



The Episcopal Diocese of New York

Ordination Task Force

Overview Section

of the

Report on the Current Discernment Process and the Path to Ordination

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Overview of the Current Discernment Process and Path to Ordination

Discerning God's Call to the Priesthood and Diaconate **in The Episcopal Diocese of New York**

“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you
to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last... “

John 15:16 (MB)

“For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the
same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are
members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace
given to us...”

Romans 12:4-6

Whatever led you to this page/document, we are glad you found your way here. Sensing a call to ministry can be an emotional process, with moments of joy and clarity, confusion and fear. We hope that knowing more about the process will demystify it a bit. Know that you can always reach out to your priest or to the Rev. Canon Masud Ibn Syedullah TSSF, Interim Canon for Ministry, in the Ministry Office with your questions.

This overview contains all the detailed steps for discerning a call to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of New York. “Do not be afraid!” (Luke 1:30, and elsewhere.) It is long and detailed on purpose, so that you might see with some clarity the road ahead, and so that you might know how much care goes into the careful consideration and support of our ordained vocations. We take discernment seriously, and the detail of this document reflects this significance. We believe that God loves you, us, and the world, and this process provides the way we discern whether ordination is the right response for those who feel called to it.

This document has many numbers and bullet points but remember that most of these represent conversations and communications with other people who are discerning with you.

Listening for God's call in our lives, and determining how we should respond, matters a great deal to us. This document focuses on ordination, but the high value we place on discernment is also true for lay ministry, which makes up the great majority of Christian vocations.

Before diving in, please take a moment to pray, whether this is your first time or ten thousandth time consulting this document. We include a prayer below, but you may know best how to pray this time you turn past the cover page. God lovingly calls us to respond to the gift of our being, and a vital work that we share, together, is listening.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

-- The Commission on Ministry

Introduction

The *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) defines the ministers of the Church as laypersons, bishops, priests, and deacons. This definition reminds us that, while all Christians are called to minister in the name of Jesus, not every ministry requires ordination. To ensure that the selection and formation of ordained ministers occur in an orderly manner, The Episcopal Church has devised canons or rules for discerning the call of some baptized Christians to ordained ministry.

These rules are outlined in [Title III: Ministry Canons of The Episcopal Church's Constitution and Canons](#), which mandate that there should be a Commission on Ministry (COM) in each diocese to advise and assist the Bishop in the design and oversight of the ongoing process for identifying individuals with the gifts for ordained ministry and recruiting, discerning, forming, and assessing their readiness of for ordained leadership. [The Episcopal Diocese of New York Canons contain diocesan specifics.](#)

[Click here](#) for a listing of the current members of the Commission on Ministry, as well as contact information for the Canon for Ministry and Liaison for the Ministry Office.

The canons guide an individual along a path to ordained ministry. The path to the diaconate consists of four steps, and the path to the priesthood consists of five steps. The bishop has oversight of the ordination process and may modify various steps on occasion.

Step One - Becoming a Nominee

This initial discernment phase at the parish/local community level follows guidelines established by the bishop and Commission on Ministry (COM). The COM has compiled a [Parish Discernment Handbook](#) to provide individuals seeking discernment of ordained ministry, parish priests, discernment committees, and vestries with essential information and guidance regarding their roles and responsibilities in this important process of discernment, education, and formation of our ordained leaders.

1. Individual becomes an involved member of a parish in the Episcopal Diocese of New York.

- The individual is an active member (a baptized and confirmed adult communicant in good standing) of a parish for a minimum of one year (or longer if required by the priest).
- During this time the individual comes to know the parish and becomes known by parishioners and the clergy.

2. Individual begins discernment with the priest.

- The individual and priest begin a focused period of inquiry, service, and exploration of the person's sense of call, lasting several months to a year.

3. Parish Discernment Committee is formed.

- If the priest has seen the beginning signs of a call to ordained ministry, the priest forms a Parish Discernment Committee to meet with the individual, who is now known as an aspirant.
- The discernment committee should be 3-5 laypeople who meet regularly with the aspirant for six months to a year to help clarify the nature of the person's call.
- The diocese recommends the book ***Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*** by Suzanne G. Farnham et. al. for guiding this work. The COM offers first time parish discernment committees training in the Listening Hearts practice of spiritual discernment.
- After its work is completed, the Parish Discernment Committee writes a [Parish Discernment Report](#) to the priest sharing its discernment.

(See the Parish Discernment Handbook for details on the role and responsibilities of the Parish Discernment Committee.)

4. Priest writes nominating letter to the bishop.

- The priest submits a **Priest Nominating Letter** ([Priesthood](#) and [Diaconate](#)) to the bishop nominating the aspirant to postulancy for the diaconate or the priesthood, including a description of the parish discernment by which the aspirant has been identified and enclosing a copy of the discernment committee's report.

5. Priest & Vestry submit canonical letter/form indicating parish support.

- If the priest and vestry, by way of a two-thirds majority, decide to sponsor the nominee, they complete and sign a **Parish Support Letter/Form** ([Priesthood](#) and [Diaconate](#)) pledging to be engaged in the nominee's preparation for ordination and to provide financial support. The Parish Support Letter/Form will be sent to the priest after the bishop has received the nominating letter.
- The aspirant is now a nominee, and the nominee is required to formally accept the nomination in writing.

Step Two - Becoming a Postulant

Postulant is the term used by the canons to describe a person approved by the bishop to pursue ordination. It may initiate the formal preparation for ordination and involves continued exploration of the postulant's call to ordained ministry.

1. Nominee meets with the bishop.

- The nominee makes an appointment to meet with the bishop.

2. Nominee accepts nomination in writing and applies for postulancy.

- The **Acceptance of Nomination and Application for Postulancy** ([Priesthood](#) and [Diaconate](#)) form and ancillary materials are sent to the nominee after the priest's sponsoring letter has been received by the bishop.
- The application materials the nominee submits to the bishop include a spiritual autobiography, ministry statement, history of church affiliation, and other information

relevant to the bishop's discernment. These documents are kept as part of the permanent records of the diocese.

- [Click Here](#) for an outline of approximate costs.

3. Nominee undergoes health related evaluations and submits documentation attesting to their completion:

- Evaluations include: 1) background check, 2) psychological evaluation, 3) physical evaluation.
- An overview of these evaluations is provided in the [About the Physical and Psychological Evaluation](#) document.
- The purpose of these evaluations is to ensure that the nominee is physically and psychologically healthy enough to do the work of ministry.

4. Nominee meets with Canon for Ministry.

- After all application materials and results of evaluations have been received and reviewed, the Canon for Ministry arranges to meet with the nominee.

5. Bishop reviews the nominee's file.

- The bishop reviews the nominee's file and decides if the nominee should proceed to the preliminary interview stage of discernment at the diocesan level.

6. Nominee completes three preliminary interviews.

- If the bishop decides the nominee should continue discernment at the diocesan level, the Canon for Ministry invites the nominee to schedule separate preliminary interviews with three members of the Commission on Ministry.
- Following each interview, the interviewer sends the Canon for Ministry an evaluation of the nominee's gifts for ordained ministry and recommends whether they should be invited to a Discernment Conference. The customary practice of the diocese is to require that two of the three interviewers recommend inviting the nominee to a conference.

- Excerpts from the interviews are sent to the sponsoring priest to be shared indirectly with the nominee.

7. Bishop reviews the nominee's file.

- Following this review, the bishop decides if the nominee should proceed by attending a Discernment Conference.

8. Nominee attends a Discernment Conference.

- At the Bishop's request, the Canon for Ministry invites the nominee to attend a Discernment Conference.
- These day-long conferences are normally scheduled two or three times a year.
- At this conference, members of the Commission on Ministry discern and evaluate the nominee's gifts for ordained ministry and provide a written recommendation to the bishop that the nominee be: granted postulancy; asked to engage in further discernment and formation and reapply again later; or pursue further lay ministry.

9. Nominee meets with the bishop for a postulancy interview.

- The bishop reviews the nominee's file and recommendations and meets with the nominee to discuss the possibility of postulancy for the diaconate or priesthood.
- The bishop notifies the nominee whether they have been made a postulant or not.
- If the answer is negative, the nominee and their priest are invited to meet with the bishop to discern the next steps for the nominee's continued ministry.
- If positive, the nominee is made a postulant, paving the way for them to begin academic and spiritual formation for ordained ministry.

Step Three – Postulant Formation.

1(a) Postulant for ordination to the vocational diaconate begins academic and spiritual formation.

- The canons identify five areas of competence for postulants to the diaconate:

- Academic studies including The Holy Scriptures, theology and the tradition of the church,
 - Diakonia and the diaconate,
 - Human awareness and understanding,
 - Spiritual development and discipline,
 - Practical training and experience.
- The postulant to the diaconate begins the diocesan Vocational Diaconal Formation Program, including enrolling in an Education for Ministry (EfM) group. EfM is a four-year program operated by the University of the South's School of Theology in Sewanee, Tennessee that helps lay people deepen their faith and learn more about the Christian tradition.
 - The postulant to the diaconate completes this three-year course of formation and study designed to provide academic preparation, theological reflection, and practical training in the ministry of the deacon.
 - The postulant to the diaconate completes an approved 200-hour Clinical Pastoral Training (CPT) program to provide practical pastoral training for postulants in a multi-faith context. CPT is usually completed during the second year of postulancy and is required by the time the postulant applies for candidacy.

1(b) Postulant for ordination to the priesthood begins academic and spiritual formation.

- A Master of Divinity degree at an approved, accredited Episcopal seminary is usually required for postulants to the priesthood. Decisions about choosing a seminary are made with the approval of the Bishop.
- The canons identify six areas for study during this period of preparation:
 - The Holy Scriptures,
 - History of the Christian Church,
 - Christian Theology,
 - Christian Ethics and Moral Theology,

- Christian Worship according to the use of the Book of Common Prayer, the Hymnal, and authorized supplemental texts,
- The Practice of Ministry in contemporary society, including leadership, evangelism, stewardship, ecumenism, interfaith relations, mission theology, and the historical and contemporary experience of racial and minority groups.
- Specific coursework requirements will vary from person to person and will depend on the recommendations of the Bishop and the Commission on Ministry.
- An approved 400-hour Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program is also required to provide practical pastoral training for postulants in a multi-faith context. CPE is usually completed during the summer following the first year of seminary and is required by the time the postulant applies for candidacy.
- Postulants to the priesthood also participate in a year-long field education placement as part of their seminary formation. This placement includes a mentoring priest in an approved parish other than the postulant's sponsoring parish and is designed to broaden and deepen the postulant's experience of the church.

2. Postulants for the diaconate and for the priesthood are canonically required to communicate regularly with the bishop through Ember Day letters.

- Ember Day letters are written four times annually: St. Lucy's Day (December 13), Ash Wednesday, Pentecost, and Holy Cross Day (September 14).
- Ember Day letters are an important means of communication with the bishop.
- Postulants continue to write Ember Days letter up through candidacy and until they are ordained as deacons or priests.
- Ember Day letters are kept as part of the permanent records of the diocese.

3. Postulants for the diaconate and for the priesthood are canonically required to prepare for ordination with training regarding:

- Prevention of sexual misconduct against both children and adults.

- Civil requirements for reporting and pastoral opportunities for responding to evidence of abuse.
- The Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church, particularly Title IV.
- The church's teaching on racism.

Step Four - Becoming a Candidate.

Candidacy is a time of education and formation for ordination established by a formal commitment to the candidate by the bishop, COM, Standing Committee (SC), and the Postulant's faith community. Unlike postulancy, candidacy is a formal canonical status that can be transferred between dioceses.

1. Postulant is invited to apply to the Bishop for candidacy.

- The **Application for Candidacy with documentation log** ([Priesthood](#) and [Diaconate](#)) is usually submitted around the mid-point of the postulant's formation and should include the date of admission to postulancy and a letter of support from the sponsoring congregation or faith community signed by two-thirds of the vestry or comparable body.
- The diocese requires the postulant to submit recommendation forms, and any other documents as detailed in the sample applications linked above.

2. The COM attests to the postulant's continuing academic and spiritual formation in writing to the Bishop.

3. The Bishop petitions the SC on the postulant's behalf.

4. The SC reviews the candidacy application and interviews the postulant.

- If the SC approves admitting the postulant to candidacy, the SC provides that approval to the Bishop in writing.

5. The Bishop records the candidate's name and date of admission in the

Candidacy Register.

- The bishop informs the candidate, his or her sponsoring clergy, the COM and SC, and, if applicable, the director of the Diaconal Formation Program, dean of the seminary, or the formation mentor.

6. The diocese requires that candidates for ordination to the priesthood take the General Orders Exams (GOE) and may ask them to undergo other evaluations.

- General Ordination Exams are generally taken in January of the senior year in seminary. These exams evaluate academic and theological formation in six core areas as outlined in the national canons:
 - The Holy Scriptures
 - History of the Christian Church
 - Christian Theology
 - Christian Ethics and Moral Theology
 - Christian Worship according to the use of the Book of Common Prayer, the Hymnal, and authorized supplemental texts
 - The Practice of Ministry in contemporary society
- If the candidate does not demonstrate proficiency in one or more of these areas, the Bishop or diocesan Board of Examining Chaplains may assign a mentor or advisor and additional work as they deem necessary until the candidate demonstrates proficiency.

Step Five - Ordination to the Diaconate

Ordination is the *“rite in which God gives authority and the grace of the Holy Spirit to those being made bishops, priests, and deacons, through prayer and the laying on of hands by bishops”* (BCP 860). In their last year of formation, candidates are invited to apply to the bishop for ordination to either the vocational or transitional diaconate. To be ordained a deacon, the candidate must be at least twenty-four years of age. The vocational deacon’s specific call is to the diaconate. A transitional deacon is a person who will later be ordained a priest.

1. The Bishop obtains in writing and provides to the SC the following documents:

- **Application for Ordination to the Diaconate with documentation log ([Transitional Diaconate](#) and [Vocational Diaconate](#))** from the candidate requesting to be ordained as a deacon.
- A letter/form of support from the sponsoring community signed and dated by at least two-thirds of the vestry or comparable body and the clergy leader.
- Written evidence of admission of the candidate to postulancy and candidacy, giving the dates of admission.
- A report from the diocesan Diaconal Formation Program, seminary, or other program of preparation showing the candidate's scholastic record in the subjects required by the canons and giving an evaluation with a recommendation as to the candidate's other personal qualifications for ordination together with a recommendation regarding ordination to the diaconate.
- A certificate from the COM giving a recommendation regarding ordination to the diaconate.
- Other documentation as detailed in the sample applications linked above.

2. SC reviews the candidate's application.

- If a majority of the SC's members attest that the canonical requirements for ordination to the diaconate have been met and there is no sufficient objection on medical, psychological, moral, or spiritual grounds, they recommend the candidate for ordination to the diaconate.

3. The Bishop ordains the candidate.

- At the time of ordination, the candidate publicly makes the Declaration of Conformity to the Doctrine and Discipline of the Episcopal Church.

Step Six - Ordination to the Priesthood

1. A transitional deacon must be at least twenty-four years of age to be ordained a priest.

2. A transitional deacon may be ordained a priest six months after ordination to the diaconate and 18 months after acceptance of nomination for postulancy.

3. The transitional deacon's background check and medical and psychological evaluations must have taken place or been updated within thirty-six months before ordination.

4. The Bishop obtains in writing and provides to the SC the following documents:

- [Application for Ordination to the Priesthood with documentation log](#) from the transitional deacon requesting to be ordained as a priest.
- Letter/form of support from the transitional deacon's sponsoring congregation or faith community, signed and dated by at least two-thirds of the vestry or comparable body and the clergy leader.
- Report from the seminary or other program of preparation showing the transitional deacon's scholastic record in the subjects required by the canons and giving an evaluation with recommendation as to the transitional deacon's other personal qualifications for ordination together with a recommendation regarding ordination to the priesthood.
- Statement from the COM attesting to the successful completion of the program of formation and proficiency in the required areas of study, recommending the transitional deacon for ordination to the priesthood.
- Other documentation as detailed in the sample applications linked above.

5. The SC reviews the transitional deacon's application.

- If a majority of the SC's members attest that the canonical requirements for ordination to the priesthood have been met and there is no sufficient objection on medical,

psychological, moral, or spiritual grounds, they recommend the candidate for ordination to the priesthood. This exact language is in the national canons!!

6. The Bishop ordains the deacon a priest.

- At the time of ordination, the deacon subscribes publicly and makes the Declaration of Conformity to the Doctrine and Discipline of the Episcopal Church.