

## **Vocational Deacons and Their Ministry in the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania**

### **Introduction**

Deacons are called and empowered by God to serve others, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely, in the name of Jesus Christ. Deacons are called to be examples, to “make Christ and his redemptive love known by (their) word and example” [BCP, p. 543], by their lives and their teachings, showing Christ’s people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself. Thus deacons serve in two directions, representing Christ and his redemptive love to the world outside the Church, and representing that world to the Church, interpreting the world’s needs, concerns, and hopes. More than that, by their example deacons inspire the rest of the Church and show us ways to more effectively minister in and to the world. Deacons remind the whole Church that Christ Jesus came not to be served but to serve.

As stated in the ordination liturgy, deacons are called “to a special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop.” In the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania that servanthood is lived out primarily in the deacons’ home communities. They are expected to participate in diocesan activities in accordance with their particular gifts. They are obligated to attend clergy retreats, ordinations and other gatherings as requested by the Bishop. According to our diocesan canons, deacons have an elected seat and voice on Diocesan Council but no vote. In addition, the Bishop takes very seriously the importance of collegiality within both the college of presbyters and the council of deacons. This collegiality is one of the gifts and benefits of serving in a smaller diocese.

### **Where do I begin?**

If you are just beginning to explore a call to ordained ministry, whether it is to the vocational diaconate or to the priesthood, the first step is to schedule a conversation with your Rector, Vicar or Priest in Charge. This begins your time of discernment. He or she will help you sort out some of the immediate questions you may have. This may occur over a series of meetings. The next step is for your clergy person to arrange a meeting with the Canon to the Ordinary and the Bishop. Following that meeting you may be invited to attend one of the next aspirant retreats which are generally held in April and October.

All those discerning a call to ordained ministry are required to attend the two aspirant retreats held each year. Generally speaking the spouses are only expected to attend the fall retreat with the aspirant. The spring retreat is for aspirants only. During the aspirant retreats, persons at all stages of the ordination process (from those still discerning a call to those ordained to the transitional diaconate) are able to gather. The entire Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee attends each retreat as well. The retreats serve many purposes. They help the aspirants stay connected with their peers. They help foster ongoing communication with the COM and the Standing Committee. Relationships are built which can facilitate addressing small issues before they become insurmountable. The aspirant 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 transparent. Transparency is that quality which promotes openness about self, engagement with others, and ongoing discernment concerning God's leading.

Openness about self implies that the aspirant is self aware concerning both the positive and negative attributes which he or she brings 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. When being transparent, the view of what God may be doing in the aspirant's life is not impeded by bravado or false humility.

Engagement with others as it relates to transparency is about a willingness to work toward new discoveries about ourselves. The aspirant is able to be responsive, not reactive to the suggestions or input from others. The aspirant is able to be 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 in the process in a vacuum.

The second expectation is that the aspirant be open to formation. The process of formation is not always straightforward, nor is it always comfortable. Simply stated, formation is a process whereby we are shaped academically, spiritually, and personally in order to live more fully into the demands of ministry.

Academic formation is simply about providing the aspirant 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 for the purpose of overwhelming 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 is about developing and supporting the aspirant's own capacity to make connections between what he or she does and what he or she believes. 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. Without spiritual formation, burnout is likely to occur.

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.

### **What is included in the formation process for the diaconate in this diocese?**

Academic formation consists of satisfactorily completing six core courses offered through the Northwestern Pennsylvania Institute for Ministry Education: Intro to Scripture, Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Systematic Theology, and Homiletics. In addition there are several required courses reflecting the Episcopal tradition including: Intro to Ministry, Intro to Anglicanism, Liturgics and the Theory and Practice of Ministry

Spiritual formation encompasses several components. First, aspirants must complete the Spiritual Development Program which is an overview of the various strands of spirituality found within our tradition. This program is offered by the diocese and consists of six day long sessions held monthly from January through June. Second, all aspirants are required to have a spiritual director. There is a list available from the Diocesan Church Center. Third, aspirants must attend semi-annual aspirant retreats as described elsewhere in this document. Fourth, the aspirant must participate, when invited by the COM, in a Diocesan Discernment process. Aspirants may be asked by their sponsoring clergy person to participate in a congregationally based discernment process prior to engaging the Diocesan discernment process.

Personal formation has three standard components. First, aspirants will participate in a colloquy group. Second, they will be required to implement a diaconal ministry plan. Third, the Diaconal Ministry Plan will be developed in the context of Field Education. In some cases the aspirant will be assigned to a parish other than their home parish for Field Ed. Depending on the needs of the aspirant, Clinical Pastoral Education may also be required.

### **What is a Diaconal Ministry Plan?**

In this diocese, those pursuing a call to the vocational diaconate are required to develop, implement and assess a Diaconal Ministry Plan as the primary focus of their two year field education placement. During the first year, the aspirant will become familiar with the congregation and its surrounding community in order to develop a combined analysis of local needs, available resources, and the individual ministries already in place in the community of the assigned congregation. Towards the end of that year, the aspirant will develop a diaconal ministry plan in consultation with the priest in charge of that congregation and the archdeacon. This plan will outline ways for the congregation, under the leadership of the aspirant, to address one unmet need in their community. The Bishop or the Bishop's designee will give final approval.

In the second year of field education, the work of actively engaging the congregation in this ministry will begin. It is expected that the aspirant will provide the leadership, encouragement and support needed but that the aspirant will not be the sole agent involved. At the end of the second year, the aspirant will submit written evaluation/critique of the ministry project. The aspirant's evaluation will become part of the required ordination exam. The examining chaplains will be looking at the quality of the evaluation, not the outcome of the project itself.

## **Appendix 1: Diaconal Ministry Plan Guidelines and Expectations**

The Diaconal Ministry Plan is designed to provide an opportunity for the aspirant to develop skills in leadership, communication, and ministry development. The priest in charge at the field education placement site, the archdeacon and the canon all are resources to the aspirant in this endeavor.

- I. Scope of Project
  - A. Developing leadership skills
    1. Analysis of current community ministries
      - a. Written analysis due after third month
      - b. Review work with sponsoring clergy
    2. Needs assessment
      - a. Written assessment due after sixth month
      - b. Review work with sponsoring clergy
    3. Resource assessment
      - a. Written assessment due after ninth month
      - b. Review work with sponsoring clergy
    4. Identification of specific unmet need
      - a. Written proposal of ministry plan due after twelfth month
        - Includes all aspects set forth above
      - b. Review proposal with sponsoring clergy, Archdeacon and Canon
      - c. Bishop's review and consent for proposal
    5. Involvement of the congregation
      - a. Begins after the first year
      - b. Ministry plan must be carried out by the congregation under the leadership of the postulant
  - B. Developing Communication skills
    1. Written assessments as noted above
    2. Written communication to the congregation concerning the ministry plan
      - a. Newsletter article, bulletin insert, etc.
      - b. Educating congregation to the need and soliciting support
    3. Presentation to the vestry or Bishop's Committee of sponsoring parish
    4. Formation of a new small group to carry out the ministry plan or working with an appropriate existing small group to carry out the ministry plan
    5. Ongoing communication with the congregation as ministry progresses
    6. Ongoing consultation with sponsoring clergy
    7. Quarterly reports to Archdeacon and Canon
  - C. Ongoing Ministry Formation
    1. Facilitated peer processing in colloquy on a monthly basis
    2. Reflection papers to be submitted to [COM, canon, bishop] prior to each aspirant retreat

3. Progress report from sponsoring clergy as to progress in continuing formation prior to each aspirant retreat

II. Evaluation

- A. Written assessment of ministry plan by the postulant covering the following areas:
  1. What worked well? Why?
  2. What did not work? Why
  3. How could this ministry be improved or further developed?
  4. What would you change? Why?
  5. Is this ministry an effective use of resources?
  6. Is this ministry sustainable?
- B. This written assessment becomes part of the Ordination exam
  1. The examining chaplains will consider the quality of the assessment not necessarily the outcome of the ministry plan