

Appendix A: Guidelines for Discernment

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2 NRSV).

A.1 Journey of Discernment

A journey of discernment designed specifically for the ELCA candidacy process focuses on the development of healthy habits and practices during a lifelong process of discernment. Such discernment is not an additional decision point in the candidacy process. Rather, it encompasses the entire life span of an applicant – before, during, and following candidacy. Consequently, a candidacy committee should not expect applicants at Entrance to have answers to all the questions that will be addressed during their seminary formation process. Candidates will continue their discernment of call throughout the candidacy process.

God works in the life of every person. Every Christian has a baptismal call to ongoing discernment of God’s activity in the world, in the church, and in one’s life. The primary purpose behind emphasizing a phase of discernment prior to candidacy – normally with a mentor – is to assist applicants in reflecting upon aspects of their lives that might confirm a call to rostered ministry. Some aspects worthy of consideration include an understanding of baptismal vocation, spirituality and prayer life, critical life experiences, relationship with a community of faith, significant life influences, and family of origin. Such preliminary discernment can help applicants clarify the interrelationship between internal and external dimensions of a call. It can also enable them to articulate some definite insights about what God is calling them to consider vocationally. The ultimate outcome of such discernment will be a decision on whether to apply for candidacy. Even if individuals discern that God is calling them to another expression of baptismal vocation, this time of discernment will have been a valuable use of the church’s resources.

Once a person begins candidacy, there will be further discernment. At its best, the candidacy process — both through a candidacy committee and on a seminary campus — provides a way for people of faith to arrive at a deeper understanding of the Christian faith and the various ways in which God calls a person into ministry, as a rostered minister or as a lay person, both in the church and in the world. The goal of discernment is to walk with people of faith in such a way that they come to a firm sense of what God is inviting into their life. Whatever the final outcome, the process will have been faithful to its objective of accompanying people of faith in discernment if the candidates take ownership of the outcome and complete or exit the process with a positive sense that the direction so discerned is a good fit for their gifts and interests as well as the needs of the church.

Several theological understandings undergird a journey of discernment:

1. Discernment is an ongoing process that may begin at different points in a person’s life, continues over a lifetime, and is revisited periodically. This is true both for applicants who enter into candidacy and for those who choose to pursue opportunities for service other than rostered ministry in the ELCA.
2. Discernment of readiness for candidacy originates in the context of how the church understands the vocation of every Christian. Some are called to a ministry of Word and Sacrament or to a ministry of Word and Service; however, many Christians are called to other avenues of service that are better suited to their gifts and interests. All paths are valuable and necessary for God’s mission through the church in the world.
3. Discernment of readiness for candidacy includes a communal component that is part of belonging to a community of faith. Such discernment is both internal (personal) and external (corporate), each dimension complementing the other.

What follows are suggested ways to structure and guide preliminary discernment with potential applicants for candidacy, along with recommended resources. Not every model or resource will be used with every individual. The needs of the individual and the circumstances of the individual's context will determine applicable approaches.

Since discernment of call is a continuum and not a separate step in candidacy, usually the candidacy committee will not work directly with individuals during this phase. Instead, this preliminary discernment will normally occur in the individual's current context, e.g., home congregation, campus ministry, or Lutheran outdoor ministry setting. Candidates may select a discernment mentor to assist them during this period. A mentor can be a pastor, a lay leader in the individual's congregation, a campus minister, a camp director, a college or seminary faculty person, or a trained spiritual director.

The characteristics of people who might serve as discernment mentors include the following:

1. ongoing spiritual growth and maturity in their own lives;
2. embodiment of personal holistic stewardship and well-being as illustrated in the Wholeness Wheel;
3. love for the church;
4. ability to listen deeply and reflect actively with others;
5. ability and willingness to pray with the individual, both in person and apart, as a regular practice;
6. ability to think critically and ask difficult questions; and
7. commitment to a process of discernment with an individual.

Discernment mentors can benefit from a focused orientation and preparation on how to use the discussion guide and other tools provided in this manual. To facilitate the discernment process, a synod may select a discernment team of two or three people who will help identify and train mentors. Synods should be flexible in applying the guidelines for discernment and adapting them to the specifics of an individual's situation to honor and respect the particular needs and uniqueness of each person.

A.2 Call

A Lutheran understanding of call is threefold. There is an internal call, in which an individual senses God's invitation to consider rostered ministry. There is also an external call, in which the church discerns, along with individuals, their appropriateness for such service. Finally, following the completion of candidacy, the call is confirmed by a specific ministry setting in which the individual will serve.

A preliminary discernment should focus primarily on call. In discernment conversations, the individual and mentor might specifically address:

1. the individual's faith story, reflecting especially on where the individual has experienced God as active;
2. understanding of the baptismal call;
3. understanding of the wider church and how one's individual call to service is related to and representative of the whole church; and
4. exploration of possibilities and preparation for bi-vocational ministry and other leadership needs of the church.

A.2.1 Possible Lines of Inquiry

1. Share your faith story, especially times when you have been aware of God's call in your life.

2. Who is the triune God in your life?
3. How do you understand your baptism and its connection to your sense of vocation?
4. What is the relationship between your personal sense of call (internal call) and the call of the whole church (external call)?
5. What other vocations have you experienced or considered? How might you envision those in tandem with your anticipated ministry?

A.2.2 Tools and Related Resources

Suggested readings for discussion:

Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Muhlenberg Press, 1957)

Timothy J. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* (Fortress Press, 2008)

William C. Placher, ed. *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005)

Paul Baglyos, [“Called to Lead: God’s Call, Your Vocation”](#)

A.2.3 Spiritual Direction

One noteworthy resource for discernment is spiritual direction. Probably the most desirable approach for the discernment described in this manual is personal spiritual direction with a trained practitioner who is mature in the spiritual life and in a good position to be helpful to the applicant. Spiritual direction can draw from a variety of traditions and approaches, many of which are not specifically Lutheran. In cases where either a seminary or a candidacy committee recommends spiritual direction to an applicant, it is helpful for the partner recommending this option to have firsthand knowledge of the expertise and experience of any person recommended for referral. Normally spiritual direction occurs on a frequency mutually determined between the directee and the spiritual director and continues over a period of several months to several years. Conversations in personal spiritual direction should focus on the prayer life and spiritual sensitivity of the person seeking direction and should transpire in a climate of confidentiality and transparency on the part of both director and directee. For more information about spiritual direction and contact information for locating individuals who offer it, consult:

1. [The Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation](#)
2. [The Academy for Spiritual Formation](#)
3. [Spiritual Directors International](#)
4. Synod offices and ELCA seminaries.

A.3 Current Life Situation

Many aspects of applicants’ lives can have an impact on their ability to prepare for and serve in rostered ministry. During discernment, applicants should:

1. reflect on their family situation, considering the way this journey will impact other family members, and gauge support from family;
2. realistically assess their financial situation and create a plan for funding seminary education,
3. consider how one’s health might enhance or hinder ministry, and
4. contemplate the likelihood of geographic relocation for theological education and first call.

A.3.1 Possible Lines of Inquiry

1. Think concretely and specifically about how a possible call will impact others in your life, such as parents, spouse, children, or a significant other. How are you addressing their concerns and needs in relation to your anticipated future life directions?
2. After you complete a personal financial worksheet, what do you identify as your financial strengths and challenges? What plans are you developing to cover the costs of further education?
3. What health issues do you need to address to sustain a healthy lifestyle throughout candidacy and ministry?

A.3.2 Tools and Related Resources

ELCA [Personal Financial Worksheet](#)

ELCA [Personal Health Assessment](#)

A money autobiography, such as the one developed by Dr. Marty Stevens at Gettysburg Theological Seminary and published in “How Much Is Enough?” (available through Region 9 ELCA, 1003 Richland St., Columbia, SC 29201).

The Wholeness Wheel (section 4.1.2), which provides a visual overview of all facets of one’s life that should be considered in a time of ongoing discernment.

A.4 Life Experience

At any age, people bring past experiences into a new venture. It is important for candidates to understand how these experiences continue to impact them — positively and negatively. Some areas of specific focus might include:

1. educational background,
2. transferable skills from work and volunteer positions,
3. cross-cultural experiences and travel,
4. self-awareness of gifts and areas where growth is needed, and
5. formative experiences and influences.

A.4.1 Possible Lines of Inquiry

1. How has your educational experience prepared and shaped you for theological education? How has your prior education influenced or informed your sense of call?
2. What skills from previous work or volunteer experiences have prepared you for rostered ministry?
3. What kinds of cross-cultural experiences (such as travel or ethnic immersion) might inform your sense of ministry? How might such experiences make a difference in the way you approach ministry and mission?
4. What people and experiences have had the greatest impact on your life? How have they shaped you spiritually, vocationally, and personally?

A.4.2 Tools and Related Resources

Spiritual direction (Appendix A.2.3)

Wholeness Wheel (section 4.1.2)

Suggested reading: Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).

A.5 Leadership Models

The role of rostered ministers in the life of the church continues to change and develop. Individuals may have limited experience with a variety of leadership models. During the discernment period, an individual should explore and reflect upon:

1. the church's need for rostered ministers with a sensitivity to mission,
2. various models for leadership, and
3. one's own leadership skills and style.

A.5.1 Possible Lines of Inquiry

1. Who stands out for you as a model for ministry? What qualities in these people do you most wish to emulate? Why?
2. What is your understanding of missional leadership? Why is this important for the church in our time? What specific gifts or barriers for missional leadership do you recognize in yourself?
3. What is the relationship between missional leadership and servant leadership in your approach to ministry?

A.5.2 Tools and Related Resources

Suggested readings for discussion:

Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Meet a Changing World* (Jossey-Bass, 2006) and Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989).

Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Baker Academic, 2011) and Craig L. Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation*, second edition (Fortress Press, 2010).

Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Introduction to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

A spiritual gifts inventory, such as the one available on the ELCA website, [“Spiritual Gifts Assessment Tool”](#)

A tool for determining leadership style, such as DISC (a personality assessment test.)

A.6 Discernment About Ministry and Seminary

There are a variety of seminary (ELCA and non-ELCA) and other accredited degree programs that prepare people for rostered ministry. Preliminary discernment can be an important time for exploring options and developing a plan for preparation.

A.6.1 Possible Lines of Inquiry

1. What areas of ministry particularly excite you?
2. What are you seeking in a seminary community?
3. What are the deciding factors in your choice of a seminary?

4. What resources are you utilizing to make a decision about where you might attend seminary?
5. What is your anticipated timeline for entering and completing seminary studies?
6. Given your understanding of the church's need for servant leaders with sensitivity to God's mission in the world, what do you consider to be the most important formative elements in your preparation for rostered ministry?

A.6.2 Tools and Related Resources

Summary of ELCA seminaries with descriptions of curriculum and context

Expectations for Lutheran learning and formation (section 4.5.4)

Philip G. Camp, *Finding Your Way: A Guide to Seminary Life and Beyond*