

# The Discernment Process in the Diocese of Indianapolis: Exploring a Call to Ordained Ministry

We believe that all baptized persons are called to minister in Christ's name, to identify their gifts with the help of the Church, and to serve in Christ's mission at all times and in all places. We affirm that all are called to sustain their ministries through commitment to life-long Christian formation. (Title 111.1.1)

If you believe that God may be calling you to ordained ministry, your first step is to begin and continue conversations with your priest.

Below are the requirements for ordination to the diaconate and the priesthood, as stated in the Constitutions and Canons of the Episcopal Church and of the Diocese of Indianapolis.

Copies of the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church and of the Diocese of Indianapolis are available by contacting Janet Brinkworth, Executive Assistant to the Bishop: [brinkworth@indydio.org](mailto:brinkworth@indydio.org).

This checklist has been prepared for your assistance and guidance in navigating the process. It is the responsibility of each Aspirant, in consultation with their mentoring priest, Commission on Ministry liaison, and with the support of Bishop's Staff, to ensure that they meet canonical requirements. Process and timeline will vary, depending on a person's needs, experience, and circumstance. There are certain requirements of time periods to be aware of, particularly Canon III.

A nominee's file will always be available to them by contacting the Bishop's Executive Assistant. The Aspirant is responsible for ensuring that all necessary documents are contained within their file. We highly recommend that Aspirants keep a copy of everything they have sent to the Bishop, the Bishop's Executive Assistant, the Commission on Ministry, and the Standing Committee throughout the course of an Aspirant's discernment of a call to ordained ministry.

Where the process is different for those discerning for the diaconate versus the priesthood, this difference is noted. If there is no division, requirements are the same for both orders of ministry.

Confirmed adult communicants in good standing are eligible to be considered for these ministries:

- having received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism,
- having been duly recorded in this Church and sixteen years of age,

- having made a mature public affirmation of faith and commitment (i.e. confirmed/received),
- having received Holy Communion at least three times during the preceding year, and
- having been faithful in corporate worship, in working, praying, and giving.

(III.6.2,8.2, Title 1.17)

### **Aspirancy: First Step in Public Discernment**

Having met with their sponsoring Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge over a period of months (at minimum), with the sponsoring Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge's support of the Aspirant's call to an exploration of ordained ministry, the Aspirant and sponsoring priest meet with the Bishop to share the Aspirant's desire to begin more formal discernment.

Once the Bishop grants permission to move forward, the Aspirant may complete an Application for Discernment and continue with the steps that follow, below.

Complete the Application for Discernment form and submit to the Bishop's Executive Assistant (Janet Brinkworth). A note of importance: throughout the process of discernment toward ordained ministry, it is the Aspirant's responsibility to ensure that materials in their files are complete.

Once the Application for Discernment has been submitted to the Bishop's office, the Aspirant will:

- Maintain the status of "confirmed adult communicant in good standing," which means a faithful practice of regular worship, and faithfulness in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.
- Remain in contact with their sponsoring Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge and with the Commission on Ministry with questions and updates, and for the purpose of ongoing support.
- Practice personal prayer and reflection.
- Engage a spiritual director for the purpose of regular guidance. A list of spiritual directors is available from the Bishop's executive assistant.
- Contact the Safeguarding administrator of his/her/their parish to complete the necessary Safeguarding God's People and Safeguarding God's Children courses as required, maintaining those certifications to remain current every 3 years. (III.6.5, 8.5)
- In consultation with the Canon to the Ordinary for Congregational Development and Leadership or the Associate for Transitions and Congregational Development, secure certification in recommended racial reconciliation/anti-racism training.
- Contact the Executive Assistant to the Bishop to secure an Oxford background check, recognizing that the expense of this background check will be split between the Aspirant and the Bishop's office. The Aspirant will be invoiced by the Bishop's office for his/her/their portion of the expense of this check. His/her/their parish may provide resources to help offset the cost to the Aspirant.
- Contact the Executive Assistant to the Bishop to secure a psychological evaluation, recognizing that the expense of this exam will be divided between the Aspirant and the Bishop's office. The Aspirant will be invoiced by the Bishop's office for his/her/their portion of this expense. His/her/their parish may provide resources to help offset the cost to the Aspirant.
- Contact the Executive Assistant to the Bishop to secure the form for a physical exam, returning the completed form to the Bishop's office.
- Provide a letter of support in this process from his/her/their spouse/partner, if applicable.

- Provide two reference letters of support from lay or ordained leaders.
- Be prepared to share his/her/their familiarity with:
  - The Baptismal Covenant, the Catechism, the Rite for Ordination according to the order they discern, and the Canons.
  - Their particular gifts and skills for ministry, and how they discern that their gifts may serve to build up the church.
  - Appropriate boundaries in areas of leadership, finance, emotion, sexuality, accountability, and responsibilities.
  - Where the Aspirant may need to improve and learn new skills.
  - How the Aspirant's family may be affected by the process of discernment, formation, and service in ministry.

The Aspirant may consult with Bishop, either Canon to the Ordinary, or the Associate for Transitions regarding the financial resources available to support their preparation.

The Aspirant's sponsoring Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge will assign 4-6 people to a Congregational Discernment Group (CDG). The Commission on Ministry will provide a Congregational Discernment Handbook and an orientation session for the CDG and the Aspirant.

- The Aspirant will meet with this group for 8 sessions over a 3-6 month period.
- Before the fourth session, the Aspirant will submit to the CDG a spiritual autobiography sharing his/her/their major life events, family and personal circumstances, spiritual events, and other factors that led to this present vocational aspiration.

The Congregational Discernment Group will:

- Assist the Aspirant in listening for, and reflecting on God's presence, discerning his/her/their gifts, and seeking to discover God's will;
- Submit a report to the Vestry and the Commission on Ministry (copy the Bishop's Executive Assistant), which:
  - Describes the discernment process that the group has undertaken, articulating their sense of the Aspirant's call
  - Includes a recommendation related to the parish's nomination of this person for continuing public discernment of a call to ordained ministry
- Commit to providing ongoing support throughout the Aspirant's discernment process, whether it is ultimately to ordained ministry or to baptismal ministry

The Bishop or a member of the Bishop's staff may recommend that the Aspirant shadow an experienced priest or deacon for a period of time, based on the Aspirant's experience and for the enrichment of his/her/their discernment. This may take place at the same time as congregational discernment.

Aspirants will submit to the Commission a typed 2-3 page spiritual autobiography on ordained ministry which includes:

- Their earliest memories of God's presence and sense of God's call
- People who have been influential in their faith development
- Reflection on their major points of decision
- Major commitments they have made
- Influences in their faith journey
- Decisions they have made in discerning a call to ministry

The Aspirant's Vestry will write a letter of support to the Bishop and Commission on Ministry on behalf of the congregation, nominating the Aspirant for Postulancy, which:

- pledges to contribute financially to that preparation
- promises that parish leaders and the congregation as a whole will be involved and supportive of the Aspirant's preparation for ordained ministry.

This letter will be signed by the sponsoring Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge and 2/3 of the Vestry (III.6.2,8.2)

If the Aspirant accepts this nomination, he/she/they will write a letter to the Bishop accepting this nomination, which also includes:

- full name and date of birth
- legal time of residence in the Diocese of Indianapolis
- evidence of Baptism and Confirmation
- Notice of any previous application or nomination for Postulancy in this or any other diocese
- Education attained: degrees, official college transcripts for both undergraduate and graduate coursework
- A description of their discernment process

When the Bishop has received all of the materials above, culminating with the Aspirant's letter accepting the nomination of his/her/their parish, the Bishop may extend a letter to the Aspirant, inviting him/her/them to take part in a Commission on Ministry (COM) weekend interview for Postulancy.

Members of the Commission on Ministry will engage Aspirants throughout the weekend, in conversation and prayer and during worship, seeking to discern each Aspirant's gifts for ministry. By the end of the COM weekend, members will make a recommendation to the Bishop about whether they believe each Aspirant should move forward to a point of more public discernment. The decision of Postulancy belongs to the Bishop, who invites these recommendations from the COM. Documentation of the COM recommendation to the Bishop for each Aspirant will be provided for the respective Aspirants' files.

The Bishop will notify Aspirants of her decision about Postulancy before they depart the COM weekend.

### **Postulancy: Next Step in Public Discernment**

From the point that the Bishop declares a person a Postulant until that person is either ordained or withdraws from the process, he/she/they is/are responsible to:

- Write Ember Day letters to the Bishop four times per year.
- Continue to communicate regularly with their sponsoring Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge and COM liaison.
- Participate in ongoing formation for ministry, including regular worship, prayer and reflection, tithing/proportional financial giving, and spiritual direction.
- Take part in COM weekends at the point of every status change (Candidacy, Ordination.) Note: postulants and candidates who are not at a point of status change are welcome and encouraged to return for twice-annual COM weekends as they are able, recognizing the value of ongoing accompaniment among COM members and Standing Committee members, building relationship among all those in the discernment process, and connection to COM liaisons.
- Return for Diocesan Convention each year as possible.

At the point when the Postulant is prepared to enter the final phase of discernment before ordination, he/she/they may send a letter to the Bishop to request Candidacy. This letter must include:

- The date of the Postulant's admission to Postulancy
- A letter of support from the Postulant's sponsoring parish, including the signatures of at least 2/3 of the Vestry and the signature of the sponsoring Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge.

The Bishop may extend a letter inviting the Postulant to participate in a discernment weekend with members of the Commission on Ministry and the Standing Committee.

Members of the Commission on Ministry will interview Postulants at the Discernment Weekend and will make recommendations to the Bishop about each Postulant moving forward toward more public discernment in Candidacy. Members of the Standing Committee will interview Postulants at the Discernment Weekend and will vote, as canonically required, about whether each Postulant should be made a Candidate.

Postulants will be notified by the Bishop or by a member of the Standing Committee about the decision of the Bishop and the Standing Committee regarding candidacy on the last day of the Discernment Weekend. Decisions about each Postulant who has interviewed for candidacy will be documented and added to the respective Postulant's file.

### **Candidacy: Final Step in Public Discernment toward Ordination**

Candidacy is a time of education and formation, established by a formal commitment by the Candidate, the Bishop, the Commission on Ministry, the Standing Committee, and the sponsoring parish. (III.6.8.4)

A Candidate must remain in canonical relationship with the Diocese in which admission has been granted until ordination to the diaconate. (III.6.4, 8.4)

The Bishop may assign the Candidate to any congregation of the Diocese or other community of faith in consultation with the Candidate's sponsoring Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge. (III.6.5)

#### **DIACONATE:**

At the beginning of each year, the Postulant will establish his/her/their own learning goals in light of the five areas of competency:

1. Academic studies, including: holy scripture, theology, and the traditions of the church
2. Diakonia and the diaconate
3. Human awareness and understanding
4. Spiritual development and discipline
5. Practical training and experience

(III.6.5)

#### **PRIESTHOOD:**

Formation includes theological training, practical experience, emotional development, and spiritual formation. This preparation will include the following seven subject areas:

1. Holy scripture
2. Church history and the ecumenical movement

3. Christian theology, including missionary theology and missiology
4. Christian ethics and moral theology
5. Studies in contemporary society, including the historical and contemporary experience of racial and minority groups and cross-cultural ministry skills
6. Liturgics and church music; Christian worship and music according to the contents and use of the Book of Common Prayer, the Hymnal, and authorized and supplemental texts
7. Theory and practice of ministry, including leadership, and the ministries of evangelism and stewardship

(III.8.5)

**DIACONATE:**

During Candidacy each Candidate's process will be periodically evaluated, with a written report of this evaluation by those authorized by the COM to be in charge of this evaluation program. (III.6.5)

**PRIESTHOOD:**

The seminary or other formation program will provide for, monitor, and report on the academic performance and personal qualifications of the Postulant or Candidate for ordination. These reports will be made upon request of the Bishop and Commission at least once per year. (III.8.5)

Within 36 months prior to ordination as a Deacon (vocational or transitional) the following must be accomplished:

- A physical medical evaluation
- A psychological evaluation by a professional approved by the Bishop, using forms prepared by the Church Pension Fund, with appropriate referrals as desired or necessary

(III.6.5, 8.5)

A person may be ordained Deacon after at least 18 months from the time of written acceptance of nomination to discern a call to ordained ministry. He/she/they must be at least 24 years of age at the time of ordination. A Candidate must first be ordained a Deacon before being ordained a Priest. There must be at least 6 months between the time a person is ordained a Transitional Deacon and the time he/she/they is/are ordained a Priest.

(III.6.6, 8.6)

**Ordination to the Diaconate: Vocational or Transition**

The Candidate will complete a letter of application to the Bishop requesting ordination as a Deacon, which will include:

- Written evidence of admission to Postulancy and Candidacy, providing the dates of admission
- A letter of support from the Candidate's congregation, signed and dated by the sponsoring Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge exercising oversight, and at least 2/3 of the Vestry
- A certificate from the seminary or other program of preparation showing the Candidate's scholastic record in the subjects required by the Canons, and giving an evaluation with recommendation as to the Candidate's other personal qualifications for ordination together with a recommendation regarding ordination to the Diaconate under this Canon

(III.6.6, 8.6)

**DIACONATE:**

An evaluation of academic work from the Director of Deacon Formation, and certification by those in charge of the Candidate's program of preparation that the Candidate has successfully completed this preparation and is ready for ordination. The Candidate will participate in a culminating evaluation as determined by the Bishop and the COM. (III.6.5)

#### **PRIESTHOOD:**

The Candidate will provide an official transcript of all academic work in preparation for ordination. The seminary or other formation program will provide for, monitor, and report on the academic performance and personal qualifications of the Postulant or Candidate for ordination. The Candidate will take the General Ordination Exams in January of their final year of seminary or other preparation, having contacted the Executive Administrator to the Bishop not later than the previous September to secure these arrangements. (III.8.5)

The Examining Chaplains will review all evaluations and exams, interviewing Candidates as necessary and subsequently reporting to the Commission on Ministry.

The Commission on Ministry will review the application and interview the Candidate, making a recommendation to the Bishop about readiness for ordination. (DOES +JBB WANT TO CONTINUE THIS?)

The Standing Committee will review files and may interview Candidates, and, a majority of all the members consenting, shall certify that the canonical requirements for ordination to the Diaconate under this Canon have been met and there is no sufficient objection on medical, psychological, moral, or spiritual grounds and that they recommend ordination, by a testimonial addressed to the Bishop in the form specified and signed by the consenting members of the Standing Committee. (III.6, 8.6)

The testimonial having been presented to the Bishop, and there being no sufficient objection on medical, psychological, moral, or spiritual grounds, the Bishop reports interview results as soon as possible and may ordain the Candidate to the Diaconate under this Canon. At the time of ordination, the Candidate shall subscribe publicly and make, in the presence of the Bishop, the declaration required in Article VIII of the Constitution. (III.6, Diocesan Canon 26.5)

No person shall be ordained Priest or Deacon to minister in the Church until the person shall have been examined by the Bishop and two Priests and shall have exhibited such testimonials and other requisites as the Canons may direct. No person shall be ordained and ordered Priest or Deacon to minister in this Church, unless at the time, in the presence of the ordaining Bishop or Bishops, the person shall subscribe and make the following declaration: "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 do solemnly engage to conform to the Doctrine, Discipline, and Worship of the Episcopal Church." (Article VIII; Title III Canon 5)

### **Ordination to the Priesthood**

The Bishop may assign a Transitional Deacon to a congregation.

A Transitional Deacon may be ordained a Priest:

- After at least 18 months from the time of acceptance of nomination to public discernment of ordained ministry
- Being at least 24 years of age
- If the medical evaluation and psychological evaluation have taken place or have been updated

within 36 months prior to ordination as a Priest, providing that these results are available in time for COM/Standing Committee interview and review

The Transitional Deacon will:

- Write a letter of application to the Bishop requesting ordination as a Priest, including the Deacon's dates of admission to Postulancy and Candidacy and ordination as a Deacon under this Canon
- Provide a letter of support from the Deacon's sponsoring congregation or community of faith, signed by the Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge exercising oversight and at least 2/3 of the Vestry
- Provide evidence of admission to Postulancy and Candidacy, including dates of admission, and ordination to the Diaconate
- Provide a certificate from the seminary or other program of preparation, written at the completion of the program of preparation, showing the Deacon's scholastic record in the subjects required by the Canons, and giving an evaluation with recommendation as to the Deacon's other personal qualifications for ordination together with a recommendation regarding ordination to the Priesthood (send to the Executive Administrator to the Bishop)
- Provide an official transcript of all continuing academic work

(III.8.7)

The Commission on Ministry will review the application and files and interview the Transitional Deacon. The COM may write a statement attesting to the successful completion of the program of formation designed during Postulancy and proficiency in the required areas of study, recommending to the Bishop the Transitional Deacon's ordination to the Priesthood. (III.8.7)

The Standing Committee will review the application and all relevant files and may interview the Transitional Deacon. A majority of all members consenting, the Standing Committee may certify 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 and that they recommend ordination. The Standing Committee may offer a testimonial to this effect addressed to the Bishop in the form specified and signed by the majority of its consenting members. (III.8.7)

The testimonial having been presented to the Bishop, and there being no sufficient objection on medical, psychological, moral, or spiritual grounds, the Bishop receives the interview results and may ordain the Deacon to the Priesthood. At the time of ordination, the Priest shall subscribe publicly and make, in the presence of the Bishop, the declaration required in Article VIII of the Constitution. (III.8.7, Diocesan Canon 26.5)