

## DISCERNMENT OF DIACONAL VOCATION IN THE PARISH GUIDELINES FOR PARISH DISCERNMENT COMMITTEES (PDCs)

### *Overview*

Discernment of the varieties of ministry in the Lord's service to which an individual might be called is the responsibility of that individual, their clergy and the worshipping community. As such, the Parish Discernment Committee (PDC) represents the congregation to help individuals affirm their special gifts of ministry that God calls forth, whether it be lay or ordained, and to take steps to respond to that call.

The congregation is the spiritual and pastoral home of an individual (in this process known as the *Nominee*). In discerning a call to ministry, the principal function of the congregation is to help the Nominee appreciate that this is the beginning of a period of exploring and testing that may or may not result in ordination. This cannot be stressed enough. Saying 'No' to a Nominee is at least as important as saying 'Yes.' The congregation and the Nominee are entering into a decision-making process that is personal and communal. Together, they are a central element of the Anglican tradition. As the PDC facilitates exploration for the individual, it also carries the discussion about ministry into the larger community. This process is not a training course in ministry for one person, but the education of a whole parish about ministry and faith development.

The PDC is asked to enter into a special relationship with the Nominee on behalf of the parish and the larger Church. This requires a commitment of time and energy, a sharing of themselves, and a willingness to ask difficult and challenging questions of one another. While the principal purpose lies in helping the Nominee to clarify a calling, committee members may enter spiritual depths in their life as a group and individually that will reward and challenge them. The process will probably result in a mutual journey for all involved.

In arriving at a recommendation, the PDC is assisting their clergy (known as the *Sponsoring Presbyter*), the Vestry and diocesan officials. The Committee recommends, but the Sponsoring Presbyter, Vestry, Bishop Suffragan, and Standing Committee of the diocese have the canonical authority to decide. The work done by the PDC and its report are among the most important parts of this process.

### *Who serves on a PDC?*

Many people entering this commitment to serve on a PDC may ask, "What do I have to offer? Who am I to judge?" The basic qualifications are within each of us in our life experiences and in the Christian commitment we offer. This task calls for a willingness to be open, honest, and candid in the context of a caring community, both to confront and to support the Nominee. Because of the special nature of the PDC's role, PDC members should not also serve as members of an Intern or Seminarian support group, nor should they be Interns or seminarians themselves.

### *General guidelines for the work of a PDC*

Before a PDC is convened, the Nominee and Sponsoring Presbyter will have discerned that the Nominee may have a call to ordination to the diaconate. The PDC learns about and becomes familiar with the qualities of deacons and the nature of a vocation to the diaconate. Their ongoing task and focus is to

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create a caring and questioning environment so the Nominee risks testing his/her vocational aspirations.

The Nominee will ask: "Is ordination to the diaconate the form my ministry should take?"

The PDC, the Vestry, and the Sponsoring Presbyterian will ask:

"Does this individual sufficiently understand the ministries of all baptized persons and appreciate the opportunities for his or her lay ministry?"

"Does diaconal ministry seem to be the form of ministry to which God is calling this person?"

"Can we, in good faith, send this person to become a servant-leader in other congregations?"

PDC members sustain a deep contact with the Nominee and frequently become identified and involved with him or her. Openness, candor, and support are encouraged. It is also important to balance those with their knowledge of the nature of the vocation to the diaconate and their experience with deacons. The reasons are evident: The committee may have to say "no" to the Nominee; or the Sponsoring Presbyterian, Vestry, or Bishop Suffragan may not accept the committee's recommendations.

In the early stages of the discernment process, the PDC and Sponsoring Presbyterian should be in close communication. As they near the conclusion of their work, including if they choose to terminate the process, the committee will need to communicate with the Sponsoring Presbyterian.

*What if the PDC or Nominee decides not to pursue further discernment for the diaconate?*

During the course of the PDC's work together, the time may come when it seems proper to the Nominee to decide not to proceed, or the committee may decide not to recommend the Nominee to the Sponsoring Presbyterian. In this event, the PDC should continue to support the Nominee in continuation or expansion of his or her lay ministry.

If the Nominee is directed to remain in lay ministry, the PDC affirms the Nominee's other ministries and its members must deal with their feelings about the outcome. The PDC can disband at the end of this task or the Sponsoring Presbyterian may suggest it continue for discernment with other future Nominees.

In the event that the Nominee and the PDC come to believe that the Nominee is called to the priesthood, further discussions with the Sponsoring Presbyterian will be needed. The process that leads to the nomination of an individual to the priesthood will need to be clarified (see guidelines at <http://episditionc.org/Diocese/ordination-process-in-the-diocese-of-north-carolin>).

*There is no one "right" way for a PDC to do its work.*

It is important for each parish to make this process its own. These guidelines may be modified to meet each situation. For example, one parish may have an ongoing PDC that works with several people. One PDC may request a session with the Nominee's spouse; yet another may want to include someone from another parish to help maintain objectivity for a well-known Nominee. Special care should be exercised if the Nominee is a staff person or spouse of a staff person in the parish. In these cases, the advice of the Bishop Suffragan and Chair of the COM-D (Committee on Ministry for the Diaconate) should be sought. It is often best, in such situations, for the PDC to come from a neighboring congregation.

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### *Procedure for the Parish Discernment Committee*

The procedure described in the following pages is outlined in steps and is designed to assist the PDC in working with a Nominee. It consists of at least six meetings over a period of three months; longer if more time is available with regard to the June 1 deadline (*See timeline of entire process so PDC can understand their role in relation to the other people and steps*). At the end, the PDC report (included below) must be completed.

A convener will be appointed by the Sponsoring Presbyter and the convener will appoint a recorder. The recorder will report the committee's answers to the questions furnished below in the PDC Report. This is an exploration and journey in which all members will be involved.

**The diocese expects the PDC to ask the Sponsoring Presbyter or Vicar to invite a member of the Committee on Ministry for the Diaconate (COM-D) to meet at least once with the PDC to answer any questions and review the PDC's role within the context of the entire ordination process.** Since the Nominee is discerning a call to ordination as a deacon, a meeting with the Archdeacon of the diocese or another deacon may be requested to clarify the members' understanding of the deacon's vocation and work. Other resources for learning about the call to the diaconate are available online at: <http://episdionc.org/Diocese/hearing-a-call---deacons.html>

### *General suggestions for all meetings*

*Please open and close each meeting with prayer.* One resource is the Prayer Book, especially pp. 816 (For the Church) and 832 (Guidance). To place the discernment of gifts in a Biblical context, read 1 Corinthians 12:1-3; 2 Corinthians 4:5-14; Ephesians 4:7,11-16; Romans 12:1-8; & Acts 4:13,32-33.

*Confidentiality* builds a climate that encourages risk, sharing, and caring and that discourages judgment, competition, or advice. At the first meeting, discuss and agree upon the actions/behaviors that will guide the PDC members to hold confidentiality throughout the process. At subsequent meetings, review these actions with one another after the opening prayers.

**SPECIAL NOTE:** Because of the probing nature of the questions asked throughout this discernment process, we recommend that all PDC members share their own views concerning the questions as much as possible to avoid an inquisitorial posture. Be careful not to assert opinions in a challenging manner. The PDC is judging the Nominee's fitness for ordination, but at the same time much can be learned from the collective viewpoints. While opinions are being expressed and judgments are being made, a sense of Christian love and learning is vital if these meetings are to be productive for all concerned.

*Evaluations* of the Nominee and of the committee process are both important. We suggest using the following methods of evaluation at the end of each meeting. With the Nominee: ask the person to depart so the PDC members can openly share their views. It is the members' prerogative to bring the Nominee back into the meeting after this evaluation. Each meeting has a list of questions to use.

To evaluate the meeting process: one easy suggestion is to tape up two pieces of newsprint and gather information about the meeting; what was good and what was not so good; what helped and what

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hindered; what suggestions from the questions above can be taken advantage of for the next meeting?

Although the recorder will gather answers to the questions explored and the minority opinions expressed during PDC meetings, each member will evaluate the Nominee and the discernment process itself. We suggest that each member keep personal notes for future reference, beginning with the first session.

### *Orientation Meeting*

Present: A member from the COM-D, Sponsoring Presbyter, PDC members. Although not required, the nominee can attend if available.

**Before the meeting:** the Sponsoring Presbyter will give the PDC members these guidelines so they can become familiar with the procedures and will invite a COM-D member to attend the meeting.

The Sponsoring Presbyter will instruct the Nominee to write an autobiography, which he or she will distribute at the end of Meeting # 1 with the PDC (*see Appendix I for guidelines for autobiography*).

**Orientation Meeting:** The newly formed PDC and the Sponsoring Presbyter meet with a member of the COM-D who provides an overview of the ordination process and answers questions. Topics to be discussed can include: clarifying the call of a deacon, emphasizing that the Nominee is discerning a call toward the vocational diaconate, not the priesthood; the PDC duties and responsibilities. Other topics for this meeting: reviewing the diocesan requirements regarding the discernment process and the role of the PDC and the Vestry within that process; administrative issues such as the length of each meeting (we suggest 2 to 3 hours), scheduling dates, and choosing a location. Finally, it is crucial to discuss the importance of confidentiality throughout the entire process for both the PDC members and the Nominee.

**In preparation for Meeting # 1:** PDC members should review the important influences in their own faith journeys; a specific high point and low point in their journey; their definition and vision of Christian ministry; and their thoughts and feelings about being members of the PDC.

### *Meeting # 1 with the nominee: Introductions*

Present: Sponsoring Presbyter, Nominee, PDC members

After welcoming all the participants and introducing the convener, the Sponsoring Presbyter departs.

The convener will chair this and all subsequent PDC meetings, and will name the recorder (preferably the convener has made this assignment before this first meeting). The purpose of this meeting is get to know one another by telling stories of each one's faith journeys. Their stories arise out of the assignment given to them by the Sponsoring Presbyter at the end of the Orientation Meeting.

The Nominee is not the focus of this meeting; the members of the PDC participate by telling their story and the Nominee listens. The Nominee's autobiography is the focus of Meetings # 2 and 3.

The convener will establish the format for the meeting:

Begin (and end) with prayer or scripture reading. Confidentiality is defined and emphasized.

All members will introduce themselves, stating their names and other information such as occupation,

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years in the parish, family members, and a (humorous) fact that others do not know about them.

Then each member will talk about his/her faith journeys. Limit each one to 10 minutes.

- \*Important influences in their faith journeys (e.g., family, friends, authors, teachers, experiences)
- \*A high point and a low point in their journey;
- \*Their definition of Christian ministry;
- \*Their thoughts and feelings about being on the PDC.

Schedule the next five meeting times, identify the topic for each, and review the questions that will direct and focus the discussions for the Meeting # 2.

The Nominee hands out copies of autobiography and describes how writing it has helped in discerning next steps with the PDC. It is to be read by each member of the PDC before the second meeting (*see Appendix I for more information on autobiography*). The following questions will help members to focus their review of the Nominee's autobiography.

In light of your own reflection of your spiritual journey, what stands out for you in this autobiography? What questions would you like to ask the Nominee that would help you to delve deeper into their sense of call toward the diaconate?

- \*What life challenges has this person experienced?
- \*What complications and challenges currently affect this person's life?
- \*How does he or she respond to stress?
- \*Describe the primary involvement for this person: work, home, church, community.
- \*Describe this person's current ministries in those areas.
- \*How does he or she tie together the secular and sacred realms of life?
- \*What is the role of prayer in the midst of their life's journey? What spiritual practices are important to them and/or helped them to navigate life's ups and downs?

*Meeting # 2: Exploration of Nominee's Autobiography, Part I (life stressors, ministries, areas of growth)*  
Present: Nominee, Committee

Begin and end with prayer or scripture reading. Remember to evaluate the meeting.

Explore the following questions or similar questions based on your reading of the Nominee's autobiographical statement and what you learned in the first meeting.

In light of your own reflection of your spiritual journey, what stands out for you in this autobiography? What questions would you like to ask the Nominee that would help you to delve deeper into their sense of call toward the diaconate?

After the Nominee has shared his/her spiritual autobiography, and the PDC members have had a chance to ask their questions, the Nominee leaves the meeting. Using the following questions, reflect upon what was heard from the Nominee. *Please note:* these questions (and any others the committee members may have) will be part of each meeting's evaluation and will help to frame the committee's final report.

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What challenges and difficulties have affected the Nominee's life?

What challenges and difficulties is the Nominee currently facing?

How does he or she respond to stress?

Describe the Nominee's areas of primary involvement: work, home, church, and community.

Describe the Nominee's current ministries in those areas.

How does he or she tie together the secular and sacred realms of life?

What is the role of prayer in the midst of their life's journey? What spiritual practices are important to them and/or helped them to navigate life's ups and downs?

How does he or she embody the pattern of living out the servant ministry of Jesus Christ in the church and in the world?

If the PDC members concur, the Nominee may be invited to return to the meeting following this discussion for a recap and to agree on the agenda for the next meeting.

*Meeting# 3: Exploration of Autobiography, Part II (emotional health, capacity for leadership)*

Present: Nominee, Committee

Before coming to this meeting ask each PDC member: in light of their own reflection and what they learned from the Nominee in the last meeting, make a list of additional questions for the Nominee.

The Nominee continues to share his/her spiritual autobiography.

After the Nominee has shared his/her spiritual autobiography, and the PDC members have had a chance to ask their questions, the Nominee leaves the meeting. Using the following questions, reflect upon what was heard from the Nominee. *Please note:* these questions (and any others the committee members may have) will be part of each meeting's evaluation and will help to frame the committee's final report.

What is the status of the Nominee's emotional health?

How aware is he or she of his or her own feelings?

How well does he or she express strong positive and negative feelings?

When dealing with his or her feelings, do physical gestures and movements (body language) match the words spoken?

To what extent is he or she aware of and comfortable with his or her sexuality? How well integrated is his or her sexuality or sexual identity with other aspects of his or her life?

Are there any indications that he or she aspires to ordination as a deacon as a way of solving his or her personal problems?

Does he or she have a level of maturity and ability to adapt to different situations that is commensurate with his or her age level?

What is this person's capacity for leadership?

Does he or she show initiative, self-confidence, enthusiasm?

Can he or she motivate others? In particular, can he or she inspire others to join in doing the church's work in the world?

Is he or she aware of and at ease with a variety of leadership styles and able to use them as the situation indicates?

How does he or she function in interpersonal relationships?

How comfortable is he or she with being a person in whom authority rests? To what extent is he or she

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ready to claim and use that authority appropriately?

If the PDC members concur, the Nominee may be invited to return to the meeting following this discussion for a recap and to agree on the agenda for the next meeting.

*Meeting# 4: Exploration of call to ordination to the diaconate*

Present: Nominee, Committee

The PDC begins to explore the Commission on Ministry's basic questions (below). The order of these questions can be rearranged as seems best. The discussion should include findings from any career counseling the Nominee has undergone and PDC members' knowledge of the Nominee's home life, work life, congregational life, and other interests, including those that have arisen in the other meetings.

What is the Nominee's understanding of the Christian ministry, in particular, the diaconate?

How does he or she view the ministry of the whole Body of Christ?

How does he or she differentiate between the ministries of laypersons and deacons?

How does he or she understand the deacon's central task in working with those in need – solving other people's problems? Giving answers? Helping people come to a resolution of their problems?

Below are some characteristics of deacons. Which, if any, of these describe their sense of calling?

- An icon (inviting model and image) of servanthood in the life and worship of the congregation;
- A bridge between the church as gathered, worshiping community and the pain, needs, and brokenness of the world;
- A prophet of social justice and compassionate action, calling all the people of God to live the servant ministry of their Baptismal Covenant;
- A leader, teacher, and nurturer of the church's social ministry.

How does he or she understand the deacon's ministry?

What further growth is needed, and does the Nominee have the capacity to achieve such growth?

What is his or her academic record?

How open is he or she to questioning, self-exploration, and testing his or her view of reality?

What evidence do you see of his or her continuing commitment to learning and intellectual growth?

In what ways do you envision and experience the Nominee as one who is growing in the Christian faith?

After the exploration of the questions above, the Nominee leaves the meeting. Using as many of the following questions as time allows, discuss what was heard from the Nominee. *Please note:* these questions (and any others the committee members may have) will help to frame the committee's final report. *Each member should reflect on all of these questions before returning for Meeting # 5.*

What evidence do you have that this person is called by God to the ordained ministry?

What did the Nominee say about their understanding of the diaconal call, for example, what was said about the primacy of a deacon's work in the world vs. their role and function liturgically in the church?

Is the Nominee confusing a calling to ordination as a deacon with a calling to Christian service as a layperson? Is the Nominee confusing a call of a deacon with that of a priest?

Are his or her primary interests congruent with the basic function of a deacon?

Are his or her innate abilities commensurate with the demands of the diaconate, in particular with the demands of part-time, uncompensated work within the church and in the world, possibly while also holding an ordinary job in a secular setting?

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Can you envision this person as a Deacon in the Church?

*Meeting # 5: Decision to (or not to) recommend nominee to proceed to the next steps of formation*

Present: Committee only

The committee reviews the previous weeks' work, referring to the recorder's notes and any of the personal notes of PDC members. Discuss in detail the list of questions provided at the end of Meeting # 4. Prayerfully, the PDC makes a final decision about whether to recommend that the Nominee proceed to the next step in the formation process for deacons.

Using the recorder's documentation and members' input, prepare a written summary for the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting using the format provided in the Appendix II.

If the committee and Nominee have discerned a call to the priesthood instead, there should already have been conversations with the Sponsoring Presbyter.

*Meeting# 6: Summary and Wrap-up*

Present: Nominee and Committee

Present the written summary of the committee's work to the Nominee.

If the Nominee is being redirected to a lay ministry, the PDC might need to assist the Nominee in recognizing and valuing a challenging, satisfying form of ministry as a baptized member of the Church in his or her other areas of primary involvement, e.g., work, family, community, or congregation, rather than as a deacon.

PDC members should discuss what changes they have experienced during the meetings in their own attitudes about or concepts of Christian ministry, especially the diaconate. They also should determine what is needed to conclude this series of meetings among the committee, the Nominee, and the Sponsoring Presbyter. Decide how the congregation may best support the Nominee in the coming months.

*Concluding the PDC Discernment Process*

If the PDC members endorse the Nominee, the PDC chairperson and Nominee meet with the Sponsoring Presbyter. If the clergy person is in agreement, the Nominee and the PDC chair attend the next scheduled Vestry meeting. Before the Vestry meeting, the Sponsoring Presbyter gives to Vestry members the PDC report, the relevant section of the Church Canons (Canon III, 6) and any diocese-specific requirements.

The Vestry members talk with the Nominee about his/her discernment process and with the PDC chair about the PDC's recommendation. The Vestry members discuss their responsibility required by the Church to support an individual toward ordination. If 2/3 of Vestry agrees to support the individual, they must sign a certificate to that effect.

The PDC report and a certificate of support from the Vestry will accompany the Sponsoring Presbyter's letter of endorsement to the Bishop.

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### APPENDIX I: SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The spiritual autobiography is designed to help Nominees explore their life histories in the context of their life journeys, their sense of call to ordination to the diaconate and a description of the process of discernment by which he or she has been identified for ordination.

Nominees should first write expansively about their developmental life in the areas of family, personal relationships, school, career, and social and leisure activities. This step is for the Nominee only, and may be the most important work that is done in this discernment process.

From this narrative, the Nominee will condense this reflection to a succinct overview of his or her life. This abbreviated document will aid the PDC, and eventually the COM-D, to explore their sense of a call in greater depth.

The Nominee's challenge is to describe his or her faith pilgrimage first with an outline of the highlights of significant moments of growth that lay out the arc of their lives and important moments for their spiritual formation. Then the Nominee may comment further on these important moments, people or reflections that have contributed to their current discernment toward the diaconate. The Nominee should be prepared to articulate how these events influenced her or his sense of a call to be ordained to the diaconate.

Because of the volume of materials that the Diocese collects and reviews for each Nominee, succinctness is highly valued. *The spiritual autobiography should not exceed five typewritten pages, double-spaced, 11 or 12-size font.* In-depth interviews will be a part of later phases of the process, so greater details can be presented at those times.

### APPENDIX II: REPORT OF THE PARISH DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE

A. REPORT TO THE SPONSORING PRESBYTER AND VESTRY, with the Nominee

B. REPORT TO THE COM-D:

What is the Nominee's understanding of the diaconate?

Describe the current ministries of this person.

In what ways do you see/experience this person as one who is growing in the Christian faith?

What further growth is needed, and does this person have the capacity to achieve such growth?

Describe this person's emotional health.

Describe this person's leadership skills.

In what ways does this person envision his/her diaconate?

Please be clear regarding this Nominee hearing a call specifically to ordained ministry, and to life as a Deacon in the larger church.

Recommend for continued lay ministry

Recommend for entry into the internship preparatory to formation as a deacon Recommend other alternatives at this time

[ ] Number of Concurrences [ ] Number of Dissents [ ] Number of Abstentions    Comments

Signature:    Date: