

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESES OF
**Western New York &
Northwestern Pennsylvania**

Ministry Discernment and Formation Process

INCLUDING DEACON AND PRIEST ORDINATION

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The Diocesan Partnership's Ministry Discernment and Formation Process begins with a call from God. A faithful response to this deserves to be tested, refined, and supported in one's community of faith and the wider church. It is not to be entered into lightly, nor alone. Most people find the process of discernment and formation to be among the most challenging and important endeavors of ministry. In the whole of our Christian vocation, it is a lifelong pursuit.

An intentional process of discernment and formation for ministry is extensive and is intended to take a period of years. This is holy work in our common life and requires us to faithfully listen together, for God's wisdom. It may result in ordination to the diaconate or priesthood, and lifelong service in these roles, though ordination is not a guarantee. In this process, a person may find that they are called to other types of ministry and it is our hope and intent that such outcomes be affirmed and valued.

Once begun, the person discerning and being formed may find it appropriate to pause, slow down, or discontinue the process; this is to be done in consultation with Tim Kroh (contact details above). At any time, the Commission on Ministry and others involved in the ordination process may advise on pausing, slowing down, and/or seeking additional discernment, counsel, or formation. With consultation of the Commission on Ministry and the Bishop, a process may be stopped; if a process is stopped, spiritual counsel will be offered to the person in process.

This is not an endeavor without costs – actual costs and often less tangible, personal costs. Financial support is available for many formation paths and there are financial expectations for persons pursuing calls to various ministries. Personal costs, including time and emotions, are important considerations. You are encouraged to evaluate these costs at each stage of the process. If you have questions at any time, contact Tim Kroh.

This document details each stage of the discernment and formation process, particularly for calls that may lead to ordination. *Please read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.*

PREPARING

- *Pray.* A practice of regular prayer, using one or more forms of the Daily Office, is vital for discernment, formation, and living into the gifts for ministry that God has given you. Spend time with God, in contemplation and “holy wrestling” about the call you are discerning.
- *Meet with your priest.* Discuss your call with the priest in charge of your congregation or, if there is no regular priest, your Senior Warden or Bishop’s Warden. Then, contact Tim Kroh.
- *Discuss your call* with a few people who know you well and ask them to pray with you.
- *Engage* in ministry, serving God through the church and your local community. We expect that persons entering discernment for ordained ministry are baptized and have either been confirmed or received in the Episcopal Church and are active in worship, learning, service, and leadership through a congregation or regional collaboration. Consider new and deeper ways to serve, which will help you further discern your call.
- *Reflect.* You may want to begin a journal for your discernment, spend time in retreat, and/or work with a spiritual guide. Be attentive and patient; listen for God’s wisdom.
- *Study.* In preparing for this intentional process of discernment, regular practices of scripture study, prayer, and worship are essential. If you do not already have them, equip yourself with a study Bible (NRSV translation) and The Book of Common Prayer. Your local congregation may be willing to provide these for you.

EXPLORERS – Stage 1

- Attend the online Explorer introduction and the Explorer tract of an Aspirants’ Weekend; the first session of the online introduction is to be attended with the Explorer’s clergy, unless other arrangements have been approved.
- If you have not already done so, begin to “try on” new ministries. What is life like if you are fully engaged in the ministry you feel God is calling you toward? What in your life might change and what would not? How can you engage in the ministry more fully now? In what ways may you need additional formation or credentials and what can you begin now? How might this ministry affect your relationships, living situation, finances, and so on?
- Prayerfully and carefully review the vows of Holy Baptism (BCP p. 304), which is the source of our call to ministry; as well as the Examination and Vows of a deacon (BCP p. 543-4) and priest (BCP p. 531-2). Consider how your baptismal promises have guided you up to this point, and how they will continue to be the foundation of all potential future ministry as a deacon or priest. Consider how the ministries of deacon and priest may reflect your sense of personal call, or not.
- Read *On the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All*, by L. William Countryman, and/or other books to help in your discernment. Tim Kroh can offer recommendations.
- *Discernment Group:* Contact your priest and Tim Kroh about setting up a Discernment Group.

These can take many forms, but the standard is a group of 5-9 persons chosen from your home congregation or the wider Church, including a deacon and priest if available, who follow a six-session curriculum of prayer, Bible study, discussion, and worship. These can be done in person, on Zoom, or in a hybrid format. At the end of this time, the discernment team will issue a report to the Commission on Ministry. Contact Tim Kroh for more information.

- *Costs:* While there is no cost for the Explorers' programs or a Discernment Group, this is a time to begin assessing the resources you will devote to increasing ministry – including time, financial support, and other gifts God has given you.

Following an Explorers' program and/or a Discernment Group, a person should prayerfully reflect on the experience and consult with their clergy. If a person is considering applying to become an Aspirant (Stage 2) and has questions about this, consult with Tim Kroh.

□ Application for Aspirancy

An application for Aspirancy may be requested from Tim Kroh; note that this is an extensive application. The application is to be accompanied by 1) a letter of support from the person's sponsoring priest and 2) from their bishop's committee or vestry, acknowledging readiness to enter this process of intentional discernment for new ministry, which may include discernment for the diaconate or priesthood. Details for these letters can be obtained from Tim Kroh.

ASPIRANCY – Stage 2

- *Timeline:* The Aspirancy stage will typically last about a year, but may be longer, especially if a person needs more time discerning.
- *COM:* At Aspirancy, persons are assigned a liaison with the Commission on Ministry. This person may call or check-in with you from time to time and is someone you may contact with questions.
- *Spiritual Counsel:* During Aspirancy, a person may be assigned a person to work with for spiritual counsel. We find this is especially important during the stage of formal discernment (see below).
- *Aspirants' Weekends:* Those Applying for Aspirancy should attend at least two Aspirants' Weekends, in-person gatherings for prayer, learning, and discussion. The Commission on Ministry and members of the Standing Committee of each diocese are in attendance, to assist with discernment, along with persons who are Aspirants, Postulants, and Candidates. These begin on a Friday evening and continue through Saturday afternoon; they are held twice each year – usually in September/October and April/May.
- *Costs:* Check with your liaison or Tim Kroh for cost details. Note that attendance at the Aspirants' Weekends continues through Candidacy (and Transitional Diaconate). During Aspirancy, a person may also engage in reading or study to support discernment; costs range from optional book

purchases and transportation to visit other churches, to tuition for one or two online courses (about \$225 each) or Education for Ministry.

• *Further Discernment:* The Aspirant stage includes several discernment tools and processes, such as meeting with spiritual counsel, directed reading, working with a ministry mentor, and visiting other Episcopal Churches. A person may be asked to complete an internship with a congregation, serve in new ways in their sponsoring church, and/or volunteer with a ministry or organization. Formation programs may be recommended. All of these are designed to support an Aspirant in exploring their call and preparing for future ministry.

• *Pausing, Slowing Down, Ending:* After an Aspirants' Weekend, or at other times, persons may be asked by the Commission on Ministry to pause, slow down, or end their participation in this process. This may give time for the ordering of one's life following unexpected circumstances, time for a move or job change, time and study to become more familiar with the Episcopal Church, and so on. It may also occur because a call for the diaconate or priesthood is not discerned; here, we acknowledge that this is a human process, with God's help, and we are not infallible. If it is discerned that your participation should end, know that it is done prayerfully, carefully, and faithfully. You will be offered spiritual counsel, if such occurs, and we will work with you and your sponsoring priest to help discern other paths for your ministry. A good discernment process may lead to the call of God that may not be what is first explored.

• *Invitation to Postulancy:* After attendance at one or two additional Aspirants' Weekends, or at other times, persons may be invited by the Commission on Ministry to apply for Postulancy.

We consider everyone an "Aspirant," for the purpose of the twice-yearly Aspirants' Weekends for discernment, until ordination to the order discerned. In addition to being a significant part of discernment in community, these weekends are designed to include and fulfill requirements for interviews with the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committees, including interviews for Candidacy.

□ Application for Postulancy

By invitation of the Commission on Ministry, an Aspirant may apply for Postulancy. This includes an application, a new letter of support from the sponsoring congregation and clergy, an extensive psychological exam, a medical evaluation, and a background check. Additional steps, such as a local internship report, may also be required. The Commission on Ministry reviews application materials and votes on Postulancy status, then makes a recommendation to the Bishop. A person is not considered a Postulant until these steps have been completed and the Bishop approves.

Costs: As of 2023, the psychological exam is approximately \$1,750-2,000 and the background check is approximately \$350. The medical evaluation may be arranged through the applicant's personal physician. These costs are borne by the applicant and, when possible, with support from the sponsoring congregation. The applicant may work out a payment plan for these costs and should consult Tim Kroh for details.

POSTULANCY – *Stage 3*

- *Timeline:* This is the longest stage of the process and may take a period of two to five years or longer to complete, depending on the order discerned, formation path, life circumstances, and personal time constraints.
- *Formation:* Postulancy is still a stage of discernment and is characterized by increased formation, with individualized plans. This may include residential seminary, a hybrid program (often referred to as “low-residency,” involving in-person and online formation), and local formation programs, which include online courses. Diocesan and canonical requirements are fulfilled through various programs of study and training. A person who has already completed a master’s of divinity degree from an approved seminary will be evaluated for additional degree programs, certification, or other coursework that may be appropriate. Individual formation plans are developed by Tim Kroh, in consultation with the Postulant, the Commission on Ministry, and the Bishop.
- *Field Placement:* During Postulancy, a person will engage in church and other “field” placements, and may be expected to complete internships in other ministries or community-based, non-profits. These expectations are included in the Individual Formation Plan.
- *Chaplaincy Training:* All persons complete some form of chaplaincy training. For deacons, this may be one or more programs designed to develop pastoral skills and experience related to their intended ministry. For priests, it includes at least one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at an approved site, or a local equivalent. Expectations are included in the Individual Formation Plan.
- *Spiritual Counsel/Mentors:* It is expected that a person will work with spiritual counsel throughout this stage and may be assigned ministry mentors.
- *Ember Letters:* During Postulancy, a person writes regular Ember Day letters to the Bishop; Tim Kroh will provide instructions.
- *Portfolio:* Postulants are expected to keep a portfolio of their formation work, including academic papers, notes on ministry projects and field placements, reflections, and so on. This portfolio is a vital tool for learning and may be utilized during the required exams before ordination. A good portfolio will also help a person gather resources for future ministry. The portfolio may take many forms (notebooks, digital files, etc.) and is the responsibility of the Postulant.
- *Costs:* At this stage, costs (in addition to Aspirants’ Weekends) are primarily associated with formation, which will vary, based on the formation path. For each of these, it is recommended that the Postulant discuss financial needs and possible support with their sponsoring priest and congregation, and with Tim Kroh. The following estimates are for 2024:

Diaconal formation includes academic courses (online), which total about \$2,250 for courses to complete a Certificate of Anglican Studies (may be slightly less if the person has already taken Education for Ministry). Additional training and fees may total an additional \$750, plus related travel costs. Specialty training for particular areas of ministry, such as chaplaincy education, may incur additional costs.

Local priest formation includes academic courses (online), which are approximately \$2,700-3,000, as well as training and other fees, which may total an additional \$1,500, plus related travel costs. Specialty training for particular areas of ministry may incur additional costs. Efforts are made to identify financial support.

Master's of Divinity formation includes graduate-level coursework through an approved seminary and may be residential (typically three years, full time) or a hybrid, "low-residential" model of study (generally four or more years). Costs and available scholarships vary widely. Transportation, housing costs, books, and fees for additional requirements, such as clinical pastoral education, should also be taken into consideration. Effort is made to help Postulants avoid debt and many seminaries have generous scholarship offerings. Persons planning for such formation will find it beneficial to take a close look at their personal finances and calculate needs prior to reaching this stage. Consult Tim Kroh regarding scholarships and other options.

Evaluation updates: If a person's Postulancy is three or more years in length, updates may be required for the psychological evaluation and/or background checks, which may incur additional costs.

- *Expectations for Compensation:* It is understood that compensation for church work as a deacon or "local priest" is rare. Persons in these roles may, with prior arrangement in a local congregation, receive reimbursement for travel expenses, funds to support mission endeavors, and, on occasion, continuing education support. Persons who complete formation with a master's of divinity and who are ordained priest may be compensated and receive other benefits for their work in the church; employment is not a guarantee and may require moving to locations of need. Persons with seminary formation may be called to serve in bi-vocational ministries, balancing church work with calls to serve in teaching, health care, or other roles.
- *Examining Chaplains Review:* Persons who will have a local Examining Chaplains process should arrange a review approximately six months prior to their exam (which takes place during Candidacy). To prepare, a person should review their "portfolio" of formation, including papers written and projects completed. The review should be arranged through Tim Kroh.

□ Application for Candidacy

With approval from the Commission on Ministry and the Bishop, a Postulant may apply for Candidacy. This is to occur *at least six months prior to intended ordination*. This includes a brief application, and new letters of support from the sponsoring congregation and clergy. The person may be asked to provide transcripts and certifications with this application.

- Persons moving in process for the priesthood are first ordained to the transitional diaconate, which is a period of at least six months prior to priest ordination.
- At the time of the application for Candidacy, a person will complete a review with Tim Kroh on remaining requirements, as well as dates on background checks, psychological evaluation, and

certifications. There may be requirements at this time for reports from field placements and others, to review readiness.

The twice-yearly Aspirants' Weekends continue until ordination to the order discerned. These weekends include and fulfill requirements for interviews with the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committees, including interviews for Candidacy.

CANDIDACY – Stage 4

- *Timeline:* This stage may be six months or longer. A person who is to be ordained priest has two periods of Candidacy, transitional diaconate and priest, with each at least six months.
- *Exams:* During this stage, persons in diaconal and local priest formation take local exams. Persons in a master's of divinity program will take General Ordination Exams, which are offered annually, in the first week of January. A person taking General Ordination Exams should consult their seminary for review programs, generally offered in the semester prior to the exams. Exams cover seven canonical areas: 1) The Holy Scriptures; 2) church history, including the ecumenical movement; 3) Christian theology; 4) Christian ethics and moral theology; 5) studies in contemporary society, including racial and minority groups; 6) liturgics and church music; Christian worship and music according to the contents and use of the Prayer Book and The Hymnal; and 7) theory and practice of ministry.
- *Updates:* An effort is made to ensure that most reports and certifications for ordination are completed prior to this stage, though such may be required during Candidacy.
- *Transition Preparations:* Candidates will prepare for and may engage in – with prior permission – interviews for placement. Placement in one's sponsoring community is rare, except for local priests, and placement in the Diocesan Partnership is not a guarantee.
- *Ordination:* Ordination to the vocational diaconate, transitional diaconate, and priesthood are scheduled through the Office of the Bishop and will be initiated by that office, in consultation with the Commission on Ministry. The dates and locations for ordinations, and the form of the worship service, are at the discretion of the Bishop and planned with Diocesan Partnership staff. Ordinands to the diaconate must be at least 21 years of age and for priest at least 24. The Candidate provides their own clericals and vestments (see below); vestments may be available through the sponsoring congregation.
- *Costs:* You may have travel costs related to your ordination; it is appropriate to discuss these with your sponsoring congregation for financial support. As ordination nears, it is appropriate for the Candidate to acquire cassock, surplice, and alb, if not already in possession, and clerical attire. Liturgical stoles, appropriate to the order, are often available in churches where you will serve. Items need not be new and there are many resources for pre-worn vestments. Your sponsoring church, family and friends, and clergy may be willing to gift items, as well.

PLACEMENT

- Prior to and following ordination, there will be discussions with the Candidate/Ordinand regarding

placement. For those ordained to the vocational diaconate and as local priests, the intent is for service in the home diocese, partnership, and local communities.

- *Vocational Diaconate:* At ordination, deacons become part of a network of clergy serving in our Diocesan Partnership and are mentored by our Archdeacons. Vocational deacons are assigned placements by the Bishop, which may be with a congregation, regional ministry, or other suitable mission endeavors.

- *Transitional Diaconate:* Persons ordained to the transitional diaconate are assigned to placements for this period of ministry by the Bishop and will work with one or more priests and, where possible, experienced deacons. This stage may include additional formation, seminary graduation, and work with our Transitions Officer.

- *Priests:* It is intended that persons ordained priest in the Diocesan Partnership serve here, as well. Local priests are assigned to carry out ministry in their local region. For priests with seminary formation (M.Div.), if a suitable placement is not available Partnership staff will work to assist the Candidate/Ordinand in finding placement in another diocese.

- *Bi-Vocational Priests:* Persons who continue employment outside the church, while also serving a congregation or region as a priest (with seminary/M.Div. formation), are considered bi-vocational. Placement must be carefully planned and the intent for this should be discussed with Tim Kroh as early as possible in the person's process toward ordination.

- *Transitions:* Canon Craig Dressler is our Transitions Officer and will be notified as persons are becoming eligible for placement as a priest, to serve one or more congregations in our Diocesan Partnership. This will be done in consultation with the Bishop and Tim Kroh. The call to a congregation requires the preparation of profile documents and interviews. This process will vary from church to church and will be different for assistant/associate and priest-in-charge positions. Canon Craig works with congregations and clergy to finalize letters of agreement. While most of our churches do not have "curate" positions, new priests may be assigned to work with senior clergy for a period of mentoring.

- *Release:* Release to serve in another Diocese is at the discretion of the Bishop. Persons who may wish to request release should notify Tim Kroh at the earliest possible date.