



Discernment Process Handbook

Diocese of Missouri

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As you open this handbook to begin the process of discernment, I trust that you know that you are indeed called by God—called into existence at your birth, called into ministry through the waters of Baptism. The principles you will read in this book assume that you have been called already. The spiritual exercise upon which you are beginning will push you and your community to ask the question: *Called into what?*

I ask you to listen carefully to three voices—God’s voice, the community’s voice, and your own, in order to answer this question adequately. The impulse for many seekers who would know God’s call is to focus on two voices only, so that the conversation becomes between the individual and God. Such an impulse is misleading. In the worst cases, it leads to self-absorption, not helpful either in ministry or its discernment. It is the middle term here, the voice of the community, which will likely prove crucial for your work. Pay attention to it.

Much of this book, in fact, is about listening to the voice of your communities—the people in your congregation, your priest, your bishop, your family, the Commission on Ministry, the Standing Committee, various examiners, and others.

Perhaps most important in the mix will be a discernment group in your local community of faith, be it parish, mission, or chaplaincy. You will spend many hours in this setting. This team will provide a small-group setting to reflect with you on personal and communal aspects of call to ministry. It will give you a chance to test your leadership within a part of the faith community. The exchanges there should, over time, give both you and your discernment group some clues about a vocation to ministry, ordained or otherwise. It should also establish a healthy climate for challenging assumptions about ministry and offering support through the process.

The various ministries of the church emerge from the life of a community—or not at all. Ministry, in whatever order, exists for the building up of the body of Christ, which in turn endures as God’s gift, a witness to and servant of God’s reign in the world. Ministry is not primarily about an individual; it is about us all of us who are knit into Christ’s body the Church. These ministries in turn look to the community for meaning and purpose. Deprived of this point of reference, both ministers and Church languish.

May the work ahead be life-giving for you. Or, to use the language of the Prayer Book, “May the Lord who has given you the will to do these things give you the grace and power to perform them.” Whatever your calling may be.

Ever faithfully, in Christ,

The Rt. Rev. George Wayne Smith
Tenth Bishop of Missouri

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INTRODUCTION TO DISCERNMENT

What is discernment? Discernment is defined as “distinguishing between” or “sorting out.” It is something we are faced with regularly. We discern what choices to make throughout our lives – where to go to college, what profession to pursue, what job to take. Discernment is not new to us, although we may not have intentionally called our decision-making process “discernment.” For our purposes, we will simply be intentional about discernment. We will be intentional about hearing God’s call.

We hear God’s call in a variety of ways and in a variety of settings. We listen, using all of our senses, our history, our culture, and the context of our lives. We hear God in the settings of our lives at work, when we worship, study the Bible, pray and participate in coffee hour fellowship, just to name a few. Where have you heard God’s call in the past?

“God calls us on many levels: God calls creation, calls the Church, calls my congregation, and calls me, today, to reach me where I am now. God calls the entirety of my life. And at specific times and places, God calls me to particular actions...A call may not be so much a call to ‘do’ as to ‘be.’”¹

Congregational Discernment Groups in the Diocese of Missouri are formed to answer the open-ended question, “To what ministry is God calling me?” Some Discernment Groups may face the more specific question: “Is that calling to lay or ordained ministry?” If that calling is to ordained ministry, then: “Is it a calling to be a Priest or Deacon?” The Discernment Group is asked to intentionally listen, reflect on the past, and envision the future with the Seeker. We will call the person raising these questions the Seeker.

¹ *Listening Hearts discerning call in community*. Morehouse Publishing, 1991. 8-9.

DISCERNMENT GROUPS

The Charge to the Discernment Group

The goal of this discernment group is two-fold: 1) The discernment group comes to consensus along with the Seeker about what calling is being heard from God; and 2) The Seeker is able to thoroughly articulate the calling God has placed on his or her life.

“The task of the members of the group is to listen prayerfully and raise questions that will help the seeker consider the issue. The questions need to be caring and probing, designed to help the person move toward a sense of clearness and a deeper comprehension of the issue in relation to God’s call.”²

Discernment group IS about the business of

- Articulating God’s call
- Reflecting back to the Seeker
- Using “I” language (I feel, I think, What I hear you saying)
- Articulating basic Anglican core values
- Contemplating the seeker’s spiritual issues
- Being leaven in the larger congregation (discernment inevitably spills over into other areas of our lives)

Discernment group is NOT

- Diagnostic
- Support group
- Psychological counseling
- Screening
- Interviewing
- Interrogating
- About life issues that would be better off being discussed with a pastor or counselor

Two Essentials

For the Congregational Discernment Group there are only two essentials in this handbook:

- 1) A discernment group meets with the Seeker.
- 2) A report is produced for the Vestry/Bishop’s Committee and Commission on Ministry (COM) that articulates the Seeker’s call.

Although all other materials pertinent to the Congregational Discernment Group in this handbook, besides the above two essential, can be considered a suggestion, the Commission on Ministry strongly encourages Congregational Discernment Groups to use the information gathered here to clearly discern the Seeker’s call.

² *Listening Hearts* p80 #5

OUTLINE OF THE STEP-BY-STEP DISCERNMENT GROUP SESSIONS

Forming a Discernment Group

- 1) A discernment group is selected at the Priest-in-Charge's discretion. Suggestions for forming a discernment group:
 - a) There may be three to six people in the discernment group, of which more than one may be a Seeker.
 - b) Members are a cross-section of the congregation.
 - c) It has been found helpful to have easy access to a clergy person (priest or deacon) as a reference for questions about ordained ministry. The Priest-in-Charge is encouraged to remain an objective pastoral presence for the Seeker and not participate in the discernment group.
 - d) Having an "outsider" as a member of the discernment group allows for a variety of perspectives of the wider Anglican community for which an ordained person serves. This "outsider" may be a member of the ELCA or another denomination with similar Anglican polity/theology if geographically necessary.
 - e) It is okay that group members are friends and/or acquaintances of the Seeker.
 - f) At least one (possibly two) facilitator(s) are designated. Facilitators help to keep the group focused and provide opportunity for open participation.
 - g) Remembering that discernment group meeting contents are confidential, an editor may be designated for the purpose of summarizing material for the report to the Priest-in-Charge, Vestry or Bishop's Committee, and COM.
- 2) All discernment group members are asked to read *Listening Hearts*.
- 3) The discernment group is trained by COM representatives and/or the Discernment Coordinator. The Seeker is invited to be present for the training. Trainers are available for follow-up consultations as necessary.
- 4) How long will all of this take? Approximately 3-6 months.

Suggested General Practices

- 1) Sessions may be at least 1-1½ hours each. Sessions are suggested to occur once every 2 weeks but not less than once every 4 weeks so as to maintain continuity between sessions.
- 2) Beginning and ending each session with silence and prayer upholds the spiritual nature of discernment.
- 3) Bible study and reflection are a regular part of the group's life. Discernment Groups are encouraged to agree on scripture for daily reflection. Suggested texts are each Sunday's Gospel reading or scripture from the ordination and/or baptismal services from the BCP.
- 4) "Check-in" is a random point in discernment sessions when any member of the group requests that each group member conveys their understanding of the Seeker's calling up to this point. The purpose of a "check-in" is to ascertain where people in the group are in their prayerful consideration and whether or not there is consensus within the group.

- 5) Verbally summarizing each session during the last few minutes before the closing silence and prayer allows the group to determine what the issues, topics, and questions are to talk about *next time*.
- 6) Members are asked to covenant with one another in maintaining confidentiality of all discernment sessions and materials.

DISCERNMENT SESSIONS³

There are two main focuses of each discernment session within their spiritual framework: 1) identifying and understanding what ministry is (i.e. all Baptized/deacon/priest/bishop); and 2) identifying and understanding the Seeker's calling to ministry. The former is educational in nature, while the latter is reflective.

The following seven sessions are a suggested model for coming to a consensus on answers to the questions in the Discernment Response.

The process you are entering as a group is a delicate one. The questions posed in each of the sessions are meant to help the members of the group "sift through" their individual and collective experience of themselves and of the seeker. The Diocese is not requiring you to report the responses to the questions, but there is a need for the group to make a report of its findings. Of course, confidentiality and discretion is essential and there should be an agreement, a covenant, that the content of the discussions are not to be shared with anyone outside the group. We suggest that when issues arise that seem beyond the scope of the committee's task they be raised jointly with the sponsoring priest, committee chair, and the seeker.

³ Adapted from the Diocese of Connecticut *Discernment of Vocation*, Epiphany 2001

SESSION ONE: Listening

Focus: During this first session, the structure of the meetings is introduced, including its educational and reflective styles. If members of the group do not know each other, this is a good time to do some basic introductions.

Introductions

Prayer: A Prayer for Quiet Confidence, BCP page 832

Review “Listening Hearts”

What is Ministry? What is the ministry of each member of the Discernment Group? What is the current ministry of the Seeker?

What is Listening? How do you listen for God? How do you know what God wants of you? What are the impediments to the discernment of listening for God? What conditions help us discern God’s call?

You may want to invite visitor(s) who are deacons, priests, and active lay people doing ministry to give a presentation about their ministry and answer questions. Ask them also to share their story of how they discerned their call into this ministry.

Review Appendix 1: Guidelines for Discernment Groups, pages 77-78.

The Facilitator should present a schedule of meetings at this point. End the session with five minutes of silence.

Closing Prayer: Prayer of Thomas Merton, Listening Hearts, pg. 145.

SESSION TWO: Service

Focus: This session answers, in more depth, "What is Ministry?" from Session One.

Opening Silence closing with;

Prayer of Vocation in Daily Work, BCP pg. 261

Exercise A

Have individuals in the group list on newspaper print priestly leadership skills & responsibilities as they perceive them to be. Compare this list with the "Examination of Priest" from the Book of Common Prayer (p531). The goal of this exercise is to clarify our understanding what priests are really ordained to do. This exercise may be repeated focusing on all of the baptized, deacons, and bishops.

Exercise B

Read aloud with one member of the group taking the role of "celebrant" the Renewal of Baptismal Vows, BCP pages 292-294.

Which of these vows are easy for each member of the group to fulfill? Which are harder, if not impossible? When do you succeed in "seeking and serving Christ in all persons?" Where do you (and the Church) fail? Share personal stories. How do you proclaim by word and example the Good News? Which is easier for you, word or example?

Who have been examples in your local community of servanthood? What qualities do they exhibit? When do you feel called to serve? Whom do you feel you are not called to serve?

Reflect on the Examination in the service of ordination: of a deacon (BCP page 543); of a priest (BCP page 531).

Closing Prayer: Prayer for Social Service, BCP pg. 260.

SESSION THREE: Mission

Focus: This session continues with the question from Session One “What is the ministry of each member of the Discernment Group” and expands it to include future ministry possibilities.

Opening Silence closing with

Prayer for the Mission of the Church, BCP pg. 816

Exercise A

Read together Matthew 28

How do you know the Resurrection of Jesus? Who was your Mary, the one who told you of Jesus rising from the dead? Review the three “mission” questions on the top of page 855 in the BCP.

What is Good News for you? How do you share it? In what ways do you exhibit an Easter attitude?

Exercise B

Reflect on the Seeker’s vision statement. The vision statement is a brief outline of what the Seeker believes God’s calling into ministry is for him/her. This may be vague or detailed, but it gives the group a brief introduction as to where the Seeker is in discernment.

Exercise C

The spouse or partner of the Seeker may be invited to this session to explore future ministry possibilities.

Silence, closing with

Collect for the Second Sunday of Easter, BCP pg. 224

SESSION FOUR: Growth, Transformation, Transfiguration

Focus: This session focuses on spiritual formation and attention to self-health.

Opening Silence closing with

Collect for the Last Sunday of the Epiphany

Our Baptismal vows call upon us to “continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers.” (BCP pg. 304). In what ways has each member of the group sought to edify themselves and their faith in Christ? Bible Study? Holy Reading? Retreats? Daily Office? How has your prayer life changed/deepened since your baptism or confirmation? How do you deal with periods of spiritual crisis, dryness and tedium?

At ordination the ordained promises to “be diligent in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, and in seeking the knowledge of such things as may make you a stronger and more able minister of Christ.” (BCP pg. 532).

How does your parish support your priest in fulfilling this vow? Why is this vow necessary for the life and health of the Church?

How have you experienced failure in this life? Disappointment? Tragedy and Grief? Regardless of the completeness of your healing, how have you been changed into someone more resembling Christ through the experience?

Reflect on the Seeker’s autobiographical sketch. What key situations, people, events shaped the Seeker’s spiritual journey? What might be the influences of the Seeker’s current vocational passion? Where has growth and transformation occurred?

Silence, closing with

Prayer – “O God of Unchangeable Power...” BCP pg. 291

SESSION FIVE: Holiness

Focus: This session focuses on self-awareness and openness. Church leaders sometimes have public roles that force them into living in a “fish bowl.” Church leaders are often faced with issues of conflict management and interpersonal communication styles.

Opening Silence closing with;

Collect at Baptism, BCP, pg. 254

Read together Matthew 5:48 and Philippians 3:7-13.

What is the Holy Life? What does it look like? Who is perfect? What does it mean to “pattern your life (and that of your family) in accordance with the precepts of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?” How is life in the Church a “school for holiness?” Married life? Describe someone in your life who is an example of holiness.

How well do you know yourself? Share a time when you were brought up short and an unattractive part of yourself was disclosed to you.

Are you, the seeker, aware of your effect on the people around you?

How do you perceive the others in your group? In what ways do they exhibit godliness? To what extent do you buy into the myth that ordination is the ticket to holiness?

How tolerant are you of ambiguity and uncertainty? What is your taste for mystery? In other words, how big is your box for God? How big is your box for your neighbors who differ from you due to race, economic class, health, sexual orientation or gender?

Silence closing with

Collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas Day. BCP pg. 214

SESSION SIX: Leadership

Focus: This session focuses on self-awareness and leadership style. There are many leadership styles and there are many settings for ministry. What leadership style matches the leadership needs of a particular ministry setting (e.g. Rector of a corporate-size congregation; a hospital chaplain, etc.)?

Silence closing with

Collect for the Church. BCP pg. 816

Read together Numbers 11:16-17, 24-25 and Matthew 9:35-38

How do these lessons characterize leadership? What is the nature of Christ's leadership? Directive? Non directive? Builder of consensus? Democratic?

How would you characterize the relationship of Jesus to his disciples?

Does your congregation find a focus in its priest? Does it derive its identity from the priest, or its inspiration? Is your church more accustomed to a "top-down" style of leadership, consensus building, or a combination of both? Does the authority of the priest derive from the position/status granted to him/her by the church, or does the authority come from the person? How anxious is the seeker when placed in leadership roles?

What qualities does each member of the discernment group demonstrate that either exhibits leadership or enhances it in others both in the church and in the world?

Silence closing with

Collect for Prayer 29. BCP pg. 236

SESSION SEVEN: Obedience

Focus: During this session, the group, including the Seeker, is wrapping up the previous six sessions. Listening deeply is the focus.

Opening Silence closing with

Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, BCP pg.225

The word obedience derives from the Latin word to “hear or listen deeply.”

Name/explore some persons in the Bible who are examples of this kind of obedience. Abraham, Sarah, Ruth, Samuel, Jesus, Peter, Paul. In each case, there were some heavy prices to pay for their obedience that preceded whatever reward came to them.

What are the limitations, restrictions, and other realities in the person’s life that must be reckoned with and obeyed? These may take the form of responsibilities and obligations (to marriage, commitments, children, family, self) that must be honored prior to making the sacrifices of the ordained ministry. Ordination never rescues a person from these more fundamental places of faithfulness.

Have the seeker, the members of the group been faithful in their sacrificial giving to the church in time, talent and treasure? What challenges and what blessings have resulted in such exercises of obedience?

How has the seeker displayed commitment in the face of hardship?

Silence closing with

Prayer of St. Chrysostom, BCP pg. 126.