

Section 1

Discerning Individual Direction

Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography

Individual Discernment Questions

Conversations with a Clergy Person

Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography

This exercise is usually completed individually. One may seek direction and help from a clergy person, the Commission on Ministry, an Education for Ministry (EFM) mentor, or a trusted friend. A person might want to set aside several hours to complete this exercise. It has proven helpful to consider the first piece to be a draft which is put aside for a while and then reviewed to make sure it says what the person intends it to say. This particular guide is taken from Common Lesson A of the Education For Ministry program. This can be used as a guide with variations and adaptations made for each individual.

A spiritual autobiography is the story of the significant events, people, and places that have influenced your relationship with God. It tells the story of how you have come to hold your own beliefs. Your spiritual autobiography describes the patterns, themes, and motifs by which you recognize the flow of your life.

There are many ways to tell your story. This process provides you with one way to do that. Your spiritual autobiography is a continual resource for connecting your life story with the story of the people of God.

A skeletal structure or outline helps when writing your autobiography, because without one, the experiences, thoughts, and themes of your life become more than you can tell.

Begin by framing your life in fifteen-year segments. The first segment would begin with the time of your birth and end on your fifteenth birthday; the rest of the segments would continue likewise.

In each of the segments consider the following

Significant Persons

Your life has been shaped by certain persons – parents, teachers, siblings, church leaders, characters in books, etc. Beginning with the first fifteen-year segment of your life, consider who the people are who contributed to your understanding of yourself and of God during this time. Name each person, and describe as best you can his or her importance in your life. Perhaps you can recall and describe a particular event which has special significance for you.

When considering the significant persons of this time frame, you may recall some who did not constructively influence you. It is important that you recall these people also. Several persons will have influenced different time periods, but for now record only what the person meant to you during each of the fifteen year segments of your life. Perhaps you can recall someone who was a special mediator of grace to you. How did this happen?

Material and Economic Life

Material surroundings involve the obvious things such as houses, neighborhoods, and valuable possessions. They also include the technologies that influence and define our situations. “Economy” is basically defined as the system used to distribute resources. Record the description of your material and economic circumstances during each of the fifteen year segments of your life. If changes in these situations occurred during the time periods, note them as well.

Pleasures and Recreations

How you have fun is a very important part of your story. Each of us finds pleasure in remarkably different activities, and during our lives our pleasures and recreations are likely to change. Think back to each time period of your life to what was fun for you – what kind of entertainment you sought out and enjoyed.

Religious Atmosphere

In considering this aspect of your life story, it is helpful to think beyond your formal religious experience. The religious atmosphere of your life necessarily is affected by your cultural and family context. Was religion something you addressed one day of the week, never addressed, or did you live in a religious atmosphere which permeated every event in your life? What religious beliefs were presented to you? Did you attend a church-affiliated school? Were your friends from families with like-minded religious attitudes? What was your community’s notion of religion? Again, consider this aspect during each fifteen-year period of your life.

Themes and Motifs

As a final consideration for the segments of your life story, record any themes, symbols, underlying values, or motifs which name the reality of your life during certain times. There may be several.

12/05
Section 1 - 2

Individual Discernment Questions

Individuals who are considering entering into a more formal discernment process with a group of listeners will need to take some time in personal discernment prior to forming a group. The following questions provide topics for a person to explore. It is not intended that each person reflect on every single suggested question in this list, however, it is important that quality time is given to as many of these as it takes to feel confident that one has explored sufficiently as an individual and is ready to share his/her feelings with a group of people. The process does not need to be rushed. It would be advisable to take some time each day to spend in quiet with one of these questions (or others) until a person feels the confidence to move to the next stage.

Before beginning any formal process of discernment, take some time to explore the following questions in your personal meditations. These are meant to stimulate your thoughts so be aware of where these questions may lead you – maybe into more questions. You might want to journal or make notes about some of these questions.

As you think about what God may be asking of you, does a particular image or vision come to mind? Take some time to look at the potential benefits and potential risks around the direction toward which you are feeling pulled.

Talk to your family about your thoughts on what God may be asking of you. How do they feel about this direction for your life? Do they have any ideas about how your direction will affect them?

Try to quiet the thoughts in your mind and focus on the feelings in your heart. Can you name these feelings? Can you describe the intensity of these feelings?

How does this perceived direction fit with any goals you may have already identified in your life?

Can you remember how long you have been feeling and thinking about this direction God may be leading you? Why would these feelings/thoughts be surfacing now?

Think through your present commitments. How much of your time and energy do you feel is already committed in some way? Do you feel over committed; not involved enough?

Think about your life journey at this point. Can you identify tasks that you feel you need to complete; steps you need to take in order to complete a part of your journey? Are you feeling rushed or the need to experience some movement?

Does your need for love or desire for approval unduly influence you?

12/05

Section 1 – 3

When you think about the direction you are trying to identify, do you find thoughts of money, or glory or a reputation influencing your potential decisions?

Think of people whom you trust, have they influenced your perceptions/thoughts about this direction?

Can you relate how you are feeling to any scripture?

What serious concerns do you have about the needs of others? Who and where are these people?

What causes you to feel deep joy? great hope? What kinds of things make you feel angry? make you cry? make you tense or stressed?

As you go about your daily life, what issues or topics do you repeatedly find most engaging?

Conversations with a Clergy Person

Prior to beginning a congregational discernment team, plan to spend several sessions with a clergy person in a congregation before forming a discernment team.. This is a time for the discerner to open him/herself to another person. The conversations may be the first time these feelings and thoughts have been spoken aloud. It is an opportunity to organize and articulate feelings and thoughts and determine if there are other areas or ideas that may need to be considered before beginning a group process. These conversations may mean meeting an hour a week for up to a month.

These conversations may focus on some of the following.

- Writing your spiritual autobiography. (See page 1 - 1.)
- What formation experiences have led you to this place of questioning?
- Practice telling your faith story. (Appendix D)
- If you are thinking about ordained ministry you may want to explore the meaning of ordination and try to identify what God may be asking you to do that requires ordination.
(Book of Common Prayer [BCP] p. 531, 545, 855-856 The Ministry)
- You may want to explore your family history and how your family is part of your discernment.
- Identify and reflect on your ministry up to this point in your life.
- Identify the various ministries within the church and what kinds of focus they have. These could include the ordained ministries of priest and deacon as well as ministries available to all people such as any of the licensed ministries. You may want to be trained in one or more of the licensed ministries and exercise these ministries in your congregation. (Canons of the Episcopal Church III.4; BCP p. 855-856)
- You may want to participate in spiritual direction with a trained director.
- Explore with your clergy your current leadership roles in the congregation.
- Go over the diocesan process toward ordained ministry.

- Work together on developing a congregational discernment team.

12/05

Section

1 - 5

Once you have reflected on some of the “Individual Discernment Questions” (section 1-3), and have had the conversations about a call with a clergy person described here, you both may feel it is time to take the next step; forming a congregational discernment team. The next section describes the work of this team and is designed to be helpful to both the discerner and the team.

12/05
Section 1 – 6