

# Discerning ministry : Beginning the process

## *The canons*

The revision of the canons of the Episcopal Church at the 2003 General Convention articulated a simple and clear vision of ministry which has been growing in the church ever since the revision of the Book of Common Prayer in the 1960s and 1970s. Two basic principles are stated:

“All baptized persons are called to minister in Christ’s name, to identify their gifts with the help of the Church and to serve Christ’s mission at all times and in all places,” and

“...all baptized persons are called to sustain their ministries through commitment to life-long Christian formation.” (III.1.1.a, b)

Further, the Bishop and the Commission on Ministry “shall provide encouragement, training and necessary resources to assist each congregation in developing an ongoing process of community discernment...” (III.3.1)

In other words, the canons now call the church (parishes and dioceses) to encourage, nurture and support all persons in the development of their ministries, ordained, licensed or lay. Some are called to ordained ministries, but all baptized persons share the fundamental ministry of the laity, “to represent Christ and his church...” (BCP, 855)

## *Discernment of a call to ministry*

The starting place for all people is “discernment,” the careful and prayerful listening, in community, for the call of the Holy Spirit, leading an individual to use God-given talents in ministry. Ideally, as the canons suggest, the process of discernment should be an on-going activity in every parish, guiding and helping all baptized persons discover their various ministries in the church and in the world. Discernment will lead to a deeper understanding of God’s call to ministry, which is unique for each individual.

Ideally, parishes would conduct workshops on discernment and have on-going discernment groups to help their members focus God’s call to ministry. The Commission on Ministry of the Diocese of Easton encourages parishes to develop such discernment groups and will assist in their development. The book *Listening Hearts* is suggested as a guide in the discernment process. Discernment in parishes (in whatever form it takes) should help persons understand how they are experiencing God’s call, articulate what that call is, consider the possible pathways to act on that call, and identify ways in which the church community can help and support them.

For most Christians, ministry takes place in daily Christian living; discernment of gifts and talents will help a person carry out his or her ministry in daily life more effectively. Occasionally, Christians are called to various ministries (some requiring special training and licenses) within a congregation or diocese. Finally, a few discern a call to ordained ministry; in this case, there are specific steps (outlined below) which should be followed.

## *Those who discern a call to ordained ministry*

**1) Initial contact with rector or minister in charge of the aspirant’s congregation.** The person experiencing a call to ordained ministry through a process of personal or congregational discernment contacts the rector of the parish for conversation regarding the nature and sense of this call. He/she (the “aspirant”) must be a communicant in good standing of his or her parish for at least one year. (It is not necessary for the aspirant to contact the bishop at this point.)

**2) Formation of the discernment committee.** If the rector believes that continued discernment is in order, a focused discernment committee is formed to help the aspirant explore specific aspects of a possible call to ordained ministry. Normally at least one person from the vestry serves on this committee; the aspirant can ask for one or two persons to serve on the committee; the rector, with the advice of the wardens, appoints the remaining members, usually making a total of 6-8 persons on the committee, plus the aspirant. The rector advises the bishop of the aspirant, so that the bishop can contact the Commission on Ministry, which will appoint a contact person to help set up and train the discernment committee.

**3) Aspirant and discernment committee begin a formal discernment process for ordained ministry.** The discernment committee meets regularly with the aspirant, usually for about eight meetings over four months. The primary function of this group is to work with the aspirant in a prayerful, focused discussion.

It is the norm in the Diocese of Easton to use the book *Listening Hearts* as a guide. Careful study of this book is essential to make the discernment process beneficial both to the aspirant and to the members of the committee. The committee should prepare itself thoroughly in the disciplines of listening and prayer that are outlined in this book and which make the discernment process successful.

The discernment committee then meets regularly with the aspirant (calling on the COM liaison for assistance if necessary and informing the COM liaison of the progress of the discernment committee). The Committee has two fundamental tasks:

(1) helping the aspirant experience how the Holy Spirit is moving in his/her life and understand more fully what sort of ministry she or he is being called to, and if it is in fact ordained ministry, which order (deacon or priest); and

(2) objective, realistic conversations with the aspirant about the practical issues involved in pursuing the path to the ministry to which he or she is being called. If this is ordained ministry, this would include reviewing plans of preparation and other qualifications required by the diocese and Episcopal Church canons.

**4) The discernment committee makes a final report** which is shared and discussed with the aspirant. Since, at every stage in the process, the aspirant and the committee have assessed and reassessed the call that the aspirant is experiencing, the final report will be a mutually agreed-upon statement of the nature of the aspirant's call to ministry and will state if ordained ministry (and which order) is the vocation to which the aspirant is called. Ideally, this is a "win-win" experience; the aspirant and the discernment committee (on behalf of the church) perceive and agree on what the Holy Spirit is doing. The discernment committee will continue to help the aspirant in following the next steps of preparation for ministry.

**5) Report to the Vestry and next steps.** If the aspirant and the discernment committee agree that ordained ministry is in fact the aspirant's call, the committee forwards its report to the vestry. This report will become the basis of the vestry's decision to certify, on behalf of the parish, the aspirant's call to ordained ministry. If this certification is given, the vestry also commits itself and the parish to involvement (including financial support) in the aspirant's next steps, preparation and possible ordination.

At this point the aspirant talks with the bishop and submits other required information. The canons describe the required process. The bishop and Commission on Ministry will assist the

aspirant in following the canonical procedures.

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