Discerning the Call

a discernment guide to faith communities

Commission on Ministry
The Diocese of Los Angeles
Discerning the call to ministry: An overview

What is “discernment”? 

All Christians—lay persons, the ordained clergy, and those considering ordination—“discern” the direction of their ministry. “Ministry” as used here pertains to the particular ways and means through which and by which each Christian takes part as a member of the Body of Christ. Therefore, discernment—which technically means “to separate,” “to distinguish,” “to determine,” “to sort out”—is a word and a process familiar to the conversations of and in the lives of the baptized. The Canons of the Episcopal Church envision the local faith community as the principal resource for this process of discernment.

There are three essential phases to all discernment processes, regardless of whether the ultimate determination is for lay or ordained ministry. These essential components are:

- One’s self-understanding.
- Community identification/recognition of a call from God.
- Affirmation from the larger Church.

Because the local faith community plays the initial and integral role in identifying and “recruiting” lay and ordained ministers, a substantial amount of time must be spent in conversation with its clergy and lay leaders, all of whom must be ready to fully endorse the individual at the conclusion of this process. That being the case, if the community determines that the call is to ordained ministry—in concert with the individual’s own understanding of call—then the authenticity of that call must be tested in the greater Church.

Information contained in this document is intended to assist anyone in discerning if a perceived call from God is to one or another of the varieties of lay leadership or to one of the categories of ordained leadership. Pages 1 through 5 of this document discuss in broad terms the discernment journey from the local faith community level until it reaches the diocesan level, a journey that commonly takes one year. Following the overview section are three appendices which contain more detailed information.

The orders of ministry

The Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer teaches that there are four orders of ministry: “The ministers of the Church are laypersons, bishops, priests and deacons.” Thus, all Christians, because they are baptized members of the Body of Christ, have a ministry. Some exercise this ministry primarily in the world, representing Christ by their life and labor. Others serve Christ primarily in the Church.

The Ministry of the Laity. “The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever thy may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, work and governance of the Church (Page 855, The Book of Common Prayer).”

Lay persons discern their vocation by understanding how best they can serve Christ in their work and minister in the world wherever that may be. Each Christian’s work, in diverse occupations, helps build up the life of the world and makes Christ present in every sphere of human activity. The Church also encourages each lay person to give of their time and talent in the work of building up the Body of Christ in the community of faith through such work as preachers, teachers, youth ministers, and hospital chaplains. They can serve the Church on vestry, at the Deanery level as representatives from congregations, at the Diocesan level on
commissions and committees, at the National level as delegates to General Convention and on the numerous program groups that spring from its work.

**The Ministry of the Diaconate.** “The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. (Page 856, The Book of Common Prayer).”

Among the ordained offices, the Diaconate is scripturally identified, originally as an appointive office. Best characterized by service in the pattern of Jesus Christ, it may involve providing acts of mercy, distribution of food, money, and other forms of aid to the needy, and the bringing of the world’s needs to the Church’s attention comprise some diaconal duties. Deacons often are found in institutional settings such as hospitals and hospices, prisons and schools, in ministry to the poor and the homeless, among immigrants and the marginalized. In the Diocese of Los Angeles, the Order of Deacons is a separate and distinct ministry order whose members are called Vocational Deacons to distinguish them from Deacons whose final order has been determined to be the priesthood, or presbyterate.

**The Ministry of the Presbyterate.** “The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God. (Page 856, The Book of Common Prayer).”

The Priesthood developed as bishops permitted “elders” to perform some liturgical functions formerly restricted to bishops. This most visible of the Holy Orders is often associated with administration of the sacraments. Some of its more common functions are preaching, teaching, spiritual formation within the parish, and administrative responsibilities on behalf of the community.

A full understanding of the Order to which a person is called occurs over time as the individual moves through the process of ministry assessment. The spiritual journey is one of learning, maturing, and challenge. Openness to the work of the Holy Spirit is of ultimate importance. It is also important to remember that each person’s process is unique, even though all go through certain steps along the way.

**Parish discernment: Who's involved and what are the roles?**

A valid ministry call is founded both upon a reasonable consensus within the local faith community and on a person’s own sense that God is indeed calling the individual into ministry of a particular character. It may well be the faith community that first perceives that God is calling one of its members, and vocalizes that awareness; or it may be the individual who voices his or her perception to the larger body. The relationship that follows is an intimate discernment partnership between individual and faith community.

**The individual**

Throughout the process of discernment the individual engages in prayer, reflection, active inquiry with a spiritual director, and conversation with members of the community, attempting at all times to ascertain the character of the call. It is the responsibility of the local faith community and the Church at large to aid in the exploration, interpretation, and validation of a call by God to ministry.

In most cases, the actual commencement of formal congregation-based discernment follows a period in which the individual alone has been engaged in discovery. In those initial weeks and
months, an individual’s path of discernment may seem obscure. The task of apprehending the nature of what is happening, and how to proceed, including the notion of speaking to others about emerging vocational inklings, initially may be confusing and daunting.

The journey of discernment is one that requires faithful responsiveness for each Christian since s/he is likely to encounter unique circumstances, questions and challenges. For some, the journey may move quickly; for others, the process may be more gradual or elongated. Nonetheless, some general guidelines follow that may help shape the journey’s path.

**Pray.** Prayer, the means by which and through which we maintain communication with God, is essential. There are many forms and means of prayer, and many good resources are available to learn more about this. What is important to say here is that a rule of life that includes significant time to be with so as to hear God’s desires is foundational to discernment of ministry. Because ordination is not a status to be pursued or acquired, but rather is to be understood as a mantle of service placed upon the shoulders of the recipient in response to God’s charge, time to distinguish the voice of the divine from the din of human endeavor is invaluable. Further, while there are appropriate times for private prayer, individuals discerning call continue to participate in the corporate liturgical and sacramental prayer life of a worshipping community.

**Test it out.** How can one be sure his or hers is a call to ordained, as contrasts with lay, ministry? How does one know God’s desire for his or her life? How does one know that what one is experiencing is a divine prompting? These are essential discernment questions. In addition to the above, it is helpful to explore other avenues of interest such as, taking courses and/or reading books on other subjects of interest—subjects that may be completely unrelated to the ordained life but are of genuine interest. Simultaneously, one might take courses and/or read books that touch on history, philosophy, religious studies, the arts, anthropology, writing, and so on. The idea is to expand the mind and heart in multiple directions to find where any resonance occurs.

**Read Scripture and talk with clergy in one’s community of worship.** Even while testing out other interests, one should continue to pursue the study of Scripture, church history, devotional writings, and other readings of spiritual or religious interest. If possible, one should find a means of giving life to this reading by means of a discussion group, or in conversation with one’s clergy person. In addition to the readings, make an opportunity to talk at some regular interval with the clergy person, who not only has personally experienced the discernment process, but also is capable of offering a confidential, supportive and honest environment for exploration of one’s call.

**Be active in the faith community.** By all means, one should not retreat to solitude for discernment. While there are necessary times for solitude and quiet during the process, being active in one’s congregation may be the single most important factor in understanding one’s call. If possible, one should participate in as broad and deep a way as possible. This breadth and depth of service is helpful at many levels. Certainly it has prima facie value to the community, just given how much help is needed in most congregations. Beyond that, such service also allows one a chance to see and experience the widest range possible of parish life, test interests and skills, and provide a deepened sense of the life of the laity. If one should encounter or witness some “negative stuff” in the course of this service, talk this over with the clergy person. But one should not be discouraged unnecessarily by it—negative things occur in Christian communities just as they do in other situations. Seeing it firsthand is an experience that can deepen one’s understanding of call, regardless of the order of ministry to which one’s process leads.
Sponsoring clergy

Because the sponsoring clergy is among the first to meet officially with a person discerning a call, the clergy leader’s role is important. By listening carefully and responding thoughtfully, the clergy leader may assist a person to perceive and express more clearly the nature of that call. In these initial contacts, the process of exploration and testing the vocation has begun. The clergy should note any recent problems in the individual’s life and be alert to manifestations of stress or trauma at the time the notion of ministry call is voiced. These issues, if present, must be resolved before continuing the discernment process. If the priest cannot in good conscience support the individual, for whatever reason, this must be made known to the individual at the very beginning of the process. Further, it is not to be assumed that any such issues impacting discernment would or could necessarily be resolved at a later stage in the process.

The initial discussion in part should review the person’s spiritual life. That is to say, does the clergy leader see evidence of a discipline of prayer, regular attendance at public worship, a commitment to the ongoing life and mission of the Church, and contact with a spiritual guide or director (other than the faith community’s clergy leader)? This initial exploration between clergy and the individual pursuing discernment would further include:

- Discussion of the faith community’s role in identification of call.
- Exploration of leadership options within the congregation.
- Reflection upon and discernment of God’s action in one’s life: A rule of life, personal prayer, study, worship, service to others; an Anglican understanding of the Sacraments and Scripture; the distinction between the roles of lay minister, deacon and priest; awareness of appropriate and inappropriate use of authority imputed to the clergy; an understanding of the Bishop’s authority and the importance of collegial relationships with other clergy; realities of clergy life such as demands, salaries, stress management, disruption of family life; and a personal understanding of the Gospel.

Suggestions for reading and discussion can be found in Appendix A.

Once the clergy leader and individual conclude the initial exploration, the next step is establishment of a Lay Discernment Committee (LDC). Committee members are appointed by the clergy person in consultation with the individual, and should represent the variety of congregational concerns. LDC membership should include some people known to the individual.

The Lay Discernment Committee (LDC)

The LDC’s primary function is to provide a forum for exploring the individual’s call. This exploration includes discussing the general meaning of ministry; looking specifically at differences in calls to lay and ordained ministries; reviewing the communicant’s life and spiritual history; and observing the applicant’s ongoing life and ministry within the
congregation. The diocesan Commission on Ministry may be consulted regarding training for LDC members.

Important note: Sponsoring clergy should not participate in the LDC once constituted and charged with its mission, or in any way be connected with its process of discernment with the individual, or development of its final report. It is crucial that the lay voice of the congregation be lifted up and the lay perspective represented clearly without interference or interpretation by the clergy leader.

When finished with its exploration the LDC will notify the clergy leader and the governing body of the faith community of its recommendation. At this time, the clergy leader and the governing body discuss whether to identify the individual as a Nominee for ordained ministry, or whether the individual seems most clearly called to a lay role. If it is determined that the call is to lay leadership, the clergy leader will confer with the individual as to what future course of study or utilization of skills in the faith community may apply. If it is determined that the call is to ordained leadership, the clergy leader will contact the Diocesan Office for Formation for the appropriate forms and the Bishop’s office to arrange for an interview with the Bishop.

Characteristics of the LDC

Whichever ministry track the individual ultimately pursues, the LDC provides a context for growth, not only for the applicant, but also for the team itself, which leads to growth for the congregation and the diocese at large. This growth is, in fact, the very proof that the team has succeeded in its work.

Because of the critical nature of the LDC’s role, its members should be prayerful people who care deeply for the Church, who trust in the Holy Spirit to guide the process, who are able to be open, honest, fair, and compassionate. Each member of the committee must be committed to respect confidentiality. What is said in this team discernment process is an issue of absolute confidentiality.

While Appendix B contains a good amount of information and suggested protocols for conducting the meetings, it is important to note a couple of additional ideas here. In addition to the basic rule of strict confidentiality, LDC members also should approach this work with the attitude that this process is intended to be helpful to the individual, the congregation and the church at large. Therefore, uppermost in their minds and conduct should be a sense of Christian love, justice and dignity for all persons. Trick questions or overly aggressive “interviewing” are counter to the aims of the process, and can do untold harm to the individual and/or members of the LDC. Remember, while being attentive and thorough, also relax and trust the process.

Concluding the LDC process

If the committee concludes there is a call to lay leadership, it will make a recommendation as to how the individual may best serve the Church. The clergy leader then will meet with the individual to discuss any possible future course of study or utilization of specific skills within the faith community.
If the committee concludes there is a call to ordained leadership, the committee will make a recommendation as to whether that call is to the Presbytery or to the Diaconate. The committee then reports to the clergy leader and the governing body of the faith community with a recommendation affirming the individual’s desire to engage the Diocesan Discernment Process as a Nominee. Any reservations that the team may have voiced are included in the report, a copy of which is sent to the Diocesan Office for Formation with the Recommendation Form in the initial application packet. The application packet must be completed at least two weeks prior to the interview with the Bishop.

LDC report to the governing body

The committee’s report to the congregational governing body (which accompanies the diocesan recommendation form) should include the following:

- The length of time you’ve been meeting and the number of meetings held
- A basic overview of the format and process used in the meetings
- An overview of the members (i.e. “4 of the 6 knew Martha previously, 2 did not. 2 are teachers, 1 a lawyer, etc.”).
- Some of the issues discussed, without revealing too much information that might be considered confidential. Something about the discernee’s gifts and weaknesses – or “growing edges”. Rely on your clergy person for direction regarding the reporting of any confidentiality issues.
- Joys and concerns about this person as a result of the discernment process.
- An answer to the question, “Can you envision this person as your priest or deacon?”

The governing body

The faith community governing body (vestry/bishop’s committee/board of directors) receives the report; reviews its contents with the clergy leader and LDC representatives; and, agreeing with the LDC’s ministry recommendation, by majority vote recorded in the minutes of the meeting, recommends the individual be nominated to the Bishop for Postulancy to the Sacred Ministry. This is the exact point at which the individual becomes known in the process by the title Nominee.

A consequence of the governing body’s endorsement is that it agrees on behalf of the faith community to be involved in the Nominee’s preparation for ordination to Holy Orders, including financial assistance during the process. This assistance will include such things as a background check, the canonically required psychological evaluation and a psychiatric evaluation prior to ordination (which is shared equally by the Nominee, the congregation and the diocese), and some financial aid while the Nominee is in seminary.

The governing body’s endorsement is the final step in the faith community’s discernment process before the Nominee is scheduled for an interview with the Bishop (at a later stage of the individual’s process, the governing body will again be asked for its recommendation.) The time allotted to pre-diocesan discernment steps varies, but one year is normative.

The beginning of diocesan discernment

The Episcopal interview

How to schedule

The interview with the Bishop must be scheduled by the clergy leader. Appointments for Nominees to the Priesthood should be scheduled with the Bishop Diocesan’s office;
appointments for Nominees to the Diaconate should be scheduled with the Bishop Suffragan’s office.

Who attends?
The interview includes the Nominee, the clergy leader and a warden (or another lay leader if the Nominee is sponsored by an institution) from the Nominee’s faith community.

What happens?
The purpose of the interview is to give the Bishop an opportunity to evaluate the Nominee’s call to the Sacred Ministry based on the nature of the faith community’s discernment and the ministry needs of the Diocese and the Episcopal Church. If the interview is favorable, the Nominee will be referred to the Office of Formation to begin the application process that will lead to attending Formation Retreat

The formation retreat
The Retreat is designed to allow the Commission on Ministry and the Presbyteral Nominee or the Diaconal Postulant an opportunity for conversation and evaluation in a relaxed environment. Commission members use the retreat environment as an opportunity to determine the individual potential, qualities, skills, talents, experience and education the Nominee brings to the discernment and formation process for the Sacred Ministry. A formation plan is recommended for presentation to the Bishop and the Office for Formation for review. Based upon the commission’s recommendation the bishop may outline a formation plan and may name a person a Postulant (Presbyteral) or a Candidate (Diaconal).

The formation plan
The formation plan is tailored to each Postulant’s particular combination of gifts, education and experience. Components of such a plan may include a Ministry Study Year (a time to engage in the actual practice of ministry in a faith community other than his/her own, enabling additional spiritual growth, leadership and problem solving opportunities), a seminary education resulting in a Master of Divinity degree, a program of Anglican Studies, a Clinical Pastoral Education and Field Study experience, and/or independent tutored study.

The Commission on Ministry expects the sponsoring clergy and LDC to maintain ties with the Postulant/Candidate, for the purposes of continuing to assist in the formation process (including financial assistance), and, as appropriate, helping the faith community’s governing body to make an informed decision regarding sponsoring the individual for the other steps in the ordination process.
Appendix A: Sources of further information

Listening Hearts:
Discerning Call in Community
by Farnham, Fill, McLean and Ward

Practicing Resurrection,
A Memoir of Work, Doubt, Discernment and Moments of Grace
by Nora Gallagher

The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church (2009)
Title III, Canons 6, 8 and 10
Appendix B: Protocols for LDCs

Episcopal Church Canons require a “careful inquiry into the physical, intellectual, moral, emotional, and the spiritual qualifications” of Nominees for Postulancy. These criteria determine one’s suitability for ordained ministry, yet they are not necessarily confined to ordained ministry. They are also characteristic of Christian life in general and aptly apply to all the baptized. Anyone presenting him- or herself for ministry ought to be formed in the Christian faith and life as to be “wholesome examples” to the people of God.

Although the primary responsibility for helping to discern any call to ministry lies with the faith community (clergy and lay leaders, as well as the governing body), the responsibility also includes the Bishop, Commission on Ministry and the Standing Committee. In fairness to each individual assessing a call to ministry, it is essential that the same criteria be used at all levels of the discernment process and that the applicant be aware of the guidelines applicable to the process.

Throughout the process discussions are conducted both by individuals and small groups. LDC and COM members ordinarily meet with the individual in small groups. Other steps along the way may involve one-to-one sessions. For example, meetings with the clergy leader, as well as the medical doctor, psychologist, and psychiatrist interview are individual sessions. During both individual and group discussions, this process insists that persons be treated with respect as members of the body of Christ and that they are assumed to be called to leadership on some level. The primary task of the LDC is itself a ministry to such individuals, assisting them in the process of discerning whether their ministry will be as a lay or clergy leader.

Discernment conversations and reflection

The LDC assists a brother or sister in Christ to clarify their call in the community of all the baptized people of God. Meetings of the LDC are therefore NOT interviews, but time of exploration of a person’s spiritual life and require that the members of the LDC remain open and vulnerable to share their own life experience and to be transformed themselves by the Holy Spirit.

The prospect of reflective discussion between the LDC and the individual can create high anxiety, not only for the individuals seeking discernment, but also for LDC members. Many members may feel inadequate and unprepared to make recommendations that affect the lives of so many people. While nothing can remove such inherent tension, conversation guidelines and orientation prior to starting may help everyone be more comfortable. Because it helps not only to know what questions to ask, but also how to ask the questions, following are some guidelines. They are not to be used verbatim, but with judgment, flexibility and prayer. Each LDC member is responsible for making certain that specific key questions are covered, either directly or indirectly, before the end of the formal discernment period.

General policies

The purpose of the ongoing discernment conversations is discovery: a mutual testing of call.

Try to look at the breadth of ministry of the diocese, not just the specific order (Lay Leader, Deacon, Priest) to which this person might be called.

Remember that LDC members act not only in their own names, but in trust for the people of God in their congregation. Thorough preparation for meetings should assure a relatively uniform process for all in the process. Try to create a sense of mutuality or partnership between the individual and LDC members. When considering topics to pursue, it may help to test them
against the following questions: What does this have to do with leadership in the Church? Why do we need to know? Would I be willing to answer the same question about myself?

It may help to remember that the purpose underlying any question should be to get at this basic idea: What may happen in the life of the Church and its members through the leadership of this person? LDC members also may consider that any given answer may be less important than the feeling or attitude behind it. Therefore, be attentive to things such as energy level, sincerity, enthusiasm, sensitivity, respect for differences, and evidence of a contagious personal faith.

Some other pointers:

- It is important to know not only about the individual’s prayer life and spiritual journey, but also how s/he would guide, direct and accompany other people on theirs.
- In discussing social issues, the ways in which an individual expresses Christian witness may be more important than ideological ideal.
- Clues about administrative skill emerge in the way an individual has handled correspondence and arrangements during the discernment period. The way s/he organizes and administers his/her own affairs will tell much about the way s/he can be expected to organize and administer the life and ministries of a congregation.
- Remember that individuals are in a discernment process in which they will reflect with many different people in different settings.
- Feedback to the individual in the recommendations of the LDC may help his/her personal growth and be of benefit to the Church.
- When the hearts are open to God’s guidance, there is good reason to hope that God will bless the process, the LDC’s recommendations, and the individual’s reception of such.

Structuring the committee meetings

Whatever time is allotted to each LDC meeting, care should be given to maximize what can be accomplished, while also respecting each person’s time constraints. Following are some general pointers about conducting each session:

- Open with prayer.
- Build a good rapport at the beginning.
- Then, get down to business.
- One person should be appointed to take detailed notes.
- Don’t get stuck on one subject, no matter how interesting it might be.
- End the meeting at the agreed upon time.
- After each meeting, LDC members should share first impressions It may be useful to have some quiet time beforehand so that individual committee members can make detailed notes about their own reactions. If each individual organizes his/her own thoughts it will ensure broader participation.

Framing the questions

The LDC should agree in advance as to what discussion questions should be included in each meeting, and note them ahead of time. These become the “discussion core” for the meetings and provide the theme of reflection. They should be based on mission criteria (ministry needs of the diocese, specific leadership qualities, special skills required, etc.) Trick questions have no place in LDC discussions. Also include specific questions based on autobiographical information the individual has provided to the team, either in the form of a letter or a brief statement at the first
session. It is generally more helpful to focus on how the individual functions rather than how s/he expresses concepts. Try to elicit stories of actual experience rather than recital of theory or listings of credentials. A rule of thumb: the way a person tells about handling a situation in the past indicates how s/he might act in future. Remember, these conversations are not actually interviews. Rather, through listening and mutual sharing we seek the best way for an individual to serve God and the Church.

Avoid questions that allow “Yes/No” or short answers. Some examples of good form are:

- “Tell us about a time when...”
- “What do you want us to know about...?”
- “Give us an example of...”
- “You say... about yourself. How has that been demonstrated?”
- “Describe an experience where...”
- “How do you...?”
- “What is your experience with...?”

Important: There are no right or wrong responses in any area of questioning. There is no political or ideological “litmus test.” Each response contributes toward deciding upon the character of the individual’s response to the call to ministry, that is to say, is there a need for ordination? With this in mind, you will want to note whether the individual draws naturally, attractively and with confidence on the resources of education, experience and faith.

What is off-limits?

A good many personal questions are illegal for pre-employment discussions and may be deemed discriminatory. While LDC discussions are not job interviews, the Diocese of Los Angeles wishes to respect such a policy. Therefore, LDC discussions shall be guided by the principle: “Don’t ask a question that you would not answer for yourself.” Said another way, if you are not comfortable answering a proposed question, do not ask it! This does not mean that personal questions are to be avoided. Within the context of the discernment process some personal discussion is not only proper, it is also demanded, given the expectations of the Church that this process will afford it extensive knowledge of all Nominees, Postulants, and Candidates for ordination. What is questioned is the propriety of such discussion in a public venue. Needless to say, this is why confidentiality is paramount. Areas of discussion should be sensitively considered by LDC, in advance, and tested by addressing questions to one another.

Appropriate questions may be phrased:

- “What do you want us to know about...”
- “...your goals for your own personal development?”
- “...how you schedule and use your time off?”
- “...what books you are reading?”
- “...what you do for fun?”
- “...your likes and dislikes about the way your life and ministry have gone thus far?”

LDC’s should not use meeting discussions to initiate questions relating to:

- Marital history.
- Sexuality (sexual orientation).
- Personal financial matters.
- Past history of substance abuse or mental illness.

It should be left to the individual to initiate any conversation around such matters.
If these are areas of concern to the LDC, a means of dealing with them will be worked out. Generally, the clergy leader or the Diocesan Office for Formation can help resolve any such questions regarding an individual.

**Concluding thoughts**

Although discussions will be personal and unique, it is to be hoped that there will be enough uniformity of process and content so the conclusions about the person in discernment can be arrived at and compared with fairness and accuracy.

All through the discernment process it will become apparent that questions are being raised and answered without being asked, or that the answer to one question comes out in discussing another, or that the thread of the conversation leads to new questions not previously imagined. These are likely to be signs of good process rather than imperfections. No matter how carefully an individual and a LDC prepares their documentation, the interpersonal action is the most likely to bring out what is really important and necessary for the mutual discernment process in which each is engaged.

**Appendix C** to this document includes questions in key areas that form the foundation of the Formation Retreat interviews that the individual, once a Nominee, will encounter. They may be helpful in guiding the work of the LDC.
Appendix C: Formation Retreat questions

Core questions, by topic area (adapted from those prepared for the Formation Retreat interviews) that may serve as a guide to Lay Discernment Committee conversations.

**Topic: SPIRITUALITY: DISCERNMENT OF CALL**

People presenting for leadership should have a clear sense of call; feel at home with the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church in all its diversity; and see worship, prayer, and scripture as an integral part of their lives.

Consider:

- Who is God for this person? Who is Jesus? Who is the Holy Spirit? Is the individual aware of and able to articulate God’s presence throughout the journey of faith?
- Is this person a communicant in good standing and actively engaged in lay ministry within the Episcopal community? How is the Church understood? What are the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church understood to be? Does s/he lead a “disciplined” life?
- Does the person read Scripture regularly and seek an understanding of origins and history of biblical interpretation? Is the individual’s own story understood in terms of the biblical story? What is the individual’s experience of prayer?
- How does the individual hear God’s call? How has the individual’s community of faith reflected that call? If this call comes late in life, what circumstances led to the desire for change now?
- Has the individual demonstrated effective spiritual leadership in the congregation?

Suggested questions in this area:

- Can you perform your ministry without being ordained? Why not?
- What are your present commitments?
- Are you overworked…too busy? Not busy enough?
- Are you feeling rushed to do or complete your task/journey? Do you feel in a hurry to get on with it?
- Do you have an image or vision of your potential ministry?
- What are the benefits of your course of action? What are its risks or hazards?
- How will your course affect those close to you? Have you explored how they feel about your course?
- What are your feelings? How intense are they?
- Is the course that you are considering motivated by zeal…by love?
- Do you have goals, long-range and short-range?
- How long have you wanted to do this? How do you know?
- Does Scripture shed any light on this issue?
- What do you perceive to be the needs of the community/Church? What do those needs suggest to you?
- Are you trying to be obedient to God? What if God says no?
- Are any stories from your life related to this issue?
- How important is Scripture to you?
**Topic: INTELLECT: PREPAREDNESS FOR FURTHER EDUCATION**

*Persons presenting for leadership should be intellectually competent and prepared for further study and challenge to their already acquired knowledge.*

Consider:

- What is the academic record of the individual? Can this person succeed in further theological education on a graduate level?
- Does the person have knowledge of areas outside those associated with principle personal interests or background?
- Can the person communicate ideas to others, listen well, and remain open to new ideas and continued learning?
- Is the individual aware of what is going on in the community, nation, and world—politically, culturally, economically?
- Is knowledge used as a vehicle of grace, or is it used defensively, to keep others away or intimidated?

**Suggested questions in this area:**

- Have you taken any exploratory course work in theological studies? What was it like?
- Is seminary study financially feasible for you?
- Have you given thought to how you would finance your theological education?
- What if you became ordained and could not find a paid position in the Church?
- If the Commission on Ministry were to recommend three years at a residential seminary, how might you respond?
- How would you feel about going back to school?
- Are you prepared to juggle a full-time job and graduate school?
- Would a year of Anglican Studies be enough further education?
- Tell us about your college years? Have you completed any graduate work?
- What do you read? Can you share a book you’ve read for pleasure in the past year? for intellectual stimulus or knowledge?
- What do you think would be the most difficult aspect of seminary?
- What do you think are the greatest hopes and problems for the contemporary world?

**Topic: EMOTIONS: INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN MINISTRY**

*People presenting for leadership should be psychologically sound and demonstrate insight into their own emotional issues. They should be good stewards of their bodies and their health.*

Consider:

- Is this individual aware of his/her own personality and the kinds of persons with whom good working relationships can be established/not be established?
- Does the individual understand his/her own personal strengths and limitations? Are the individual’s self-perceptions consistent with how the individual is viewed by others?
- What effect has the individual’s family of origin had on personal development? What kinds of relationships has the individual had in the past and currently? With family and others?
- Is the individual comfortable with his/her own sexuality? To what extent is it possible to talk with others about sexual issues and/or problems? Can relationships be established with persons of the same sex? Opposite sex? Differing sexual orientations?
- Is the individual comfortable with a personal sense of the physical self?
• Has the person had problems with or family history of addiction, such as alcohol/drugs or food?

_Suggested questions in this area:_
• Does your kindness and affability make you vulnerable to manipulation by others? Do you feel obligated to do this? Do you feel that it is your duty? Is this expected of you?
• Will you resent doing this?
• Does your need for love or desire for approval unduly influence you?
• What are your instincts? Impulses? Inclinations? What are their sources?
• Are money, glory, or reputation factors in your decision?
• What people have influenced you in your perception of call? How?
• Are physical problems (for example: recurring headaches) trying to tell you something? Is God trying to tell you something through them? Might they be limitations on your leadership ability?
• What do you do for physical exercise and recreation?
• Is there an image that describes how you feel? Or how it would feel? What color does it feel like?
• If you were to paint a picture of your situation, what would it look like?
• Have you had a serious illness or have you been hospitalized in recent years?
• Do you have a history of abuse or addiction? If yes, what did you do about it?

_Topic: AUTHORITY/MORALITY: LEADERSHIP IN MINISTRY DEVELOPMENT_

_Persons presenting for leadership should strive to pattern their lives after the example of Jesus._

Consider:
• Does this individual understand his/her own values and how they were formed?
• How is the Gospel a part of this person’s decision-making process?
• How does this individual relate to those who hold a vision of morality that is different theirs?
• Is the person of high moral character? Is the quality of this moral character perceived by others?
• Does the individual reflect something of the person of Christ?

_Suggested discussion questions in this area:_
• What is your attitude toward authority?
• In what ways do you ascertain right from wrong?
• Are you aware of the criticism and rejection Church leaders often receive? Could you handle this? How?
• What values do you hold most dear?
• Are you aware of the adulation Church leaders often receive? How would you handle this?
• What do you think “honesty” means in today’s society?
• Do you see pastoral care as a part of your ministry?
• Do you see yourself as a “servant?”
• What would you describe as the most pressing moral issues facing the Church and society today?
• What are the needs of society as you see them, and how do you think the Church can address them?
• Are your abilities commensurate with the demands of leadership in the Church?
• What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses?
• How do others perceive you?
• Do the people in your faith community experience you as a leader? How do you know?
• To what extent does your sense of call come through your faith community?

FURTHER CATEGORIES OF SUGGESTED QUESTIONS
It may be helpful to refer to the leadership qualities that have been repeatedly asserted in our exploration of what the mission of the diocese will require of ordained leaders in the near future:

Motivate and Build: One who can help congregations to grow. The ability to work in new areas and begin new congregations. The ability to help congregations that have been dwindling or seem to have reached plateaus.
• Tell us about a time when you motivated others.
• Give us an example of a program you have built.
• Do you see yourself as a motivator or builder?
• How would you go about introducing new ideas or programs into your faith community?
• Can you tell us about a time when things were difficult in a program you were leading and you managed to turn it around?
• How do you go about calling others to assist you in your work?
• Have you accomplished something of which you are particularly proud?

Contagious Personal Faith: One who has spiritual depth, a questing prayer life, a sense of God’s presence in his/her pilgrimage; and who can help congregations to grow and develop in faith. One who has a clear vision of faith and the ability to share this vision.
• How do you view the ministry of the whole Body of Christ?
• Can you tell us a little about the difference you perceive between the ministries of laity and ordained persons?
• What is your understanding of the ordained minister’s central task in pastoral care? (Solving other people’s problems? Giving answers? Helping one come to a resolution of one’s problems?)
• Describe an experience where you had to explain something of the Christian faith to a child.
• What would you like us to know about your personal relationship with God?
• What is your experience of the work of the Spirit in your life?
• Can you describe to us the difference between a priest and a deacon in the Episcopal Church?
• What are some of the ways in which you share your faith with those closest to you?
• Tell us your favorite Bible story. What is your favorite hymn? Do you have a favorite prayer?

Develop and Discern Leaders: One who has demonstrated the ability to listen and to hear others and the ability to raise up others as leaders. Strong educator skills. The ability to learn and continue to learn.
• What is your favorite thing to do in Church? Tell us about a book you are presently reading.
• What was school like for you? Did you enjoy it?
• Have you ever been challenged on some point of theology or anything you may have said in a class or a sermon? How did you handle it? How did it make you feel?
• How extensive is your collection of books? Tell us what you read for fun?
• Have you had opportunity to teach or train others? What was that like? Did you enjoy it?
• How would you describe your teaching style?
• Do repeated questions on the same topic annoy you?
• Do you enjoy talking about yourself?

Risk-Taker: One possessing the ability to take risks in the most creative sense of this concept. The capacity to persevere in difficulty, and resilience in adversity. The capacity to work hard. The demonstrated ability to deal creatively with past failures.

• Tell us about a time when you took a big chance. Did it pay off? What did you learn?
• Give us an example of something you really love to do.
• Describe your favorite place to be.
• Have you ever failed miserably at anything? Would you mind sharing that with us?
• What is your experience with persons outside your culture?
• Have you traveled a great deal?
• Describe something that you have worked really hard to do.
• What do you want us to know about your home?
• Can you tell us what makes you laugh?

Genuine Inter-Personal Awareness: One who has demonstrated not only a call and ability to direct, guide and support those within their community, but deep awareness and integration of personal skills and identity (including limitations).

• Can you tell us something you really love to do?
• Describe for us your favorite person.
• Tell us about a time when you thought you recognized a real leader. What was that person like?
• What does it feel like to work with people you admire?
• How would you describe your own leadership style? What things do you do to call others to ministry?
• What does ordination mean to you?
• How do you think your friends will treat you differently if you are ordained?
• Tell us your favorite story about yourself.