

The Episcopal Diocese Of Western New York

Discerning a Call to Ministry

*Discernment Handbook
for the Diocese of
Western New York*

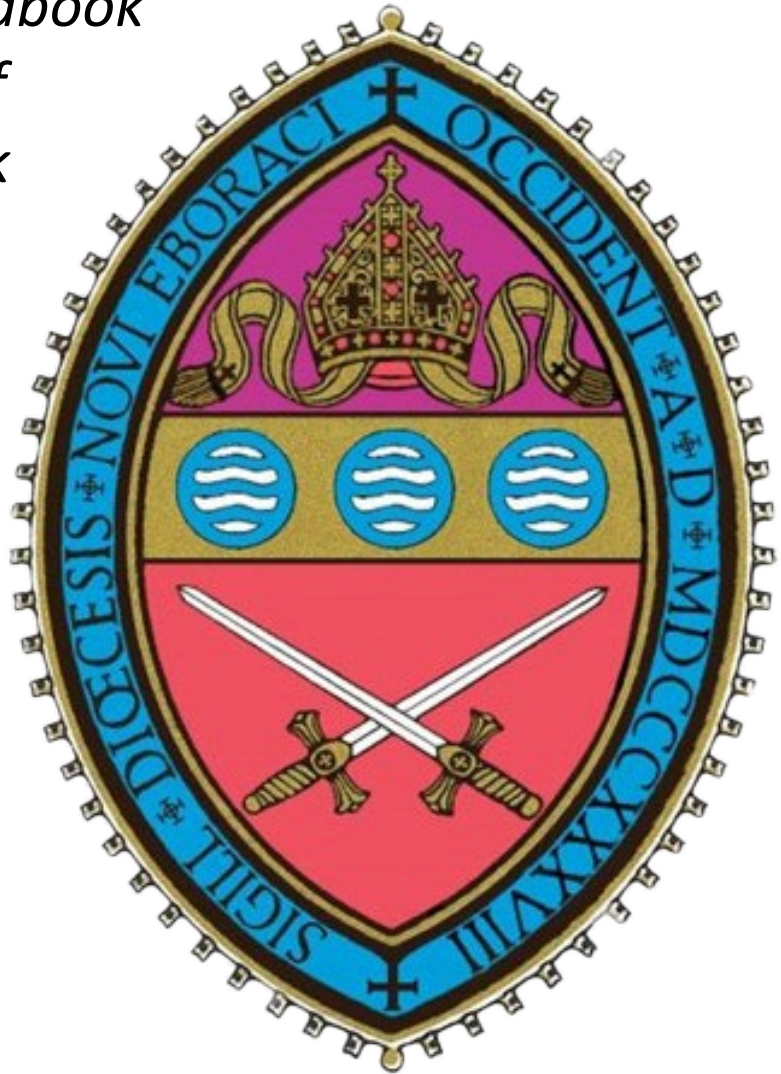


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Note: The forms referenced in this handbook are available at: <https://episcopalwny.org/discerning-a-call-to-ministry/>

I. Overview of Ministry and Ordination

The Right Reverend Stephen T. Lane

Welcome to the Commission on Ministry Handbook for the Episcopal Diocese of Western New York!

The following pages are intended to help you understand our diocesan interpretation of **the process for the discernment of ministries** laid out in **the Canons of The Episcopal Church**. This Handbook should be read alongside **Title III** of the Canons. In fact, it might be best if you read Title III first, and then read about our local process.

The Episcopal Church understands discernment of ministry in the context of Baptism and the life of a local worshipping community. Discernment of ministry is a function of the Body of Christ and is expected to be addressed mutually with members of the local church. Every baptized person has a call to ministry given in baptism. The discernment of particular ministries requires both the internal sense of call on the part of an individual and the external affirmation of that call by the Body. Since the days of the apostles, the church has always given the “Amen” to an individual’s sense of call. (I Cor. 12:4-11) Indeed, the Body has often discerned a call in a person before it has become apparent to that person and raised him or her up to serve. (Acts 6 & 7)

While we often think of the discernment of ministries in relation to ordained persons, the discernment of ministry is intended for all Christians. Therefore, these pages offer guidance for the discernment of lay ministries, as well as for deacons and priests. The Commission on Ministry has responsibility for the oversight of all discernment and formation for ministry in the diocese. Regardless of your sense of call, this Handbook is for you.

Any worshipping community may serve as a place for the discernment of ministry. These communities include, but are not limited to, local churches, college chaplaincies, youth groups, Christian camps, and military bases. Wherever the Gospel is preached in community, there is the opportunity for the discernment of ministry.

Discernment usually begins with a conversation with the priest responsible for the worshipping community. Questions and wonderings may lead to more substantial conversations that then proceed to conversations with the bishop and a formal discernment process. The diocese will sponsor occasional discernment days to encourage and facilitate these conversations.

A brief word here about the priesthood and the diaconate. For many decades, the church understood the call to these ministries as a single call. Those who stopped short of priesthood were called “permanent” deacons, and such persons were often understood to be pastoral assistants to priests. In the early 2000s, during the revival of the diaconate, The Episcopal Church recognized the diaconate as a separate and equal order to the priesthood with separate requirements for formation. We now call such persons **deacons**, and those persons on the way to priesthood are called “transitional” deacons. Formation for both orders requires significant education, which may be undertaken at a residential seminary or one of many non-seminary training programs. The choice will be determined by personal considerations and in consultation with the COM and the bishop.

This Handbook has been revised in 2026 to make it clearer and to reflect the realities of life in today’s Episcopal Church. We hope you find it helpful. Yet we know it may inspire as many questions as it answers. Your questions are always welcome, and we hope you will feel free to address your questions to your local priest, members of the Commission on Ministry, and the Bishop’s Office.

May God bless your discernment and may we all be effective servants of Christ in the world!

+stl
April 2026

II. Conversations for Deepening Discernment

The Holy Spirit authorizes and empowers every baptized person to carry on various ministries for the good of, and on behalf of, the congregation and the world. The Episcopal Church (TEC), by way of its canons (governance documents, laws), calls for each diocese to affirm and develop the ministry of all baptized persons. The Church ordains some to serve through ordained ministry. Most of us act on Christ's love by sharing at home, in our communities, or worldwide the variety of gifts and talents that God has entrusted to us. Parish clergy and/or the diocese train members to serve as licensed Eucharistic ministers, Eucharistic visitors, and worship leaders.

Our individual calls affect the life and ministry of the whole body, just as the companionship of the body shapes and feeds each individual call. Discerning a call to ministry thus involves prayerful attention to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit among us. Whether God's call seems clear or is difficult to hear, we discern it most faithfully with other members of Christ's body, whether in small groups who study and pray together, in discussion with spiritual mentors, or by experiencing the practice of various ministries.

A. Initial Conversation with Clergy Sponsor

When an individual is ready to enter a formal process of discernment for any ordained or licensed lay ministry, the first step is to engage in conversations with a clergy sponsor. A clergy sponsor is generally responsible for oversight of the parish/worshiping community in which the explorer is a confirmed and active member and in which these conversations will take place. Conversations may cover a wide range of topics, including the explorer's:

- spiritual history
- experience of community
- physical and emotional health
- commitment in relationships
- financial status
- education
- gifts and passions and
- prior service in the church.

The goal of these conversations is to gain some sort of clarity about the explorer's call to ministry. During this period the explorer should become familiar with The Book of Common Prayer, 1979, especially the sections regarding baptism and ordination. The explorer should also review the Canons of the Episcopal Church, "Title III: Ministry," which speaks of both ordained and licensed lay ministries.

B. Aspirants Weekend

The Commission on Ministry for the Diocese of WNY hosts Aspirants Weekends for an overnight gathering. Aspirants Weekends would include anyone exploring a potential call to ordained ministry through the church. Persons who are exploring a potential call to ordination attend along with members of the Standing Committee and Commission on Ministry.

Aspirants Weekends explores the practice of Christian discernment in general, as well as offering information about current and/or expected opportunities for ministry. The gathering includes presentations and discussions about what it is like to serve in an ordained role. It also provides information about the diocesan discernment process.

III. Discerning and Preparing for Lay Ministries

By virtue of our baptism, we are all called to ministry. The Holy Spirit authorizes and empowers every baptized person to carry on various ministries for the good of and on behalf of the congregation. For some Christians, this means being called to ordained ministry. For most of us, this means being actively involved in lay ministry or ministries.

After engaging in conversation with a clergy sponsor and attending the Aspirants Weekend, explorers may discern a call to a deeper engagement in lay ministry. If so, they are encouraged to continue receiving spiritual direction for ongoing discernment and support, and to participate in regular Christian formation. Adult education classes, small groups, Bible studies, and prayer groups provide opportunities for learning and growth in the Christian faith. Those who are interested in an in-depth study of scripture and theology may enjoy participating in Education for Ministry (EFM), a program offered at parishes around the diocese.

While the possibilities for lay ministry are limitless, The Episcopal Church canons outline specific licensed ministries for which the diocese provides formation and support. For ministries within the church, “a confirmed communicant in good standing ... may be licensed by the Ecclesiastical Authority to serve as Worship Leader, Preacher, Eucharistic Minister, or Eucharistic Visitor.

Eucharistic ministers, Eucharistic visitors, and worship leaders are generally trained in their own parish setting, usually by the rector. The Congregational Management page of the diocesan website includes detailed information about:

- Descriptions of lay licenses
- Required training for lay licenses
- Requesting and renewal of licenses

Information on these licenses are available at www.episcopalwny.org/congregational-management/

IV. Discerning and Preparing for Ordained Ministries

A. First Conversation with the Bishop

If, after participating in the Parish Discernment process and attending the Aspirants Weekend, an explorer considering ordination and their clergy sponsor believe that further formal discernment regarding Holy Orders would be appropriate, the clergy sponsor will set up a meeting with the bishop. At the meeting, the explorer, the clergy sponsor, and the bishop will discuss next possible steps.

Before meeting with the bishop, the explorer and the clergy sponsor must submit the following materials to the bishop's office for review.

- A1: Explorer's Information Form (with spiritual autobiography and photograph)
 - See Appendix A for a description of the spiritual autobiography

B. Parish Discernment Process

If the bishop, clergy sponsor, and explorer agree that formal discernment regarding ordination should continue, **the clergy sponsor shall notify the COM Chair**. The next step is for the explorer to work with a group in Parish Discernment (PD) within the home congregation. The role of the group is not to decide whether a explorer should be ordained or licensed, but rather to help the explorer clarify and test their understanding of God's call. As their name suggests, they are meant to assist the explorer in listening and in prayer.

The PD consists of four to six members invited by the clergy sponsor. The group should reflect the diversity of the sponsoring congregation, and it may include members from other congregations, as appropriate. One member of the group will serve as the convener, who is responsible for scheduling and facilitating the meetings. Another member will serve as the scribe, whose job it is to keep notes that will help the PD to compose its final report. A member of the Commission on Ministry may also be part of the PD.

The PD will meet with the explorer a minimum of ten times over a period of at least six months. Each session should last between one and one-and-a-half hours, beginning and ending with prayer. PD members should commit to being present for every session in its entirety. The outline of sessions, including topics and homework, is found below (See Appendix B).

The Commission on Ministry recommends that the explorer keep a reflective journal during the process, and that the PD members write down their thoughts and questions after each session as well. For their final session together, the PD will write a report that responds to the questions outlined below. The explorer, too, will write a final reflection. Both written reflections will be shared with the clergy sponsor, the bishop, and the Commission on Ministry. (Conversations between the explorer and the clergy sponsor should continue throughout the Parish Discernment process.)

The PD, in their work with the explorer, should look for the skills and characteristics of an effective ordained leader, including the following:

- Deep faith and relationship with Jesus Christ
- Passion for the Gospel and for making it known
- Commitment to God's mission of reconciliation
- An ability to lead and to equip others for ministry
- Humility and self-awareness
- Healthy relationships and appropriate boundaries
- A sense of creativity and holy imagination
- Perseverance and adaptability
- Intellectual capacity and a commitment to lifelong learning

Please note: Delving deeply enough to get a clear sense of these skills and characteristics will require that the PD members consider the questions in the session outlines as simply starting points for discussion. Listening well to the explorer's verbal and nonverbal replies will reveal other questions for further discussion.

The Commission on Ministry (COM) will appoint a liaison to facilitate coordination between the congregation's PD and the COM. Prior to the first meeting of the PD, the COM liaison will confer with the clergy sponsor and the PD convener to clarify procedures for the PD's work and to answer questions about the process. At the PD's first meeting, the liaison will explain an overview of the PD process and distribute resource materials to guide their work. After that, the liaison will remain available to the convener to provide additional directions and resources, if needed (See Appendix B).

C. Second Conversation with the Bishop

Following the conclusion of the PD's work, the clergy sponsor will set up a meeting at which the explorer, the clergy sponsor, and the bishop can discuss next steps. Before this meeting, the following documents must be submitted to the bishop's office:

- A2: Explorer's Reflection on Parish Discernment
- A3: Parish Discernment Team Report

D. Nomination by the Congregation and Application for Postulancy

If an explorer has been invited by the bishop to seek nomination from the parish congregation, the clergy sponsor meets with the vestry for a vote (2/3 + majority) on whether to nominate the explorer for ordination. The clergy sponsor informs the vestry about what has been discerned by the CID and at the COM discernment retreat. All information about the explorer is shared with the explicit expectation of confidentiality. A vestry's nomination of an explorer to prepare for

ordination constitutes a commitment that the parish will support the nominee financially and spiritually during the journey to ordination. In order to nominate the explorer, the vestry submits

the following form to the bishop's office:

- A4: Vestry Nomination for Postulancy

An explorer who accepts the congregation's nomination for ordination to the diaconate or priesthood submits the following form, along with documentation of Baptism and Confirmation, to the bishop's office:

- A5: Acceptance of Nomination and Application for Postulancy

The application packet for Postulancy includes:

- A6: Financial Disclosure Form
- Official Transcripts (undergraduate; and post-graduate-if applicable)
- Seminary Transcript & Evaluation (if applicable) OR Nominee would be examined by our Joint Board of Examining Chaplains
- Date of previous application for Holy Orders or Nomination, if any____/____/____
- Executive Assistant begins Background Check process
- Priest Aspirant ONLY
 - A7: Health Questionnaire & supporting documents
 - A8: Authorization to Release
 - A9: Life History Questionnaire
 - A10: Behavior Screening Questionnaire
 - A11: Medical Exam using the required CPG form (by the Nominee's primacy physician)
 - A12: Mental Health Exam using the required CPG Form
 - Report received from physician to the Bishop
 - Report received from psychologist to the Bishop

E. Postulancy

If the bishop accepts an aspirant who has applied for postulancy, the bishop so informs the aspirant. Planning for study and supervision to prepare the postulant for the diaconate or the priesthood then begins in concert with the bishop.

Plans for the education necessary to fulfilling an ordained role are specified in part by canonical requirements of The Episcopal Church and in part by the bishop's discernment of the formation needed by specific individuals. Those preparing to serve as priests normally have a college degree and undertake a three-year seminary education. Vocational deacons receive training focused on their specific ministries in the world, as well as participating with other deacons in studying scripture, church history, theology, and liturgics as appropriate to their role.

Following the meeting with the bishop, the COM chair invites the aspirant for an interview with the entire Commission on Ministry. Based on this interview, COM will issue a recommendation decision to the bishop. A Certificate of Consent from Standing Committee concerning any impediments to postulancy is issued. Upon receiving both the COM and Standing Committee documents, the bishop will either stop the process or accept the aspirant for postulancy.

Upon being informed by the bishop that he has accepted the aspirant for postulancy, COM will appoint a liaison to the postulant. The postulant will communicate to the bishop during Ember weeks (Holy Cross, Advent, Lent, Pentecost) and to include: Spiritual, Educational, Relationships, and Finance subjects; be faithful at worship and in prayer; be in regular contact with COM Liaison; and function in an assigned community, as appropriate.

Deacon Postulants are required to provide the following:

- A7: Health Questionnaire & supporting documents
- A8: Authorization to Release
- A9: Life History Questionnaire
- A10: Behavior Screening Questionnaire
- A11: Medical Exam using the required CPG form (by the Nominee's primacy physician)
- A12: Mental Health Exam using the required CPG Form
- Report received from physician to the Bishop
- Report received from psychologist to the Bishop

F. Letter of Support by the Congregation and Application for Candidacy

If a postulant has been invited by the bishop to seek support from the parish congregation, the clergy sponsor meets with the vestry for a vote (2/3 + majority) on whether to support the postulant for candidacy. All information about the postulant is shared with the explicit expectation of confidentiality. A vestry's support of a postulant to prepare for ordination constitutes a commitment that the parish will support the nominee financially and spiritually during the journey to ordination. In order to support the postulant, the vestry submits the following form to the bishop's office:

- P1: Vestry Endorsement for Candidacy

A postulant who accepts the congregation's support for ordination to the diaconate or priesthood submits the following form to the bishop's office:

- P2: Acceptance of Support and Application for Candidacy

G. Candidacy

Following acceptance by the bishop of the postulant's application for candidacy, the COM will review the postulant's file, and the COM chair will invite the postulant for an interview with the entire Commission on Ministry. Based on this interview, COM will issue a certificate of

recommendation to the bishop and inform the Standing Committee president. The President of the Standing Committee invites the postulant for an interview. Based on this interview, a certificate of recommendation from Standing Committee concerning any impediments to candidacy is issued. Upon receiving both the COM and Standing Committee documents, the bishop will either stop the process or admits the postulant in the process for Holy Orders. If the bishop accepts a postulant who has applied for candidacy, the bishop so informs the postulant.

Upon being informed by the bishop that he has accepted the postulant for candidacy, COM will appoint a liaison to the candidate. The postulant will communicate to the bishop during Ember weeks, be faithful at worship and in prayer, be in regular contact with COM Liaison, and meet with the bishop regarding placement. In addition, the following is required:

- Supervised Field Education
- General Ordination Examination (GOE)
- Safe Church Training
- Title IV Training
- Racial Reconciliation Healing & Justice Training
- Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) Report
- Seminary transcript & Faculty recommendations

H. Letter of Support by the Congregation and Application for Ordination

If a candidate has been invited by the bishop to seek support from the parish congregation, the clergy sponsor meets with the vestry for a vote (2/3 + majority) on whether to support the candidate for ordination. All information about the candidate is shared with the explicit expectation of confidentiality. In order to support the candidate, the vestry submits the following form to the bishop's office:

- C1: Vestry Letter of Support for Ordination to Diaconate

A candidate who accepts the congregation's support for ordination to the diaconate or priesthood submits the following form to the bishop's office:

- C2: Application for Ordination to the Diaconate

I. Ordination to the Diaconate

Following acceptance by the bishop of the candidate's application for ordination, the COM will review the candidate's file, and the COM chair will invite the postulant for an interview with the entire Commission on Ministry, if needed. COM will issue a certificate of recommendation to the bishop and inform the Standing Committee president. The President of the Standing Committee may invite the candidate for an interview. A certificate of recommendation and certification from Standing Committee concerning any impediments to ordination is issued. Upon receiving both the COM and Standing Committee documents, the bishop will either stop the process or takes order

for ordination. If the bishop takes order for ordination, the bishop so informs the candidate, Standing Comm Pres, COM Chair, Clergy Sponsor, and Canon to Ordinary.

An ordination date as a Transitional Deacon is decided by Bishop and Ordinand. If the Ordinand is continuing as a transitional deacon, COM will appoint a liaison to the Ordinand.

J. Letter of Support by the Congregation and Application for Priesthood

After the following requirements have been met:

- At least 18 mths has elapsed since the date of acceptance by the Nominee for Holy Orders (may include 6 mths as Deacon)
- Faithful at worship and in prayer in a local church
- Regular contact with COM Liaison
- Meet with Bishop re: available positions/assignments
- Served at least 6 months as a Transitional Deacon
- Certificate from the seminary or other program of preparation, written at the completion of the program showing the Deacon's scholastic record in the subjects required by the Canons and giving an evaluation and recommendation.

Then the bishop may invite the ordinand to seek support from the parish congregation. The clergy sponsor meets with the vestry for a vote (2/3 + majority) on whether to support the ordinate for ordination to the priesthood. All information about the ordinate is shared with the explicit expectation of confidentiality. In order to support the ordinate, the vestry submits the following form to the bishop's office:

- O1: Vestry Letter of Support for Ordination to Priesthood

An ordinate who accepts the congregation's support for ordination to the priesthood submits the following form to the bishop's office:

- O2: Application for Ordination to the Priesthood

K. Ordination to the Priesthood

Following acceptance by the bishop of the ordinate's application for ordination to the priesthood, the COM will review the candidate's file, and the COM chair will invite the ordinate for an interview with the entire Commission on Ministry, if needed. COM will issue a certificate of recommendation to the bishop and inform the Standing Committee president. The Standing Committee will review then ordinand's file. A certificate of recommendation and certification from Standing Committee that all canonical requirements have been met. Upon receiving both the COM and Standing Committee documents, the bishop will either stop the process or takes order for ordination. If the bishop takes order for ordination, the bishop so informs the ordinate, Standing Comm Pres, COM Chair, Clergy Sponsor, and Canon to Ordinary.

An ordination date to the priesthood is decided by Bishop and Ordinand.

Appendix A: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography

A spiritual autobiography is a tool for listening to your life and for telling others about it. It records not just the facts, but your telling of their significance. It focuses on how you engage with the world, yourself, others, and God. It speaks to recurring themes, changes in attitude, shocks and surprises, tides and turnings, calms in the storm.

For our purposes, your spiritual autobiography should be about five typed pages long, but no less than three typed pages. Use any or none of these suggestions for revealing who you have been, who you are, and who you seem on your way to becoming.

1. **Think of your life till now as a five-chapter book:** What are the titles of the chapters, and why? Explain what is the same or different about each chapter. Who are the significant characters in each chapter? What are their significant gifts and challenges to you? What tensions (attraction, conflict, companionship) hold these characters in the plot of your life? Which characters have dropped out of that plot, and what difference has that made?
2. **Think of your life as a series of hit songs:** What are they? Who “sang” them in which era of your life, and why? Who is singing to you now? How have the harmonies and rhythms changed, and what do you make of that? As you seek ordination, are you asking to change key, add a refrain, write another verse?
3. **If your life were plotted out on a map,** what would be the interstates? What would be the wandering back roads? What would be the dead ends and how did you come to take them? Where are the scenic routes, and what do they show you? Where did you start at birth and how long did you stay there? With whom did you hitchhike along the way? Did you have to walk through any storms? Where were you when the clouds broke? What led you to take the turns that now seem to direct you toward ordination?
4. **Think of your life as a kayaking trip down a river.** Where did you put yourself and your kayak into the water, and how did you come to that point of entry? Who floats with you on this trip downriver? Where has the river changed course? Where has it deepened and quieted, and what did you do with those pools? Where have you hit the rapids—when and how did you know that things had changed? How did you respond? When and where did you roll over or fall out of the kayak? Have you had to bail yourself out of a sinking situation? If so, how did you do it? Is the river clear and cold, warm and silty, fast or slow now? What kind of water do you think is ahead, and how will you navigate it? What makes you think so?
5. **Think of your life as a pie chart:** Into how many slices is the pie divided? What are they? What color is each piece and why? How do the pieces compare in size? In what order are they arranged and why? Where and how did you get the data from which this pie chart is drawn?

How would your best friend draw a pie chart of your life and why? Your spouse? Your most tenacious detractor? What slices would you change, and how?

Appendix B: Parish Discernment Session Guidelines

TO BE FINALIZED BY THE COMMISSION ON MINISTRY IN SUMMER 2026