

Discerning Your Call and Your Gifts
For Ministry of Word and Sacrament

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Foreword

Discerning Your Call and Your Gifts for Ministry of Word and Sacrament

Trusting the work of the Holy Spirit in human lives, we believe that your reading this booklet is not a coincidence. You may be seeking to discern God's call and would like to know more about the gifts for ordained ministry. Our prayers are with you as you go over the pages that follow. It is our sincere hope that you will find the information in this booklet helpful in discerning God's call for you.

In the past two decades since the Preparation for Ministry process was formalized in the Book of Order, there have been significant changes in society and in the church. We now have more women in seminary than men. More than two thirds of our inquirers and candidates are second or third career people. At the same time, the pastoral leadership needs of the church have changed. Over 5,000 congregations have membership of less than 100. About 1,700 of these congregations have installed pastors. Another 1,600 of these congregations are without any pastoral leadership. The church has a critical need for pastoral leaders who can do new church development, or youth ministry, or serve small membership congregations, multicultural congregations, and racial ethnic congregations.

Another concern of the church is that we currently have over 2,600 ministers of Word and Sacrament who are members-at-large of their presbyteries. This means that their work is not considered to be validated ministry by their presbyteries. For personal and other reasons, they are not serving congregations as pastors.

In addition, seminary education has become expensive for many students. According to Auburn Theological Seminary's study on seminary debt in 2005, an average student debt is \$25,000 at graduation. This means some seminary graduates have no debt because of the sacrifices of their family and home congregation. However, many others who do have debt owe much more than \$25,000 when they graduate.

Cognizant of these concerns, the writing team has decided to focus on discernment and call and the needs of the church. The purpose of this resource is to help you discern your call and gifts for ordained ministry **before** you enter a costly process and to help you understand where opportunities exist to serve the church and meet the church's needs. We hope that this booklet will also help those who serve on the Committees on Preparation for Ministry so that you and they may discern that call together.

Discernment

Discernment is an over used word. The dictionary defines it and its variants, as “keenness of discrimination,” “showing insight and judgment,” “perceptive,” and “differentiate.” They are easy words to say; yet in varying degrees, challenging and exciting. Discernment is not easy. It comes from and is born of a desire to know things, to know oneself, deeply, in relationship not only with others, but also with God.

Discernment is not a simple knowing, or awareness. It requires placing personal awareness within the context of life experience in relationship with others and with God. Discernment is a complex, challenging, and hugely rewarding ongoing life task.

Why is this important? Because discerning a call, be it to ministry of word and sacrament, teaching, business, professional life, or....is the first step in laying a foundation for a life of authentic, spiritual, personal, and professional growth and development. It leads to wisdom, a quality in short supply, in current culture.

Discernment is necessary for the future life of the church. The traditional church of the middle and latter 20th century is fast ending. While islands of the familiar will continue to exist for years to come, most will be gone within the next ten to twenty years. What will be in place of what many have grown up with, or come to know and love? It's hard to say or predict for our culture is rapidly changing and with cultural change comes the need for the church to adapt. In some respects, the people of the church are like one dance partner with and within the culture, moving to the music with its other partners while maintaining its unique identity and character. Elegant dancers must be willing to spontaneously respond to changes in the music; changes large and dynamic, small and subtle.

Like the dancers above, the church and ministers or called church professionals must be able to sense and respond to the changing music of the world in which they live. Elegant response requires discernment; the willingness and ability to dance, not only with the culture, but also with God and the Holy Spirit as intimate dance partners.

Rev. Kris Haig, a Presbyterian pastor in the Midwest, identified a set of Theological Assumptions about Discernment, which she made available to the whole church. They are:

- ❑ God is present and active in our daily lives.
- ❑ Our own fulfillment and greatest joy will be found when our choices are congruent with God's will for us.
- ❑ Discernment uses all of our capacities for knowing.
- ❑ The Holy Spirit guides by the principle of attraction and a drawing toward the good.

It is obvious, from the above, that discernment is counter-cultural. To be a discerning person is not a developmental goal sought after in current elementary, secondary, or post secondary education. Rather, vocationalism is the overall thrust of the educational system, with a focus on economic gain, often at the expense of personal growth and satisfaction, and all too often, at the expense of healthy family life.

Education in the early 21st century tends to emphasize rules, rote memory, teaching to the many tests used to evaluate performance, and striving for grades rather than knowledge and wisdom. Very little of today's education equips a student for making life decisions and living a life of personal, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional growth. Discernment, when practiced, can clearly separate the former from the latter.

Discernment is counter-cultural because it is often slow, usually requires significant personal discipline, and calls for thoughtful risk taking. Discernment values seeking wisdom, self-knowledge, personal growth, emotional maturity, and spiritual development.

Living a Christ centered life is counter cultural as is discernment. So, why do it? Because with discernment we gather the information and guidance we need to make thoughtful, holistic, God centered decisions, not only about the possibility of seeking ordination, but about all of life in general. Discernment leads to congruence.

Discernment is a way of seeking God's will in making decisions about our lives. It is about congruence. Discernment is about allowing God to enter into decisions about life in ways that set aside ego, personal needs and wants, and brings God into the process with full voice, as quiet and mysterious as that voice can be. Discernment is about taking the questions we have to God, as well as to other trusted friends and colleagues and seeking answers. Not our answers, but God's answers in our lives. Discernment is about the discipline of asking questions of God and others and disciplined listening for answers, trusting that the Holy Spirit is speaking, however uncomfortable and exciting that voice may be. Discernment is about surrendering to the voice of the Spirit and trusting that the path before us is God's path for us. Discernment is about risk. Risking our lives with the Holy Spirit.

While there are many forms of discernment, *examen*, described below is simple and very effective, building a discipline and recorded body of experience, that when viewed over time, can bring insight and wisdom to otherwise perplexing and mystifying situations. Described by St. Ignatius of Loyola in *The Spiritual Exercises*, and described in modern language in *Sleeping with Bread*, by Dennis, Sheila Fabricant and Matthew Linn, examen draws on daily experience for ongoing discernment. Reflecting on the experiences of the day is one form of God's ongoing revelation to us. Examen, carefully recorded, provides the raw material for recognizing the patterns of God's work in our lives, one day at a time.

The process of examen is straightforward. Begin with a quiet place where you can be alone, or if you are sharing the experience, be with a partner, family, or friend(s). Lighting a candle can

remind us of God's presence in the process. After a moment of quiet prayer, asking for God's presence, reflect back on the day, the people, experiences, events, emotions and thoughts. Ask God to bring to your awareness the experiences for which you are **most grateful**. Reflect on them, feeling gratitude and thanks for those experiences. When you are finished, under the heading of "Consolations," record those experiences in a diary or notebook, with today's date.

After recording your consolations, again, after quiet prayer, ask God to bring to your awareness those experiences of the day for which you are **least grateful**. Take time to identify the actions, thoughts, and feelings that contributed to making the experience what it was. Record what you learned under the heading, "Desolations."

When you are ready, or when you and your companion(s) are ready, give God thanks for all of the experiences of the day. And, if you are so moved, share what you learned with a trusted friend. Do this every day of your life.

To aid in the process, listed below are some of the characteristics of Consolations and Desolations. While the lists are not exhaustive, they do bring shape to words that are not commonly used today.

Characteristics of Consolations

- ❑ Courage, deep strength
- ❑ Delight, deep joy
- ❑ Satisfaction, a sense of "rightness"
- ❑ The feeling of freedom
- ❑ Gratitude
- ❑ Energy, vitality
- ❑ Desires are rooted deeply in the "true self"
- ❑ Surrender to the Holy Spirit
- ❑ The choices are life giving

Characteristics of desolations

- ❑ Discouragement
- ❑ Sadness, not due to crisis or depression
- ❑ Anxiety, worry
- ❑ Feeling of being trapped, stuck, imprisoned
- ❑ A sense of burden
- ❑ Enervation, weakness, little or no energy
- ❑ Desires are rooted shallowly, in the "false self"
- ❑ Seeking to control others, emotional manipulation
- ❑ The choices are life draining

With careful note taking, a diary of experiences will be created that, over time, will provide guidance and direction for many of life's decisions. And, over considerable time, will, in concert with developing wisdom, nurture our elegant life dance in the world and in partnership with God.

Is the Calling to Ministry of Word and Sacrament Different from the Calling of the Laity?

In our baptism each of us is called to the one ministry of Jesus Christ. The community of faith covenants with families and with God to nurture those baptized into an understanding of their unique ministry within that one ministry of the body of Christ. To make contemporary Paul's word in I Corinthians 12, some are called to be "teachers, or business people, or nurses, or political leaders, or homemakers, or social workers or community organizers, or ministers of word and sacrament." Each of these vocations is an important calling for the wholeness of the body and for its faithful ministry in the world. Each calling needs the other callings to be effective and for the body to be whole.

As in the congregations described in Acts and the Epistles, the faith community called forth leadership from its midst, choosing those who had the needed gifts for the unique situation. Today those called forth through the voice of the community of faith are called to specific functions within the community of faith and are ordained to their role: Deacons, Elders, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament. This ordination does not confer on the person a special spiritual status but recognizes and validates their ability to assume a leadership role in the community of faith. Ordination is to function within the body, not to status.

The role of the Minister of Word and Sacrament is to "equip the saints for the work of ministry," and "building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12), and, as the title describes, proclaim the word and administer the sacraments. The minister is "set apart" for the tasks of such leadership, but is dependent upon the ministries of each of the members of the community. The gifts of all are needed.

Gifts for Ministry

"Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are a variety of services, but the same Lord: and there are a variety of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone." I Corinthians 12:4-6

Since you are reading this publication, you are most likely thinking about ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). You are beginning to look both inward and into the world to discover how it is God calls ordinary people to ministry. One way of looking at your call to ministry is to examine your gifts—those whom God calls, God equips for ministry. Each of us is given, by God, certain gifts; those God calls to ministry are given gifts particularly suited to ministry. The good news in this is that God will not call you without giving you all you need for your task!

Gifts are just that, “anything willingly given to someone without payment, a natural ability.” So we are talking about your natural abilities given by God without payment. What gifts are needed by God and God’s church for ministry of Word and Sacrament? Think about a minister you know and have observed. Most likely you have seen someone who demonstrates an ability to preach, to communicate with the spoken and the written word, someone who has a gift with words. The pastor you have observed may have a firm foundation in our Reformed tradition, but be able to speak to and appreciate the 21st century’s culture. You may have experienced a pastor who has the gift of compassion, the gift of ministering to all sorts of people. You may have felt the pastor equipping the community to witness, care for and go out into the world. Hopefully, the pastor has shown the gift of good stewardship of the pastor’s own mind, body and spirit. You have experienced the pastor’s gifts for creative vision and imagination. Perhaps you have been the beneficiary of a pastor who has the gift of listening. The members of your church may have benefited from a pastor who was able to discern the gifts of others and use those gifts to augment his or her own gifts for ministry, strengthening the body of Christ. You may want to make an inventory of your own gifts and talents to check out how you yourself might fulfill these roles of a pastor. Also list your own special gifts for ministry as this is only a partial listing.

- Gift of language—spoken and written
- Gift of appreciation of both our tradition and the present
- Gift of compassion
- Gift of equipping the saints
- Gift of good stewardship of body, mind and spirit
- Gift of creative vision and imagination
- Gift of listening
- Gift of discerning gifts in others
- My other gifts for ministry:

If you need help with seeing your gifts you might want to ask your ministers, elders of your church and other leaders of your church what gifts they have observed in you that would indicate your call to ministry of Word and Sacrament. You might be surprised at the gifts they will identify, gifts that you may not be aware of that but that you have demonstrated.

The Necessity for the Community of Faith to Validate the Gifts for Ministry

God's call in our baptism and God's call to a specific ministry is a call into life in community. The community at baptism assumes responsibility for the nurture in the faith of the one baptized. As that person grows in faith, the community helps in the discernment of that call. H. Richard Niebuhr has summarized four elements that together make up a "call" to all the baptized, including those discerning a call to Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

1. **The Call to be a Christian.** This is the universal calling in our baptism to follow and serve Jesus Christ. Each Christian is called to determine his or her particular ministry and to live out that ministry.
2. **The Secret Call.** This is those inner nudgings of the Spirit that leads a person to consider a specific vocation as a way of living out his or her call to ministry. For some the call comes as a life transforming event while for others it comes slowly and with great wrestling.
3. **The Providential Call.** This emerges from considering one's God-given gifts and talents as well as life experiences. To discern this call requires an honest look at one's self and one's abilities and questioning as well as confirmation from the community of faith. Any secret call must be weighted against the gifts one has been given.
4. **The Ecclesiastical Call.** Multiple bodies merge to affirm an ecclesial call: congregations in which the individual participates, Presbyteries, theological institutions, Committees on Preparation for Ministry, etc. The community voice confirms and challenges the individual's understanding of his or her call. For ordination to occur, the final ecclesial voice is a call from a congregation or other validated ministry to the person to be Minister of Word and Sacrament.

Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit moves as the body seeks to discern God's will together. For those sensing God's call to ministry, discernment is not just between the individual and God. Rather discernment is also within the community of faith as the body seeks to discern with the individual. The individual's home congregation and especially the Session, the Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM), and the Presbytery are the bodies assigned to support the person in that discernment process. This discernment is often a time consuming and ponderous process, but it reflects the depth of interdependence that is central to an understanding of Christian community.

Committees on Preparation for Ministry know well that Ministers of Word and Sacrament need to be persons who are growing – after as well as before ordination. Thus the Committee assesses the person’s 1) education for ministry; 2) spiritual development; 3) interpersonal relations; 4) personal growth; and 5) professional development. Growth in each of these areas provides criteria for the CPM to validate the call. On occasions the CPM can help the individual see that God is calling to another vocation than Minister of Word and Sacrament. And this is not a lesser calling.

Many seeking ordination to Minister of Word and Sacrament do not value the questioning of the CPM. However, in the community of responsibility and accountability, the person sensing an inner call needs to clarify and confirm that call in relationship with the CPM. “Testing the call” requires not only support, but as importantly, hard questioning and examination of gifts to clarify the call and to assess gifts for ministry.

As you seek to discern your call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, remember this journey is taken not alone with God but in the community of faith, a community that is called to challenge and affirm your gifts for ministry and support you in the journey.

Considering the Needs of the PC (USA)

As you seek to discern God’s call your focus will be not on how **you** want to serve, but on how **God** wants you to serve; not on where **you** want to serve but where **God** wants you to serve. Some clues about how and where God’s call might lead you can be found in the leadership needs of PC(USA) congregations.

As mentioned earlier, the PC(USA) is seeing a change in the landscape of what is needed in ministers of Word and Sacrament. Most of our congregations are small, with over half having fewer than 100 members. Many of our congregations offer only minimal salaries or seek part-time pastors who serve as tentmakers. Many congregations are seeking pastors with skills that are necessary for this changing landscape such evangelism, church transformation, and cultural proficiency.

The current supply and demand situation within the PC(USA) also presents a challenging situation. There are three times as many ministers and candidates seeking calls than there are open positions. And candidates seeking their first call outnumber positions open to first call candidates by a margin of 2 to 1.

All of these realities invite you, as part of your discernment, to consider the question: “Am I open to go **wherever** God calls me to serve?” Being open to go wherever God calls means being willing to serve any size congregation, including one with less than 100 members. It means being willing to serve in any state, town, and community type, including a rural community away from a major metropolitan area. It means being willing to have a

“tentmaking” profession that would allow you to serve a church as well as support yourself while seeking a call.

As you discover the forms of ministry to which you are called, and as you are called to new forms which may take you to places you may have never asked or imagined, pray for the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit to be upon you. And you never know, you just may discover the truth of Myra Scovel’s words from her poem, “The Wind of the Spirit”

Put yourself into the path of the wind, Nicodemus.
Bright leaves will dance before you.
You will find yourself in places
you never dreamed of going;
you will be forced into situations
you have dreaded
and find them like a coming home.

Process

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, ‘Here I am; send me!’” Isaiah 6:8

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is ready to explore God’s call with you. Of all that Presbyterians are known for, being a church which does things “decently and in order” tops the list, as you will see when you begin looking into becoming a minister of Word and Sacrament.

You are to be congratulated for reading this booklet as you begin your journey. The process begins at home with your pastor and your church’s session. These people know you and have seen your gifts for ministry demonstrated in your life and service to your home church. The pastor can put you in touch with the presbytery’s Committee on Preparation for Ministry, a committee mandated by the Book of Order, to walk with you through the process of becoming a minister. The moderator of the CPM will be able to tell you about your presbytery’s requirement for ordination. You may be interested to learn that some presbyteries have requirement about the seminary in which you will receive your Master of Divinity degree so it is very important to contact the CPM early in your journey.

The process begins with your church’s session recommending you to the presbytery and appointing a liaison to be your contact person at your church throughout the time you are in the process. The CPM will meet with you, appointing someone to be your liaison with the CPM, and going over the requirements in the Book of Order as well as the presbytery’s own

requirements. Information about these steps and requirements may be found in the Book of Order (G-14.0400); further helpful information may be found at www.pcusa.org/prep4min.

The first requirement is to have been a member of your sponsoring church, home church, for at least 6 months; in some presbyteries the time for membership is a year. The time under care of the presbytery takes a minimum 2 years, one year as an inquirer and one as a candidate. Your church session must vote to recommend you to the presbytery for both of these steps. The presbytery then votes to admit you to inquiry and then to candidacy.

Your seminary education will take at least three years with a possibility of either the seminary or the CPM adding other requirements such as time spent learning how to minister to people in the hospital and an internship in a PC(USA) church. You will be embarking on both an academic/educational course of study at the seminary as well as an ecclesiastical process with the PC (USA) through your presbytery's CPM. The two tracks of preparation for ministry may not begin or end at exactly the same time.

The good news about this process is that you will have many companions all along the way, offering encouragement, advice, a sympathetic ear and support. As you may already know your call to ministry is about serving Christ's church as a minister of Word and Sacrament. This call comes with built in requirements which are set in a process so that the church through the voices of both your local church and presbytery can help you live into that call.

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