



# The Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania COMMISSION ON MINISTRY

## A Guide for Sponsoring Priests

### *What is a Sponsoring Priest?*

A Sponsoring Priest is the Rector or Priest in Charge of the congregation where the person who is discerning a call (the Individual) regularly worships and serves. In the case where this Individual is a member of a parish with no Rector or Priest in Charge, the Sponsoring Priest could also be a priest in a neighboring parish, appointed by the Bishop.

### *What is your initial role in discernment?*

As the Sponsoring Priest, you have a special responsibility. You may be the first person with whom an Individual speaks about his or her growing sense of call in a serious, prayerful, and prolonged way. Your work of discernment with the Individual is of utmost importance. It shapes the beginnings of the formal process and lays the groundwork for the kind of work that follows. If your time with the Individual is prayerful and allows for the movement of the Holy Spirit, there is more likelihood that the Individual will seek out that kind of an environment for the rest of his or her formation. This is the kind of holy work the Diocese seeks to encourage and support.

As is outlined in the diocesan document *Responding to God's Call: First Steps* the Sponsoring Priest is invited to commit to meet with the Individual for an unspecified amount of time to pray together and discern what kind of a call the Individual is hearing. The language of this document is very intentional, for this work is much more than a series of casual meetings. The Sponsoring Priest has the duty and holy responsibility to walk this path with the Individual, invoking God's blessings as they journey, no matter where this path may lead them – even if that path does not lead to ordination.

The Sponsoring Priest should also connect the Individual with one of the diocesan Regional Discernment Groups to enrich this period of discernment. You should not attend these groups yourself, but the learnings and revelations of these conversations should be discussed during your regular meetings with the Individual.

If you would like some additional help in this process, you may also reach out to the diocese to connect the Individual with a Vocations Counselor – someone in the diocese, lay or ordained, who has gifts for this particular kind of ministry. Before these meetings begin, the Sponsoring Priest, Individual, and Vocations Counselor should discuss how the content of these conversations should be shared with one another.

### *What should your conversations with the Individual look like?*

These conversations are, first, pastoral ones. Your job is to hear the Individual's story – what has led him or her to this point, what gifts he or she feels can be offered to this ministry, what challenges might present themselves along this journey, and, most importantly, where God is at work in this person's life. At one level, you should ask the same kinds of questions you might ask in any pastoral situation – questions that get at the heart of the matter, that invite the Individual to consider a topic in a new light, and that point to the presence of God in the life of the Individual and of the Church.

But these conversations are also about discernment for both you and the Individual. What are you seeing in this person that leads you to believe he or she has the capacity for ordained leadership? As one priest on our diocese puts it, "I try and tease out what this sense of vocation consists of. It's not enough to feel 'called to be a priest' – what does that mean? What is it that you're called to?" It is important for you and for the Individual that these conversations include a robust discussion of the different orders of ministry and the skills, openness, and spiritual maturity that are required to effectively live each one. If the Individual is already ordained in another faith tradition, speak with them about their move into The Episcopal Church. Why has this Church felt like their spiritual home? What life events precipitated this change? How might their ministry look different in this new faith tradition?

Many priests encourage the Individual to do some particular reading, either about the Anglican tradition, discernment, or about the charisms of particular orders. The Diocese offers a bibliography (included here as Appendix A) that includes some important resources for this kind of study. But don't limit yourself to these books – if there was a book that was particularly meaningful to you in your own discernment, offer it to the Individual if it seems appropriate. And please, let the diocese know so we can add it to our list!

The discernment process, of course, happens in community, which importantly includes the Individual's spouse or partner. Invite them to come meet with you together. Talk honestly with them both about the joys and challenges of the ordained life, about their finances, about the possibility of jobs changing, relocating, or seminary. If you sense that there is reluctance on the part of the Individual's partner or spouse, ask some good questions about that now, and know that this is truly a gift to them and to their relationship.

Above all, take your time. Meet for as long as you need to. Also, ask the Individual to wait if you need to. The diocese asks that the Individual be a person who has been a confirmed Episcopalian for at least a year, and the hope is that he or she is someone who has worshiped regularly in your parish for enough time that you feel you have a sense of them as a person and as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Part of your job may be to ask the Individual to continue to pray and offer his or her gifts in your parish – all the while listening for God's guidance – while putting the discernment process on hold for a while. Once you begin your conversations, remember that your discernment and the discernment of the Individual is on God's time and is not bound to the diocesan calendar. If your conversations need to take so much time that you are not able to begin a parish committee in time for the Individual to "get in" to the first Bishop's Discernment Retreat in January, fear not! There will be another retreat next year, and the Holy Spirit is patient and persistent.

Remember that the diocesan guide *First Steps* asks you to also refer this person to the diocesan Regional Discernment Group for additional prayer and conversation. You should feel free to ask the Individual about his or her work with that group – how it is providing clarity? What further questions is it raising? How is it challenging the Individual’s assumptions? Where is God in all of this?

Also, the diocesan guide asks you to encourage the Individual to take on a leadership project within the parish. More details about this project can be found in *First Steps*, and you should take time during your conversations to discuss how this work is going and how it is helping the Individual to see his or her own gifts and growing edges when it comes to leadership in the ordained ministry. You should include your own assessment of this leadership in your letter to the Bishop recommending this Individual for the Bishop’s Discernment Retreat, so conversation about it now will be most helpful.

### *What are some resources for these conversations?*

We have already mentioned the bibliography of helpful reading in Appendix A. Appendix B contains a series of seven helpful questions for discernment of vocation, as prepared by the Rev’d Bud Holland of this diocese. Appendix C of this document lists the qualities the diocese has identified as being important for ordained leadership. We hope that using these resources as a framework for your conversations will be helpful.

Also, feel free to avail yourself of the help offered by the Commission on Ministry (COM). If it would be helpful for you to talk through this process with someone from the COM, please do so. Every member of the COM would be most happy to be a sounding board for you in your own discernment. You do not have to do this alone!

As was mentioned earlier, if you would like even more help with this discernment, the COM is happy to provide an additional vocations counselor for the Individual to meet with. These counselors are people within the diocese who have experience and gifts for this kind of discernment and can serve as an additional place for prayer and reflection with the Individual about his or her call. Conversations with these counselors are not meant to replace conversations with you, but they are meant to augment and fill out the discernment process. You should be clear with the Individual and with the vocations counselor about how much of your conversations you are willing to share.

### *What are the next steps?*

If after several months of conversations with the Individual and the Individual’s work with the Regional Discernment Group, you perceive enough of a call to the ordained ministry to move forward in the process, you should contact the Canon for Transition Ministry to set up a meeting with a member of the COM. A member of the COM will come to meet with you and the Individual to discuss next steps, including the formation of the Parish Discernment Group. Specific instructions about the make-up of these groups can be found in *First Steps* and in the *Responding to God’s Call: A Handbook for the Parish in Discernment*.

Of course, the next step may also be telling an Individual that you do not perceive a call to the ordained ministry at all. As one priest in our diocese puts it, “I do take seriously a responsibility not just to push people to the next step of the process. [Ordained leaders] need to be capable, organized, personable, engaging, etc., and it does us no good as a Church to call people who will not thrive.... Discerning a call to the [ordained ministry] is the Church’s responsibility as well as the individual’s, and we do no service to anyone if we just pass people along to the next stage of the process without being honest with ourselves and with them about whether we honestly think this would work.”

In other words, another important part of your role is to prayerfully redirect Individuals for whom the ordained ministry is not a healthy or holy option. Before you form a Parish Discernment Group (PDG) to aid a member of your community in ascertaining his or her call, pray to determine whether you personally believe in this person’s vocation. If you have some reservations about a person’s call but see sufficient evidence of a vocation to warrant forming a committee, share your misgivings with the Individual transparently and kindly from the outset. If you simply cannot discern that this person has a vocation as either a priest or a deacon, share that fact with him or her. Do so kindly, honestly, transparently, and with love – but please do so. You may also find the Regional Discernment Groups an important tool in helping the Individual to find his or her “yes” – whether or not that “yes” is a call to the ordained ministry. While being this honest and transparent with a parishioner may be painful, far less damage will ensue for the Individual, your parish, and you by taking this direct path than if you are not clear and honest about your perceptions. There is no justifiable warrant for forming a PDG for a person whom you cannot in good conscience support for ordination.

### *How do you interact with the Parish Discernment Group?*

Generally if you discern a person may have a call, the PDG that you appoint will likewise discern a call. However, this is not guaranteed. Should a PDG fail to affirm a person’s call, it is your responsibility to share that fact with the Individual. Do so with honesty, transparency, and - above all – with kindness and love. Also, please do so personally, yourself; nobody else in the parish is as well-equipped as you are to deliver this news as you are. And remember, your support of prayer and presence should continue after the work of the PDG is finished, whether the Individual is moved forward in the ordination process or not. He or she will continue to need your guidance and prayer in the days ahead, whether he or she is applying to seminary or returning to the Regional Discernment Group to find a clearer sense of a call to lay ministry. Helping our parishioners to discern a call, and then providing resources and space which empower them to live out that call, is true Gospel work. It is work that grows the Kingdom of God, and as such is some of the most important work you can do. May God bless you in this holy part of your ministry.

## Appendix A: A Bibliography for Spiritual Discernment

### General Reading

*The Book of Common Prayer:*

- “Holy Baptism” pp. 299-314
- “Ordination” pp. 511-555
- “An Outline of the Faith” pp. 845 ff., especially 854-858

Countryman, L. William. *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All*. Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 1999.

Edwards, Lloyd. *Discerning Your Spiritual Gifts*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1988.

Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books, 1994.

Farnham, Suzanne G., Stephanie A. Hull, R. Taylor McLean. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*. Revised Edition. Harrisburg, Penn: Morehouse, 1999.

Farnham, Suzanne G., Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan M. Ward. *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 1991.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983.

Palmer, Parker J. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. New York: Wiley, 1999.

### The Diaconate

*Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church*

- Canon III.6: Of the Ordination of Deacons
- Canon III.7: Of the Life and Work of Deacons

Booty, John E. *The Servant Church, Diaconal Ministry and the Episcopal Church*. New York: Church Publishing, 1982.

Plater, Ormonde. *Many Servants, an Introduction to Deacons, Revised Edition*. Lanham, Md.: Cowley, 2004.

## **The Priesthood**

*Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church*

- Canon III.8: Of the Ordination of Priests
- Canon III.9: Of the Life and Work of Priests

Brown, Rosalind & Christopher Cocksworth. *On Being a Priest Today*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2004.

Pritchard, John. *The Life and Work of a Priest*. London: SPCK, 2007.

Proctor, Samuel D., and Gardner C. Taylor. *We Have This Ministry: The Heart of the Pastor's Vocation*. Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson, 1996.

Sedgwick, Timothy F. *The Making of Ministry*. Boston: Cowley, 1993.

## **The Anglican Tradition**

Griffiths, James. *The Anglican Vision*. (Book 1 of The New Church Teaching Series). Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1997.

Nichols, Aidan, O.P. *The Panther and the Hind*. T&T Clark, 1993.

Ramsey, Michael. *The Anglican Spirit*. Seabury Books, 2004.

Rowell, Geoffrey, Kenneth Stevenson and Rowan Williams. *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*. Oxford: Oxford, 2004.

Williams, Rowan. *Anglican Identities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2003.

## Appendix B: The Big Seven Questions

How would I describe my vocation in one sentence (or two)?

What or who has influenced my sense and understanding of my vocation: lives of others, history, scripture, prayer, prayer book and worship, ordination vows, sense of God's mission, the evolution of perspective about my vocation over time?

What gifts do I bring to my understanding of vocation and the ways I have incarnated my vocation over the years?

What have I learned about myself with regard to my great interests, passions, enjoyment, skills, achievements, facing into the whirlwind, dealing with life's deep issues and crises?

What would be the best stewardship of me?

How open am I to other challenges, urging from others, senses from my prayers about what God might want for me to do and be?

What stories from scripture, tradition, my upbringing, culture, personal positions, and reflected experience inform and instruct me about who I am, who I am called to be, and what I am called to do?

## Appendix C: The Qualities We Seek in Our Ordained Leaders

*Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant....*

2 Corinthians 3:4-6a

*The power for authentic leadership...  
is found not in external arrangements  
but in the human heart.*

(Parker Palmer)

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The ordained leadership in the Diocese of Pennsylvania must first be grounded in the love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Leaders in this corner of the Church should find the beginning, middle, and end of their calls in the obedience, passion, expectation, and hope of those who are disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. These leaders must also possess certain gifts that can be used to guide and shepherd God's holy people. The gifts and qualities described here are not exhaustive, nor are these qualities exclusive to the ordained ministry. The discernment process of the diocese will focus on discerning the presence, or the potential presence, of these qualities and abilities in each person.

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### **1. A visible love for the proclamation of the Gospel and for the Church**

The Diocese of Pennsylvania seeks to raise up clergy who love God with heart, mind, and soul, and who know and love the person of Jesus Christ and seek to make him known. Those seeking ordination must place Jesus Christ as the center of all they do, say, and feel. Their discipleship should be evident in their speech and action, their choices, and their relationships with friends, community, and family. We are looking for clergy who demonstrate a visible love of the Gospel and of God's people. Ordained leaders in this diocese should show a genuine, holy love for those whom they serve and those who are in their care, a love that gives them the strength and compassion to give freely of themselves to others, even to give their own lives for their people and for the sake of the Gospel. Clergy in this diocese will have both a deep reverence for the sacraments at the heart of our liturgical life as well as an understanding that the world itself is a visible sign of God's love and care and is therefore worthy of our good stewardship.

### **2. The ability to communicate the truth of the Gospel in ways that lead to connection and transformation**

Clergy in the Diocese of Pennsylvania are called to be communicators of God's love to God's beloved. Ordained leaders in this diocese must have the capacity to clearly articulate how Jesus transforms their lives, the Church, and the world. In order to do this, our clergy need to speak

several languages – both figuratively and literally – whenever they speak from the pulpit, in personal or pastoral conversations, and through various forms of social media. Clergy in this diocese are called to minister in a wide variety of contexts and among all sorts of people. The Diocese of Pennsylvania seeks to raise up clergy who have the skills for honest, open, and effective communication that demonstrates a love of both God and neighbor.

### **3. Spiritual maturity, self-awareness, and authenticity**

The work of the ordained ministry is a great gift and blessing; it also can be complex, challenging, and exhausting. To be an effective clergy person requires a strong spiritual center, physical and mental resilience, a deep knowledge of one's own spiritual gifts, a profound sense of humility, a commitment to a healthy integration of work and play, and a willingness to grow and learn alongside others. All of this is grounded in a life shaped by a discipline of personal prayer, public worship, and other holy conversation. We seek to raise up clergy to be servants of the Gospel, who will be able to persevere in challenging circumstances, recognize areas for personal growth, and be willing to learn new skills and ask for help in doing so. We pray that all of our ordained clergy will "lead a life worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1)

### **4. The ability to lead, organize, and equip others in ministry**

"Leadership is authentic self-expression which creates value for others," says the Rev'd Doug Travis. Clergy in this diocese must not only possess a depth of faith and spiritual devotion but also the ability to lead others to find the same depth and devotion in their own lives. They should have a vision for the ministry of the Episcopal Church and the wisdom to guide others into discovering and using their own gifts in the service of the Gospel. The Diocese of Pennsylvania seeks to raise up clergy who have a heart for this kind of mutual ministry and vocational discernment. Ordained leaders in this diocese should be wise mentors and guides who are motivated by the desire to help others find the place for their gifts in the Kingdom of God.

### **5. A capacity for creative leadership**

The Diocese of Pennsylvania seeks to raise up leaders who are able to develop and employ their sense of creativity in ministry. Our clergy must be able to thoughtfully discern new paths in the life of the Church through a careful listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. They must also have the courage to follow where these paths may lead. Ordained leaders in the church should have gifts to listen, learn, gather support, and then lead their congregations in taking risks for the sake of the Gospel. Our clergy must be courageous enough to make honest mistakes and humble enough to learn from them. We are looking for priests who see opportunity and hope where others see decline,

who find assurance and inspiration in the knowledge that Christ is present and active in the Church today.

## **6. The ability to lead congregations through change**

We live in a rapidly changing world, and our congregations live in that world as well. This means that all of our congregations will face adaptive challenges as they seek to proclaim the Gospel in this world. We seek to raise up priests who can help our congregations to respond faithfully to God's calling of them into this unknown future. These priests see Grace in the process of transformation and change and possess the skills to help others see this Grace as well.

## **7. A willingness and ability to be vocationally flexible**

The churches in the Diocese of Pennsylvania are in a variety of contexts in a variety of locations and with a variety of needs. We seek to raise up leaders who will be able to respond to this variety with flexibility and creativity. Few priests in this diocese are likely to serve in one role at one type of church in one city for their entire vocation. We recognize, too, that a growing number of parishes require clergy leaders who do not depend on them for their entire livelihood; therefore, we need to raise up priests who can offer their presence and their gifts in a part-time or non-stipendiary capacity. We are looking for clergy who can demonstrate flexibility in their vision of professional ministry in order to respond to God's call to them and to the Church in our world.