

# Discernment for Ministry



## Congregational Discernment Team Handbook 2024

The Episcopal Church in Southeast Florida

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<a href="#"><u>A Letter from the Bishop</u></a> .....	2
<a href="#"><u>A Note about Using this Handbook</u></a> .....	4
<a href="#"><u>An Outline of the Discernment Process</u></a> .....	5
<a href="#"><u>Steps in the Discernment Process</u></a> .....	8
<a href="#"><u>Step One: Conversations with your priest and spiritual director</u></a> .....	8
<a href="#"><u>Step Two: Forming a Congregational Discernment Team</u></a> .....	8
<a href="#"><u>Step Three: The work of the Congregational Discernment Team</u></a> .....	9
<a href="#"><u>Step Four: Concluding the work of the Congregational Discernment Team</u></a> .....	9
<a href="#"><u>Step Five: Preparing for what comes next</u></a> .....	9
<a href="#"><u>Step Six: Preparing for Aspirants' Retreat</u></a> .....	10
<a href="#"><u>Step Seven: Aspirants' Retreat</u></a> .....	10
<a href="#"><u>Step Eight: Postulancy</u></a> .....	11
<a href="#"><u>Step Nine: Candidacy</u></a> .....	11
<a href="#"><u>Forming a Congregational Discernment Team</u></a> .....	12
<a href="#"><u>Possible outcomes</u></a> .....	13
<a href="#"><u>Norms for a group covenant</u></a> .....	14
<a href="#"><u>The CDT facilitator</u></a> .....	15
<a href="#"><u>Checklist for First Steps</u></a> .....	15

*We are grateful to the Dioceses of Colorado and Missouri,  
whose processes have informed this handbook.*



Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It is one of the chief responsibilities of the Christian community to raise up, nurture, and sustain able, effective leadership, both for the local and the wider Church. This responsibility was entrusted to the apostolic community by our Lord, and in so doing, we are participating in caring for God's people in collaboration with God, who from the beginning has never left God's temple untended.<sup>1</sup>

These words from the late Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, while ostensibly about the priesthood, actually are good words for all of us in any aspect of Christian ministry:

*When people are selected for the priesthood we look for certain qualities. We look first for faith, and with it faithfulness, "stickability" and the capacity to go on when the going gets tough. We look for evidence of a life of prayer because prayer is required of a priest, both to sustain the loneliness of the job and as a sign of the way he is pointing others. We look for commitment to people, both to challenge and to console the strong and the weak, the gifted and the deprived. We look for a willingness to live sacrificially: to choose the less attractive job; to make do with a not very appealing income; and to work long hours without obvious reward. We look for leaders who can inspire without domineering, whose model is that of the Good Shepherd rather than the successful graduate of the management training school.<sup>2</sup>*

The Church has benefitted greatly from the insights of reflection on organizations and management in recent years, and this has proved very useful to us. But this is not where the Church begins in its discussion of either Christian community or leadership.

Leadership in the Church is primarily about *connecting* and *gathering*, because leadership in the Church is always about the Church *as a community* and about building up the Body for active ministry to bring Church and world into creative mutual engagement and transformation for the well-being of all. And leaders in the Church, whether we are lay or ordained, do this, in the words of another Archbishop of Canterbury, by making God real for people.<sup>3</sup>

This makes the task of discernment multi-layered: discernment is for and about individual Christians, but it is also, and equally, about the Church and the Church's needs in the present moment, but also, more importantly, into the future, as far as we can tell what that future will demand.

---

<sup>1</sup> See the BCP, p. 520.

<sup>2</sup> From the Foreword to *Father Diamond of Deptford* edited by Rodney Bomford and Harry Potter (Ditchling Press Ltd 1994), p

<sup>3</sup> Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today* revised edition with a Foreword by John Pritchard (London: SPCK 2009), p. 78.

We have huge expectations of our leaders in the Church, whether they are church wardens or heads of youth ministry or deputies to General Convention or bishops or congregational administrators, and the task of leadership is no easier in our day than it has been in times past. Our circumstances are unique, but that is the case in every age. It is always true that “there has never been anything like this in the past.”

Yet there have been, in the Church’s understanding of leadership and ministry, some fundamental qualities and characteristics that are known to support and sustain those in ministry. In discernment these qualities and characteristics and their depth will be revealed. Not all will possess the same gifts, and not all will be asked to do the same work. But in all true discernment there is always a “Yes” – a Yes to some aspect of each baptized life that can be offered as a living sacrifice of serving our crucified and risen Savior. The goal of discernment is to identify this, and set it free for the building up of the Body and for Christ’s glory.

*My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am going  
.I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end,  
nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you  
does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always though  
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.<sup>4</sup>*

With every blessing,

+Peter

---

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

## **This Handbook**

The Commission on Ministry has developed this resource to facilitate discernment for lay and ordained ministries. It is our hope that through prayerful conversation with one's priest, a spiritual director, and a small group of fellow church members, exploring topics such as baptismal covenant, spiritual gifts, and ministry roles, over time the Holy Spirit will provide clarity in this mutual exploration.

The Bishop and the Commission on Ministry appreciate the participation of all individuals who seek to discern their gifts for ministry and those who assist them in this discernment. Please notify the Commission on Ministry at the address listed below if you find any errors or omissions in these documents, or if you have suggestions that might be used to improve this Handbook. This Handbook and accompanying curriculum are "living documents" that will be updated regularly. Thank you for your prayerful, faithful participation and your dedication to the discernment process in the Episcopal Church in Southeast Florida.

All correspondence about this Handbook and about all matters to do with discernment should be addressed to:

Executive Assistant to the Canon to the Ordinary  
The Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida  
555 NE 15<sup>th</sup> Street  
Suite 934B  
Miami, FL 33132  
305-373-0881 Ext. 129  
[canonexec@diosef.org](mailto:canonexec@diosef.org)

## **An Outline of the Discernment Process**

A process of discernment is focused on discovering one's own identity in God within the community of the Church. This experience is a spiritual practice that transcends feelings and even aspirations, and yet is fully present to both. Discernment is meant to be holistic, inviting the whole self to be seen and loved. The journey, however, is not always easy; the courage to be vulnerable will be of utmost importance as one undertakes a deeper grasp of God's call in one's life.

Discernment is a spiritual practice for all of God's people in different seasons of life. It is not simply something future deacons, priests, and bishops do. God's "Yes" comes to us to serve in greater ways within God's Church as lay persons. God calls people to ministry with youth or ministries of study or in worship or any number of other vital aspects of life and work within the Body of Christ. Beginning this process does not assume the outcome, nor should it be geared to some expected result. Rather, engaging in discernment is meant to be a life-giving gift for the individual and the community of Christians in which the seeker finds him or herself.

For ease of reference, the discernment process is divided into three broad stages, though not everyone involved in discernment will be in all stages.

- 1) **Discernment in the Parish.** The discernment process until the end of the period of congregational discernment. This stage is under the oversight of the priest.
- 2) **Discernment Retreat.** The discernment process from the end of congregational discernment through the Discernment Retreat. This stage is under the oversight of the Bishop, the COM, and the Retreat Leadership. This stage is for those discerning calls to ordained ministry as well as to lay pastoral and congregational leadership.
- 3) **Formation.** The discernment and formation process after the Discernment Retreat. This stage is under the oversight of the Bishop, the COM, and those responsible for the seeker's academic and spiritual formation. This stage will take quite different forms, depending on an individual's call, background, and needs.

The first stage of this process may be used in our communities for a range of discernment, especially if an individual would like a small community of reflection for help in deepening his or her Christian discipleship in the life of the congregation. However, we also recognize that much discernment at the congregational level happens between an individual and the priest, and that this is sufficient for the needs of many. As we emphasize several times in this handbook, most of those who engage in discernment will be in discernment for new or deeper ministry as lay people.

This does not mean that the seeker may not be growing into a wider lay ministry beyond the congregation (in the diocese, for example, or in a Church-wide ministry). It simply means that the primary base for most seekers' ongoing faithful Christian life will be with their priest and their worshipping community.

A few of those who engage in congregational discernment may move on in discernment for ordination. Entering a congregational discernment process does not mean that further discernment beyond the congregation is either automatic or even likely, and it is important to emphasize this at the outset. It is the responsibility of the clergy to ensure that seekers are given the help and support that they need, especially if there are initial hopes that are not realized. Without such clarity and honesty from the beginning, the discernment process cannot be a safe environment for either the seeker or those who are asked to help the seeker in discernment. A careful reticence about possible outcomes of discernment is essential to this process. Given the amount of time and commitment that is asked of everyone in this process, and the dangers that are inherent in allowing potential seekers to be involved in a process that clearly from an early stage must end, no one will be admitted to a further stage in the discernment unless it is clear that this is appropriate.

## **Things to consider before beginning**

- The seeker must have been confirmed or received in the Episcopal Church, and in good standing.
  - For those who have been received from another Church, discernment would not normally begin until the seeker has been an Episcopalian and participated in a range of church life at the congregational level for a period of five years after formal reception into the Church.
- Clergy in the Church are subject to mandatory retirement at 72 and Seekers should be prepared to serve at least 10 years in ordained ministry. Formation for the diaconate or priesthood is a multiple-year process, therefore, the upper age for Seekers entering discernment is about 57.
- Seekers begin by speaking with their priest and engaging in an open-ended, but focused, conversation once a month for a year. Seekers should have a frank and open conversation with their priest about their life and articulate, insofar as it is possible, the issues that are moving them to ask for discernment.
- If the seeker is not already in spiritual direction, this must begin, and should be with a spiritual director approved by the seeker's priest. The seeker is expected to meet with the spiritual director once a month for nine months before beginning a CDT. The Bishop's office maintains a list of available spiritual directors.
- Seekers who have been in a process for discernment for ordination or who have been ordained in another Church or denomination are subject to special expectations as outlined in a separate document. Please communicate with the Bishop's office as soon as possible before moving forward for more information.
- Those who are discerning a call to Holy Orders should note that during formation and once ordained, the clergyperson will not be able to serve in his or her home parish.

## **The First Step**

### **Conversations with your Priest and Spiritual Director (Typically 1 year)**

Discernment happens in community because God created us to be in relationship with one another, and we are only truly the persons we have been created to be in relationship with one another. On our own, we can often misunderstand or misinterpret what may be happening in our spiritual lives, and the Christian tradition has always stressed that discernment is never a matter for the individual and God alone. The Church also understands discernment to be about the Church as well as about the individual. Discernment therefore begins in conversation with your priest and with a spiritual director.

Clergy may take the initiative and approach individuals in their communities in whom they see the gifts of leadership that might be put to the service of the community, the diocese, or the wider Church. Some of our finest leaders have been those who would not have put themselves forward, but who have responded faithfully when invited.

Even if not so approached, anyone who is sensing a nudge to some form of leadership in the Church will begin by having a series of conversations with the priest in charge of his or her community. These conversations will last for several months and cover a wide range of topics, including a spiritual autobiography, a sense of a more focused commitment, and the concrete circumstances of his or her life that shape ministry possibilities. The priest may expect the seeker to do some focused reading as a part of this conversations. Confirmation or Reception in the Episcopal Church and a history of stable and active commitment and participation in the congregation is assumed.

One should also seek out and regularly meet with a spiritual director, who can be a prayerful, discerning presence on the journey. This is a crucial relationship for any Christian. The selection of a spiritual director is an exercise of discernment: gender, faith tradition, and personality are just a few of the variables to consider. One's priest can help find a suitable spiritual director, and there are other resources, like Spiritual Directors International ([www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org)), that have directories available on its websites. You can also call the Bishop's Office and speak to the Executive Assistant to the Canon to the Ordinary for advice on finding a known Spiritual Director.

## **The Second Step**

### **Forming a Congregational Discernment Team (CDT) (2-3 months)**

After meeting together for a year, the priest determines the need for a Congregational Discernment Team (CDT). The seeker and priest will invite a group of people from the congregation to form

this CDT. These thoughtful, prayerful parishioners commit themselves to be members of the CDT to support the seeker on their discernment journey for lay or ordained ministry.

### **The Third Step**

#### **The Work of the Congregational Discernment Team (6-10 months)**

After the CDT finishes training, they work and meet with the seeker for approximately 6-10 months to explore his or her sense of deepening commitment. The CDT follows the curriculum set forth in the *Congregational Discernment Team Curriculum* document. The seeker should continue meeting with his or her spiritual director.

### **The Fourth Step**

#### **Summarizing the work of the Congregational Discernment Team (1-2 months)**

After completing all the phases, the group meets without the seeker to reflect on the discussions and to share insights. Each member can offer reflections, either written or verbally. The group will prepare and share a combined summary of the group's insights.

### **The Fifth Step**

#### **Preparing for What Comes Next**

The CDT summary, the priest's assessment of the seeker's gifts, and the seeker's desire to continue begin a new phase of the discernment process. Here we come to a fork in the road.

For most in the discernment process, the CDT and the seeker will determine that the seeker pursue some further lay ministry. The next step is a discussion with the priest about either a deepening of existing ministry in the seeker's community, or a new role within the community. The seeker and the priest can continue this conversation and look at forms of lay leadership that fit the seeker. It may be that the seeker is looking for further theological education, and the priest will refer the seeker to the Center for Christian Leadership and Formation (CCFL) or another local or online educational institution.

It is important for all to understand that this represents a real achievement, and in no sense has the seeker "failed" the discernment process. Most seekers will not move beyond this stage in the process, and it must always be remembered that only a comparatively small number of people

serve the Church in an ordained capacity. Indeed, the Church has always relied on, and in the future will rely more heavily on, able, committed, well-formed lay leaders, and in the Episcopal Church we have from the very beginning of our organization as a Church placed equal value on lay ministry and leadership.

The CDT, the seeker, and the priest may determine that the seeker move forward in the discernment process, in which case the summary report is filed. The Executive Assistant to the Canon to the Ordinary begins and maintains contact with the seeker through this part of the discernment process toward the Discernment Retreat.

## **Sixth Step (3-5 months)**

### **Preparing for Aspirants' Retreat**

If the seeker is discerning a call to the diaconate or priesthood, then he or she will continue on to complete the necessary paperwork to apply to the Aspirants' Retreat. The paperwork required includes but is not limited to:

- Medical report completed by a physician
- Psychological report completed by a diocesan approved psychologist
- Life history screening and behavioral history documentation
- Financial check
- Background check

Once these documents are complete, the Bishop's office will review them and meet with the Aspirants' Retreat Team who will then recommend that the seeker be invited to the Aspirants' Retreat by the Bishop.

Please note that there is no guarantee that all seeker's will be invited to the Aspirants' Retreat simply because they completed the necessary paperwork.

It will incumbent upon the seeker to finance all testing required. Often, the sponsoring parish will be able to assist seekers with the costs incurred. At the time of this writing the approximate costs are almost \$1,000.

## **Seventh Step**

### **Aspirants' Retreat**

The Aspirants' Retreat is held twice a year, often once in the winter and once in the spring. During this three-day, two-night retreat, Aspirants meet with various experts from across the church and professional spectrum. These individual and group meetings are meant to offer the

Aspirant and chance to share their discernment and call with professionals who are each experts in their respective fields. The retreat environment is supposed to be holistic. At the end of the retreat, the Aspirants' Retreat Team meets with the Bishop to recommend the next stage in formation: Postulancy.

## **Eighth Step (deacons: 2 years; priests: 3-4 years)**

### **Postulancy**

Postulancy is a status in the Church where the individual has moved from discernment into intentional formation. The step is highly customized to the Postulant based upon their previous education and experiences. In general, deacons will begin or continue to be enrolled at the Center for Christian Formation and Leadership (CCFL) as they follow the CCFL Diaconal Formation Program, the courses of which can be found on their website. In addition to academic formation, the Postulant will engage in Contextual Education throughout his or her time in Postulancy. It is highly likely that such Contextual Education will happen at a different parish than the sponsoring parish in which the Postulant did his or her discernment. Congregations will be expected to make a written financial pledge towards the cost of training and formation of potential aspirants who are admitted to postulancy, with a minimum commitment of \$500-\$1,000.

Postulants in formation for priesthood will enroll at a residential seminary of the Bishop's approval and complete a three-year Master of Divinity degree. During this time, the Postulant will be formed academically and contextually so that he or she is ready to serve within the diocese upon his or her graduation. Sponsoring congregations are expected to financially assist the Postulant during their time in seminary, often committing a minimum of \$5,000 per year.

## **Ninth Step**

### **Candidacy**

The final step before ordination is called Candidacy. This canonically required step is where Postulants are assessed, often in the form of the General Ordination Exams or their equivalents, and upon successful completion of them are approved by the Standing Committee of the Diocese. Candidacy typically occurs during the final year of Postulancy. Once approved by the Standing Committee, the Bishop's office will work with the Candidate to schedule their ordination, assign them a congregation, in the case of a deacon, or assist them in finding a congregation to which they might apply as a priest.

## Forming a Congregational Discernment Team (CDT)

- A discernment team is selected by the priest. The minimum size for a discernment team is three individuals from the seeker's community in addition to the seeker. Groups larger than six members are possible, but become increasingly difficult to schedule. *All members of the discernment team need to be present at each meeting, and it is expected that these meetings will be in-person.*
- Strive for a demographic representation of the congregation for the best chance of different perspectives and breadth of experiences.
- All members of the discernment team should be members in good standing of the Episcopal Church or of a Church in full communion with the Episcopal Church. Exceptions to this rule may be approved by the Commission on Ministry liaison.
- There should be at least one person who knows the seeker well and one person who does not know the seeker at all.
- The COM will appoint a member from the wider Church to the team. To make this request the priest submits [Form COM-2 \(Appendix 1B\)](#) to the Executive Assistant to the Canon to the Ordinary in the Bishop's office. The submission of Form COM-2 signifies that the priest has met with the seeker for at least one year and believes him or her to be stable and ready for discernment.
- Neither the priest nor the priest's spouse shall be a member of the discernment team, nor shall the seeker's spouse.
- A seeker who is actively involved in a ministry outside the congregation, such as a hospital, prison or shelter, may wish to include someone who knows him or her in that context.
- The first meeting needs to be scheduled with a training team from COM. Form COM-2 will serve to notify the COM. *Phase One* in this Handbook will take place at that time.
- Being part of a discernment team is a substantial commitment, even up to 18 months. The Handbook assumes meeting times of an hour and a half each, though they may run longer than that. It is assumed that there will be a one-month gap between meetings and there must be a minimum of a two-week gap between them to allow time for prayerful reflection. Gaps between meetings of much more than a month are strongly discouraged.

## Possible Outcomes

The goal of the CDT process is one of participating in the discernment ministry of the Church. This process is meant to be holistic, both helping the seeker as well as the team to listen attentively and articulate how the Spirit might be moving. While these three outcomes are quite broad in nature, the process itself has integrity as a practice of discernment. These outcomes should not be seen as goals by the seeker or the team, but rather avenues that emerge through the process itself. They are listed here to help align perspectives.

- 1) In most cases, the process will find that the seeker is called to a new or enhanced lay ministry. The discernment team and the seeker may discern fresh avenues of service in the congregation, an affirmation of an existing commitment, or a potential for lay ministry beyond the congregation.
- 2) In some cases, the discernment process may reveal that the seeker needs, at this time in his or her life, to give priority to a personal matter such as marital counseling, career guidance, health issues, and so on. The discernment team should not attempt to work outside its charge, and should ask the priest or the COM to find appropriate professional assistance for the seeker. Depending on the nature of the situation, this may cause the discernment to end before all sessions are complete.
- 3) In a few cases the seeker and discernment team may decide to seek further discernment for formation for Holy Orders.

Regardless of which outcome emerges through the CDT's process, the team and the seeker will need to complete a summary report for the COM. Please complete the form detailed in Phase Nine of the CDT Curriculum.

## **Norms for a Group Covenant**

- Meetings begin and end with prayer. During the meeting anyone may request silence for prayer. The role of silence is of paramount spiritual importance, as God is often heard in the silence.
- Discuss in some detail what confidentiality means, and the difference between confidentiality and secrecy. Consider flagging issues that individuals particularly want to be kept confidential.
- One person (not the seeker) should be the facilitator, who takes on overall leadership to ensure that the group meets regularly and stays on task. One person may serve as a convener for all sessions, or that task may be rotated.
- Alternative or differing opinions need to be considered as valuable.
- During group discussions, anyone has the freedom to pass. Likewise, the group should give time to introverts and invite them to have a chance to speak.
- Meetings will begin and end on time. Members should arrive on time and be prepared for the meeting. Routine establishes group trust and morale.
- Committee business or group content will not be discussed outside group meetings. If someone brings up matters from a meeting in another context, others in the group should gently remind him/her of this part of the covenant.
- All notes should be kept secure and destroyed at the end of the process.
- All members of the congregational discernment team, the seeker, and the clergy-in-charge should familiarize themselves with this guide and the Canons of the Episcopal Church that pertain to ministry: Title III, Canons 1-9.
- Each member of the discernment team should have a Bible and a Book of Common Prayer at each session. These are referenced frequently in the training materials.
- Members of the discernment team should remember that the focus of these sessions is the seeker. It is natural and healthy to reflect on the material as it applies to one's life, but the focus should not shift to the team members and their own discernment issues.
- Situations or conversations that are inappropriate should be immediately referred to the priest or the facilitator (who will then include the priest). The safety of each individual is of paramount importance. When in doubt, report!

## The CDT Facilitator

The facilitator should not be the seeker. The facilitator should:

- Schedule meetings, and send reminders to members of meetings and any preparation that they are expected to do, and give notice of any unexpected changes.
- Be responsible designating a session convener who will open and close each meeting in prayer.
- Ensure that the members keep the Group Covenant.
- Be the liaison to the priest for any communication from the team.
- Be responsible for ensuring the proper completion of the discernment and completing the report and forms.

### Checklist for First Step

- Meet with your priest at least monthly for one year
- Meet with spiritual director at least monthly for 9 months
- Submit Form COM-1, “Biographical Information,” found in the COM Forms Document, available from [www.diosef.org](http://www.diosef.org)
- Form a Congregational Discernment Team
- Download from [www.diosef.org](http://www.diosef.org), *Congregational Discernment Team Curriculum*
- Your priest submits Form COM-2, “Forming a CDT,” found in the COM Forms document
- Begin the curriculum and follow the reporting steps outlined therein