

## **The Discernment Process for Ordination to the Priesthood in the Diocese of Washington**

### Introduction

All Christians are called to ministry by the Holy Spirit who calls us and empowers us to serve.

One ministry among many in the Episcopal Church is priesthood. Because of the unique role of a priest, each Diocese of the Episcopal Church is given the responsibility to discern and support those called into this ministry. The discernment process presented here is the outcome of many conversations with clergy and laity of the Diocese of Washington. In these conversations we recognized that, at a time when there is a decreasing number of stipendiary positions available for priests, it is poor stewardship to encourage the formation of more clergy than the Church needs. In addition, we heard a desire to create a discernment process that is flexible, nimble, and balanced in its response to an individual's sense of call and the Episcopal Church's leadership needs. We recognize that the ministry of priests has changed, and clergy need new skills and qualities to serve our congregations well. The central focus of the discernment process for ordination to the priesthood is not whether an individual is called to ministry, since by baptism God has called all of us to minister. Rather, the principal focus of discernment concerns how closely an individual's gifts and experience match the unique challenges of priestly ministry in this time and place. We pray for the Spirit's guidance in all states of this process, and we trust that the process will continue to evolve over time.

To give a sense of the practicalities of this new reality, over 50% of the aspirants in the Fall 2013 diocesan process were declined.

### The Changing Landscape

The landscape of Christianity in America has changed dramatically in the last fifty years and the rate of change continues apace. Models of pastoral leadership that previously served God's people well are less than effective now; new times require new skills and aptitudes. We believe that God is calling the Episcopal Church to mission and ministry in the midst of change so that the richness of our spiritual tradition may serve the needs of our time. Every congregation, from the largest Cathedral to the smallest country church, faces new challenges and new opportunities. The Diocese of Washington needs ordained leaders able to equip our current congregations to adapt to new realities, sing the Lord's song in new lands, and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ways that speak to the varied contexts and cultures of our communities. We seek leaders with the skills and capacities to plant new congregations and worshipping communities. Through our conversations with small groups at various churches, diocesan committees, and the clergy of the diocese, we heard the Spirit's call for particular qualities in our priests for the Diocese of Washington. The following document will be our guide in discerning new priests for ordination in the diocese at this time.

## Qualities We Seek in a Priest

Our ordained leaders collectively will be multicultural and racially diverse, to reflect the breadth of humanity represented in our mission area. They will be mission-focused, entrepreneurial, collaborative, and adaptive. The qualities described here are not exhaustive -- nor are these qualities exclusive to priestly ministry. They are the result of much discernment and many conversations amidst clergy, lay leaders, congregations, and other dioceses. We do not expect every candidate for the priesthood to exhibit all of these qualities, but we do expect them to exhibit most of them. Our discernment process will focus on discerning the presence, or the seeds of presence, of these qualities and abilities in each candidate.

- 1) **Compelling spiritual life and a passion for the Gospel:** There is great spiritual hunger in the culture at large and in our congregations. The Diocese seeks clergy who love God with heart, mind, and soul, and who know Christ and seek to make Christ known. Our clergy will have a vision for the Episcopal Church's ministry and how to guide our people to greater faithfulness and spiritual depth. They will have both a deep reverence for the sacraments at the heart of our liturgical life and a sacramental worldview in which *outward and visible things reveal inward and invisible truths*.
- 2) **Ability to communicate the Gospel in ways that people and communities find engaging and relevant to their lives:** Communication is multi-faceted. Today's clergy need to speak several "languages," both human and technological, from the pulpit, in personal conversation and in social media. They are called to minister in a wide variety of contexts, among all sorts of people. There is a particular, urgent need to reach younger generations—families raising children, teenagers and young adults—as well as the ability to be an effective spiritual presence among our fastest growing demographic, those over the age of 75.
- 3) **Spiritual maturity, self-awareness, and authenticity:** The work of the Episcopal priesthood is challenging. It requires a strong spiritual center, physical and mental stamina, healthy personal boundaries, and a willingness to grow and learn alongside others. Effective clergy must be able to persevere in challenging circumstances, recognize their personal growth edges, and be willing to learn new skills and ask for help.
- 4) **Ability to lead, organize, and equip others in ministry:** Many people are drawn to the priesthood for the love of ministry—pastoral care, teaching, service, and speaking out for justice. The predominant model of ministry in most Episcopal churches is that of one minister (the priest) ministering to all the people, or at the center of the Church's ministry. We seek a new paradigm, of clergy able to equip others for meaningful Christian lives and vocations, inviting others into the life of Christian community and ministry. It will require community organizing skills and the ability to identify and mentor new leaders.
- 5) **Entrepreneurial leadership:** We seek individuals who are able to take risks and try new things in ministry. Twenty-first century clergy need creativity, the capacity to discern new paths, and the willingness to make mistakes and learn from them. Entrepreneurial leaders see opportunities where others see decline; possibilities where others see insurmountable challenges.

- 6) **The ability to lead congregations through change:** The majority of our congregations face significant adaptive challenges. This generation of clergy will lead our congregations through the wilderness of life as it has been to the Promised Land to which God calls us. As with our spiritual ancestors, there is a process of transformation required of us on the journey, as well as the ability to adapt to new ways of being the Church. Our clergy will lead the way, in faithfulness to God's call and in the challenging work of change.
- 7) **A willingness and ability to be vocationally flexible:** Our churches are in a variety of contexts in a variety of locations with a variety of needs. Our clergy will need to respond to this variety with their own flexibility. Few are likely to serve in one role at one type of church in one city for their entire vocation. In addition, a growing number of congregations require clergy leaders that do not depend on them for their entire livelihood. Thus, we need some priests who can offer their presence and their gifts as priests in a part-time or non-stipendiary capacity. Our clergy will demonstrate flexibility in their vision of professional ministry in order to respond to God's call to them and the church in our world.

## The Discernment Process

The discernment process involves multiple steps and a number of groups of people. The flow chart on the following page is a quick guide to this, but the rest of this document details each stage and what will be completed. The terms below will help you become familiar with the people and groups involved.

### Terms

**Aspirant:** the person who is discerning a possible call to ordination as a priest

**Candidate:** canonical status of a person after postulancy and before transitional deacon

**Commission on Ministry:** group of laity and clergy who support the exploration of ministry in the diocese in accordance with the provisions of the Canons of the General Convention

**Diocesan Review Group:** 6-7 people appointed by the Bishop (includes Commission on Ministry members and Canon for Clergy Development, and can include additional appointees by the Bishop)

**Diocesan Discernment Retreat Team:** 6-8 people (includes Commission on Ministry members, Canon for Clergy Development, and can include additional appointees by the Bishop) – this group is trained in discernment and leads the Diocesan Discernment Retreat.

**Formation Team:** 5-7 people (includes Commission on Ministry members, Canon for Clergy Development, and can include additional appointees by the Bishop); continues to meet with postulants as they are formed

**Nominee:** person who is approved to pursue ordained ministry after the Diocesan Discernment Retreat but has not been made a postulant by the Bishop

**Local Discernment Committee:** 3-4 people selected by the sponsoring priest from aspirant's congregation or worshipping community

**Postulant:** canonical status of a person who has been approved by the Bishop to pursue ordained ministry

**Sponsoring Priest:** Rector, priest-in-charge, interim rector, or chaplain at sponsoring congregation or community

**Standing Committee:** Diocesan committee that certifies the preparation and suitability of individuals seeking ordination

# The Discernment Process in the Diocese of Washington

## Reflection and Clarity

**Focus:** Discernment of gifts of aspirant

**Process:** Aspirant meets regularly with sponsoring priest and spiritual director.  
3-4 person Local Discernment Committee meets.

**Suggested length:** 6-12 months

**Outcome:** Reflections (Form 2) on how aspirant's gifts relate to *Qualities We Seek in a Priest* submitted by committee chair and aspirant. Sponsoring priest submits a recommendation. Aspirant submits personal statements discussed on Form 3 .



## Diocesan Review

**Focus:** How the expressed gifts of the aspirant reflect the church's needs for gifts in a priest

**Process:** On a specific date in the fall, the Diocesan Review Group meets with each aspirant and decides who most appropriately fits the characteristics identified in *Qualities We Seek in a Priest* and meets the needs of the Diocese

**Outcome:** DRG extends invitation to Discernment Retreat or declines aspirant .



## Discernment Retreat

**Focus:** Discernment of aspirants

**Process:** Discernment Retreat Team runs annual retreat. The Bishop meets individually with each aspirant during the retreat.

**Time:** 2 day retreat in the fall of each year

**Outcome:** DRT extends invitation to become a nominee or declines to move aspirant forward.

## Decline to move forward

**Focus:** Caring response to aspirant

**Process:** Representative from DRG calls aspirant and sponsoring priest to inform them of the group's decision. The Canon for Clergy Development available for further in-person discussion if aspirant chooses.

## Decline

Same process as above except with representatives from Discernment Retreat Team.



## From Nominee to Postulant

Nominee submits the following paperwork to the Canon for Clergy Development: background check, physical health forms, psychological health forms, college transcripts, letter of support from vestry, and financial summary. Bishop notifies the nominee when he/she has been made a postulant.



## Formation

**Focus:** Formation of postulant as a priest

**Process:** Postulant meets with Formation Team to shape individual's formation process. Formation Team follows postulants and candidates until approved for ordination, regularly updating Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee.

## The Discernment Process

### Reflection and Clarity

The purpose of this stage is to encourage the aspirant and the Church (represented by the Local Discernment Committee (LDC) and the sponsoring priest) to reflect on the aspirant's personality, gifts in ministry, and life experience and how they do, or do not, correspond to the *Qualities We Seek In a Priest*. The suggested length of this stage is 6-12 months.

In this stage, the aspirant must:

- ❑ Contact the sponsoring priest and begin meeting.
- ❑ With the sponsoring priest, decide if and when to move forward.

After the sponsoring priest and aspirant agree to call a committee, the aspirant must:

- ❑ Contact the Canon for Clergy Development
- ❑ Send in Form 1: Application to the Discernment Process for Ordained Ministry
- ❑ Meet regularly with a spiritual director
- ❑ With sponsoring priest, call together a local discernment committee. A brief guide to these meetings is available on the diocesan website.
- ❑ Reserve the date for Diocesan Discernment Retreat in the event that the aspirant is invited by the Diocesan Review Group to attend. **This once-a-year retreat is mandatory.**

When the aspirant, sponsoring priest, and LDC decide that they are ready to offer a thorough **reflection on the aspirant's qualities, the following** must occur:

- ❑ Each LDC member and the aspirant responds to Form 2: Local Discernment Committee Feedback
- ❑ Committee members and aspirant share their responses with each other with the sponsoring priest present.

If aspirant decides to continue in the discernment process, the following must occur:

- ❑ The Form 2s from the committee and the aspirant are submitted
- ❑ The sponsoring priest submits a recommendation, focusing on the ways the aspirant exhibits the qualities the diocese has identified as important in priestly ministry.
- ❑ Aspirant submits personal statements (Form 3)

**All required information and submissions must be completed and submitted to the Canon for Clergy Development at least a month before the Diocesan Review Group meets.**

### **Diocesan Review**

The purpose of this stage is to advance the aspirants that best express the *Qualities We Seek In a Priest* and meet the needs of the Diocese. The Diocesan Review Group will interview each aspirant on days designated by the diocese in advance. \* The DRG will choose up to 7 aspirants to attend the diocesan retreat based on the diocese's needs and the strength with which they exhibit the qualities. Each aspirant and sponsoring priest will be informed of the decision of the Diocesan Review Group. Aspirants who continue in the discernment process will be invited to attend the Diocesan Discernment Retreat. The Canon for Clergy Development is available for in-person meetings with declined aspirants and their sponsoring priests if the aspirant chooses. It is possible to start the discernment process again; a decision to call a new Local Discernment Committee should only be made after a significant time of prayer, deliberation, and consultation with the sponsoring priest.

\*Due to time constraints, if there are more than 14 aspirants, the Diocesan Review Group will choose those to be interviewed based solely on a review of the aspirants' submitted paperwork.

### **Discernment Retreat**

The purpose of this stage is to delve more deeply into the sense of call to ordained ministry as a priest, the unique spiritual and other gifts of the aspirants, and the presence in the aspirant of the *Qualities We Seek In a Priest*. The Diocesan Discernment Retreat Team has received training in vocational discernment and will use individual and group discussions to obtain a deeper sense of each aspirant's call to priestly ministry. During the retreat, the Bishop will meet with each aspirant individually. The retreat will be a time of prayer, reflection, and discernment of whether each aspirant is called to ordained ministry as a priest in the Episcopal Church. After the retreat, the Diocesan Discernment Retreat Team and the Bishop will meet and decide which aspirants will continue in the process towards ordination. The Diocesan Discernment Retreat Team will contact the aspirants and sponsoring priests of those who were not moved forward. If invited to continue, aspirants become nominees. The Canon for Clergy Development is available for in-person meetings with declined aspirants and their sponsoring priests if the aspirant chooses. It is possible to start the discernment process again; a decision to call a new Local Discernment Committee should only be made after a significant time of prayer, deliberation, and consultation with the sponsoring priest.

### **From Nominee to Postulant**

The purpose of this stage is twofold: (1) to ensure that there are no unforeseen reasons why a nominee should not become a postulant and (2) to identify any specific needs pertinent to the nominee's formation as a priest. The physical, psychological, and financial reports will only be seen by the Canon for Clergy Development and the Bishop; however, recommendations based on these reports for the formation process will be given to the Formation Team.

In this stage, the Nominee will send to the Canon for Clergy Development:

- ❑ A physical health report completed by a physician (Form 4)
- ❑ A psychological health report completed by a psychologist recommended by the diocese (Form 5)
- ❑ College transcripts
- ❑ A letter of support from the vestry of sponsoring congregation (Form 6)
- ❑ Permission for the diocese to do a background check (Form 7)

After all materials are received and reviewed, the Bishop will decide whether each nominee shall be made a postulant. The Bishop will inform each nominee by letter whether or not postulancy has been granted.

Please note that at any time the Bishop can decide that the nominee or postulant will not continue in preparation for ordained ministry.



## **Formation Stage**

The Formation Team will contact a nominee once she or he has been made a postulant.

The focus of the formation stage is on how to best equip, educate, and prepare postulants for the priesthood. This process will be unique to each postulant, based on the postulant's gifts, experiences, circumstances, and call.

Some may be asked to complete an internship year before seminary. Some may attend a three-year residential seminary, while others will attend seminary part-time. Some will pursue language training; others will focus on specialized ministry tracks. Formation and educational decisions will be made in collaboration with the nominee/postulant and based on recommendations from the Bishop. Guidance regarding which seminaries to consider will also be given; the Bishop must approve a postulant's selection of seminary. The Formation Team will guide postulants through the process, ensuring that postulants meet all canonical requirements set forth by the Episcopal Church for ordination and that all receive the specific experience and training needed for their particular vocations.

Postulants remain under the guidance of the Formation Team until their ordination as priests. The team will offer support and guidance to the postulants and will also advise the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee on the postulants' formation. The Formation Team thus serves as bridge between postulant and the diocese.

In this stage, postulants will write Ember Day letters to the Bishop which they will continue doing until they are ordained as priests. These are private correspondence between the postulant and the Bishop. Ember Days traditionally are observed on specified days after the First Sunday in Lent, the Day of Pentecost, September 14th, and December 13th.

Please note that at any point in the process the Bishop can decide that the postulant or candidate will not continue in preparation for ordained ministry.

## **Canonical Status and Ordinations**

### **From Postulant to Candidate**

At the direction of the Canon for Clergy Development, postulants will submit required information and documentation to become candidates in the spring of their Middler year or equivalent. The Commission on Ministry makes a recommendation to the Standing Committee on ordination to the diaconate based on the Formation Team's regular updates. The Standing Committee interviews the postulant and determines whether to recommend candidacy. Prior to a postulant's candidacy interview, the Formation Team will meet with the Standing Committee to discuss its work with each postulant. During the interview, the postulant will be expected to articulate a sense of call and ministry to a group of people that they do not know. The Standing Committee's recommendation is not automatic; it is possible that a postulant may not be recommended for candidacy. The Bishop will inform each postulant by letter whether she or he has been granted candidacy for ordination to the diaconate.

### **From Candidate to Transitional Deacon**

At the direction of the Canon for Clergy Development, candidates for ordination to the diaconate will submit required information and documentation to be ordained transitional deacons in the fall of their senior year or equivalent. The Bishop will inform each candidate by letter whether he or she has been approved to be ordained a deacon.

### **From Transitional Deacon to Priest**

At the direction of the Canon for Clergy Development, transitional deacons will submit required information and documentation. The Commission on Ministry will make a recommendation on ordination to the priesthood based on Formation team's updates. The Standing Committee will conduct a formal interview with the deacon more reflective of a parish interviewing for their priest. This is an opportunity for the deacon to experience an interview setting and for the Standing Committee to learn whether the deacon is ready to assume the role of priest. The Standing Committee does not expect that every question will be answered perfectly, but it expects that the deacon will be prepared to step into the office to which she or he seeks to be ordained. Prior to the interview, the Formation Team will meet with the Standing Committee to discuss its work with each deacon. During the interview, the deacon needs to articulate a vision for his or her ministry in the Church. The Bishop will inform each deacon by letter whether she or he has received approval to be ordained a priest.