (diocesan level)

- After fulfilling all requirements (see the [Ordination Manual](#)), the Postulant is ready for a Canonical Examination to assess readiness for ordination.
- If approved, he or she is now a Candidate.

Candidacy (diocesan level)

- Last stage before ordination
- The Candidate completes academic training (if applicable) and fulfills other requirements set by the Bishop and/or COM necessary for ordination to the Diaconate.

The Parish Discernment Committee Process

The Parish Discernment Committee (PDC) assists the Rector and Vestry in discerning whether an individual is called to ordained ministry. It is the understanding of this Diocese that a call to ministry comes out of community. Often the PDC is a standing committee, appointed by the Rector. In some cases, a PDC is called together on an ad hoc basis for one individual.

Three areas to be explored:

1. Call and Character
2. Maturity and Devotion
3. Anglican Foundations and Ministry Experience

The parish discernment process is a series of conversations (at least 3) between an individual seeking ordination and a PDC to assess the individual's readiness in the three areas listed above. Usually, the Rector or other ordained parish priests do not participate in the conversations with the PDC; although sometimes the Rector is present for the first one. If the individual is married, the spouse is required to attend at least one session. When the PDC has finished meeting with the Aspirant, it writes a report that is presented to the Vestry.

A suggested format for conversations with the Aspirant is as follows:

- Session 1: Questions and a conversation about the Aspirant's personal life, personal call, and life of devotion to God. (Call and Character)
- Session 2: Questions and a conversation about the Aspirant's life of following Jesus and leading others in following Jesus. (Maturity and Devotion)
- Session 3: Questions and a conversation about the Aspirant's understanding of Christian Foundations, the Sacraments, and the Mission of the Church. (Anglican Foundations and Ministry Experience)

It is important for these conversations not to be rushed, allowing both the individual and committee members enough time to ask and answer questions prayerfully and thoughtfully. Additional sessions may be added at the discretion of committee members or the individual. You may direct your questions to the Canon to the Ordinary or the COM Chair.

Sample Discernment Questions

Below are questions for the three sessions that the PDC may choose to use. They are not, however, required. As long as the PDC discusses the general categories brought up below, they can choose to do so in their own manner. Some questions create dialogue that may answer other questions. In this situation, questions do not have to be asked again.

Session 1: Personal life, Call and Devotion

1. Briefly tell us your life story, including your faith background. In what ways have you seen God at work in your life from the beginning until now?
2. Tell us about how you pray, study the Bible, and provide spiritual leadership in your family. Are there other spiritual disciplines you find helpful for your growth in Christ?
3. Tell us about your strengths and growth areas as a follower of Jesus Christ. Where do you want to grow in the next year?
4. Tell us about the hardest thing you have ever had to do in your life. What process did you go through? To whom did you turn for guidance?
5. Tell us why you believe God is calling you to ordained ministry in the Anglican Church. When did you first sense this calling? How does your wife/husband and family fit into your calling?
6. In Mark 8:34 Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me". What has following Jesus cost you so far? What more might it cost you as an ordained minister in the Anglican Church?
7. Ordained ministry can be very costly for a spouse and family. What costs do you foresee for yourself and your family in future ministry? What benefits?
8. How does the Holy Spirit guide and direct you in your personal life and your ministry? How would you teach others to listen to the Holy Spirit's guidance and direction?

Session 2: Following Jesus and Leading Others

1. What does it mean for you to be a disciple of Jesus? How are you currently living this out in your daily life and work?
2. From whom did you learn about being a disciple of Jesus? What are the most important lessons you learned from this person about following Jesus?

3. After Jesus washes his disciples' feet in John 13, he says to them, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (verse 14). How do Jesus' words apply to ordained ministry? How might this be hard for you?
4. What things have given you joy so far in your ministry to others? Why do you think these things give you such joy?
5. Where have you already been in leadership roles as a lay person in the church? What lessons about leadership did you learn from these roles?
6. From your personal experience, what makes for a good, ordained leader in the church? Give some specific examples of someone whose ordained leadership you respect.
7. When have you had problems with someone in authority over you? Give some specific examples of the difficulties you faced.
8. When did you have the privilege of seeing someone come to faith in Christ because of your relationship with her or him? What did you learn from this experience?

Session 3: Foundation, Sacraments and Mission of the Church (Guidelines for answers in red)

1. What is your understanding of the role of Holy Scripture in the life of a believer? How does the Anglican Church in North America view Scripture? (See 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and Hebrews 4:12 as good guides for an answer. Inspired by God, useful for teaching, rebuking, training, correcting, equipping, living and active, "sharp". ACNA affirms what those texts affirm.)
2. Name the historic creeds of the Christian faith. Why are these creeds important for us? Are there any parts of these creeds that you have major doubts about? (Nicene, Apostles, and Athanasian Creeds. Historic statements of faith that the Church has relied on for centuries. Hopefully no!)
3. Name the orders of ministry in Anglican churches. What are the duties and responsibilities of each of these orders? (**Deacon, Priest, and Bishop. Deacons** are servants who assist in worship and care for the needy and sick. **Priests** carry out sacramental duties (celebrate communion and baptize), and lead Parishes and the people in their congregations. **Bishops** are shepherds of the larger flock (Parishes) and lead dioceses.
4. What are the important services in the *Book of Common Prayer* and why are they beneficial? Why are the Anglican services attractive to you? (Has to include Holy Eucharist. Can include the Daily Offices—Morning, Midday and Evening Prayer and Compline. Can include Holy Matrimony and Burial of the Dead. Can include special liturgies such as Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday.)

5. What is a Christian sacrament? Tell us about your experience of the sacraments in your life as a follower of Jesus. (Sacrament defined: "An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Two Gospel Sacraments of the Church—Baptism and Holy Eucharist.)
6. What do you think happens when someone is baptized? Why do Anglicans baptize babies as well as older children and adults? (Wrong answer—the person is saved. Some right answers—the baptized person can claim the promises of being cleansed of sin (water image), having new life in the Holy Spirit, being adopted into the "family"- the Church, being an inheritor of the riches of the kingdom. When babies are baptized, their parents claim the promises on their behalf and pledge to raise their children to understand the promises as they grow up. Later in life the kids can go through and receive Confirmation to "confirm" the promised made on their behalf at their baptism.)
7. What do you think happens in Holy Communion? Why do you think Holy Communion is the normative Sunday service in most Anglican churches? How important is this to you? (The bread and wine take on the "Real Presence" of the body and blood of Jesus. Something we can receive on a weekly basis.)
8. What is the mission of the church? What are your guiding scriptures for understanding the church's mission? (No one "right" answer. But would expect references to taking the gospel of Jesus into communities and the world, Great Commission, preaching the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, etc.)
9. Tell us about any experience you have had in a short term or long-term mission, either domestic or foreign. How did this experience impact your life?
10. How would you help people to become disciples of Jesus who in turn make disciples? What is the role of ordained ministers in this process?

Instructions for Writing the Parish Discernment Committee Report

The report should be finished within four (4) weeks of the final parish discernment committee meeting.

A report template is provided to make it easier for PDC's to write reports. A printable version can be downloaded from the diocesan website, as well as a fillable version into which you may type directly.

Parish Discernment Committee Report (Template)

Aspirant Name:

Meeting Date(s):

Presenting Parish and Discernment Committee Member Names:
Background/ Faith Information on Aspirant: Name, spouse's name if applicable, age, time in parish. When did they come to faith? How do they describe their current relationship with the Lord?
Call to Ministry and Current Ministry Involvement: How do they describe their call to ministry, and what is their understanding of that call? How are they currently serving? How do others respond to their call?
Readiness for Ministry; Challenges and Growth Areas:
Concerns and/or Areas for Follow up:
Summary and Recommendation:

Committee Chair Signature

Date