



Discernment: Exploring the Church

As part of discernment, we ask all seekers to expand their perspective of the Church beyond their own church's walls. This work will look somewhat different for each seeker, but the process and the report should take their shape from this guide.

We hope this work will bring you joy as you explore Christ's Church and seek your place in it.

Prayer & Support

- Deepen your prayer life.
 - Expand your use and knowledge of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP); pray the daily offices either on your own, or with others.
 - Learn about and try on different forms of prayer.
 - Ask your community to pray with and for you.
- Find and meet regularly with a spiritual director or guide.
 - If you don't have a spiritual director, some good sources to consider are: 1) asking your clergy for recommendations; 2) visiting a monastic community or religious order where spiritual direction might be offered; 3) work with [Richmond Hill](#) or [Spiritual Directors International](#), both of whom keep curated lists and help make connections with spiritual directors trained through their program.
- Find and meet regularly with a counselor or therapist
 - We believe counseling and therapy support health and wholeness for all people. We recognize it can be cost prohibitive, but therapy can play an essential part in self-care, self-awareness and discernment.

Study

- **Scripture:** If you don't already have one, consider purchasing (or requesting as a gift!) a study Bible. We recommend the NRSV-UE with Apocrypha
- **Prayer Book:** There are rich prayers, resources and historical documents in the BCP which you should be familiar with and revisit often. Read, mark, and inwardly digest both the Baptismal Covenant (p. 304) which forms the foundation for ministry of all the Baptized. As you discern, read and pray with the ordination vows ([priest](#) p. 525, [deacon](#) p. 537). Return to them often as discernment unfolds.



- **Required reading:** We recommend a few books for all people to read as they are beginning to discern vocation in their lives:
 - “[Transforming Vocation](#)” by Sam Portaro
 - “[Praying Shapes Believing](#)” by Leonel Mitchell & Ruth Meyers
 - Diocesan Racial Justice and Healing Anti-Racism Readings and Webinars: <https://episcopalvirginia.org/ministries/justice-healing/education/>
 - Review the handouts & resources from the discernment retreat
- **Other Suggested reading:**
 - “[Practicing Resurrection](#)” by Nora Gallagher
 - “[Joan Chittister: Essential Writings](#)” Kownacki and Synder, editors
 - “[Let Your Life Speak](#)” by Parker Palmer
 - “[The Sacred Journey](#)” by Frederick Buechner
 - “[Unexpected Consequences: The Diaconate Renewed](#)” by Suzanne Epting
 - “[Being Called, Being Gay](#)” by Gregory Millikin

Observations

- Visit at least five Episcopal Churches in the Diocese of Virginia for an in-person worship experience. You are welcome to visit and reflect on other churches beyond the Diocese as well, but it’s important for us to be reminded, as both lay and ordained persons, that we are part of one diocesan family.
- Increase your involvement in your own parish community and/or get involved in a new church-related ministry that you’re less familiar with.
- The written reflection guide offers you some things to think about as you make your visits.

Conversations

- Schedule time to talk with church professionals, lay and ordained.
 - First, get to know all the professionals, lay and ordained, who are a part of your own parish ministry team.
 - Consulting with your clergy, schedule conversations with **at least one priest, one deacon and two lay ministry leaders** (paid or volunteer) in other parishes (recommended for all who are Exploring the Church)



- For those discerning a call to ordained ministry, we ask that you speak with at least **two additional clergy** in the orders that you are discerning (two deacons or two priests... or if you aren't sure, two deacons and two priests!). It's important to remember that there are many approaches to ministry, and hearing from many voices will help you discern with a full and open heart.
- For those discerning a call to ordained ministry, you will work with the Vocations Minister to schedule a brief, informal conversation with the Committee on the Diaconate and/or the Committee on Priesthood as a relational way to establish your role as a seeker.

Reflection and Writing

- As a spiritual discipline, keep a journal on your faith, journey, and call.
- As you conduct your visits and conversations, think of each one as an opportunity to reflect on God's presence. Take particular note of:
 - What you noticed or heard that gave you a sense of peace
 - What you noticed or heard that you wondered about (write down the question(s) that formed as you wondered!)
 - What you noticed that surprised you
 - What feeling you had before, during and after the visit or conversation.



Guide for the Exploring the Church Report

This report is to be submitted to your presenting priest and the diocesan Vocations Minister. If you are completing discernment as part of the [Young Priest Initiative](#), submit the resume and report to your contact with YPI, who will update you on the next steps in the process.

The **church resume** that accompanies your report should detail your education, job history and church experience. For work experience, be sure the resume is written in plain English rather than your field's jargon and that it highlights experience relevant to Church leadership. For the church experience portion, be sure to answer:

- When/where were you baptized?
- When/where were you confirmed?
- How many churches have you been a member of and for how long? Describe each church.
- What ministries are/were you involved with?
- What formal theological education or lay ministry training do you have? (e.g., Education for Ministry (EfM), seminary education, Eucharistic Visitor training)

The **Exploring the Church report** should address the following questions narratively (the report should be approximately 3-4 pages, double-spaced):

- How has your prayer life changed during your discernment thus far?
- How has your understanding of the prayer book changed?
- What did you read from the reading list?
 - What in the reading was most powerful for you?
 - What did you struggle with or question?
 - Were there other readings you found particularly helpful?
- Reflect on conversations you had with church leaders & committee(s).
 - What stood out to you during these conversations about the gifts of each order of ministry (lay, deacon, priest?)
 - Highlight several points that particularly resonated with you from the conversations you had (offer some detail)
 - What questions arose for you?
- Reflect on the parishes that you visited (and please list them for us)
 - What especially stood out to you during the visit?
 - What questions or wonderings did each visit leave you with?
- Anything else you'd like to share about your discernment thus far.



Guide for Conversations with Church Professionals

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Some Additional Directions

- **Please be thoughtful and thorough in this process**
 - You will learn a lot about the church during these visits. Be thoughtful and know that every person you speak with has also been on a discernment journey.
 - Those in discernment for the diaconate should speak with and/or shadow with at least three deacons serving this diocese (please consult the list provided at your diocesan discernment retreat).
 - Please don't ask to interview bishops; there are too few to make this a sustainable request.
- **Get suggestions.** Ask your presenting priest for recommendations, asking for a variety of leaders. If you aren't already going, consider attending a regional event or meeting which is a great way to get to know people.
- **Select some of the questions below**, plus add a few of your own.
- **Take 30 minutes or so.** Your conversation should last about 30 minutes. It can be longer, but remember to be respectful of the person's time.
- **Take notes.** If the person is comfortable with it, take notes during the conversation. If not, write down your thoughts afterwards in your journal.
- **Respect confidentiality.** Respect the person's wishes if they would like any part or all of the conversation to be kept in confidence. Ask the person if you're not sure if something they have shared is sensitive.



- **Talk face-to-face.** It's preferred that you have these conversations in person or via videoconference if needed. It's OK to send the questions ahead of time, but "email" is not the same as "interview." A very part of this exercise is getting a sense of the person and building your network.

Possible Questions:

1. What does it mean to you to be a [priest/deacon/lay professional]?
2. What about your ministry brings you the most joy?
3. What about your ministry is the most difficult?
4. How is the [priesthood/diaconate] different from your perception of how it would be before ordination? *Or, for lay professionals:* How is working for the church different from your perception of how it would be?
5. What impact has your ministry had on your personal life and family?
 - a. This doesn't have to be overly personal. Consider topics like how their ministry affects their rhythm of life, where their family lives, how they're perceived outside of church.
6. What do you think the role of [priests/deacons/lay professionals] will be in the future?
7. What advice our guidance would you offer for someone discerning their call?

Afterwards, Reflect On...

- What did you hear that resonated with you?
- What did you hear that made you curious to learn more?
- What did you hear that made you feel uncomfortable or uncertain?
- Where did you see yourself reflected in the views and the experiences of the people you talked with?
- How does this person's leadership style seem to compare to what you've experienced in the church? How does their leadership style compare with your own?
- How does their ministry context compare to contexts that you've experienced?
- What surprised you?
- What additional questions did this interview raise for me?



Guide for Parish Visits

Visit at least five Episcopal parishes in the Diocese of Virginia for an in-person worship experience. You are welcome to visit and reflect on other parishes beyond the Diocese as well, but it's important for us to be reminded, as both lay and ordained persons, that we are part of one diocesan family.

Some Additional Directions

- **Visit at least five new to you Episcopal churches** and write a reflection for each using the guide below. These should not be parishes you've attended previously, or at least they shouldn't be churches you're very familiar with.
- **Get suggestions.** Ask your presenting priest for suggestions on parishes to visit, or consult the "[Find a Church](#)" tool on the diocesan website.
- **Seek diversity.** Seek out churches that seem different from yours. We hope you will make an effort to step out of your comfort zone and explore the richness of worship and parish life in our diocese.
 - Some ways parishes may differ: race, ethnicity and languages spoken; economic status of parishioners; size/average attendance; political/theological beliefs; liturgical style; urban/suburban/rural; the role of leadership in the church.
- **Take notes** and gather information about how visitors are welcomed & what information is available about parish ministries.
- **One caution:** It's OK to say you're visiting as part of your own vocational discernment, just don't give anyone the idea that you're a member of a search committee scouting out their priest!

Guide for Journaling and Reflection:

1. What are the basic ways the church compared to your home church? (E.g., location, size, architecture.)
2. Liturgy and Worship
 - a. What aspects of the worship resonated with you? What did you struggle with? Why?
 - b. What was unfamiliar to you or made you curious?
 - c. What was the sermon about? Who preached it? What was the delivery style like?
 - d. What were the roles of lay ministers, deacons and priests?



- e. What was the priest's style in celebrating the Eucharist?
 - f. What was the music like?
 - g. What else did you notice?
3. The Congregation
 - a. What are the basic ways the congregation compares to your own? (E.g., age, dress, demographics)
 - b. How would you describe the congregation beyond those basic observations?
 - c. Describe how those in the pews participated in the service. (E.g.: Were they reverent? Joyful? Did they sing?)
4. The Leadership
 - a. Who's on staff at this parish? How many clergy serve there? How many lay leaders are a formal part of the ministry team?
 - b. What seemed to be the relationship between the rector and the congregation?
 - c. How does this compare to your parish experiences?
5. What ministries are held up in the bulletin or in the announcements?
6. How would you describe the values/mission of this parish? How does that compare to your home parish?
7. How would you describe the neighborhood/community where the parish is located? How would you describe the parish's relationship/involvement with that neighborhood/community?
8. What was your greatest takeaway from this parish?
9. If you were a part of this parish, what would you most want to be involved with?
10. In what ways could you see yourself serving in this parish? If you could not see yourself serving in this parish, why not?