

**Diocese of East Carolina**  
**Guidelines for Developing a Parish Discernment Committee on Vocation**

**Background** – Given the discrepancies of the parish-level discernment process in the diocese for individuals who feel called to ordination, a diocesan guide for clergy and laity was proposed to clarify this process and encourage the use of a consistent model throughout the diocese.

The following is a preliminary draft of this guide.

**Mission Statement**

*The mission of the Parish Discernment Committee on Vocation is to encourage, challenge, guide and support individuals exploring a call to the ordained ministry. To be included in this endeavor is the identification and exploration of the individual's gifts for varieties of ministry, lay and ordained.*

Guidelines for developing a parish discernment committee follow those addressed in the diocesan Steps to Ordination to the Priesthood:

1. Five to seven active members of the congregation should be selected by both the rector and the individual to serve on the committee. Members of the committee are expected to pray for all involved in the discernment process.
2. It will be understood that all committee activity will be treated confidentially and that the individual in discernment will be made known to the congregation only at such time as they have been recommended by the Vestry to the Bishop.
3. The committee is to meet with the individual a minimum of six times. It is recommended that meetings be held at least once every four to six weeks.
4. It should be understood by the committee and the individual that their journey together is only the *beginning* of a period of exploring and testing that may or may not end in ordained ministry.

It is to be remembered that the parish traditionally calls people to various forms of ministry, lay and ordained, both in the Church and the world. The parish is the spiritual and pastoral home of the one seeking vocational clarity. It is through the life of the parish that gifts are made manifest and offered “to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship and governance of the Church”(BCP 855).

In this context, the committee’s role is to help to discern and affirm gifts of the individual for ministry, and to encourage and support the individual in the exercise of those gifts, whether or not they come to be identified as those particular to ordained ministry.

Great respect must be afforded to the process in which saying “no” can be at least as important as saying “yes”, particularly where saying “yes” is easier than saying “no.”

If the individual is recommended to the vestry to continue, consideration should be given for continued support of the individual through further stages of the process. If it is the committee's recommendation that the individual's gifts are not suited to ordained ministry, consideration should be given for continued encouragement and support for further development of the individual's gifts for lay ministry.

Again, the committee serves as one step of a process of discernment. In this they serve to assist the applicant to verbalize a call which at this point seems distinct from other calls to ministry in the church; help the applicant discern specific gifts for ordained life and ministry; and reach consensus with regard to the applicant's suitability for postulancy and the beginning of skills training for a future of ordained ministry.

This process will culminate in individual written evaluations of the applicant by members of the committee to file with the Rector, and a formal report of the group to the Rector and vestry.

Regarding meetings of the congregational discernment committee:

1. All sessions are to be framed in prayer.
2. Committee members should come to this process having themselves spent time reflecting upon their own spiritual journey, particularly the manner in which their gifts of ministry have been articulated and made manifest through life in the Church.
3. Throughout the process, particular attention should be paid to the following characteristics of the applicant:
  - a. communication skills
  - b. ability to relate to others
  - c. personal integrity and self-esteem
  - d. physical health and energy
  - e. intellectual gifts and abilities
  - f. sense of strengths and weaknesses
  - g. emotional maturity and stability

A Suggested outline for discernment committee meetings:

I. Committee and Rector meet for introduction to the discernment process, answer questions and clarify purpose of the process at the parish level.

II. Committee meets with the individual and all share life journeys

Focus on the following areas may prove fruitful:

What is your earliest memory of religious life/church/God?

What are two highlights ( major events or important details of significance ) of your personal religious journey?

What practices sustain you spiritually?

How has God changed you?

How has God's call been made manifest to you by others?

Recall two persons you have known who have greatly influenced your spiritual life. How have they changed you?

III. Committee meets with individual to discuss his/her present ministry and sense of vocation

Particular emphasis on the following questions is recommended:

Do you believe in God?

Why do you want to be ordained?

What can you do as a priest/deacon that you cannot otherwise do?

How has God's call been made manifest in you?

How have others made you aware of God's call?

Who are your role models?

How is your present ministry different from your present sense of call?

IV. Committee meets with the individual to explore the gifts she/he brings to this call.

Discernment of gifts for ordained ministry will require answering the following questions:

Do you have the academic skills necessary to prepare for this vocation?

Do you have the emotional stability to meet the challenges of this vocation?

Do you have family support?

Are you situated financially to incur the expense of a seminary education?

How do you relate to others?

Are you open to challenging ideas?

Are you open to changing your mind?

How do you deal with conflict?

How do you deal with authority and community discipline?

What is a priest?

What weaknesses will you bring to the [diaconate, priesthood]?

What strengths will you bring to the [diaconate, priesthood]?

- V. The committee will meet with the individual to discuss Christian life and how one lives out the Christian vocation ( Some areas listed here may have already been explored during earlier sessions)

How are the following relevant to your own continuing growth in the Christian journey?

Spiritual discipline and prayer

Sacraments and worship

Scripture and Bible study

Authority and obedience within the church

The interior life of the Christian community

Servant ministry to the larger community

- VI. Final meeting of Committee with Rector and individual

Prior to this meeting the committee will have met together apart from the individual to reflect on and summarize the findings of previous meetings. From this discussion a written outline of reflections should be prepared to share with the individual. This will include the decision to recommend the individual to the vestry as an aspirant to ordained ministry, or to suggest further time for growth and discernment, or to indicate that the committee does not concur with the individual's particular sense of call and vocation and will withhold recommendation to the vestry.

Included, also, should be specific recommendations, questions or concerns regarding the individual's particular sense of call: for instance, spiritual direction, mentoring, reading list, retreats, conferences, lay leadership training, or other disciplines intended to strengthen or expand and encourage the individual's capabilities and understanding and to further their growth and involvement in ministry, whether it be lay or ordained.

- VII. Report to the vestry and continuing support

The committee shall draft, approve and sign a letter to the vestry which represents the committee's work and evaluation. A committee member should present the report to the Vestry in order to summarize, clarify and answer questions.

Continued involvement in the vocational journey of the individual by one or more of the committee members is highly recommended, whether this be to support and encourage the aspirant continuing in the ordination process, or to advocate and support the individual continuing to clarify a call outside ordained ministry, in on-going parish and diocesan involvement, spiritual practice and study.