



A MATTER OF DISCERNMENT

A DOCUMENT TO ASSIST CANDIDATES AND POTENTIAL CANDIDATES FOR PUBLIC MINISTRY

ASKING THE QUESTION

“How do I know God is calling me to Word and Sacrament ministry?” You are probably asking yourself this very question if you’ve taken the time to pick up this document. There is no existing list of things to check off when we are trying to hear God’s voice. We simply have to listen. This document aims to help you do that.

LISTEN TO THE FIRST ANSWER

In Holy Baptism, we are claimed by God and given a mission for this life. Recognizing our baptismal calling is the beginning of the discernment process in our lives. No matter what we are called to, that call comes from God through the baptismal waters connected to His Holy Word. Recognizing this key aspect of the faith journey is critical to following Jesus. Luther, in his commentary on 1 Peter, once said that we exist for the sole purpose of serving our neighbors. There are limitless ways in which we can accomplish this service!

Think of all the people you know who are Christians. Do they all recognize that God has called them into a baptismal vocation? Perhaps you can think of a time in your life when you didn’t understand the call on your life as a baptized child of God. There are myriad ways the baptized serve the Lord: by being a parent, teacher, mentor, missionary, coach, nurse, lab tech, trash collector, bridal gown alteration specialist, florist, police officer, fire fighter, water treatment plant worker, farmer, librarian, mechanic, volunteer at school, and the list goes on and on.

HOW CAN I HEAR MY PERSONAL CALLING?

Discernment is defined as “the ability to side between truth and error, right and wrong.” Discernment is a life-practice. It never ends as long as we have breath in our bodies! This happens in at least four ways:

1. Immersing oneself in Scripture, which is truth, wisdom and enlightenment;
God speaks to us primarily through His Holy Word. Martin Luther once wrote, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.” However, be aware, Scripture isn’t an answer book; it is the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. Discernment is a process that is led by the Holy Spirit. Through our continual reading, study and meditation on the Scriptures, God the Holy Spirit communicates insights to us. He renews our minds so that we have the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5-8), which teaches us to sacrifice, submit to God’s will, and be obedient to the Holy Spirit’s nudgings. Scripture doesn’t present discernment as a guessing game. God is not trying to keep His will secret from us. In fact, most of us don’t falter in discernment as much as we are weak in knowledge (especially of Scripture) and wayward in obedience to what God has made known to us.
2. Participating in the body of Christ and seeking guidance from trusted Christians (pastors, mentors, etc.) as they consider and confirm the gifts, passions, traits, weaknesses, etc., they see in you;
One caveat: Beware of focusing exclusively on teachings about spiritual gifts. Certainly, Scripture teaches that the Spirit gives individuals gifts for the upbuilding of the kingdom of God, but pride, especially in the form of perfectionism, can mask or distort our understanding and obedience to the person God has made us to be. Spiritual gifts must not be sought after as ends in themselves, but rather must be developed by experience and God’s grace as tools for obeying Jesus’ command to love one another.

3. Study and practice these disciplines to rest before God, listening to His heart for your life.
4. Finally, attention to the needs in God's world almost always informs discernment of vocation.

SOME QUESTIONS TO PONDER WITH YOUR PASTOR:

The following is "food for thought" as you listen for God's voice in this candidacy process. Journaling your responses to readings and questions can be helpful, as the Spirit will guide your heart and mind to process what you are hearing from the Holy Spirit through Scripture, other people, prayer, worship and service.

1. In what ways is the discernment of God's call on our lives mysterious, ineffable, transcendent and ultimately not amenable to human analysis? What difference might that make in your discerning of that call?
2. Must your ministry be Word and Sacrament ministry? In other words, are you called to ordained ministry or are you simply realizing God has a call on your life in general? Reflect on Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1. How does Paul know he has been called by God?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Paul is very clear about the nature of his call: He is to preach the Gospel. Do you think you will know clearly what God is calling you to? Why or why not?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:16. Who does God call according to Paul? What does it look like when God calls? What doesn't it look like?
5. Read 1 Corinthians 3. What is our role as servants of God when it comes to the Church?
6. Take some time and explore these nine words for discernment.

Nine unique Greek words for "discernment."

1. *Dokimazo*: Romans 12:2 & Ephesians 5:10 (test, examine)
2. *Dialogizomai*: Luke 1:29 (ponder, wonder about)
3. *Synesis*: 1 Corinthians 1:19 (understanding, insight)
4. *Synetos*: 1 Corinthians 1:19 (intelligent)
5. *Anakrino*: 1 Corinthians 2:14 (examine, question, judge)
6. *Diakrino*: 1 Corinthians 11:29 (doubt, waver)
7. *Aisthesis*: Philippians 1:9 (discernment)
8. *Kritikos*: Hebrews 4:12 (able to discern)
9. *Aistheterion*: Hebrews 5:14 (faculty, powers of discernment) Notice – constant practice!

7. Read Ephesians 4:20-24 and note the three steps:

- Put off the old self
- Submit to God's transformation (renewing) of the mind
- Put on the new self.

How is this happening in your life?

8. Read Romans 12:1-18. Notice how it can be parsed with regard to discernment:

- Be willing to worship, prepare, change and serve (12:1-2)
- Humbly receive and eagerly fulfill the gifts and assignments God gives (12:3-8)
- Engage in spiritual discipline for the sake of Christlike service to others (12:9-18)

What does this say to you personally?