

Locally Formed Priests and Their Ministry in the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania

Introduction

Equipping transformational leadership for transformational ministry.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is clear that the context for ministry continues to shift. We are called to minister and proclaim the good news in a dynamic world. The call is the same—to proclaim the Good News, but the ways this is accomplished may be very different. While seminary training has been a tradition for sometime, there have always been many ways of educating and forming priests. In the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania, we are continually seeking to refine that process.

The ministry of a priest is “to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of the Lord.” [BCP, p. 856] Under the authority of the diocesan bishop, priests exercise a ministry of leadership in congregations they serve. They are called to preside over the transforming work of Christ in both individuals and communities. To that end, the priestly ordinand vows to “be diligent in the reading and study of Holy Scriptures . . . to build up the family of God . . . to persevere in prayer . . . offering all your labors to God.” [BCP, p. 532]

In the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania, there are many communities where priestly leadership and the transforming work of Christ are sorely needed, but given our particular context, these needs cannot always be met by relying on the traditional model of seminary formation. There are many who are eager to engage priestly ministry in our diocese for whom the financial and time constraints of the traditional model are so prohibitive that they are unable to proceed in the discernment/formation process. While the norm for those preparing for the priesthood continues to be completion of a three year residential program in an Episcopal seminary, exceptions are made on a case by case basis. The most common of these exceptions is that of a person called as a priest to bi-vocational ministry. In each case, a detailed plan of formation and study will be planned.

Whether one is formed through seminary or through the local process, priests are expected to invest in their education and formation. Following ordination, all clergy of the diocese are expected to attend clergy retreats, ordinations (and other gatherings as requested by the Bishop) and participate in/support diocesan activities/ministries in accordance with their particular gifts. All priests in good standing have seat, voice and vote in the clergy order at Diocesan Convention and are expected to be present, unless granted leave by the bishop. The Bishop makes a serious commitment to fostering collegiality within both the college of presbyters and the council of deacons, and expects his clergy to do likewise. Collegiality, truly knowing and supporting one another in ministry, is one of the gifts and benefits of serving in a smaller diocese.

What are the criteria for selection for the local formation process?

As stated above, local formation for the priesthood is the exception, not the norm. As such, this track is not one option to be chosen among many but rather a product of discernment between the bishop, standing committee/COM and the aspirant. In order for local formation to be considered:

- A four year program of study at an accredited college or university is preferred. Exceptions will be evaluated on a case by case basis.
- You must have sufficient flexibility of schedule to attend required classes and retreats.
- You must understand that locally formed clergy in this diocese are non-stipendiary. Therefore you must have sufficient economic resources to support yourself and your family apart from the congregation you will serve.
- The congregation that is sponsoring you must be willing to engage in the necessary formation and training with which to support the aspirant both before and after ordination.

Where do I begin?

If you are just beginning to explore a call to ordained ministry, the first step always is to schedule a conversation with your Rector, Vicar or Priest in Charge. (If you are in a congregation with no regularly assigned clergy oversight, please contact the Canon to the Ordinary). Thus begins your formal time of discernment. Your local clergy leader will help you sort out some of the immediate questions you may have. This may occur over a series of meetings. Next, your sponsoring clergy will ask for a meeting with the Canon to the Ordinary and the Bishop. At this meeting there will be opportunity for conversation about the nature of your call and the options you may have in responding to that call. Following that meeting the bishop may decide to invite you to attend the Aspirants' Retreat (generally held in April and October).

The Aspirants' Retreat is a semi-annual gathering of people at all stages of the ordination process (from those still discerning a call to those ordained to the transitional diaconate). There is time for formal teaching, informal conversation and individual interviews. All those discerning a call to ordained ministry are required to attend each of the two Aspirants' Retreats held each year. The spring retreat is for aspirants only. In the fall, the aspirants are expected to be joined by their spouses. All members of the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee attend these retreats as well.

The retreats serve many purposes. They help the aspirants stay connected with their peers. They help foster ongoing communication and relationships with the members of the COM and the Standing Committee. These relationships become more important when dealing with the inevitable bumps in the road common to all aspirants. The Aspirants' Retreats are also times for evaluation of progress and individual interviews at decision points during the process. Those decision points include but are not limited to: postulancy, candidacy, and ordination.

What is expected of me as I move forward?

Anyone contemplating Holy Orders in the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania is expected to be first and foremost centered in Christ. You should be faithful in worship and prayer, active in your local faith community and at a relatively stable point in your life. The process of formation is exciting, but it is also demanding. If you have recently experienced a major transition, you may wish to wait for your life to settle down before engaging this process.

You are expected to be transparent. Transparency is that quality which promotes openness about self, engagement with others, and ongoing discernment concerning God's leading. The process of discernment and formation includes questions which go to the heart of who you are and who God is calling you to be.

Openness about self implies that you are self aware concerning both the positive and negative attributes which you bring to the table. Perfection is not a requirement for ordination and neither is self abasement. Transparency means that one's own life story is in proper perspective and not at the center of every thought or every encounter. Neither bravado nor false humility facilitates an understanding of what God may be doing in your life.

Transparency also means that you are willing to engage and listen to others, to work collaboratively toward new discoveries about yourself. You are able to be responsive, not reactive to the suggestions or input from others. You are able to be open and unguarded enough to hear the voice of others.

Ongoing discernment means that there is never one right path or right call or right decision. As we move through our lives, God's call on us is open to change depending on our own circumstances and perhaps sometimes the choices made by others. This means that one does not engage the process in a vacuum.

You are also expected to be open to formation—to be willing to change. The process of formation is not always straightforward, nor is it always comfortable. Simply stated, formation is a process whereby you are shaped academically, spiritually, and personally in order to live more fully into the demands and opportunities of ordained ministry.

What are the elements of the local formation process for the priesthood in this diocese?

Academic Formation

Academic formation consists of satisfactorily completing the 16 core courses: Intro to Scriptures, Old Testament, New Testament, Church History I and II, Systematic Theology I and II, and Homiletics I and II. Also required are: Intro to Ministry, Intro to Anglicanism, Liturgics, The Theory and Practice of Ministry, Ethics, Pastoral Theology, and Contemporary Issues. Some of these are jointly offered by our diocese and the Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA through the Northwestern Pennsylvania Institute for Ministry Education. Academic formation provides you with the tools and the language necessary to function as the resident theologian in one's faith community. Academic work provides the context for discussion and education in any number of formats. It gives one a more precise language, not to

overwhelm someone with jargon, but to present carefully constructed frameworks for working through difficult life issues and ethical choices presented by those being served.

Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation encompasses several components.

- You are required to have a spiritual director. There is a list available from the Diocesan Church Center.
- You must attend semi-annual Aspirants' Retreats as described elsewhere in this document.
- You must participate, when invited by the COM, in a Diocesan Discernment process.
- At the discretion of your sponsoring clergy person, you may be asked to participate in a congregationally based discernment process prior to engaging the Diocesan discernment process.

Spiritual formation develops and supports your own capacity to make connections between what you do and what you believe. It is imperative to upholding the vow to pattern one's life in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Prayer, spiritual direction and retreats are all instruments of ongoing formation which replenish the spirit. Spiritual formation nurtures your soul, avoiding "burnout" and continuing to connect you to the holy and to the reasons you sought ordained ministry in the first place.

Personal Formation

Personal formation is the development of a comprehensive understanding of the nature of a call to ordained ministry. Through it the aspirant submits ever more completely to the will of God. Personal formation is a reorientation that places more emphasis on the community and less emphasis on the self. Even as this change in orientation occurs, there still remains the fundamental individual orientation between God and God's beloved. Even so, personal formation moves one from offering one's self to God on one's own terms to offering one's self to God on God's terms.

Personal formation has three standard components.

- You will participate in a colloquy group. This is a peer group that meets at regular intervals with a colloquy mentor for discussions about the challenges of ministry or academics.
- You will be required to engage a formal Field Education experience. In some cases you may be assigned to a parish other than your home parish for Field Ed.
- Depending on your needs and experience, Clinical Pastoral Education may also be required. CPE is a supervised learning experience most often in a hospital or long term care setting but may also be done in the parish setting. It is an action/reflection model for exploring the demands of ministry in a real time setting.

Conclusion

Equipping transformational leadership for transformational ministry is more than a tag line from our mission statement. It lies at the heart of the challenge to proclaim the Gospel in this time and in this place. The Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania is an exciting time and an exciting place. The call to

ordained ministry comes in many ways. If you feel you are hearing this call, or if you know of someone else who may be hearing this call, it starts with a conversation . . . and prayer.

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