

Appendix 8 – Guide for Parish Discernment Groups

Overview and Purpose

When the clergy leader and the applicant determine that the applicant is ready, a Parish Discernment Group is formed. Participants typically include the applicant, a group of five to six lay people from the parish; it must include one member of Parish Council. The clergy leader oversees and supports group leaders but does not participate in the group meetings. The Group will also include a member from another parish and who may have been involved in a Parish Discernment Group in their parish.

The Group meets for six to nine months and can only begin after the Ministerial Discernment Lead has met with the members of Group and the applicant to orient them to the work.

The purpose of the Group is to provide an intensive time of meeting with the applicant to:

- a) review the applicant's sense of call;
- b) have a frank discussion of learning goals and the progress made towards those goals;
- c) explore the applicant's learning of the dimensions of the Criteria for Holy Orders;
- d) and, determine whether the group can affirm the applicant's call to ordained ministry at this time.

Work done earlier (including the use of the Assessment tool, work on the Action Learning Plan and meeting with the clergy leader to reflect on experience in the parish) continues during the life of the Group.

The Group should follow the flow of meetings and conversations outlined below. At the conclusion of the series meetings, the Group writes a letter (Appendix 9) to the bishop outlining what they observe to be the applicant's strengths and those areas needing further work with respect to the Criteria for Holy Orders. The letter will explicitly state the overall recommendation of the group: "yes," "no" or "not at this time."

Session Guide Introduction

This guide is designed to help Parish Discernment Groups assist the applicant in exploring their call and to help the Group explore its own experience of the applicant both through reflecting on the applicant's experience in the parish and the Group meetings. In most cases, an applicant exploring their call will already be exhibiting aspects of diaconal or priestly ministry. The sessions are intended to help the applicant and the Group identify and explore these aspects.

This guide is based on the Criteria for Holy Orders. There are ten sessions outlined in this guide including introductory and concluding sessions. Most sessions cover a given topic or theme, and include work to be done before the session, question prompts and activities. Groups should follow this guide and may augment it with their own questions as well.

The clergy leader should continue to support the applicant's growth and learning while the Group is meeting. The clergy leader's role is to support and oversee the Group, but the clergy leader does not attend the sessions.

To help facilitate meetings, each group should select a convener and a secretary (neither of these roles is appropriate for the applicant).

The convener is responsible for setting meeting dates, contacting the group and distributing any materials. The convener should be willing to be a point-person for communications with bishop's office regarding the applicant's process. The convener should be a person who facilitates the conversation in meetings, steering the conversation back to its focus should it begin to drift. It's helpful if the convener has had prior experience in small group leadership.

The secretary can be rotated among members (again, with the exception of the applicant). Notes gathered by the secretary will form the basis of formal letters submitted to the bishop.

General Outline for Meetings

Groups will meet for six to nine months and should plan to meet for at least 90 minutes per session no less than once a month. Groups begin when the clergy leader and applicant agree that the applicant is ready. They conclude when the Group has examined all the questions in the guide and has arrived at a consensus about the applicant's call to Holy Orders.

Each Group will find its own rhythm and style. Groups should open and close each session with prayer, silence or both. Each session should also include some time for personal sharing, prayer and mutual support.

Session Nine provides for a time for members to meet without the applicant present for their own discernment conversation. Groups may find the need to do this more frequently, for instance, at mid-point in the meeting cycle. This check-in time can be used to identify areas of the applicant's call, experience or learning that members wish to revisit or to explore more fully. If differences in discernment are identified during the process, the Group can then take steps to attempt resolution.

Groups are welcome to supplement, but not replace the guide with their own work.

Session One: Introductions and Spiritual Autobiographies

Before the group gathers, each member (including the applicant) should prepare as follows:

Prepare the story of your spiritual life. Make sure you include many aspects of your life in what you share: personal life, family life, vocational life and life in the Church are all relevant. Forms that your autobiography can take may include (but are not limited to): a timeline with milestones and turning points; a collage with images that communicate important themes; a picture or pictures that communicate your spiritual history and life via images; or the use of some other medium that best suits you. After you complete this in a comprehensive form, decide what you would be willing to share with the group in a 15-minute presentation.

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting exercise: Pray together the Collect for Ordination (pg. 653 of the BAS). Briefly introduce yourself to the group: your name, any role(s) in the parish, and one expectation that you are bringing to this process.
2. Go over any norms for the group: Arrive and end on time, what is said in the group stays in the group, use "I statements," etc.
3. Activity: Each member of the group should spend ten to fifteen minutes sharing their spiritual autobiography. Group members simply receive someone's story after it is offered (no need to probe further or comment on it). If the sharing needs to be carried over to a second session, do so.
4. Reflection: After everyone has had a turn telling their story, the group explores:
 - in what ways do our spiritual journeys connect thematically to one another?
 - what similarities do our stories share?
 - what differences?
5. End with any comments about the next session and prayer of your choice.

Session Two: The Criteria for Holy Orders and the Call Narrative

Before the group gathers, each member should prepare as follows:

Review applicant's Enquirer's History Form, Assessment Tool and Action Learning Plan (applicant should send these to the members of the group to review before the meeting).

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting exercise: A member offers prayer. Read together Matthew 4:18-22. Reflect briefly on one time when God interrupted the expected pattern of your life.
2. Activity: Read the Criteria for Holy Orders aloud. Speaking without interruption, the applicant shares the work they have done so far. This should focus on insights and discoveries made to date. In a go-round fashion, each group member shares

their impressions and experience of the applicant's leadership and personal growth.

3. Reflection: The applicant with other group members identify:
 - What do they hear are the applicant's areas of strength?
 - What are the areas that the applicant still needs to work on?
 - What are the areas the group and the applicant believe are important to explore more fully?
4. End with any reminders about next session and with prayer.

Session Three: Gatherer and Builder of Community

Before the group gathers, each member (including the applicant) should prepare as follows:

Read through the description this criterion and make notes about a time when you experienced the applicant functioning in this way. Applicant does the same in reflecting about self.

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting exercise: A member offers prayer. Read together Acts 2:43-47. Reflect briefly on a time when you felt especially connected to this parish community.
2. Activity: Applicant shares a time when they have functioned as a gatherer and builder of community. Other group members share what they have experienced of the applicant as a gatherer and builder of community.
3. Questions for the group to explore with the applicant:
 - What does it feel like for you to function as a gatherer and builder of community?
 - How do you see this function as important to priesthood/the diaconate?
 - What, if any, misgivings do you have about functioning in this way *in the Church*?
 - What have you learned/do you continue to need to learn about functioning in this way?
4. End discussion by going around the group and each person sharing one insight (for themselves or about the applicant) they will take away from exploring this criterion.
5. End with any reminders about next session and with prayer.

Session Four: Christ-Centered Anglican Spiritual Practice

Before the group gathers, each member (including the applicant) should prepare as follows:

Read "The Examination" in the ordination liturgy for deacons (pg. 655-656 of the BAS) or for priests (pg. 646-647 of the BAS), depending on what the applicant is discerning. Make notes about what kind of spiritual practice you imagine would best support the kind of presence and activity described.

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting time: A member offers prayer. Read together Psalm 84. Share one place where you feel especially close to God.
2. Activity: Read through the criteria related to Anglican spiritual practice. The applicant shares their spiritual practice and connects it to the criteria. Explore this question with the applicant:
 - In your current spiritual practice, where are pools of water? Where are the deserts?
3. Other questions for the group to explore with the applicant:
 - Who is the God you encounter in your spiritual practice? Who is the God you long to encounter in your spiritual practice?
 - What comes easier/more naturally for you in maintaining a spiritual practice?
 - What are the challenges you experience in maintaining a spiritual practice?
 - What do you think is the importance of having a spiritual practice as an ordained person?
4. End by going around the group with each member identifying one insight about the applicant or about spiritual practice that they will remember from the discussion.
5. End with any comments on the next meeting and with prayer drawing on those things for which group members articulated that they needed prayer.

Session Five: Emotional and Relational Maturity

Before the group gathers, each member (including the applicant) should prepare as follows:

Read through the criteria on emotional and relational maturity and make notes about where you have seen this lived out in the applicant's time in the parish or in the group.

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting time: A member offers prayer. Read together Ruth 1:16-18. Share one relationship that has been important to you in the last month.
2. Activity: Each group member shares one situation in their lives that has called on them to be emotionally or relationally mature. What is the situation and how has it asked you to function? Share in a go-round fashion.
3. A group member will read the criteria aloud on emotional and relational maturity. Explore some or all the following discussion questions with the applicant:

- a. Where in your work in the parish or in your personal life do you most struggle with emotional or relational maturity? What are the specific people or situations that are the most challenging for you?
 - b. Who for you exemplifies the kind of qualities described in the criteria?
 - c. What are you doing to nurture your best self in terms of emotional or relational maturity?
4. In a go-round fashion, each person shares their description of where they have seen emotional or relational maturity in the applicant. Applicant shares as well.
 5. Applicant shares what they have heard in the group and what they believe they continue to need to work on.
 6. End with any comments about the next meeting and prayer.

Session Six: Expressing and Interacting with Authority

Before the group gathers, each member (including the applicant) should prepare as follows:

Read through criteria related to authority and make notes about what the word "authority" brings up for you. Where in your life have you had a positive experience with "authority"? Where in your life have you had a negative experience with "authority"?

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting time: A member offers prayer. Read together the question and answer on obedience from the ordinal (BAS pg. 654). Share a moment from the last month when you exercised authority at home, at work or at church.
2. Activity: In a go-round fashion, each person shares the notes they have made related to their positive and negative experiences with "authority."
3. Discussion questions with the applicant:
 - Where are you comfortable and uncomfortable with your interaction with people who have been given authority in relationship to you?
 - How would you describe your sense of your own authority and how it manifests itself in your relationships in your family, in your work life and in the Church?
 - How would you describe the Anglican Church and its understanding of authority? How is this expressed in the way a parish is structured? In relationship to the bishop and those who carry the bishop's authority?
4. In a go-round fashion, members of the group share their thoughts on this question: what is one insight about the applicant that you will take away from the discussion and what is one question you would commend the applicant to explore? Lastly, the applicant shares one learning they have had about themselves in relationship to this criterion and one area they believe they still need to explore.
5. End with any comments about the next meeting and prayer.

Session Seven: The Love of Learning

Before the group gathers, each member (including the applicant) should prepare as follows:

Make notes: Why might it be important for a priest or a deacon to be a person who is not only open to learning but who relishes it?

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting time: A member offers prayer. Read together Proverbs 8:22-31. Share the name of your favourite teacher at school, and why they inspired you.
2. Activity: Explore some or all with the applicant:
 - Who (besides the person you have mentioned) have been your most important teachers in life? Who were they and what did you learn from each?
 - What life events have taught you the most important lessons or have opened you to the most important learning in your life?
 - What Bible story has taught something very important in your life? What did you learn?
 - What book, movie, saint, theologian or artist (etc.) has been your teacher? What did you learn?
 - Describe one important thing you've experienced in the parish and what it has taught you.
 - What situations or people are harder for you to learn in or from?
 - What areas do you want to learn about in for the future?
3. Group members go around the circle and share with applicant what they have learned in this session about the applicant and this criterion. Applicant then repeats back what they have heard from the group.
4. End with any comments about the next meeting and prayer.

Session Eight: Stewardship of Our Lives

Before the group gathers, each member (including the applicant) should prepare as follows:

Spend some time thinking about the following:

- *Who or what do you value in your life? What people/activities/issues are primary for you?*
- *How does what or who you value translate/not translate into how you spend your time, energy and other resources?*

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting exercise: Read together Ignatius's Prayer:
' Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me.'
 Spend five minutes in silent reflection on this prayer and its resonance with your own life of faith. Allow each group member to share one word that has come to them in this quiet time.
2. Activity: Go around the circle and share one insight that each person in the group had as they did the preparatory work for this session.
3. Explore some or all with the applicant:
 - What is your "Rule of Life," that is, what do and how do you spend your time as you nurture yourself physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, socially? As you nurture the relationships with God and important others in your life?
 - What parts of your "Rule" are easier for you keep? What parts do you need to continue to work on or refine?
 - How do you understand financial stewardship? How do you understand and practice financial giving when it comes to the support of your parish? Your family? Other important people or causes?
 - How do you understand your stewardship of the Earth and its resources? What specifically do you practice to care for Creation?
4. Group members go around and share one thing they appreciate about what they have heard from the applicant and one encouragement they would offer the applicant about the applicant's stewardship of their life.
5. End with any comments about the next meeting and prayer.

Session Nine: Discussion (held without the applicant)

Before the group gathers, each member should prepare as follows:

Read through the Criteria for Holy Orders again as well as your notes. Make notes about the following:

- *What are the criteria or other areas in which I experience the applicant's strengths?*
- *What areas do I believe the applicant needs to continue to work on?*
- *Given my experience of the applicant in the parish and my/our experience of the applicant in the group, can I envision this person as a priest/deacon?*

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting exercise: A member offers prayer. Read together Acts 6:1-7. Share one quality that you feel the church needs in its leaders today.
2. Activity: Go around the circle and share:
 - Perceived strengths of the applicant.

- Perceived areas that the applicant needs to continue to work on.
 - Group members' sense of whether the applicant could be a priest or deacon.
3. Group discusses what they have shared and decides whether they are affirming the call and recommending the person go forward to diocesan discernment ("yes") or whether the answer is "no" or "not at this time" and *why*.
 4. Group decides who will draft the report and how it will be distributed for comment and finalized.
 5. End with any comments about the next meeting and prayer.

Session Ten: Sharing the Report (held with the applicant)

The convener and/or the secretary of the Group shares the report with the clergy leader, clarifying what next steps may be after Session Ten. This same person also meets one-on-one with the applicant and shares the report.

If the recommendation is "yes":

- a. The convener and the secretary meet with the clergy leader.
- b. The convener and the secretary meet with the applicant.
- c. The Group and the applicant meet as outline below.

If the recommendation is "not at this time":

- a. The convener and the secretary meet with the clergy leader to clarify the steps recommended before the applicant would be eligible to re-apply.
- b. The convener and the secretary meet with the applicant.
- c. The Group and the applicant meet as outlined below.

If the recommendation is "no":

- a. The convener and the secretary meet with the clergy leader to clarify what needs to be in place to provide the pastoral care and support the applicant may need.
- b. The Group and the clergy leader meet with the applicant.

When the group gathers:

1. Prayer and connecting exercise: Read together Psalm 98. Share one moment of joy you have experienced in the group's work together.
2. Distribute copies of the report. Group members take turns reading each section aloud.
3. Applicant asks any questions they might have about the report.
4. Discussion of any specific sections of the report and discussion of next steps.

- If "yes," what is the next step?
 - If "not at this time," what is the recommended next step?
 - If "no," what is the next step?
5. Group members reflect together on their experience of the group:
 - What was energizing or uplifting?
 - What was more of a struggle?
 - What new insights were gained?
 6. Close with prayer for the applicant and for all the members of the group.