

EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF CALIFORNIA GUIDELINES AND RESOURCES FOR LOCAL DISCERNMENT COMMITTEES

This document provides a general introduction to Local Discernment Committees (LDCs) within the Episcopal Diocese of California. It is a direct response to requests to the diocesan Vocations Office for guidance. It is not an attempt to direct, replace, or supersede the rich variety of existing discernment models already at work within the diocese. Congregations, Religious Orders, and Christian Communities with active discernment processes in place may use these *Guidelines* as an introduction for new members or for those beginning individual discernment. We hope to provide ideas, models, and resources that may assist individual LDCs meet the needs of their particular faith communities and of those within them.

To this end, we have tried to avoid technical terminology and professional jargon and have appended a list of potential sources for further reference and growth. For simplicity of language and grammar, when used in relationship with a discernment committee or process, the words “congregation” and “faith community” include parish, mission, Christian Community, and Religious Order. Similarly, “rector” may refer to the vicar, priest in charge, clergy in charge, and any other canonically defined superior within the particular faith community. Of particular note, the *Guidelines* emphasize the broader use of the discernment process and LDCs in supporting exploration of personal life decisions and individual calls to ministry outside of holy orders. Individuals and LDCs specifically discerning calls to ordained ministries should also contact the Diocese of California (DioCal) Vocations Officer and refer to the document, *Discerning Your Call to Ministry*, referenced in the Bibliography below.

What is Discernment?

We in the Episcopal Church refer to explorations of personal life decisions within shared spiritual community as *discernment*. Too often the term *discernment* is used only to refer to the process of exploring an individual’s call to ordained order as either deacon or priest. That is not the intent. Anyone experiencing a major life decision—such as a career change, whether to have a child, or how to best care for a loved one—may seek and benefit from a discernment process within our community in Christ. Thus, individual congregations, Religious Orders, and Christian Communities are encouraged to establish Local Discernment Committees and processes in support of the individual discernment needs of their faith communities.

The Episcopal Church believes that all baptized Christians are called to serve God through Christ. Baptism is the only call we need. Indeed, The Title III, Canon 1 of The Episcopal Church (TEC) requires that each diocese provide “assistance in understanding that all baptized persons are called to minister in Christ’s name, to identify their gifts with the help of the Church and to serve Christ’s mission at all times and in all places.” When an individual is discerning a call to a special lay ministry, such as pastoral care or Christian formation, an LDC can be of special assistance in clarifying the call. It is possible that, through the discernment process, the perceived call will change. It also is possible that it might result in a shared understanding of a

personal call to holy orders or to live in more focused Christian fellowship within Religious Orders or Christian Communities. Discernment is a process that does not presume a particular result.

What is a Local Discernment Committee?

A Local Discernment Committee is a group of people who come together to explore with an individual who is seeking to understand and clarify a life decision, which may, but need not, include a call to specific ministry. The Episcopal Church believes in *raising up* leaders from within our congregations and faith communities through community-based discernment processes. DioCal *Guidelines for Those Seeking Holy Orders* require that anyone seeking ordination to holy orders work with, and be endorsed by, an LDC at each of several steps. Thus, strictly speaking, a faith community is only *required* to establish an LDC to work with those seeking holy orders. However, the Diocese of California strongly encourages every congregation, Religious Order, and Christian Community to maintain an active discernment program, including LDCs.

Possible Discernment Structures

Some congregations within the Diocese of California have well-established, institutionalized structures for the process of discernment, which may take a variety of formats. Each faith community is encouraged to intentionally adopt a model that works best within its traditions.

- Some have established an overarching group, often called a Vocations Committee, that may formally be authorized by and/or report to the Vestry. The Vocations Committee may have a variety of functions, including establishing, training, and monitoring individual LDCs. This process helps provide continuity and training, while maintaining the flexibility to be enriched by new voices over time and to respond to individual needs, especially for life event and lay ministry discernment.
- Some congregations have established a single LDC that meets with all people aspiring to holy orders. This model ensures continuity and training, but may be slow to incorporate new voices over time and may not be intended to respond to people who seek discernment for life events and non-ordained ministries.
- Others create LDCs only as individuals approach the rector with a specific need or request. This makes the rector largely responsible for forming and monitoring all LDC activities. It allows for response to calls to lay ministry and people facing life events but may not provide continuity and ongoing training.

How Does a Local Discernment Committee Work?

Establishing an LDC

Generally, a rector recommends establishment of an LDC for a particular individual for a specific purpose. Anyone may initiate the request for an LDC, but presiding clergy should approve it, and the individual must agree to it. The process for creating individual LDCs may be further defined by those congregations with formal discernment structures.

- Generally, an LDC of three to five members is recommended in order to include diverse experiences and viewpoints without having too many voices to foster thoughtful listening and deliberation.
- It is useful to identify prospective LDC members whose life experiences, personalities, and personal characteristics will allow them to listen insightfully and to thoughtfully and to prayerfully enrich the discussions.
- In addition to members of the discerning individual's congregation, LDC members may be recruited from the individual's personal and professional lives and may include trained facilitators from the deanery or the diocese.
- It is recommended to discuss with the discerning individual who that person would like to have (or not have) on the LDC, although it always should be clear that it is the community, not the inquirer, who is forming the LDC.
- LDCs primarily are formed of lay people. However, at times it may be appropriate to appoint an ordained clergy member who does not hold an official position of canonical authority with the discerning individual's home congregation.
- Unless otherwise specified within a congregation, the rector, vicar, or clergy in charge should approve the members of the LDC, especially if discerning a call to holy orders.
- Consult the DioCal Vocations Office for assistance.

Expectations of LDC Members

- **Commitment**
 - Although individual discernment is self-defined, it is important up front to establish an expectation of the length of time of service. If the discernment concerns lay ministry or personal life decisions, the term of service will be determined by the specific situation and need. Whether initially identified or discovered during the discernment process, if it is determined that a person is called to holy orders, service on an LDC may continue for several years.
 - Determine an initial schedule that meets needs of both the discerning individual and the LDC. It may change over time, especially if the individual is called to holy orders. Regardless, the schedule needs to be intentionally established to meet the needs and capacities of all involved. Participants may wish to evaluate progress and reaffirm their personal commitments on a regular basis, perhaps as often as every six months.
 - Depending on the purpose and frequency, meetings may last from 90-180 minutes. Agree on the maximum time up front and keep to it. Begin and end on schedule.
 - Each LDC member is expected to meet as scheduled and to provide the prayerful deliberation between meetings necessary to contribute to the process.
- **Integrity**
 - As members of a community of Christians, LDC members must possess a sincere commitment to, and faith in, discerning God's will in community with others.
 - Empathetic, non-judgmental listening is critical.
 - Be prayerful, candid, objective, fair, and non-judgmental in deliberations.
 - Speak the truth in love.

- Confidentiality is paramount. While it is totally appropriate for the broader faith community to know of, and pray for, someone discerning a call to holy orders, it may not be appropriate for someone who is in discernment for a life event. Nothing that is shared within the LDC is shared outside the LDC, unless required by official forms in applying for holy orders, and only then in summary form and as approved by both the individual in discernment and by the entire LDC.
- In discerning calls to ministry, it is critical that each member understands the various roles and responsibilities of laity and ordained clergy within the Episcopal Church.

LDC Functions and Operations

- **General**

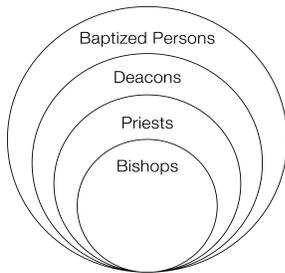
- The primary role of an LDC is to assist an individual address a major life decision, which may or may not include a call to further ministry.
- It is important to set some ground rules up front about how meetings will be run, thoughts shared, and disagreement and conflict addressed. Do not wait until the issues arise. An outside resource or reference may be useful in establishing a shared understanding of how the LDC will function. Several, but not all, possible aids are identified in the Bibliography below.
- Discernment requires reflective listening, loving inquiry, and thoughtful discussion.
- Discernment is active and collective. Everyone involved must be fully engaged.
- The LDC's role is not to advise, solve, or resolve, but to assist the individual in hearing God's voice in the situation.
- Discernment is a process, not a result. A rigorous discernment process will not simply affirm a decision that already has been made. Even when an individual may desire or presume a particular outcome, it is the LDC's responsibility to probe, challenge, explore, and *discern*.

- **Individual Life Decisions**

- LDC composition, schedule, and duration may be shaped to meet the specific life discernment need of the individual.
- Avoid putting people on the LDC who recently have gone through similar situations or otherwise may be prone to extrapolate and advise from their own particular experiences.
- It is particularly important in personal life decisions to avoid trying to *fix* a situation or direct an individual to the decision that seems obvious or that someone else would make.
- When a direction is discerned together, and the individual is ready to move on, it may be useful to document that decision and in some way formally conclude the discernment process.

- **Calls to Ministry.** "An Outline of the Faith," in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)*, p. 855) teaches that "The ministers of the Church are laypersons, bishops, priests and deacons." Thus, all Christians who are baptized in the Body of Christ are called to ministry.

The call to ministry is not a hierarchy, with laity at the bottom and bishops at the top.



Although the corporate church invests bishops, deacons, and priests with additional authority and responsibility, all ministry begins with, and is performed within, the baptismal covenant. Instead of a traditional organizational hierarchy, the calls to ministry all nest within baptism, like this.

It is incumbent on discernment bodies to understand the Church's ministries as a whole in order to share a vision of the rich variety of lay and ordained ministries that the Church and world offer and need. Because an individual is particularly active in a critical ministry, like social outreach or pastoral care, does not automatically mean that the person is called to ordination.

- **Lay Ministry.** “The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work in the world; and to take their place in the life, work and governance of the Church.” (BCP, p. 855) It is the responsibility of LDC’s to assist people in finding and fulfilling their individual calls to ministry. Each congregation has its own list of priorities and needs for ministry, and individuals may regularly identify new and surprising opportunities for service. An active LDC program will help identify, recruit, discern, and nurture those lay leaders in ways that enrich the Church, benefit the community, and serve Christ in wondrous ways.
- **Holy Orders.** An LDC may be formed in order to work with an individual discerning a call to ordained orders as either a deacon or priest, or the individual and LDC may mutually identify that call during the discernment process. (Introductory descriptions of the ministry of deacons and priests appear on page 856 of the *Book of Common Prayer*, which also includes the *Examinations* for each order, as cited below.) When a call to holy orders is affirmed, a whole new set of formal guidelines, including LDC processes and requirements, kicks in. At such time as the call to ordination is either sought or identified the individual and the LDC should immediately contact the DioCal Vocations Officer and must become intimately familiar with the documents, *Discerning Your Call to Ministry* and *Guidelines for Ordination to Holy Orders*, both of which can be found on the DioCal website.

The requirements for ordination are extensive, rigorous, formal, and complex. We recommend that you review and understand the entire process soon after the potential of a call to ordination is identified. The LDC needs to be prepared to understand the nature and requirements of the ordained orders in detail in order to best discern an individual's true call and to fulfill its obligations to the discerning individual, the congregation, and the Diocese of California. Most importantly, the LDC must be prepared to honestly discern and share what it determines is the appropriate call for the particular individual, whether or not it is the specific call that the person has initially identified.

- **Religious Life.** TEC Canons (Title III, Canon 30) make provision for two forms of Religious Life: Members of *Religious Orders* are vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience; members of *Christian Communities* commit themselves in obedience to their Rule and Constitution, which *may* include variations on poverty, chastity and obedience. In cases where an individual is discerning a call to such an affiliation, the LDC will need to be aware of the requirements of the several orders and communities. It may want to contact or visit appropriate communities as part of the discernment process. At the very least, the LDC will need to be aware of the specific discernment requirements of the Order or Community that the inquirer seeks to enter. For additional resources, see Conference of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas (CAROA) and National Association of Episcopal Christian Communities (NAECC) in the Bibliography below. See *Discerning Your Call* (below) for more specific information on DioCal requirements for LDC's working with someone moving towards community in Religious Life.

Conclusion

Christ calls each of us to serve—perhaps even on a Local Discernment Committee. LDCs provide a wonderful opportunity to learn and grow in Christ with others. By serving on an LDC, you are not just assisting someone else's discernment. You also are continuing your own.

A Selective Bibliography of Discernment Tools and Resources

This is an initial list. As you find and use other tools and resources, please refer them to the Vocations Office, so that they may be added here.

Documents and Resources of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of California

- *The Book of Common Prayer*. NY: Church Publishing Co. 1979.
 - The Baptismal Covenant, pp. 305-305.
 - Examination of a Bishop, pp. 517-519
 - Examination of a Priest, pp. 531-532
 - Examination of a Deacon, pp. 543-544
 - An Outline of the Faith, or Catechism, pp. 845-862
- The Episcopal Church (TEC). *Constitution and Canons, 2015* (or most current), *Canons, Title III* : http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/2015_candc.pdf.
- Diocese of California (DioCal). *Constitution and Canons, 2015* (or most current), *Canons, Canon XIV*:
http://www.diocal.org/sites/default/files/media/PDF%20Docs/Constitution_and_Canons_of_the_Diocese_of_California_revised_2015.pdf.
- Diocese of California (DioCal). *Discerning Your Call to Ministry*:
http://www.diocal.org/sites/default/files/media/PDF%20Docs/discerning_your_call.pdf.
- Diocese of California (DioCal). *Guidelines for Those Seeking Holy Orders*:
<http://www.diocal.org/sites/default/files/ordination-documents/ordination-guidelines-201501.pdf>.
- Melissa Ridlon, Vocations Officer, Diocese of California: melissar@diocal.org; 415-869-7814.

Other Online and Published Resources

- David G. Benna, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*. Downers Grove, IL: Varsity Press. 2015.
- Congress of Anglican Religions Orders of the Americas (CAROA). *A Handbook of Guidelines*. www.caroa.net.
- L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing. 1999.
- Suzanne Watson Epting, *Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed*. NY: Morehouse Publishing. 2015.
- Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, & Susan Ward., *Listening Hearts: Discerning Your Call in Community 20th Anniversary Edition*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing. 2004.
- Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, & Susan Ward, *Listening Hearts: Manual for Discussion Leaders*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing. 1993.

- Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, & Susan Ward, *Grounded in God Revised Edition: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing. 1999.
- Albert Haase, *Saying Yes: Discovering and Responding to God's Will in Your Life*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press. 2016.
- Sue Annis Hammond, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* (3rd ed.). Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishing Co. 2013.
- Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2008.
- Nancy Ann McLaughlin, *Do You Believe? Living the Baptismal Covenant*. NY: Morehouse Publishing. 2006.
- Wayne Muller, *How, Then, Shall We Live? Four Simple Questions that Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives*. NY: Bantam Books. 1997.
- National Association of Episcopal Christian Communities (NAECC). www.naecc.us.
- John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 2006.
- Henry Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. NY: Harper One. 2013.
- Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. NY: Wiley. 1999.
- Jane Riess, *Flunking Sainthood: A Year of Breaking the Sabbath, Forgetting to Pray, and Still Loving My Neighbor*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press. 2011.
- Richard Rohr, *Falling Upwards: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. SF: Jossey-Bass. 2011.
- Mark E. Thibodeaux, *God's Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God's Will*. Chicago: Loyola Press. 2010.