

Section 2

A Congregational Discernment Team

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The Purpose and Composition of a Team

Purpose of a discernment team

- To help the discerner hear more clearly God's call and how this call is played out in the discerner's spiritual journey.
- To walk with the discerner, to support and encourage the questions.
- To be a sounding board for the thoughts and questions being raised.
- To know the person, his/her background, his/her present ministry, his/her understanding of a call and where he/she feels led by this call.

Note: The congregational discernment team is **NOT** a support group or an advocacy group lobbying for the discerner. The team is rather a group interested not only in the discerner but in the life and ministry of the Episcopal Church.

Size of a discernment team

Usually 3 to 6 person is a good size. The discerner suggests some people and the clergy person suggests some. All persons suggested must be acceptable to both the discerner and the clergy. The team should reflect the diversity of the congregation and its ministries. They can have varying degrees of relationship with the discerner. People do not have to have had prior experience with discerning.

It is wise to think of the following as you and the clergy person build the team: You may want to include:

- Some people from outside the congregation, another denomination or faith.
- Someone from another Episcopal Church.
- Some people who know you.
- Someone who represents the interest of the congregation (Vestry person, etc.).
- People who will challenge you..
- People of integrity – can keep confidentiality.
- A clergy person on the team might be helpful – example, a pastor from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) or the United Methodist Church (UMC).–The clergy person from your congregation doesn't have to be on the team.
- People who can articulate their own vocation and ministry in the context of the work of the Church.
- People willing to walk with the discerner.
- People open to God's movement in their lives.
- People who have the gifts of frankness and courage.
- People who have the welfare of the larger Church always in mind.
- Persons of prayer, humility, confidentiality, and openness to the working of the Holy Spirit within the Church.
- Someone who may have experience in the type of ministry you may be feeling a call to.

Orientation for the Discernment Team

The first session in any process will be an introductory session. Team members will introduce themselves and the overall process will be presented. It will be very helpful for the team to invite a member of the diocesan COM to help with this. The clergy person should also be part of this initial meeting. This is a time to get process questions answered. This would also be the time to agree on what each session will look like.

For the first meeting the group will need the following materials

Copies of this notebook for each person in the group

Process toward Holy Orders (outline from the Diocese)

Resource books (optional)

Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, Farnham

Discerning God's Will Together, Morris and Olsen

Discernment, Wolfe

Understanding discernment

It is important that the team understand what discernment is and what type of process the team will use. Some time will need to be spent in dialogue about the general topic of discernment in order to make sure all members are familiar with what is expected and what will happen.

Included in the Appendices are some definitions and some processes that vary in their structure. The team will want to spend some time dialoguing about these processes and come to consensus on what process it will use.

Setting meeting times and dates

Each discernment session usually lasts 1 ½ to 2 hours.

A discernment process can take from 9 to 18 months. This length, of course, may vary depending on the individual and the team. In smaller congregations, people may know each other well enough that some of the discernment has already happened through interactions in daily life. In larger congregations, the team will likely not know each other well enough and the length of time may be longer. It is important that the team decide when the discernment is finished. A consensus will generally emerge and the group will sense when it is finished.

Asking Reflective Questions

There are some samples of Reflective Questions included in Appendix C. Reflective questions often provide the opening for deeper conversation. Asking reflective questions is a technique that the team can develop. This type of reflective dialogue also requires listening in a way to draw conclusions from examples.

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The discernment team will want to keep the following attributes and dispositions of the discernor in mind throughout the entire process. These attributes and dispositions will be revealed in a variety of ways in the conversations rather than by asking direct questions about them.

- Communication skills
- Ability to relate to others
- Personal integrity and self-esteem
- Physical health and energy
- Intellectual gifts and strengths
- Sense of own strengths and limitations

Working as a team

The team will want to spend some time on deciding how to function together as a team. What are the roles that will be helpful to the process with this group of people? Having this discussion at the beginning helps keep the focus of the team on the work to be done rather than on group dynamics that can arise and interfere with the process. There are various roles described in Section 2 - 5 of this packet. The team will decide which are important to use.

Choosing a discernment process

During the initial session it will be necessary to decide what process would be most helpful for this discernment group. The Team needs to consider the discerner's approach to self reflection. Some people will be able to reflect on their lives and draw conclusions because their thought processes are built this way. Some people will be more direct and concrete in their self expressions. Finding a process that is comfortable for the discerner and takes into account the person's learning and processing style is important in order for the experience to be helpful. It may be necessary to "walk" through each of the suggested processes to feel which one will best serve this discerner. Several processes are outlined in Appendix G.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is extremely important. It will be necessary to keep this in mind when choosing team members. The team will need to have a conversation about confidentiality and make a covenant with one another as to keeping the content of the discernment sessions confidential.

Note: Discerning is very personal. The topics discussed can be very sensitive. The team needs to balance sensitivity with inquiry. It is unfair to accept a conversation at a level that does not ask the group and the discerner to struggle. This struggle with and the expression of the deep sense of personal relationship with God and others is central to the practice of creative ministry.

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Knowing when to end the discernment

There are several ways the team knows the discernment is finished.

- The discerner has reached the clarity he/she was seeking.
- The team feels any progress has stopped and it may be necessary to stop meeting or to take an extended break.
- There seems to be an impasse due to personalities on the team.
- It is discovered that the discerner needs to seek a different type of help.

There should be a consensus before proceeding to the next step. The discerner may:

- Decide to pursue the strengthening of a more clarified call to his/her lay ministry.
- Decide to pursue a call to an ordained ministry.
- Decide to take some time in study and practice in a variety of ministries.
- Decide that there are other issues in his/her life that need more resolution before proceeding.

In any case, the team and the clergy may want to help the discerner develop whatever plans seem to be emerging.

Reporting to clergy and to the Vestry

The team will need to keep the clergy and the Vestry informed concerning the progress of any discernment team meeting in a congregation. The outcome will need to be conveyed to the clergy and the Vestry. It is important to respect the confidentiality of the discernment process and not to divulge personal information of the discerner that would compromise confidentiality. The focus of the report to the Vestry or Bishop's Committee should be:

- The process that was undertaken to discern the discerner's calling.
- The outcome of that process.
- Any further recommendations for the discerner and the development of his/her ministry.

If the discernment indicates the direction is toward ordained ministry, formal papers from the diocese need to be completed; these are included in the discernment packet from the diocese.

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Possible Roles in a Discernment Team

In the orientation session, the team will want to discuss and decide upon the structure of the team and how it will operate together. It may be advisable to have defined roles. The roles could rotate through the team or remain with one person for the duration. The team will decide if it needs all of the following roles or just some of them. At the very least, it would be advisable to have a facilitator. The team may be willing to share all the rest of the responsibilities during each of the sessions.

Convener

- Notify people of the sessions.
- Make sure the meeting place is reserved.
- Assign roles for each gathering.

Facilitator

- Keep the session on track and schedule.
- Make sure everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity to speak.
- Observe the tone and spirit of the gathering.
- Know if and when to take a break.

Worship Leader

- Select prayers/devotional material for the session.
- Lead prayers for the session.
- Lead Bible study (see Appendix F for suggested passages).

Recorder

- If the team decides it needs notes, take the official notes of the session.
- Prepare the report to the clergy and Vestry with agreement from the team.

Process Observer

- Be aware of positive and negative dynamics in the group.
- Calls a break to discuss group dynamics, if necessary.
- Keeps track of the rate of progress.
- Observes the behaviors in the group and suggests changes if necessary.

Guidelines for Discernment Sessions

It is best to limit each session to 1 ½ to 2 hours in length.

Meeting once a month seems the most appropriate.

Choosing a general structure that each session follows is helpful for continuity.

A facilitator for each session is necessary in order to keep the session moving. This role may rotate among members, if desired. (See “Team Orientation” for the role of the facilitator.)

A Suggested Session Outline

Gather and check in with each other. This is a brief updating so that the group knows what is going on with each person. *10 -15 minutes*

Prayer, meditation, Bible study. The person assigned for this role may decide how the group will pray together. *15-20 minutes*

Prayers for self and others.

Meditation on scripture or devotional reading.

Brief Bible study. (See appendix for suggested passages)

Note: The use of Scripture has long been a traditional way of helping us to become aware of God's action and will. Various methods have been used. Be present and open to the scene and to that person's experience, being sensitive to the insights and movements given by the Holy Spirit. How do these insights increase your awareness of the meaning and role of the Church, the ordained ministry, and prayer and ministry as Christians? How does all this relate to the vision and call of this individual to ministry?

Focus for the session

60 minutes

Reflection on the session (see appendix for suggested reflection questions)

15 minutes

Closing prayers

Reminder about the next session

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Closure: The Report to the Vestry/Bishop's Committee

When a congregational discernment team reaches closure, a letter needs to be written to the Vestry/Bishop's Committee. This letter may be kept in the discerner's file. If the discerner is called to Holy Orders, a copy of this letter will be forwarded to the Diocesan COM to be kept in the discerner's file at the diocesan office.

The team needs to include in the letter the following information:

- A statement of the outcome of the discernment process; the conclusion reached about the ministry to which the discerner is called.
- A description of the process used for discernment.
- A statement indicating the relationship between the discerner and the members of the team – how long each member has known the discerner and in what capacity.
- Statements about the indicators which led to the identification or clarification of the discerner's call to ministry.
- A description of the discerner's gifts for ministry and the way these gifts have been used in the congregation.
- Descriptions of relevant dispositions and qualities of character observed during the process.

If the team identifies a call to ordained ministry, the letter will include the following:

- How will the gifts for ministry identified in this person enhance his/her ordained ministry?
- What factors might inhibit this person's ordained ministry? Will remedial work or further training overcome those limitations?
- If the discerner is in a committed relationship, what did the team assess about the relationship and the partner's ability to relate to the ordination process?
- In what ways has the discerner shown him/herself to be a "wholesome example" in the local congregation, in the work place, and in the community at large?
- Describe the discerner's attitude towards servant leadership, pastoral leadership, evangelism, stewardship and the facilitation of lay leadership in a congregational setting.
- How does the discerner react to and interact with those in authority?

Include any additional information that the team feels might be helpful to the diocesan COM.

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