



EPISCOPAL
DIOCESE *of*
INDIANAPOLIS

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF INDIANAPOLIS

**HANDBOOK FOR
CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT GROUPS**

Revised March 2024

This handbook has borrowed heavily and is adapted from work done by the Diocese of Missouri who in turn borrowed and adapted from the Diocese of Connecticut. Additional credit goes to the Diocese of California. We thank each of these Dioceses for generously sharing their materials.

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GOAL OF THE CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT GROUP

The goal of the Congregational Discernment Group (CDG) is two-fold:

1. The CDG comes to consensus, if possible, along with the individual (known as the “Discerner”) about what calling is being heard from God. If the group is unable to come to consensus, then the report to the Commission on Ministry should include the differing viewpoints so that the priest, vestry, Commission on Ministry (COM), and the Bishop fully understand the recommendation(s) of the CDG members.
2. The Discerner is able to thoroughly articulate the calling God has placed on their life.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT GROUPS

1. Four to six active congregants appointed by rector or designated clergy
2. Able to commit to the following time frame:
 - a. Read this handbook in its entirety.
 - b. Attend orientation/ training session for congregational discernment groups.
 - c. Six to eight sessions with individual over a 3-to-6-month period of time
3. The CDG will:
 - a. Complete the report form in Appendix B, that includes a narrative report. Produce a report for Commission on Ministry (COM) articulating the individual’s call. The report will contain full description of the discernment process undertaken by the discernment Group [see report form].
 - b. If the Discerner’s call is to ordained ministry, the CDG will also give the vestry a copy of the report and include a statement of congregational commitment for on-going support of the individual.
 - c. Provide support follow-up for individual seeking discernment during the formation process.

INTRODUCTION TO DISCERNMENT

One of the notable factors of the Christian community is that it is a community. The body of Christ is most clearly equated to the community of those who believe in Christ. Each member of the body remains an individual and yet is an integral part of the group. It is the gifts of each person working together with others that help the group function at its best and accomplish great things. Sometimes an individual may not be aware that they have certain gifts. With the help of a few fellow Christians as guides they can discover hidden gifts and find new satisfaction in the ministry they offer.

One very helpful support for those who are searching for direction in their ministry is a Congregational Discernment Group (CDG). This is a small group of parish members who agree to meet with persons trying to discern their gifts, to offer them support as they explore possibilities. In the case of a person seeking ordination, this lay group would be the group that recommends an individual to the vestry for nomination for Holy Orders. Trust the Holy Spirit to be an active participant as the CDG gathers to support one another in discernment. Discernment is listening to God and discovering God's will for one's life. In many respects this process provides opportunities for vocational discernment for all involved, not just the individual seeking discernment about a vocational direction leading to Holy Orders. The CDG may continue to serve the congregation as an ongoing group that assists parishioners with any questions for which discernment would be valuable.

It may seem presumptuous to be part of the decision for another person and yet it is a rare gift and an important ministry to offer your time and attention as a resource for someone who is exploring. The individual may be seeking to redirect their personal ministry in the parish community; or they may be looking toward the world of need outside the church doors; or may feel a call to pursue ordained ministry. The person will be able to move forward to the task with stronger clarity if members of the congregation have been part of the exploration.

Ministry, in whatever order, exists for the building up of the body of Christ, which in turn endures as God's gift, a witness to and servant of God's reign in the world. Ministry is not primarily about an individual; it is about all of us who are knit into Christ's body- the Church. These ministries in turn look to the community for meaning and for purpose. Deprived of this point of reference, both ministers and Church languish.

~The Rt. Rev. George Wayne Smith, 10th Bishop of Missouri.

FORMING A CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT GROUP

APPOINTMENT AND EXPECTATIONS

The rector or designated priest will assign no fewer than four or more than six persons to the task.

All members of CDG, including discerner, read the CDG handbook prior to the orientation session.

All members of CDG attend the orientation session.

The Discerner also attends the orientation session.

Group meets one time for orientation session.

One person assumes leadership for the group.

Group then meets, on a regular basis, with individual seeking discernment.

DISCERNMENT:

The goal of the CDG is two-fold: 1) The CDG comes to consensus along with the individual about what calling is being heard from God; and 2) The Discerner is able to thoroughly articulate the calling God has placed on their life.

The CDG will produce a report for the Commission on Ministry (COM) articulating the individual's call. The report will contain a full description of the discernment process undertaken by the CDG (see form in Appendix B). If the CDG believes there is a call to ordained ministry, they will provide a copy of the Report to the vestry and include a statement of congregational commitment for on-going support of the individual. The CDG is expected to continue to provide support to the Discerner during the formation process.

In order for the CDG to complete its work, it will need a brief spiritual autobiography from the Discerner by the fourth session outlined in the pages below. See Appendix A for more detail on the spiritual autobiography.

FORMATION AND ORIENTATION SESSION

Suggestions For Discernment Meetings

Four to six members selected by local parish priest or designated clergy person.

1. Select four to six people from the congregation; **the sponsoring priest is not a member of the group.**
2. Members are a cross-section of the congregation. At least one vestry member should be in the group.
3. Although it is helpful to have easy access to clergy as a reference for questions about ordained ministry, it is imperative that the sponsoring priest remain an objective pastoral presence for the individual and not participate in the discernment group.
4. It is permitted for group members to include friends and/or acquaintances of the discerner (but not spouse or partner).
5. At least one convener is designated. Conveners keep the group focused and provide opportunity for open participation.
6. Remembering that discernment group meeting contents are confidential, an editor may be designated for the purpose of summarizing material for the report to the sponsoring priest, vestry, and COM, if appropriate.

Suggested General Practices

- A. Members are asked to covenant with one another in maintaining confidentiality of all sessions and materials.
- B. Sessions may be about 2 hours each. Sessions normally occur on a consistent and defined basis so as to maintain continuity between sessions.
- C. In support of the spiritual nature of discernment, please begin and end each session with silence and prayer.
- D. Verbally summarizing each session during the last few minutes before the closing silence and prayer allows the group to determine what the issues, topics, and questions are to be discussed during the next meeting. From time to time, it may be appropriate to take a step back to reflect on the direction the discernment is taking.

DISCERNMENT SESSIONS

There are two main focuses of each discernment session within its spiritual framework (the former is educational in nature while the latter is reflective):

1. Identifying and understanding what ministry is (i.e., all baptized/deacon/priest/bishop)
2. Identifying and understanding the Discerner's call to ministry.

The eight sessions on the following pages are a suggested model for coming to a consensus on the groups understanding of the Discerner's call to ministry (whether that is lay or ordained). These sessions could be condensed into as few as six sessions. The material explored in these sessions is significant. The group may choose to add an extra meeting to more thoroughly explore a particular subject from the sessions.

The process you are entering as a group is a delicate one. The questions posed in each of the sessions are meant to help the members of the group sift through their individual and collective experience of themselves and of the person seeking discernment. We suggest that if issues arise that seem beyond the scope of the group's task they be raised jointly with the sponsoring priest, convener, and the person seeking discernment.

Each group should define its own norms. The following are some suggestions.

1. Take time to become settled in God's presence.
2. Listen to others with your entire self (senses, feelings, intuition, imagination, and rational faculties.)
3. Do not interrupt.
4. Pause between speakers to absorb what has been said.
5. Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking.
6. Speak for yourself only, expressing your own thoughts and feelings, referring to your own experiences. Avoid being hypothetical. Steer away from broad generalizations.
7. Listen to the group as a whole – to those who have not spoken aloud as well as to those who have.
8. Generally, leave space for anyone who may want to speak a first time before speaking a second time yourself.
9. Hold your desires and opinions – even your convictions – lightly.

SESSION ONE: Listening

Focus: During this first session, the structure of the meetings is introduced, including its educational and reflective styles. If members of the group do not know each other, this is a good time for basic introductions.

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Welcome and introductions.

A Prayer for Quiet Confidence, BCP page 832.

Review Guidelines for Discernment Groups

What is ministry? What is the ministry of each member of the discernment group? What is the current ministry of the Discerner?

What is listening: How do you listen for God? How do you know what God wants of you? What are the impediments to the discernment of listening for God? What conditions help us discern God's call?

Members of the group may wish to share how they discerned their call to ministry.

Summary of session

Silence

Closing Prayer: (Appoint someone before the session starts to lead the closing prayer.)

A Prayer by Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O.

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

SESSION TWO: Service

Focus: This session answers, in more depth, “What is ministry?” from Session One

Opening Silence

Prayer of Vocation in Daily Work, BCP, page 261.

Exercise A

Read aloud with one member of the group taking the role of “celebrant” the Renewal of Baptismal Vows, BCP pages 292-294.

Which of these vows are easy for each group member to fulfill? Which are harder, if not impossible? When do you succeed in “seeking and serving Christ in all persons?” Where do you (and the Church) fail? Share personal stories. How do you proclaim by word and example the Good News? Which is easier for you, word or example?

Who have been examples in your local community of servant hood? What qualities do they exhibit? When do you feel called to serve? What do you feel when you are not called to serve?

Exercise B

Reflect on the descriptions of the orders of ministry in the catechism (BCP, page 855) and Examination in the service of ordination: of a deacon (BCP, page 543); of a priest (BCP, page 531).

Summary of session

Silence

Closing Prayer: Prayer for Social Service, BCP page 260.

Preparation for session three: Discerner writes a brief outline (Vision Statement) of what they believe is God’s call to them. This statement may be vague or detailed, but it gives the group a brief introduction as to where the Discerner is in discernment. Instructions for writing the Vision Statement can be found in the appendix.

SESSION THREE: Mission

Focus: This session continues with the question from Session One “What is the ministry of the Discerner and expands it to include future ministry possibilities.

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Opening Silence

Prayer for the Mission of the Church, BCP page 816.

Exercise A

Read together and reflect on Matthew 28. Briefly consider the following questions:

How do you know the resurrection of Jesus? Who was your Mary, the one who told you of Jesus rising from the dead? What is the Good News for you? How do you share it? In what ways do you exhibit an Easter attitude?

Review the three mission statements on the top of page 855 in the BCP.

Exercise B

Reflect on the sense of call Discerner has described (Vision Statement) in preparation for this session.

Exercise C (Optional)

The spouse or partner of the individual seeking discernment may be invited to this session to explore future ministry possibilities.

Summary of session

Silence

Closing Prayer: Collect for the Second Sunday of Easter, BCP page 224.

Preparation for session four: Discerner writes a spiritual autobiography to be distributed and read in advance of session four. Instructions for writing the Spiritual Autobiography can be found in the appendix.

SESSION FOUR: Growth, Transformation, Transfiguration

Focus: This session focuses on spiritual formation and attention to health.

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Opening Silence

Collect for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, BCP page 217.

Review guidelines. Discuss the challenges and successes of using the guidelines in the group’s process.

Our Baptismal vows call upon us to “continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers.” (BCP, p. 304) In what ways has each member of the group sought to edify themselves and their faith in Christ? Bible Study? Holy Reading? Retreats? Daily Office? How has your prayer life changed/deepened since your baptism, or confirmation? How do you deal with periods of spiritual crisis, dryness and tedium?

At ordination the ordained promise to “be diligent in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, and in seeking the knowledge of such things as may make you a stronger and more able minister of Christ.” (BCP, p. 52) How does your parish support clergy – and laity - in living into this practice? Why is the reading and study of Holy Scripture necessary for the life and health of the church?

Have you experienced failure in life: Disappointment? Tragedy and Grief? Regardless of the completeness of your healing, how have you been changed into someone more resembling Christ through this experience?

Reflect on the Discerner’s spiritual autobiography. What key situations, people, events shaped the Discerner’s spiritual journey: What might be the influences of the Discerner’s current vocational passion? Where has growth and transformation occurred?

Summary of session

Silence

Closing Prayer: O God of Unchangeable Power, BCP page 291.

SESSION FIVE: Holiness

Focus: This session focuses on self-awareness and openness. Church leaders sometimes have public roles that force them into living in a “fish-bowl.” Church leaders are often faced with issues of conflict management and interpersonal communications styles.

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Opening Silence

Collect at Baptism, BCP page 254.

Read together Matthew 5:48 and Philippians 3:7-13.

What is the holy life? What does it look like? Who is perfect? What does it mean to “pattern” your life (and that of your family) in accordance with the precepts of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Describe someone in your life who is an example of holiness.

How well do you know yourself: Share a time when you were brought up short and an unattractive part of yourself was disclosed to you? In what ways are you aware of your effect on people around you?

To what extent do you buy into the myth that ordination is the ticket to holiness?

How tolerant are you of ambiguity and uncertainty? What is your taste for mystery? In other words, how big is your box for God? How big is your box for our neighbors who differ from you due to race, economic class, health, sexual orientation or gender?

Summary of session

Silence

Closing Prayer: Collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas Day, BCP page 214.

SESSION SIX: Leadership

Focus: This session focuses on self-awareness and leadership style. There are many leadership styles, and there are many settings for ministry. What leadership style matches the leadership needs of a particular ministry setting (e.g. rector of a corporate-size congregation; a hospital chaplain; director of a food pantry, etc.)?

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Opening Silence

Collect for the Church, BCP page 816.

Read together Numbers 11:16-17, 24-25 and Matthew 9:35-36.

How do these lessons characterize leadership? What is the nature of Christ's leadership: Directive? Non-directive? Builder of consensus?

How would you characterize the relationship of Jesus to his disciples?

Does your congregation find a focus in its priest? Does the congregation derive its identity from the priest? Is the congregation inspired to carry out the mission of the church because of the priest? Is your church more accustomed to a "top-down" style of leadership, consensus building or both? Does the authority of the priest derive from the position/status granted to them by the church, or does the authority come from the priest? How anxious is the Discerner when placed in leadership roles?

Does your congregation have a deacon? If so, how is leadership shared? In your understanding, what are the differences and similarities between the priest and the deacon?

What about lay leaders in your congregation? What is the source of their authority? How do they work with clergy and share leadership?

What qualities does each member of the discernment group demonstrate that either exhibits leadership or enhances it in others both in the church and in the world?

Summary of session

Silence

Closing Prayer: Proper 19, BCP page 233.

SESSION SEVEN: Obedience

Focus: During this session, the group, including the Discerner, is wrapping up the previous six sessions. Listening deeply is the focus.

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Opening Silence

Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, BCP page 225.

The word obedience derives from the Latin word “to hear or listen deeply”

Name/explore some persons in the bible who are examples of this kind of obedience (Abraham, Sarah, Ruth, Samuel, Jesus, Peter, Paul). In each case, there were some heavy prices to pay for their obedience that preceded whatever reward came to them.

What are the limitations, restrictions, and other realities in the individual’s life that must be reckoned with and obeyed? These may take the form of responsibilities and obligations (to marriage commitments, children, family, self) that must be honored *prior to* making the sacrifices of a ministry. Ministry *never* rescues a person from these more fundamental places of faithfulness.

Have the individual and the members of the group been faithful in their *sacrificial* giving to the church in time, talent, and treasure? What challenges and what blessings have resulted in such exercises of obedience?

How has the Discerner displayed commitment in the face of hardship?

Summary of session

Silence

Closing Prayer: Prayer of St Chrysostom, BCP page 126.

SESSION EIGHT: Sending out for Ministry

Focus: During this session, the group, including the Discerner, is reflecting on the previous seven sessions and attempting to come to consensus about the Discerner's call to ministry.

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Opening Silence

Prayer: May the Holy Spirit, who has begun a good work in us, direct and uphold us in the service of Christ and his kingdom. *Amen.*

Reflect on what has been discussed in the previous seven sessions.

Has the Discerner reached some clarity about the direction of his/her/their future ministry? Does the group believe the Discerner is called to a particular ministry within the church? If so, which ministry?

How will the group support the Discerner in his/her/their continued discernment?

If the Discerner's discernment has led the CDG to consensus about a call to ordained ministry, the CDG needs to write a report of its work to the Commission on Ministry and the vestry.

Summary of session

Silence

Closing Prayer: Prayer attributed to St. Francis, BCP page 833.

NOTES:

APPENDIX A: Spiritual Autobiography (Materials adapted from The Episcopal Diocese of Kansas City)

A spiritual autobiography is different from your life story. A spiritual autobiography is the story of your faith, your belief system and how it came to be. What do you believe? What is your theology? What influenced your beliefs and spirituality? Who were your models and teachers? In other words, tell us about the formation of your spirituality and how that is continually fed, nurtured, strengthened, and challenged. Your spiritual autobiography should be five to seven pages.

Some things to consider as you are writing your spiritual autobiography:

Just as we look for God's presence and action in our scripture studies, in developing a spiritual autobiography, we likewise look for God's presence and action in our own lived experiences. We reflect on the people, times and events that have been significant in our spiritual lives. We are looking for the things that have made us the spiritual beings we are today. Think about

- Encounters with God (mystical, practical, in alone moments, through other people)
- Significant events (when your faith has been tested, strengthened, revealed)
- Experiences of spiritual growth (epiphanies, gradual enlightenment/learnings)
- The modeling and witness of others (the "Christ bearers" in your life)

Tell your story. What were your parents or another family member's religious or spiritual influence on you? What messages were communicated to you about God by those who had care over you? (For example, "God loves you" or "If you're bad, God will get you!" or "Christians are narrow-minded, judgmental people" or "God does not exist," etc.) What early experiences had great impact on your subsequent spiritual journey? If your family went to church, what was the impact of your church community on your childhood, teenage and adult life? How have later church communities you've been a part of affected your spiritual life?

Finally, tell us what ways God is active in your life today. Through whom or what? What is your understanding of your relationship with Christ today? Say something about the commitments you have made as a result of your life's experiences and your sense, if any, of the Christian vocation you have developed as a result.

Reflect on all this before you begin writing. Make notes for yourself. Then begin writing. You may find that you have exceeded the seven-page limit we have given you. If so, keep a copy of the entire spiritual autobiography you have written for yourself. (Your priest or discernment committee or others may also want to see a longer spiritual autobiography.) For the Commission on Ministry, please condense any longer spiritual autobiography to the required four pages before submitting.

APPENDIX B: DISCERNMENT GROUP'S REPORT

Note: Everyone in the CDG, including the one who requested discernment contributes to the report as indicated. An editor may be designated to make the report cohesive.

Name of individual _____

Congregation _____

City _____

Congregation Discernment Group Members (printed or typed):

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Dates the Group Met (month/day/year):

Please write a narrative report of your work to the Commission on Ministry and the vestry addressing the following areas. The report should be typed and cohesively integrate the thoughts of all members of the CDG and attached to this form.

To what ministry do you hear God calling this individual, i.e. lay, diaconate, or priesthood?

Describe the Discerner's call to ministry.

How has the Discerner exhibited diligence in the study of the Scriptures and prayer, reading and study or participation in study groups, workshops, conferences?

Describe how the Discerner demonstrated a spirit of reconciliation as stated in the baptismal covenant.

Is the individual able to serve all persons? With what groups is the Discerner most comfortable? Least comfortable?

In what ways has the Discerner exhibited leadership among fellow ministers to build up the family of God?

Where does the Discerner find support and nurture both within and outside the Church?

Signatures of the Congregational Discernment Group Members:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Date _____

SIGNATURE OF INQUIROR

I have participated in, read, and understood the response of the CDG.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX C: CONTINUING SUPPORT OF THE INDIVIDUAL SEEKING HOLY ORDERS

Acceptance of Postulancy

If the individual is nominated and accepted for Postulancy, the congregation must determine how it plans to sponsor the postulant. The congregation should continue to nourish the postulant in every way possible (including appropriate financial support) throughout the critical process towards candidacy and, following that towards ordination.

It is particularly important to this end, to appoint a **congregational sponsor**, preferably someone who has served on the CDG and is familiar both with the postulant and with diocesan procedures for ordination. The congregation at large, as well as the vestry should be aware that the education and formation leading towards ordination constitutes a long, demanding, and costly process.

Parish Communications

The appointed congregational sponsor's task includes the following:

- i. Communicating with the postulant personally, or by mail/email/text if the postulant is studying at a distant seminary.
- ii. Arranging for new vestry members to meet the postulant.
- iii. Reporting to the vestry the postulant's progress.

Vestry Withdrawal

The vestry may, in rare cases, decide to withdraw sponsorship. The postulant should have ample warning of the possibility of such action, with the reasons for it and suggestions for effective improvement. If such action is eventually taken, the vestry must have in place procedures for communicating this disappointing decision in a sensitive, timely, and pastoral way.

Ordination

Finally, the vestry should remember that it remains a primary support group throughout the progress towards ordination. This is symbolized by the requirement that it submit endorsements for advancement to candidacy, and for the ordination to the diaconate and to the priesthood. The ordination, when it comes, will be a joyful event in the life of the congregation.

Denial of Postulancy

In case Postulancy is denied the one seeking Holy Orders, the vestry and the CDG should have in place pastorally sensitive procedures for supporting the individual through the disappointment or delay that may result. If the individual intends to re-apply, the CDG should help her/him/them develop the skills that may be required. Or the CDG may identify other areas of ministry for which the individual is better suited. Being asked to wait is sometimes a healthy choice for everyone.

APPENDIX D: SUGGESTED READINGS FOR DISCERNMENT

OUTLINE OF FAITH, ORDERS OF MINISTRY AND BAPTISMAL COVENANT
Book of Common Prayer pp. 845-862

DISCERNING YOUR SPIRITUAL GIFTS
Lloyd Edwards, Cowley, 1988

LISTENING HEARTS: DISCERNING CALL IN COMMUNITY
Suzanne Farnham et al. Morehouse, 1991

GROUNDED IN GOD: LISTENING HEARTS FOR GROUP DELIBERATIONS
Suzanne Farnham et al. Morehouse, 1991

LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK: LISTENING FOR THE VOICE OF VOCATION
Parker Palmer, Jossey-Bass, 1999

CALLING: A SONG FOR THE BAPTIZED
Caroline Westerhoff, Cowley, 1994

SERVANTHOOD
Bennett Sims, Cowley 1997

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF MINISTRY
www.episcopalchurch.org

LIVING ON THE BORDER OF THE HOLY: RENEWING THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL
L. William Countryman, Morehouse, 1999

MANY SERVANTS: AN INTRODUCTION TO DEACONS
Ormonde Plater, Cowley, 1991

THE DIACONATE: A FULL AND EQUAL ORDER
James Monroe Barnett, Trinity Press International, 1995

These are just a few of many resources for discernment available. They may be available through internet sources such as amazon.com or barnesandnoble.com if not in a local bookstore.