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# Church Discernment Process and Church Discernment Committee Handbook

## Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic

### Guidelines for Rectors and Appointees In the Church Discernment Process toward Ordination

A person seeking ordination must be put forward by his/her church. A major part of the screening and evaluation process takes place at the local level and before persons are sent forward to the DOMA Ordination Committee.

The first step for the aspirant is to discuss the sense of call with the Rector (or Priest-in-Charge by whatever title). Rectors should respond to persons who sense a calling and present themselves for consideration, but it is just as important to be alert to individuals the clergy and laity may observe whom they believe should be encouraged to consider a path toward ordained ministry.

The Rector, if he/she is in support of the person's exploring a call to ordination, should ask the aspirant to prepare and submit to DOMA the "Application for Holy Orders," found in the Ordination Forms & Guidelines. This application will be used at both at the local church level and the diocesan level as a resource for discernment.

The Rector should also discuss the oaths which the aspirant will be required to sign if he/she is approved for ordination. The following Oath of Conformity and Oath of Canonical Obedience must be affirmed by all ordinands at the time of their ordination:

"I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God and to contain all things necessary to salvation, and I consequently hold myself bound to conform my life and ministry thereto, and therefore I do solemnly engage to conform to the Doctrine, Discipline and Worship of Christ as this Church has received them. And I do promise, here in the presence of Almighty God and of the Church, that I will pay true and canonical obedience in all things lawful and honest to the Bishop of the Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic, and his successors, so help me God."

The next step is for the Rector to appoint a Church Discernment Committee.

#### **Purpose of the Church Discernment Committee (CDC)**

The task of this committee is to explore this possible call with the aspirant and, if married, with his/her spouse. The Committee is to help discern whether the aspirant possesses gifts for ordained ministry, and whether God is indeed calling this person to ordained ministry. The Committee then makes a recommendation to the Church as to whether the committee affirms a call, and if so, what the nature of that call is.

The Church has always understood the call to ordained ministry as both personal and communal. A true call by God on an individual Christian is affirmed and authenticated by the Christian community at large. Because the

congregation is the aspirant's spiritual home, it is in the congregation where exploring and identifying calls to ministry begin. The CDC, appointed by the Rector and reporting to the Vestry, is an instrument of that work. It is important to recognize that the CDC's deliberations may or may not lead to a recommendation to pursue ordination; furthermore, the CDC is advisory to the Rector and Vestry, and its recommendations are not binding.

### **Formation of the CDC**

The Rector and Vestry should appoint a Church Discernment Committee membership of between five and seven laypersons, although a member of the clergy may be included. Committee members should be people who are spiritually mature, are able to discern God's will, and who have the integrity to speak the truth in love. Some of the people chosen for committee membership should be familiar with the aspirant, but it is also advisable to have some members who do not know the aspirant well, since a fresh and objective evaluation will be helpful.

### **Spiritual Grounding of the CDC**

The appointees of the CDC should be people whom the Rector knows to be grounded in prayer, experienced in seeking God's guidance, and able to be both caring and honest with the aspirant. It is important that the environment created by the CDC be one of concern, candor, and love. All meetings should begin and end with prayer. Stopping the discussion for prayer at other times can be important, as well. Throughout, the Holy Spirit should be called upon to guide the process and everyone involved.

### **Structure of the CDC**

The Rector or Vestry should appoint a chair for the committee as well as a recorder who will be responsible for keeping minutes. The Rector is an advisor to the committee but does not attend every meeting.

### **Process of the CDC**

The aspirant's "Application for Holy Orders" should be distributed to each member of the CDC before the meetings begin. A good and thorough evaluation process should be conducted over a period several months rather than days or weeks. We recommend that the committee meet with the aspirant no fewer than six times, including one or more meetings with his/her spouse, if married. Particular attention should be given to the document, "Criteria for Evaluating Aspirants' Suitability for Ordained Ministry." All members should participate in the discussions. Questions will be explored that are deeply personal to the aspirant. Therefore, the CDC should make a covenant to keep confidential all that is discussed, except as necessary for the report and recommendation.

Below is a rough outline of the format and subject of the meetings:

#### **Session 1**

The Rector should attend the first meeting to brief the CDC on its mission and guidelines, and on his/her expectations of the committee. The first meeting should also be a time for the committee members and the aspirant to get to know each other on a spiritual level. This can be done by sharing each other's spiritual journey, or by asking a focus question for each person's reflections, such as, "How did Jesus come into my life, and what difference has he made?"

## Session 2

Have the aspirant orally articulate his/her spiritual autobiography, including the aspirant's sense of call, how it came about and the particular nature of the call. Explore the aspirant's perceptions and understanding of ministry. The following questions are suggested:

- Describe your call. How have you personally explored this possible call into God's service through personal prayer and in discussion with family, friends and church leaders? How was your sense of call affirmed or questioned?
- How do you understand the term "ministry?"
- What are the different ministries in the Church, both lay and ordained?
- What do you see as the gifts of ministry, and how are these gifts manifested and developed in the Church?
- What do you see as the primary functions of the ordained Deacon and the ordained Priest?
- What evidence can you show to demonstrate that you are being called by God to ordained ministry?
- Are you clear on the difference between a call to Christian service and a call to ordained ministry? Why could not the ministry to which you feel you are called be carried out as a lay person? Have you considered being licensed as a lay minister (see the Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic's Canon III.)?

## Sessions 3-5 (or as many as needed)

Using the following criteria, explore in depth the aspirant's gifts, preparation, and suitability for ordained ministry. These are the same criteria that will be used at a later stage by the DOMA Ordination Committee, if the aspirant proceeds on toward ordination. The CDC members' resources for this exploration should include the Bible, the ordination Canons of the Anglican Church in North America and DOMA (found at the end of this document), the Ordination liturgies of the Anglican Church in North America (available for download at [bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net](http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net)), the aspirant's Application for Holy Orders and the oaths to be signed at ordination.

### Criteria for Evaluating Suitability for Ordained Ministry

#### 1. Spiritual Maturity

- a. How is this person's walk with Christ expressed in his/her life?
- b. Does this person have an understanding of the wholeness of the faith?
- c. How long has he/she been a mature Christian?
- d. How well does this person know the Bible? What is his/her view of the authority of Scripture?
- e. Does this person have a basic understanding of the Book of Common Prayer?
- f. Has he/she discipled a less mature Christian?
- g. What is so unique about this person's gifts that the ordained ministry is necessary for their exercise?
- h. What is this person's discipline of prayer and worship?
- i. Does he/she understand the specific role(s) of a vocational deacon? Of a priest?
  - i. What is leading him/her to believe that now is the time to pursue ordination?
  - ii. How does he/she see him/herself reflecting Christ as a vocational deacon or priest?

- iii. How have others supported this calling?
- iv. What would he/she give up in being ordained? What would his/her family give up?
- j. How would the Christian ministry he/she envisions, or is currently involved in, be significantly enhanced through ordination?
- k. If he/she envisions a particular Christian ministry, why does he/she believe that he/she could not carry it out as a lay person?
  - i. What would he/she do in ordained ministry that he/she could not do as a lay person? In other words, “Why ordination?”
  - ii. Has he/she considered being licensed as a lay minister (see the Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic’s Canon III.6)?
  - iii. If, through the process of discernment, God says “no” to ordination, what effect would that have on his/her involvement in the Christian ministry he/she envisions or is currently involved in?

## 2. Holiness of Life

- a. How well does this person’s life reflect the character guidelines for leaders in the Church set forth in the New Testament? See 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9.
- b. Has he/she been addicted to drugs, alcohol, pornography or other sexual behaviors?
  - i. How has he/she dealt with addictions?
  - ii. What is the status of his/her healing?
- c. In the event of past transgressions, has the aspirant shown sincere repentance and healing? How has the Church been a part of that restoration?
- d. Does this person affirm the ethical standards set forth in the Canons of the Anglican Church in North America and DOMA?
- e. Is he/she prepared to sign the declarations of conformity required by those Canons?

## 3. Leadership

- a. What is this person’s potential to be a strong leader?
- b. How long has he/she been active in the Church? In what ministries? How have these ministries affected his/her faith and life?
- c. How has he/she served in worship ministries?
- d. How has he/she shown leadership in the church?
- e. Does this person have leadership experience in other organizations, e.g., community service groups, political groups, social service organizations, university groups?
- f. Discuss the particular gifts of leadership this person displays.
- g. Vocational deacons and priests are called to exercise servant leadership
  - i. How well does he/she relate to other individuals?
  - ii. How has he/she modeled servant ministry/leadership in the workplace, in the church, in the home, in the community?
  - iii. How well does he/she work alongside and motivate others?

- iv. How does he/she create and maintain trust?
- v. How does he/she deal with negativity and conflict?
- vi. Vocational deacons give up their role and voice as a lay person in the congregation and yet they are not the rector, either. How would he/she feel about this role of a servant without a vote?

#### 4. Intellectual Strength

- a. What are the signs of this person's intellectual gifts?
- b. Where did he/she rank in college?
- c. What graduate school experience, if any, does this person have?
- d. Is this person able to articulate the Christian faith in a winsome way?
- e. Explore his/her written and oral work. How comfortable is he/she in public speaking?
- f. Does this person have an ability to appraise a situation, a group or an institution, and organize his/her thoughts in a clear and consistent manner?
- g. Is this person well versed in the liberal arts?
- h. What formal religious training or education (classes) has he/she taken and how would these be of value in serving as a vocational Deacon? As a Priest? What seems most exciting about further theological training and preparation to be a vocational Deacon? A Priest?

#### 5. Stability

- a. What are the signs that this person's life is stable?
- b. What enduring relationships are important to him/her?
- c. Are this person's relationships healthy and lasting?
- d. What is this person's marital history?
- e. If married, how does this person maintain and strengthen his/her marriage?
- f. If there has been a divorce, are all matters of custody and property settled?
- g. How does this person relate to his/her family responsibilities?

#### 6. Stewardship

- a. What is this person's work history?
- b. Does he/she have the ability for self-support? How has that been expressed?
- c. Is he/she financially responsible?
- d. Does this person demonstrate a positive work history?
- e. What is his/her history of debt?
- f. Vocational Deacons generally serve without compensation ("non-stipendiary"). Is he/she in a position to give sacrificially of his/her time and talents in this way?
- g. Explore these areas of personal stewardship.
  - i. Is this person of robust health and what does he/she do to maintain physical and emotional health?
  - ii. Does he/she tithe?
  - iii. How long has he/she been tithing?

- iv. What does this person do to gain renewal and refreshment in terms of vacations, recreation and continued education?
7. Teaching (especially for those exploring a call to the Priesthood)
    - a. Does this person have gifts that will enable him/her to proclaim the Gospel and instruct people in the faith?
    - b. How has this person been involved in the teaching and/or preaching ministry of your church? What fruit has come forth from that ministry?
  8. Evangelism and Witness
    - a. Does this person witness readily to his/her faith in Christ?
    - b. Does he/she have a demonstrated track record in reaching out to unsaved people and helping them come to faith?
    - c. Has he/she brought someone to Christ?
  9. Involvement in the World
    - a. What are the person's interests beyond the Church which indicate a healthy interest and appreciation for the breadth of the society in which he/she lives?
    - b. What books, magazines or journals has he/she read?
    - c. What sort of political activity has marked his/her life?
    - d. What appreciation does this person have for forms of spiritual expression found in music, poetry, and the arts?
    - e. What sort of groups has this person been involved in, e.g. clubs, lodges, athletic groups, other organizations?
      - i. Are they consistent with lives that are wholesome examples to the flock of Christ?
      - ii. Has he/she ever been a member of a secret society?
    - f. The vocational Deacon is sometimes called a bridge to the world. How has he/she responded to the pain, brokenness and hunger in the wider society?
  10. Mobility
    - a. Is this person willing to attend residential seminary training?
    - b. Is he/she able to go where his/her gifts are likely to be used by the Church?
    - c. If married, how will the employment of a spouse affect this person's mobility?
    - d. Are there particular issues, such as health care of a parent, spouse or child, which affect the mobility of this person?
    - e. Are there other factors that support or limit mobility?

### 11. Special Gifts

- a. What special gifts and strengths (emotional, intellectual, spiritual) does this person have that make him/her especially attractive for the ordained ministry of the Church?
- b. Does he/she speak a foreign language?
- c. Does he/she have experience in rural or urban community work?
- d. Is his/her prior employment especially suited as preparation for some form of ordained ministry in the Church?
- e. Does this person have gifts for church planting?

### 12. Demonstrated Servanthood

- a. Does this person have an inner quality that offers hope while offering self in service to others?
- b. What kind of ministry does this person have outside the formal Church structure?
- c. Does this person have a ministry that is evident in the larger community? If so, how has it manifested itself?
- d. Ordained ministers take vows of obedience to their bishop. How does this person feel about serving under authority?
- e. A Deacon is particularly accountable to the Bishop and responsible to his/her priest. Is he/she able to serve with humility, submitting to go and do as the Bishop leads?
- f. What potential struggles might he/she have in serving under another person in ministry?
- g. Deacons and Priests are often called upon to serve in unexpected ways.
  - i. How does he/she deal with interruptions?
  - ii. How does he/she manage priorities and obligations?
  - iii. How does he/she face change and stress?
  - iv. Is he/she willing and able to serve humbly even when there is little recognition or affirmation?
  - v. How does he/she handle situations that are not clearly defined or may be in flux or development?

### 13. Interpersonal Relationships

- a. Does this individual readily exhibit an open and affirming style with others?
- b. Has this person clearly demonstrated an ability to listen with empathy and understanding to others, even when he/she might have a different opinion?
- c. How does this person face and seek to resolve conflict?

### Session 6

If the aspirant is married or engaged to be married, the CDC should meet with the aspirant and his/her spouse or fiancé(e). The discussion should cover the demands and rewards of seminary and clergy life from the emotional to the financial. Questions should be addressed in the first instance to the spouse or fiancé(e), with the goal of thoroughly engaging him/her in an open discussion. The following lines of inquiry are suggested:

- When in your relationship has dramatic change occurred?
  - How was your relationship affected?
  - How did you deal with the stress?

- What do you expect the process toward ordination to be like?
  - What do you feel when you look forward to it?
  - What would cause you distress about the process?
- In what ways have you and your spouse/fiancé(e) explored your sense of God's call?
- In what ways do you think seminary will put a strain on your marriage?
- Have you ever sought the help of a marriage counselor? How would you feel about doing so?
- Have you had the opportunity to see close up what life is like for a clergy person and spouse and their family?
- How would you describe the life of a clergy person and family?
  - What is it like for the spouse?
  - What steps would you take to nurture the health of the family?
  - What pressures might be a detriment to the family?
- What expectations do you think a congregation might have of a clergy spouse?
  - How do you feel about those expectations?
  - How would you respond to those expectations being placed on you?
- What impact do you think your spouse's pursuing this vocational path will have on your own vocational life?

#### **Session 7 (or as many sessions as needed)**

The committee meets without the aspirant to discuss the progress to date and begin addressing these questions:

- Given what you have learned, what is the best course for this person's ministry?
- Can you envision this person as a Priest or as a vocational Deacon?
- Would this person be suitable as a Priest/Deacon for the whole Church, and not simply to serve in your midst here at your congregation?
- Do you want to present the aspirant to the vestry for approval?

After the committee has come to consensus, the chair should appoint a member to prepare a draft report to the Vestry. The aspirant should be given the opportunity to read, comment on, and discuss the draft report with the CDC chair and the Rector.

#### **Session 8**

At this final session, the committee shares its report with the aspirant. The aspirant shall also have prepared an evaluative report of his/her experience in the CDC process, and the CDC shall invite the aspirant to discuss this report in this final session. The aspirant may choose to forward his/her evaluative report to the DOMA office for inclusion in his/her file.



### **Product of the CDC**

The Report and Recommendation to the Vestry is the final product of the CDC. This document should be detailed, specific, several pages in length and should:

1. Describe the course of the CDC's work with the aspirant.
2. Make a clear recommendation as to whether the aspirant should be ordained, and, if so, to what order (Priest or Deacon). The report should include the committee's reasons for its recommendation.
3. Discuss the aspirant's suitability for ordained ministry in terms of the Criteria included in this handbook.
4. Identify all concerns or reservations.
5. Include recommendations for areas where further growth is needed.
6. The report should be dated and signed by the members.
7. If the CDC decision is not unanimous, the report should include a statement from the dissenting member(s).

### **Next Steps**

At this point, the Rector may terminate the process. If the Rector decides to proceed, he/she will ask the CDC to issue its final report and recommendation to the Vestry.

If the Vestry approves the aspirant, its recommendation will be submitted to the DOMA Ordination Committee on the form, "Vestry and Rector Recommendation for Postulancy," along with a copy of the CDC report.

If the Rector recommends that person go forward in the process, the Rector writes a letter to the Bishop explaining the basis of his/her support, identifying the person's strengths, areas for growth, and any concerns.

### **The Bishop's Role**

The Bishop exercises his initial role in discerning an applicant's call after the Rector and Vestry have acted on the report of the Church Discernment Committee and have made a favorable recommendation to the DOMA Ordination Committee. While the Bishop appreciates being introduced to aspirants during church visitations, he generally does not wish to have individual appointments or interviews with aspirants until after the Rector and Vestry have acted. An exception to this is where aspirants have previously been ordained in other denominations.

### **Help in the Process**

The DOMA Ordination Committee is eager to assist the clergy and laity in this very important endeavor of identifying and preparing the future ordained leaders of our Diocese.

If you have questions or need further guidance, please contact the Rev. Jim Beavers, Canon for Ordinations.