Sample Discernment Processes

Minnesota Discernment Process

Diocese of Colorado – Holy Orders Handbook

The Quaker Clearness Committee Model

Listening Hearts

These resources were compiled and used with permission from the Diocese of Iowa
Introduction

The Commission on Ministry has included several different discernment processes for congregational discernment teams and discerning individuals to use as they begin to meet together. Each of the ones included has benefits and can be adapted to individual situations. It is the desire of the COM that each person seeking to use a discernment team review each process and determine what type of process fits the situation.

It is our hope that as congregations become more proficient with discernment teams, they will contribute their processes and adaptations to the COM in order to be added to this resource.

Discernment Processes Included in this Resource

Minnesota Discernment Process.
A process of individual discernment developed by the Diocese of Minnesota. Each session focuses on a specific aspect of call.

Diocese of Colorado – Holy Orders Handbook
A process of individual discernment developed by the Diocese of Colorado. The focus is more on the development of a person’s ministry. There are scripture passages and prayers designated for each of the sessions.

The Quaker Clearness Committee Model
A much more informal process that can be used in addition to another process or in smaller congregations where most people know each other. This model needs to be adapted to the Chicago Diocese’s guidelines; the community of faith should be the primary nominator and should help in forming the committee.

Listening Hearts by Suzanne Farnham, Joseph Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan Wand
A more informal process. The book has many helpful ideas about discernment groups and the way they might function.

*In all discernment committees, whatever notes are written down should be kept confidential and destroyed or given to the discerner at the close of the process.*
Minnesota Discernment Process

Session 1  Getting Acquainted
1. Discerner distributes a written draft of his/her autobiography and call.
2. Group establishes overall organization and schedule for the meetings.
3. Group (including discerner) discusses what it is to have a sense of “call” in one’s life – how it is known, sensed, experienced, heard, learned, etc. and how we respond to it.
4. Group becomes sensitive to the following characteristics (especially in the discerner, but also in each other):
   • Communication skills
   • Ability to relate to others
   • Personal integrity and self-esteem
   • Physical health and energy
   • Intellectual gifts and abilities

Session 2  Biography of Discerner
1. Discerner reflects on his/her autobiography, giving insight into personality, strengths and weaknesses.
2. Group discusses (with discerner) the significant life experiences that have shaped the discerner’s present identity and life direction.
3. Group becomes sensitive to the discerner’s sense of strengths and weaknesses (limitations).
4. Discerner re-writes autobiography after the session if necessary.

Session 3  Insights into Ministry
1. Discerner distributes his/her re-written autobiography.
2. Group discusses the distinctions between the ministries of the laity, deacons, priests, and bishops once by themselves and again with the discerner.
3. Group (with discerner) discusses the meanings and differences that distinguish the various ministries.
4. Group becomes sensitive to new ideas, concerns and points of confusion, discovering each other’s understanding of ministry.

Session 4  Discerner’s Present Ministry and Theology
1. Discerner presents a description of his/her current ministry.
   • How is this ministry being validated?
   • How is this different from the ministry of deacon, priest or bishop?
   • Would the discerner’s ministry be enriched by ordination?
2. Discerner shares and group discusses how they relate to
   • Prayer
   • The sacraments
   • Scripture
   • Authority
   • Obedience
Session 5  Discerner’s Sense of Call
1. Discerner distributes a description of his/her sense of “call”.
   • From the community
   • From God
   • In the context of his/her family and friends
2. The group (with discerner) sensitively discusses what had been written, recognizing that the ability to struggle with and express the deep sense of personal relationship with God and others is central to creative ministry. The discerner is challenged to risk and speak deeply about his/her call.

Session 6  What does the Discerner Bring to this Call
1. Discerner presents written insights and reflections on “moral character”
   • What that means to the discerner
   • How what that means shows in his or her life.
   • How the discerner copes with failure to live up to his/her standard of behavior.
2. Discerner’s work experiences – how these experiences relate to the discerner’s sense of call?
3. What vision does the discerner bring to the future ministry? (To what extent is it open-ended?)
4. Does the discerner have any burdensome financial obligations?

Session 7  Whom Does the Discerner Bring to the Call?
1. Discerner’s spouse or partner also attends the session.
2. How does the discerner’s family relate to the call?
   • Realistic vision?
   • What is the role of the family in the decision to explore ordination to the priesthood/diaconate?
   • What about the potential personal and financial stress with the seminary training?
3. Are there other family pressures involved in the decision?

Session 8  Committee Reflection
1. Group meets without discerner.
   • Each committee member brings written observations/reflections to share.
   • An outline of the reflections is prepared to share with the discerner.
2. Group meets with discerner
   • Outline is shared with the discerner
   • Discussion
   • Discerner has the opportunity to discuss areas he/she feel/thinks have been discovered or unexplored.
3. Committee chair drafts letter for the Vestry following the outline prepared in this session; the draft is circulated among committee membership before
Session 9  
Final Meeting of the Committee
Committee meets, possibly, over dinner to review comments and suggest improvements for the letter drafted by the chair.

Final Task. Chair presents the letter to the Vestry and responds to their questions.
A SUGGESTED OUTLINE FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION SESSIONS
IN THE CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT PROCESS
Diocese of Colorado

The following questions may be helpful for each of the sections. They are intended to assist in opening possible areas of consideration. Most do not have any “right’ answers, but are only meant to stimulate thought and discussion.

I. The Church

1. Thanksgiving to God for Parish Life in Christ
   • What does it mean to be God’s chosen people? Chosen for what?
   • How does a group of people become “bound together in love by the one Spirit?”
     What does this mean?
   • What is the relationship of individual and communal discernment of God’s will or our lives?
   • Why did the disciples on the road to Emmaus not recognize Jesus? What may have gotten in the way? What gets in the way for us?

2. The Ministry of the Laity
   • How have we discerned God’s will for us in our own present vocations?
   • What are our responsibilities as Christians in our present vocations?
   • What gifts do we have that could add to the unity and wholeness of the Body of Christ?
   • How can we be more open to Christ’s presence with us?

II. The Ordained Ministry

1. The ordination of a Deacon and a Priest
   • In what way do the ministries of all the baptized, the diaconate and the priesthood differ from one another?
   • What are some indications of being “called” to any particular vocation? To the ordained ministry?
   • What kind of leader is a shepherd? What qualities are needed to be a dictator? To be an example?

2. The Pastoral Ministry
   • What are “pastoral “responsibilities?
   • How can one’s image of God and relationship with God affect pastoral ministry?
   • Is there a difference in the call to pastoral ministry for the laity and the ordained ministry? If so, what is it?
3. The Priesthood
   • What makes a priest? What can we learn from Jesus as High Priest about the role of priest?
   • Is there a role for priest in areas other than specific “parish work” and if so, in what ways?
   • What does it mean, and what difference does it make that it is Christ who chooses us first and not we who first choose Christ?

4. The Diaconate
   • What makes a deacon? What can we learn from Jesus as Servant Lord about the ministry of a deacon?
   • If we are all called to be engaged in serving others (diakonia), why should deacons be ordained?
   • How do deacons carry on Christ’s Servant Ministry?

5. The Cost of Ministry
   • How can we differentiate “taking up your cross” and being a self styled martyr (developing a martyr syndrome)? What are the differences in attitude?
   • How are Christ’s instructions to the apostles related to taking up one’s cross, surrendering one’s willfulness?
   • In what way does the news that we are reconciled make us a new creation? How in our own lives does this good news relate to taking up our own crosses?
   • What is the relationship of “taking up your cross” to self-examination and increased self-awareness?

6. The Discipline of Ministry
   • In what way do our lives reflect the new covenant of reconciliation?
   • How do we reflect God’s place in our lives? How do we feed Christ’s sheep?
   • In what way can we prepare ourselves and nourish ourselves for being ministers of the new covenant?

III Prayer and Ministry

1. The Prayer of Union
   • With whom (or what) do we desire to become united in prayer of union?
   • What are some ways we can open ourselves to, or increase our awareness of, the presence of God, Christ, within us?
   • In what way can the prayer of silence, non-verbal or listening prayer be a prayer of union – with God – with others?

2. Prayer for One Another
   • What are some ways we recognize the Holy Spirit within others, within creation, within ourselves?
   • How can we increase our awareness of the needs of others, rather than our own projections of what we think they need?
   • What are various types of intercessions used in your own verbal or non-verbal
prayer for others, and for yourself? What has been most helpful?

3. The Faithfulness of God
   • In what way can “sitting in solitude and silence” increase awareness of God’s faithfulness, God’s love?
   • What are some of the ways we learn how to trust in God?
   • What are some of the experiences you have had which have increased your faith and trust in God?
A PRAYER, BIBLE AND THEOLOGY STUDY GUIDE
FOR THE CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE

I. The Church
1. Thanksgiving to God for Parish Life in Christ
   Collect “For the Unity of the Church” BCP pg. 255
   Scripture Deuteronomy 7:6-8
   Colossians 3:12-17
   I Corinthians 11:23-26
   Reading An Outline of the Faith (The Catechism)
   The Church BCP pg. 854-855
   The Sacraments BCP pg. 857-858
   Prayer “A Litany of Thanksgiving” BCP pg. 836-837

2. The Ministry of the Laity
   Collect The Prayer – Confirmation Service BCP pg. 418
   Scripture Deuteronomy 10:12-15
   I Corinthians 12:12-28
   Ephesians 4:1-16
   Matthew 28:16-20
   Reading The Catechism – The Christian Hope BCP pg. 861-862
   Prayer A Song of Creation BCP pg. 88

II. The Ordained Ministry
1. The Ordination of a Priest
   Collect For the Ministry II BCP pg. 256
   Scripture Isaiah 6:1-8
   Ephesians 4:7, 11-16 or I Peter 5:1-4 or Philippians 4:4-9
   Matthew 9:35-38 or John 6:35-38; 10:11-18
   Reading The Ordination of a Priest BCP pg. 531-532
   Prayer The Litany for Ordinations BCP pg. 548-550

2. The Ordination of a Deacon
   Collect For the Ministry II BCP pg. 256
   Scripture Jeremiah 1:4-9 or Ecclesiastes 39:1-8
   Psalm 84 or 119:33-40
   II Cor. 4:1-6 or I Tim. 3:8-13 or Acts 6:2-7
   Reading The Ordination of a Deacon BCP pg. 543-544
   Prayer The Litany for Ordinations BCP pg. 548-550

3. The Pastoral Ministry
   Collect A Prayer of Self-Dedication BCP pg. 832

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| Scripture                  | Isaiah 55  
|                           | I Corinthians 4  
|                           | I Peter 5:1-11  
|                           | Matthew 7:7-12  
| Reading                   | The Celebration of a New Ministry:  
|                           | The Induction and Prayer  
| Prayer                    | A Prayer attributed to St. Francis  

4. The Priesthood

| Collect                  | For the Ministry I  
|                         | BCP pg. 256  
| Scripture                | I Samuel 2:35  
|                           | Hebrews 4:14-5:10  
|                           | John 15:1-17  
| Reading                  | The Ordination of a Priest:  
|                           | The Consecration  
| Prayer                   | Christ Our Passover  

5. The Diaconate

| Collect                  | For Social Service  
|                         | BCP pg. 260 or  
|                           | Vocation in Daily Work  
|                         | BCP pg. 261  
| Scripture                | Isaiah 42:1-4 or Isaiah 52:13-53; 12  
|                           | I John 4:7-12  
|                           | Matthew 25:31-46  
| Reading                  | The Ordination of a Deacon:  
|                           | The Consecration  
| Prayer                   | The Song of Simeon  

6. The Cost of Ministry

| Collect                  | Holy Cross Day  
|                         | BCP pg. 244  
| Scripture                | Revelation 5:6-14  
|                           | II Corinthians. 5:17-6:16  
|                           | Matthew 9:35-10:39  
| Reading                  | The Catechism  
| Prayer                   | Sin and Redemption  
|                          | BCP pg. 848-849  

7. The Discipline of Ministry

| Collect                  | Second Sunday of Easter  
|                         | BCP pg. 224  
| Scripture                | Exodus 20:1-20  
|                           | I Corinthians. 9:16-27  
|                           | John 21:15-19  
| Reading                  | The Catechism  
| Prayer                   | The Ministry  
|                          | BCP pg. 855-856  

|                          | The Song of Zechariah  
|                          | BCP pg. 92  

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### III. Prayer and Ministry

1. **The Prayer of Union**
   - **Collect**
     - Of a Saint III
   - **Scripture II**
     - Chronicles 6:12-21
     - John 17
   - **Reading**
     - The Catechism
     - God the Son
   - **Prayer**
     - The Second Song of Isaiah

   *BCP pg. 849-850
   BCP pg. 86

### 2. Prayer for One Another

   - **Collect**
     - Proper 22
   - **Scripture**
     - Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-19
     - Philippians 1:3-11
     - Colossians 1:9-23
     - II Thessalonians 1:11-12
   - **Reading**
     - The Catechism
     - The Holy Spirit
     - Prayer and Worship
   - **Prayer**
     - The Solemn Collects: Good Friday

   *BCP pg. 852-853
   BCP pg. 856-857
   BCP pg. 277-280

### 3. The Faithfulness of God

   - **Collect**
     - For Quiet Confidence
   - **Scripture**
     - Lamentations 3:21-33
     - Romans 8:31-39
     - Matthew 5:1-12; 6:19-34
   - **Reading**
     - The Catechism
     - Human Nature
     - God the Father
     - Prayer You are God

   *BCP pg. 832
   BCP pg. 845-846
   BCP pg. 846
   BCP pg. 95
The Quaker Clearness Committee Model


This informal model may be used in conjunction with another discernment process or as a “stand alone” process in small congregations where most of the members know one another. It will need to be adapted to our Diocesan model with a greater emphasis placed on the community’s involvement in organizing members and nominating an individual as all listen for God’s call on their lives.

The purpose of a clearness committee is to “[invite] people to help each other with personal problems while practicing a discipline that protects the sanctity of the soul.” (Although Parker uses the term “problems,” this process can be effectively used in discerning vocation. Much of the Listening Hearts material is based on the clearness committee model.) It works like this.

The discerner brings an issue to a group of 4-5 people she/he has invited to be on the committee. In preparation for their meeting, she/he writes 1-2 pages about the issue, giving a clear statement of the issue, relevant background, and relevant foreground.

The group meets for 2-3 uninterrupted hours, and the discerner is the center of attention. Committee members are forbidden to speak to her/him except to ask open, honest questions. Some attention should be paid to what “open” and “honest” means. Asking the question, “Have you ever considered therapy?” is a leading question – not open and honest. Asking “Have you often felt this way?” is acceptable. The discerner usually answers each question, but has the right to pass. There is lots of silence, and nothing is hurried. Advice and oversimplification from committee members are not allowed.

About 15 minutes before the session ends, the discerner is asked if she/he would like to do some “mirroring”. If not, the group continues with questions. If so, committee members reflect, or mirror, what the discerner said or did, but might not be aware of. “When you talked about X, your voice dropped and you seemed tired, but when you spoke of Y, your energy rose and your eyes got bright.”

There are two levels of confidentiality in effect in a clearness committee. First, what’s said in the meeting stays there. Second, members may not approach the discerner with comments or suggestions, either during or after the meeting.

Of course the clearness committee can (and should) be infused with prayer – both corporate and individual. The group may want to select a convener to keep track of time and to facilitate times for prayer.

From “The Commission on Ministry Handbook”
Diocese of Wyoming 2005
Discernment Process Suggested in *Listening Hearts*

1. In preparation for the first meeting, the discerner writes a brief biographical sketch tracing the significant threads of experience and background that relate to the question, stating the issue or decision the person is facing and mentioning any information that may be relevant.

2. Convener of the team distributes copies of the biographical sketch to the other team members at least a few days before the meeting. Members will keep the discerner and the rest of the team in prayers before the team meets.

3. When the group assembles, if all do not know one another, they take some time to introduce themselves.

4. The convener opens the meeting with a specified period of silence to permit all to become receptive to God’s presence.

5. The convener ends the silence by having the discerner say, in his/her own words, the issue or question of call.

6. The task of the members of the team is to listen prayerfully and raise questions that will help the discerner consider the issue.

7. If the issue being considered is unclear, the first questions need to deal with that. Next, questions to establish relevant background may be in order. Thereafter, the questions should become slower-paced and more reflective.

8. Questions should be concise and presented one at a time. Avoid giving background as to why you are asking a question or explaining the reason for the question. If you are unsure exactly how to phrase the question, it is better to wait silently to let the question develop and become more focused.

9. The background information supplied by the discerner is often fertile soil for questions.

10. Avoid questions such as; “What does God want you to do?” If the person knew the answer, the group would not be gathered for discernment.

11. Members must refrain from giving advice. Do not ask questions that suggest the answer or cloak advice in the guise of questions.

12. It is advisable for the discerner to keep the answers brief because more questions and more silence may provide further clarity.

13. While articulating answers to the questions is usually helpful, the discerner is never obligated to answer any question.
14. The work of God often takes place in the depth of quiet. Preferably, each person will be conscious of permitting a period of prayerful, silence between speakers.

15. Each member of the group needs to help maintain a pace that allows reflection. Any member may ask for a time of silence.

16. Each member of the group needs to help maintain a gentle atmosphere, guarding against any tendency to become confrontational.

17. An atmosphere of open listening needs to be maintained.

18. Each member of the group needs to help ensure that members do not press their own agendas or feelings on the discerner.

19. Each member of the group should ensure that others in the group have the opportunity to speak.

20. About thirty minutes before the meeting is scheduled to end, the convener offers the discerner the opportunity to ask questions of the group.

21. About ten minutes before the end of the meeting, the convener asks the group to determine whether or not another meeting is desirable. If anyone in the group is not comfortable with the direction the discerner seems to be moving, it is important for that person to suggest that the group convenes again.

22. The final five minutes are for free and open prayers which the convener introduces and concludes.

23. At any time during the meeting, a sense that the group has crossed a threshold may emerge. A member may suggest that a common understanding seems to exist. Should this occur, the convener may check this perception with the group, and if verified, begin to conclude the meeting.

24. A meeting or series of meetings can take place without resolution of the issue raised by the discerner. The consensus may be that the group has gone as far as it can for the time being. Should this occur, the desire to “wrap things up” neatly or to come to closure on a particular question should be resisted.

25. It is essential that what goes on in the meeting is absolutely confidential unless the discerner expressly chooses otherwise.

26. Everyone should come to meetings prepared to schedule a time for another meeting.

27. At the conclusion of the final session all discerners should return their copies of the biographical sketch to the discerner.