

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA REGIONAL DISCERNMENT GUIDELINES

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The Make-Up and Function of a Regional Discernment Group Team

- An RDG (Regional Discernment Group Team) consists of four to six people, lay and ordained from various congregations in a deanery.
- The teams will be selected from a pool of approximately ten people who have been identified by the deans working with the rector/vicar/priest-in-charge in the churches in each deanery and trained by a Commission of Ministry authorized trainer(s). Once a team is selected at least 1/3 of its members must be from congregations other than the discerner's sponsoring congregation.
- It would be preferable to have as many churches within each deanery represented as possible to avoid bias for the discerner. There should be no more than 2 people from any one congregation on an RDG Team at any given time whenever possible.
- The time commitment for an RDG team is usually 8 to 10 meetings over a four to six-month period.
- The first meeting is devoted to information distribution, training and organization. After the first meeting, the dates, time and location of the remaining meetings are determined by the team and the discerner. The time commitment involves six to eight meetings with the discerner, the initial training and organization meeting, several team evaluation discussions before or after a meeting with the discerner, a meeting to assemble and prepare the final report, and finally, a meeting with the discerner to review the final report and discuss the RDG's recommendations.
- The final report remains confidential. It will be given to the aspirant, sponsoring clergy and if recommended to move forward, to the rector/vicar/priest-in-charge and the Vestry/Mission Committee of the sponsoring congregation for their endorsement. In either case a copy will also be sent to the Bishop, the Ordination Coordinator and the Co-chairs of the Commission on Ministry.

The Suggested RDG Meeting Schedule

Session Topic:	Participants:
a. Initial Organization and Training Review	Dean/RDG Team
b. Introduction and Spiritual Journey	RDG Team/Discerner
c. Spiritual Life and Prayer	RDG Team/Discerner
d. Their Call to Ministry	RDG Team/Discerner
e. Family Life and Self Care	RDG Team/Discerner
f. Leadership and Ecclesiology	RDG Team/Discerner
g. Academic and Intellectual Life	RDG Team/Discerner
h. Preliminary Drafting of RDG Team Report	RDG Team
i. Review of the Final Report	RDG Team/R/V/P-I-C/Discerner

A detailed outline of the suggested Meeting Agenda will be presented in a later section.

WHAT IS DISCERNMENT

“In classical spirituality, discernment means identifying what spirit is at work in a situation: the Spirit of God or some other spirit.”

(Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), p. 23).

What does discernment involve? A dictionary would tell you that "to discern" means "to recognize" or "perceive." What is done in an RDG Team is to attempt to discern - to recognize or perceive - the will of God for the Church and for the discerner. Attempting to discern the will of God is risky and bold - just as saying the Lord's Prayer is "bold." Therefore, discernment is, and should be, an exercise in prayer, careful listening or attentiveness, and patience. In discernment we are listening and waiting to gain clarity about the nature of a particular person's calling from God.

- Discernment is more than just a skill. Discernment is a gift from God before it is anything else. Yet there are clearly skills you can put to use when using your gift, and you can become better at it through training and experience.
- Discernment is more than just a process. Even for the most “material” or “nitty-gritty” matters, there is a Spirit at work nudging us, leading us, and even pulling us. Then again, even for the most “spiritual” matters, there are disciplines, methods, processes, means, and tools, which the Spirit can work through to help us discern rightly. Discernment isn't usually a sudden zap from beyond, but something which emerges from hard work and close attention.

Recommended reading:

Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community

(Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward, rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002).

Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations

Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean, rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999).

RDG TEAM MEETINGS

The Charge given to the RDG

The RDG Team is only one of several groups and many individuals that have been, and will be, discerning on behalf of the Church and the discerner. The RDG Team will work with the discerner to help discern God's call through discussions, prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In what way is God calling this person to ministry? What potential can be seen? A final report will be prepared by the team and will contain a recommendation that the discerner either continue in the process of discerning a call to ordained ministry or continue serving God and the Church through baptismal ministry. Also, if anything about the discerner has been identified as an area of concern and would possibly benefit the discerner through additional formation, it should be indicated in the report as well.

INTRODUCTION

We uphold these values when discerning a call to ordained ministry:

- God calls people both by inward spiritual experience and by the outward beckoning of the community, the body of Christ.
- Our process of discerning various calls to ministry is rooted in the history, doctrine, community, and worship of the Episcopal Church.
- Each individual is treasured and held in the highest esteem.
- Baptism calls each person to ministry.
- All orders of ministry—laity, deacons, priests, and bishops—are equally important in carrying out the mission and ministry of Christ's Church.
- In the discernment process we are to be prayerful, centered in God, patient and yearning for gracious guidance.
- Conversations concerning discernment are always to be open and honest.
- Thorough evaluations and recommendations from sponsoring clergy and vestries/mission committees are essential and vital.

We look for these qualities in persons seeking *ordination* and recognize that *this is a long list and many of these qualities may still be developing*:

- A deep commitment to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.
- A desire to seek God's will.
- A love of Jesus Christ that can inspire and empower others.
- A practice of prayerfulness and servanthood demonstrating durable Christian faith and witness.
- A significant leadership involvement in church activities.
- Involvement in and a keen awareness of the issues of society.
- The ability to integrate the needs of the world with the message of the Gospel—a quality especially important for a deacon.
- Commitment to the development of moral character patterned after the life of Christ.
- A capacity for perseverance in difficulty, a resilience in adversity, and an ability in using life experiences as vehicles for personal growth.
- Intelligence and imagination with a sound educational background.
- The ability to learn and a desire to continue to learn.
- The ability to communicate well.
- The ability to teach and to give a reasoned account of the Gospel.
- A desire to help others grow in faith and knowledge.
- A commitment to listen with sensitivity and understanding.
- The ability to hear and accept constructive criticism.
- Initiative and energy; the capacity to be a self-starter and to work hard.
- A sense of humor and humility.
- Self-awareness, including a firm grasp of one's personal strengths and weaknesses.
- A healthy sense of personal and institutional boundaries.
- The ability to care for and serve others and to be with them in times of crisis.
- An enjoyment of others; pleasure in human interaction, and a history of getting along well with others and cooperating in team efforts.
- Breadth of vision and acceptance of others; an ability to relate to people of different personalities and ages and from varying religious, cultural, and economic backgrounds.
- A demonstrable ability to be a leader, to motivate and enable the ministry of others, and to be an agent of change.

SOME PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES

The process you are entering as a group is a delicate one and as a result, each RDG Team will probably be different. The following suggestions are meant to help in the formulation of the path to be taken when interacting with and helping your discerner in his or her discernment.

- A **Convener** or **Facilitator** should be identified to lead the meetings, help the group follow the agenda, make sure meeting times are known by all, and start and finish the meetings on time. If the convener cannot attend a meeting, it is his/her responsibility to identify a replacement.
- A **Recorder** or note taker should be identified for each meeting. Records will be important for further reflection when preparing the final report but should be destroyed after submitting your final report.
- A **Scheduler** can help in establishing the meetings dates, times, and locations most convenient to the team members and the discerner.
- A meeting should **begin with some quiet time** for centering and freeing yourselves of the worries of the world.
- Always **open each meeting with a prayer**. Several relevant prayers can be found in the BCP on pages 810-841.
- Some form of Bible study should be used at the beginning of each meeting. This could entail some form of Bible study, such as lectio divina and should be used at the beginning of each meeting. Suggested passages are: 1 Corinthians 12: 1, 4-14: Ephesians 4: 7, 11-16: Romans 12: 1-8: and Acts 4: 1-13.*
- All must be involved in the discussions. Although your work is primarily focused on the discerner, members of the team should offer abbreviated comments of similar experiences in support of the discerner. Involvement by the team will reduce the feeling of an inquisition for the discerner.*
- An absolute requirement is that **this entire process is confidential**. "What occurs in an RDG meeting stays in the RDG meeting." The only sharing occurs as the result of the distribution of the final report. The rector/vicar/priest-in-charge of the sponsoring congregation receives a copy of the final report and it is up to them whether to share the report with the Vestry. The reports sent to the Commission on Ministry and the Bishop are held in the strictest confidence.
- All questions should be informational** and as open, honest and straightforward as possible. This means no giving advice, no "why don't you?" or "here is how I would do it." No personal agendas should be involved at all.
- Trust in yourself** and ask questions that may be odd but meaningful to you. "What shape or color is your present vocation and what is the one you are discerning?" Why?
- Don't be in a hurry**. Your time together should be relaxed and gentle. Leave time between questions for reflection. Don't be afraid of silence. Silence may mean something important is happening or is going to happen—don't rush to fill the silence.

- **Practice active listening** whenever possible. Listen with your entire self (senses, feelings, intuition, imagination, and all of the other rational faculties).
- **Speak only for yourself and don't interrupt.** Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking. Don't speak in broad generalizations. Don't challenge what others say.
- **Honor the positives and accept the negatives.** The discerner will succeed in his/her vocation because of what he/she does well and not because of what she/he doesn't do well. Support and encourage positive behavior of the team as well as the discerner.
- **At the end of each meeting try to determine how the team and the discerner have worked together.** One possibility is to simply ask what was good and what was not so good about how the groups worked together? Ask what helped and what hindered in the discussions and what we should continue to do, what to delete and what to add.
- **Always close the meeting with a prayer.**

SUGGESTED MEETING AGENDAS

Sessions:

1) "Initial Organization and Training Review" (*Dean and RDG Team*)

- A brief period of quiet, an opening prayer and an optional Bible study or meditation.
- Information and *training areas to review and discuss*:
 - The overall ordination process.
 - The role of the RDG Team in discerning a call to ordained ministry.
 - The Deanery Discernment Committee meeting agenda.
 - The Discernment Process (a discussion)
 - Priest vs. Deacon - what to look for.
 - Lay Ministry and Oblate/3rd Order - what to look for.
- Creation of the RDG's Organization (RDG)
- How did it go? How did we work together? What could be done better?
- Closing prayer

2) "Introductions and Spiritual Journey" (*RDG Team and Discerner*)

- A brief period of quiet, an opening prayer and an optional Bible study or meditation.
- Emphasize that everything that happens in the meetings will be held in the strictest confidence.
- Introduce yourselves—including the discerner—taking about at least 5 minutes each. Have the discerner share some things about the discerner's life, work, things that are important to the discerner, the discerner's relationship with the church and to God. The RDG members should also share their experiences with discernment, if any, and why this type of ministry is important to them.

Has the discerner ever wanted to be a priest or a deacon? Has the discerner served on a discernment committee before for a rector or for someone seeking Holy Orders?
- The remaining time should be spent listening to discerner's spiritual journey. *It is important to work hard to set the tone of the meetings. All team members should actively participate. Listen and offer supporting comments and questions of clarification. Humor is encouraged. Remember don't offer solutions or suggestions and "no why didn't you?"*
- Remember, the meeting is open to move where it wants and, with the Holy Spirit's help, needs to. If the discerner says something that you are curious about or interested in, have the discerner explain. "Tell me more about... or that interests me tell me why you think you felt that way?"

- Remember any question is a good question as long it is as honest and sincere.
- Discuss meeting times and places, necessary absences and whatever else that seems important to team.
- How did the meeting go? How did we work together? What could be done better?
- A closing prayer.

3) **“Spiritual Life and Prayer”** (*RDG Team and Discerner*)

- A brief period of quiet, an opening prayer and an optional Bible study or meditation.
- Discuss the nature and regularity of the discerner’s prayer life.
- Discuss whether they are currently in Spiritual Direction.
- Discuss the discerner’s understanding of spirituality within the Christian context.
- Discuss the discerner’s relationship with Christ.
- Discuss the place of the Eucharist in the discerner’s spiritual life.
- Discuss other issues or questions regarding spiritual and prayer life.
- Discuss the place of scripture in the discerner’s spiritual life.
- Close the discussion with some supportive comments about the discerner’s relationship with God. What did you appreciate about what was discussed?
- How did the meeting go? Did we work together in a good way? What could be done better?
- Closing prayer.

4) **“Call to Ministry - Inward and Outward Aspects”** (*RDG Team and Discerner*)

- A brief period of quiet, an opening prayer and an optional Bible study or meditation.
- Have the *discerner read aloud either the Examination for the Ordination as a Deacon, BCP page 543, first two paragraphs, or for the Ordination as a Priest, BCP page 531, first three paragraphs depending on the discerned call.*
- A clear articulation of one’s call to ordained ministry - especially to the particular order to which the discerner believes they are being called. (priest vs deacon)
- The discerners understanding of the theology of the order to which they feel called.
- The discerner’s understanding of the servant nature of diaconate/priesthood.
- The discerner’s understanding of the sacramental nature of the diaconate/priesthood.
- The liturgical role of a deacon/priest during the celebration of the Eucharist.

- Close the discussion with some supportive comments about the positive outward aspects of the discerner's call. *What did you appreciate about what was discussed?*
- How did the meeting go? Did we work together in a good way? What could be done better?*
- Closing prayer.

5) "Family Life and Self Care" (RDG Team and Discerner)

- A brief period of quiet, an opening prayer and an optional Bible study or meditation.
- The discerner's support system in and outside of family.
- Role of a Spiritual Advisor/Director
- Financial Considerations - are they well thought out?
- Level of spouse/family support.
- Past and present self-care strategies.
- Other issues or concerns regarding family life and self-care.
- Close the discussion with some supportive comments about the positive outward aspects of the discerner's call. *What did you appreciate about what was discussed?*
- How did the meeting go? Did we work together in a good way? What could be done better?*
- Closing prayer.

6) "Leadership and Ecclesiology" (Theology of the Church) (RDG Team and Discerner)

- A brief period of quiet, an opening prayer and an optional Bible study or meditation.
- The discerner's understanding or model of the church in the present - how the model might change in the future.
- What is your leadership style and how did you develop it? What was your first leadership role and how did it go? How has your leadership style changed, if at all, over the years?
- Issues of authority and discipline inside/outside the Church.
- How do you deal with conflict, particularly in interpersonal conflicting relationships?
- What do you do if people don't agree with you and won't follow your ideas?
- Understanding the relationship between bishop and clergy.
- Understanding of own leadership style - can give examples from past experience.

- Can describe “growing edges” regarding leadership abilities.
- Can describe strategies they might use in a hypothetical situation.
- Other issues or concerns regarding leadership and ecclesiology.
- Close the discussion with some supportive comments about the positive outward aspects of the discerner’s call. What did you appreciate about what was discussed?
- How did the meeting go? Did we work together in a good way? What could be done better?
- Closing prayer.

7) “Academics and Intellectual Life” (*RDG Team and Discerner*)

- A brief period of quiet and an opening prayer and an optional Bible or meditation.
- What does the discerner understand as their ability and interest in teaching the faith.
- What kind of formal and/or disciplined course of study has the discerner engaged in related to faith?
- What is the discerner’s awareness and understanding of diocesan requirements for educational preparation for ordination. (Further education)
- What other academic history has the discerner had, and what does the discerner see as their academic strengths and weaknesses.
- Interest and ability to meet academic requirements for ordained ministry.
- Other issues or concerns regarding academic and intellectual life.
- Close the discussion with some supportive comments about the positive outward aspects of the discerner’s call. What did you appreciate about what was discussed?
- How did the meeting go? Did we work together in a good way? What could be done better?
- Closing Prayer.

8) “Preliminary Drafting of RDG Report” (*RDG Team*)

When all agree that there has been sufficient time and opportunity to explore all pertinent issues with the discerner, and if the discerner continues to sense a call to ordained ministry, RDG Team members need *to come to a clear consensus about their own responses to the discerner's call to ordained ministry. If a consensus cannot be reached a separate report should be issued clarifying the related issues and discussed with the Bishop. A report*

prepared by the assigned RDG reporter and signed by all RDG Team members will either:

1. Or: Recommend that the discerner continue the process toward ordination. After meeting with the discerner in an in-depth exploration of all aspects of their call, it is the consensus of the RDG Team that the discerner has a clear understanding of the process and requirements for ordination in our diocese, has thoroughly tested the call and that they too sense that the discerner may have a call to ordained ministry.
2. Or: Agree that they too, sense of call to ordained ministry, but recommend further time, prayer and discernment for the discerner to clarify what that call might be.
3. Or: Not recommend the discerner, at this time, to continue an exploration of a call to ordained ministry.
4. Or: The discerner needs to hear what gifts for ministry the RDG did see in them and encourage them to discern and explore lay ministry more deeply.

Preparations (suggested)

- Find a comfortable and quiet place where you won't be interrupted and spend some time with God. Ask God to guide your recollections and reflections.
- Read all of the notes for each session and spend some time in reflection on each and how each relates to the whole.

Review previous sessions

- What have been the discerner's attitude, involvement and response to the process?
- Has the discerner been open and willing to share her ideas and thoughts?
- Have you seen any signs of spiritual growth during the sessions?
- What areas have been identified as needing some work?
- What has been each of the team member's response so far to the discerner's discerned call to ordain ministry?
- Have you identified any evidence that may suggest that ordination may be a way to find identity rather than to express ministry, more for the "self" than for the Church?
- Finish the discussion with a closing prayer and a request for the Holy Spirit to continue to be with the team and the discerner.
- Some questions to consider:
 - Does the discerner have a good understanding of the nature and demands of the ministry to which he or she believes they are called?
 - Does the discerner have the personality and skills appropriate for the order to which he or she feels called?
 - What are the discerner's strengths for this ministry?
 - Do you see any problem that might make ordination inappropriate for the discerner?

- Can you see the discerner as your deacon or priest?
 - To which order does the discerner feel called? To which order do you believe the discerner is called? Why?
- When you are ready, review the suggested RDG Report Outline below. Take your time with each question. Pay attention to your comments realizing they may affect both the discerner and the Church in some way. After you have written your response to the questions, reflect on the discerner and the members on the team. Give thanks for all the gifts they have given you over the past three months or so.
- Send your responses to the member of the team that has agreed to draft the final report.

Prepare the RDG Report

- Identify a member of the team willing to compile the team members responses into a first draft of the RDG Report following the suggested format.
- The final report must recommend** the discerner continue the process of discernment toward ordained ministry as a deacon or a priest or pursue a particular ministry in lay leadership e.g. lay preaching, evangelist, catechist. No other recommendation can be made.
- Circulate the draft to the team, collect all suggested changes and prepare the final report. If consensus on the recommendation to the Commission on Ministry was not possible, a dissenting report may be prepared and submitted by the descanter.

9) "Review of the Final Report" (RDG Team and Discerner)

- Open with a prayer.
- The RDG Team shares their final report both orally and in writing with the discerner, supporting it with examples.
- Particular attention should be paid to the recommendation and if it differs from a recommendation to continue with the process of Holy Orders, significant justification for the recommendation must be supplied.

Suggested Outline of the RDG Report to the Rector/Vicar/Priest-in-Charge and the Vestry/Mission Committee and should include:

1. Date
2. Name of discerner
3. Names of RDG members
4. Congregations of the RDG members
5. Responses to the following:
 - a. The RDG's understanding of the discerner's call to ordained ministry.
 - b. The RDG's understanding of the discerner's spiritual strengths and weaknesses.
 - c. An assessment of the discerner's intellectual ability to pursue graduate level studies in theology, scripture, etc.
 - d. A description of the discerner's family situation, including how spouse, partner, children, siblings and parents feel about the discerner's desire for ordination.
 - e. A description of the discerner's spiritual history
 - f. A description of the discerner's life and ministry in the congregation
 - g. An assessment of the discerner's potential for leadership in the church.
 - h. An assessment of the discerner's effectiveness in pastoral and/or interpersonal relationships in the congregation.
 - i. Additional observations that the Rector/Vicar and Vestry/Mission Committee should know about.
 - j. The RDG's formal recommendation for the discerner at this point in time.
 - k. Signatures of all members.

The final RDG report will be given to the aspirant and sponsoring clergy. If the aspirant is recommended to move forward it will be sent to the Vestry/Mission Committee for their endorsement and the rector/vicar/priest-in-charge of the sponsoring parish. In either case a copy will also be sent to the Bishop, the Ordination Coordinator and the Co-chairs of the Commission on Ministry.

APPENDIX A

Best Practices for a Discernment Process¹

- Prayerful listening.
- Open mind and open heart.
- Confidentiality.
- Consider this work a high priority and a gift of your time and talents to the Church.
- Trust in the Holy Spirit to guide the process.
- Open in prayer and close in prayer.
- Be respectful and accepting of one another's views and thoughts.
- Be compassionate and caring of all involved in this process.
- Be willing to be influenced by others, not locked into your own opinion
- Listen and guide rather than give advice.
- Raise caring and probing questions to help the discerner move toward a sense of clearness and a deeper comprehension of an issue in relation to God's call.
- This process is focused on the individual's discernment and assisting him/her through this process. Questions that satisfy your curiosity are focused on you, not on the individual, and are not appropriate.

¹ Developed by Lisa Sargent and Mary Davy.

APPENDIX B

Regional Discernment Group Authorized Trainers

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