

# On the selection, formation and placement of parish priests

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My interest in this paper is to suggest ways that parishes can improve their role in the selection, formation and placement of parish priests. I'm not addressing the seminaries role and will only touch on the diocese's role. Most of my attention is on the front end of that process – selection.

## **What are we seeking in a priest?**

Possibly the most significant force in shaping effective and healthy parish oversight is the parish priest. The priest is central in the parish's capacity to face into a crisis, take advantage of opportunities, and in establishing the structures, processes and climate needed for formation. The priest's person and competence have a major impact upon the parish's life.

We have all known clergy who did these things well. We have also known others who just "got into the wrong business"; people who were moved through parish and diocesan discernment processes and rewarded for their ability to jump through hoops and survive.

How might we increase the number of clergy who can serve our parishes with competence and faithfulness? What might we experiment with to improve our processes of selection, formation, and placement?

From a systems perspective one thing to be done is to build upon elements that are already strong and contribute to our success and to strengthen the weaker elements. There are a number of system models that identify the key and interdependent elements that make up a system. For example, a system can be seen as having 1) direction -in goals, values, and vision, 2) structure and processes – in groupings, standards, and the steps of decision making, 3) people – in the competence and commitment of participants, 4) dynamics – such as inclusion and information flow, trust, inter-group issues, and 5) leadership – which includes the ability to focus and navigate the system.

In selecting, forming, and placing priests we seem to have worked more on structure and processes to the neglect of the other elements. All organizations have a tendency to focus on one or two system elements, and then in time swing their attention to other elements, and in that swing proceed to neglect what had been the earlier center of concern. The area of structure and processes is one of the easier places to focus because it can be done relatively quickly and costs less than dealing with other elements such as the training and support needed to increase the competence of people. It also avoids the difficult political work of clarifying direction and values.

Balancing and strengthen our system around the selection, formation and placement of parish priests needs to include improving our sense of direction by giving more definition to what we are seeking in a priest. Sometimes we are not clear about the essential elements the church needs in its priests; other times we use lists that are so long that they are useless in real decision making. We could also improve the process element by making better use of the learnings from quality management. I wonder what it would be like if early in the discernment process a designated person, with an ability to deliver hard news, just said to the candidate – "John, I'm not commenting on you as a human being or as a member of the Body of Christ. I am saying that we do not see in you something essential for effective priestly ministry in a

parish church. Specifically, we have not seen ... (say something about capacity for leadership, spiritual maturity, emotional intelligence, or priestliness)." The same directness and honesty might be useful in the process of forming priests and later by bishops and search committees.

### **Five critical elements**

R. David Cox writes, "The presbyterate remains an essential pastoral office within the priesthood of all Christians, for teaching, for nourishing the community of faith through word and sacrament, and for leading the community as an elder." (*Priesthood in a New Millennium*, Church Publishing, 2004) Cox acknowledges that not all priests will be parish priests. But he sees the leadership task as being part of the ministry for all priests. What is it we need from those who will exercise this leadership and especially those who will do that as parish priests?

What might we look for in the discernment process that leads to ordination as a priest? What do we need to equip and develop in the formation process? What does a parish need to consider as they seek a priest? Five elements come to mind.

**1. Leadership ability** – This is the ability to get others to take action in faithful and effective ways. It's the elder role in the community. In one sense the priest presides at the Holy Eucharist because he or she presides in the Eucharistic community. It's an interdependent sacramental role. Each form of presiding is about building up the Body and nurturing the gifts of the people of God in such a manner that they may be exercised in harmony. It's the ability to engage in a complex set of behaviors, including:

- Gathering the community, focusing and shaping its life
- Facilitate others in listening and responding to one another and to the movement of the Holy Spirit in their common life
- Facilitating the parish in seeing the needs and opportunities before it
- Having political common sense
- Having an adequate longer-range perspective, and clarity about the priestly role in a parish's life, so that the parish is moved toward greater health and faithfulness.

**2. Emotional maturity** – This includes abilities such as:

- Having an awareness of his or her emotions and accepting responsibility for how they act on the emotions
- An understanding of the impact of his/her behavior on others
- Self-confidence
- Self-control
- The ability to stay with something while being flexibly
- The capacity to negotiate with others
- The ability to be part of the group as well as to stand apart from the group

**3. Spiritual Maturity** – Priests need to be people of Apostolic Faith. That would usually include behaviors such as:

- Maintaining a spiritual discipline that is grounded in Anglican spirituality. Generally accepting responsibility for his/her spiritual life.
- Stability as seen in a productive connection with a parish church and the Episcopal Church.
- Action that shows the character needed -- "an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works" and signs of "humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance born of love, eagerness to maintain unity in the bond of peace, truthfulness mediated in love, mutual

kindness, tenderheartedness and forgiveness"; "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

**4. Competence in many of the skills related to effective priestly ministry** – Does the person have, or seems able to develop, competence in presiding at liturgy, preaching, spiritual and pastoral guidance, and Christian formation? Each requires skills in designing and planning as well as implementing.

## **5. Priestliness**

This may be the most difficult area to get right. Many people have a hard time being specific about what is involved in priesthood beyond the elements noted above. But in our discernment processes we turn away people based on a feeling that he or she just isn't "called." It's dangerous territory. Many of us are aware of the unconscious factors that are involved in selecting one person and not another. We know how physical attractiveness or compatible views influence hiring and advancement in organizations and how an elusive uneasiness may be more about us than about the person in front of us. The one danger is that we can operate as though these barely conscious forces do not exist in us. The other danger is that in our discomfort with the vagueness of this may lead us to move people through the process because we hesitate to "judge."

Something else we have seen in some parishes is moving people into the process because they are interested in priesthood, strike us as sincere, and are generally "nice." This can lead to dropping those who are edgy, more creative and possibly a bit odd. We can have a vague sense of "priestliness" about a person. And based on that response we encourage the person even though it is absolutely clear that he or she is emotionally and/or spiritually immature or has little leadership ability.

I'd invite you into this dangerous territory of trying to be more descriptive of what we are looking for in a priest, as priest. I believe that the most fruitful approach is through the lens of the spirituality of priesthood. In "Priestly Spirituality", Eleanor McLaughlin wrote, "A priestly spirituality for the ordained priesthood is distinct though not disconnected, from the spirituality of the whole people of God. It is so because it is public; because it is nurtured in the awesome privilege and responsibility of Presidency in the Eucharistic community; because it focuses, enables and gives a model for whatever else goes on in the community; and because it confronts the specific experiences and temptations of the ordained priesthood." (Ascension Press, 1981)

Here's some of what I look for. What I'm seeking is evidence that the characteristic is already present in some form. If I can't see it in the person now, it's unlikely to appear suddenly later.

1. "Being with God with the people on your heart" –This is Michael Ramsey's famous phrase expressing the priestly calling. Is this a person of prayer, one who can be with God? Is this a person who is with people rather than above them or separated from them? Does this person have tenderness toward people? Are they interested in the life and journey of others? Do they ask people about their life, including their spiritual life?
2. Helps others enter into the experience of God. Has something of the enchanter about them. Others feel drawn to the person in a strange mix of attraction and hesitation, even fear. The person manages this attraction responsibly, isn't narcissistic or excessively controlling. The person can work with others through more than words; knows how to use silence, touch, and movement along with words. The person carries and makes accessible an experience of God rather than therapy or problem solving.

3. Has a sacramental way of being and engaging. That has several aspects to it:
  - A sense that the person's spiritual rhythm moves between altar and daily life gracefully.
  - A sense that he or she sees the "inward and spiritual grace" within the life of individuals and the community. This person can illuminate the experience taking place more by pointing to it than many words about it.
  - The person's being and doing is grounded in personal and corporate prayer.
  - Is accessible and human, involved with people and their concerns
  - Is able to be in a liturgical role and also able to pray the liturgy. For many this will relate to living the week before the Sunday Eucharist with attention to prayer life and in a manner that is not driven and caught up in busyness. The capacity of the priest to be centered and attentive while presiding is key to the congregation's ability to do the same.
4. Accepts being what Urban Holmes called a "God symbol" and also being a person. In a sermon on vocation Rowan Williams said, "The Holy Ghost calls us to be more, not less ourselves – teaching Peter to be more Peter, John to be more John." We are seeking one who continues to grow into his or her uniqueness and also accepts that they exist as a sacramental being for others.
5. Is a person of and for the church. He or she loves the church. This is best when it is expressed as a critical love with an awareness of the church's faults and problems, but finally is still a lover. Shows in his or her life a collegiality with others. This doesn't mean that it is expressed in particular institutional ways, e.g., likes hanging out with other clergy. But it is expressed in some fashion. This is a person who exhibits the capacity for collegial relationships with the bishop, other priests, deacons and the laity.
6. Comfortable living with paradox. Priesthood in the Anglican tradition carries a number of paradoxes – priest as person and as symbol, minister of word and sacrament, sacrificial and pastoral, represents Christ and the church, is one of the baptized (laos) and is set apart, is of the local parish and a wider and larger church, able to be fully with and part of the parish community and able to maintain a separateness (engaged detachment).
7. The other four elements appear in an integrated way in the person. They come together in harmony in this person. The person accepts all four as important aspects of the priest's life.

Early in the journey toward priesthood it's not realistic to assume we will see all these things fully present and competently used. But it is reasonable to assume that we will see some of it already being lived, parts beginning to show, and a longing for and openness to the rest.

The norm we might establish is that a person who is to be brought into the formation process for ordained priesthood is a baptized Christian of apostolic faith and practice (or actively progressing toward that); with adequate psychological and emotional maturity; a priestly spirit; and a demonstrated capacity for leadership and pastoral oversight in a Christian community. The process of formation before and after ordination needs to continue equipping and nurturing these capacities in an integrated program of academic and experiential learning and supervised application. It might help to look at the formal formation process as beginning with the early discernment process in a parish and continuing through the priest's second or third year in charge of a parish.

In offering these five elements I have purposely not tried to identify all that might fit within each category. The list is meant to be suggestive and is an invitation for others to do their own research and thinking.

## **Selection and Formation in the Parish**

I'm not suggesting that the aspirant should be showing strength in all these areas as they begin a discernment process but that we should be able to see real potential. "Real" potential, not the abstract potential that is in effect saying, "well anything is possible." (meaning that when pigs fly we would expect to see this particular person growing in the needed manner). This isn't about seeking the "perfect", but we should be able to see glimmers and signs that a person has or can develop in the five areas.

There are some who present themselves in which the capacity to develop is not there. They need an early and honest conversation. Others are blocked within themselves or by life circumstances. They may work these things out or not. In my mind dealing with the blocks is related to Kierkegaard's phrase, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." The candidate needs to be able to engage and move beyond the blocks if he or she is to be ordained. This means giving themselves to the desire and the call to such an extent that their mind and heart are focused and they can persevere in the face of resistance and doubt, their own and that of others.

One of our better priests had to do this in regard to her family. When there was clarity in her own longing for ordination and it was confirmed by companions and friends, she still had to cope with what seemed to be overwhelming resistance from her husband and children. They just did not want this. The scenes were angry, even threatening at times. A lot of "acting out." She persevered. She worked hard to listen and love them while moving toward ordination.

The gospel tells us that we may need to lose everything, in this case family and security and affection, and that we will receive the kingdom and have it all returned a hundredfold. Of course what is returned may not be what we lost; certainly it is unlikely to come in the same shape. In this case the priest entered into a life with her husband and one daughter that was richer; and with two other children there was continuing loss and pain. Another priest told me how she had gone down the path fearfully and in blindness. She said that she had no idea of how it would all work out. She worried about her son, her financial security and the investment she was making in this process of discernment and learning. The gift of joy and more inner harmony as a priest came after years of struggling with herself and others.

Both priests had to learn to "will one thing." This coming to purity of heart is often about a commitment to "real life." It is a dedication to yourself, and an oblation to God. It is having an authentic life that isn't at its root an act of self-will or of compulsive adaptation to others.

We should see the aspirant actively engaging the work needed to develop these capacities. The discernment process might continue its work as long as the person is progressing. If there isn't the needed engagement from the aspirant it might be better to allow the process to go on "hold." That would keep the responsibility where it belongs – on the aspirant. Otherwise rectors and discernment committees are likely to over-function and keep seeking some way to help the person understand and do what is needed. It's too much work from the rector and committee and too little from the aspirant. We have been aware for some time that once a person gets past the early stages of "the process" there's a good chance of ordination in a few years and then of being in a position of leadership in a parish.

In the ideas below I'm also suggesting that parishes do more than most now do; that we do this ministry with more discipline, more kindness and directness.

## **We might experiment with ten things**

### 1. Training people involved in the ordination discernment process.

The church's decision over the past 40 years to expand the number of people involved in the process was a needed action. At the same time it has created predictable problems. We have made a basic error in empowerment. Our theology and ideology led us to involve more people, but we failed to equip them for the work they faced. For example, there are people involved in the decision-making process without the competencies needed to make sound decisions; too many have little grasp of the leadership needed to work with parish dynamics and issues. Many don't understand basic group decision-making and discernment processes. For any organization to achieve the results it seeks, and to do that in a manner that increases participation in the process: 1) The participants need adequate training and coaching related to both the process itself and final outcome being sought, 2) They need to be people of apostolic faith if they are to see it in others, and 3) There is a need for clarity about where the final authority lies at various stages.

### 2. A focus on the outcome of the process -- priestly leadership in a parish.

All lengthy decision making processes have the tendency to become focused on the short-term elements of the process; i.e., we put our energy into doing the piece of the task we have been assigned. It's necessary to do this if we are to be productive in our work. But along with it we often lose track of the final outcome of the process. Decisions are more fruitful when individuals and groups in the ordination process hold in front of them that most of the people who move through the entire process are going to end up as parish priests. That's the bottom line to which successful discernment groups keep returning -- how well will this person function as a parish priest? And, so, do we see those capacities in this person?

Jumping through all the hoops in a process doesn't do it. There is a need to be clear about the outcomes we seek from the activities along the way. It may help to draw a candidate's attention to the competency or characteristic we are seeking than to focus on our prescription for how to develop that competency.

It isn't easy for the priest and lay leaders involved in the process to work with somewhat more objective criteria rather than their impressions and feelings, but it is what can make the process fair and useful. It may help to use a spectrum in doing a broad initial assessment. Such as –

#### Leadership Ability

See no sign of it                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      Visible and competent

Do the same for emotional maturity, spiritual maturity, seems able to learn competence in many of the skills related to effective priestly ministry, and priestliness.

I'd suggest not inviting the person "across the line" if he or she is at a 1 or 2 in any area.

Leaders get distracted from focusing on criteria because we get triangulated by other factors – the person is under thirty and we think the church needs young priests, the bishop has asked us to take someone into the parish for discernment and we want to be helpful, or a candidate is especially attractive in some manner. There is nothing wrong with any of these starting points but we need to move quickly into a process of considering the person in terms of criteria related to parish priesthood.

Why am I focusing on parish priesthood? Aren't there priests who teach, serve as military chaplains, are on the bishop's staff, and are nuns and monks? That's true there are various ways to live and work as a priest. For the past sixteen years most of my time has been spend being a consultant and trainer. But serving a parish is what most priests do for most of their working life. For its own health the church needs to keep its attention on both what is the most common situation and what has the greatest impact on its ability to engage the mission of Holy Unity. Exceptions can be acknowledged and worked with along the way.

### 3. Make an early decision and have other times for formal decisions along the way

This could mean making more formal decisions at several points along the way. An initial response soon after a person expresses interest helps in the stewardship of the parish's time and energy, and is a kindness to the person. The rector and vestry also need to endorse the person to the diocese for that process to begin. In between the two there is a need for at least one other formal stopping and taking stock session. Other than these moments of formal decision making we need to turn our attention to support and formation. Neither the person interested in ordination nor the parish is well served by living in a constant state of judgment, even if we call it discernment.

The initial decision by the priest, possible in consultation with lay leaders, to move the person into a formal process needs to be thoughtful, honest and in prayer. It's basic quality management to understand that you need to get things right at the front end of a process. If he or she is seriously lacking on one or more of the essential elements don't even start someone along the path. If the person is saying they don't want to lead a parish or they are obviously immature – don't waste their time or the parish's resources with a year or two of "discerning."

We are frequently dealing with someone who has been in the parish for at least several years. If we stop and think about it we have a lot of information on how the person functions in each of the five areas. We need to invite a person "across the line" or to say in specific terms why not. In either case we need to talk in relationship to criteria such as the five elements noted earlier. If we are saying that we don't see it and we have spoken in relationship to the five elements, the person knows what they need to deal with if they are to come back and reopen the conversation. This would not be the same thing as jumping through the hoops toward ordination because we are not offering activities to do -- go to therapy, attend training, read a book -- but a change that is needed in the person's behavior or stance. There may be things the person needs to do in order to make changes in his or her behavioral patterns, but the focus is on the outcome not the steps that may or may not bring the needed change.

What does it mean for the person to be invited to "cross the line", to move forward in the ordination process? It does two things. First it means that the person hears early acknowledgment and encouragement. Second, it means that the parish begins to work with the person in an intentional manner. As I see it this would involve things such as: 1) The person is added to a list of those being prayed for around discernment and formation for priesthood. 2) The parish is now ready to spend its resources of time, energy, and money on the person. See the comments below about the parish as a place of priestly formation. 3) The person is invited into whatever formal parish processes exist – formation & discernment work, coaching, meetings with the rector.

There are several ways of thinking about this “crossing the line” step.

### More generous

You are too weak on one or more of the core elements. This is not to say that you should not continue with your interest in ordination. If you address the concern please ask for another conversation.

*Being on this side of the line means that the parish will not be devoting special attention and resources on the person*

### ← The line to cross

There is adequate strength and promise in all the elements for where we are now in the process. Either the person or the rector (with others) can end the process at any point. The rector provides an initial statement in two categories:

1. Behavior patterns or a stance that will end up making you unfit for ordination. We will need to see significant progress or you will be dropped from the parish process at some point.
2. Behavior patterns or a stance which are likely to undermine your functioning as a priest. We are urging you to work on these.

*Being on this side of the line means that the parish is saying --- let's work together toward your ordination. We will give you special attention and resources. Along the way you or we may decide that ordination is not appropriate.*

### More demanding

You are too weak on one or more of the core elements and/or you have behavior patterns or a stance that will end up making you unfit for ordination. This is not to say that you should not continue with your interest in ordination. If you address the concern please ask for another conversation.

There is adequate strength and promise in all the elements for where we are now in the process. You don't appear to have any behavior patterns or a stance that will end up making you unfit for ordination. The rector makes an initial statement on any behavior patterns or stances which are likely to undermine functioning as a priest. We are urging you to work on these.

Either the person or the rector (with others) can end the process at any point.

There are several ways in which clergy may have difficulty with the inter-personal or intra-personal dynamics in this work. In some cases the person presenting themselves may be a close friend of the rector or someone seen as an adversary. In any situation where the rector has strong emotions about a person it is an ethical “must” to involve a couple of others in the initial discernment and decision. Clergy who seem unable to make use of stated, public criteria like the elements may be avoiding accountability for their decisions and face the danger of creating criteria rooted in personal bias. Those who can not sort out which side of the line a person falls may be being excessively controlling or so subtle that everything becomes too complex to realistically manage.

It could change the whole climate of what we are doing if we make decisions earlier. Once we have made the decision that a person has the potential for priesthood then we can shift toward support, equipping, and training. The parish church can be a significant resource in the formation of priest if we can make better use of the time before the person goes to seminary. This would allow us to make use of the parish setting in a kind of action–reflection learning process. In that process we or the person may discover that initial judgment was mistaken.

#### 4. The parish as a place of priestly formation: a disciplined *action – reflection - learning process*

There are things that the potential priest can learn in the parish that will not be fully accessible until he or she has been ordained and begun work in a parish as a priest. In the months or years from a person first showing interest and being invited to continue with the parish's support there is an opportunity for priestly formation. The quality of the conversations that can take place while still in the parish context differ sharply from the conversations of seminarians. A discussion in seminary about the use of inclusive language in liturgy is likely to be abstract, ideological and loaded with the word "should." The same discussion in the parish context involves the feelings of parishioners, the impact on many people, and possible consequences in spiritual formation as well as pledging. The parish community's trust, stability and mutual obedience is involved in the decision.

It's not adequate to have processes in which people offer reflections on their life and then are asked the best questions the group can come up with, hoping to probe enough to be able to make a judgment but not being so intrusive that the person becomes uncomfortable.

Our process needs to involve the person in three kinds of activities that provide the basis for useful reflection. First, include them in activities related to pastoral oversight and leadership, liturgical roles, and the other various functions in which a priest engages. Second, require participation in experiential training programs that provide opportunities to explore and learn competencies related to leadership, emotional intelligence and spiritual life. Third, provide a disciplined reflection – learning process. These three actions will shift the process to one of action – reflection – learning.

The first two activities offer the ground for a reflection process that is around the needed learning issues. This will be something of a shift from discernment through our stories about the past to working more with the here and now experience. I'm not suggesting that we entirely eliminate the process of reflecting on our total life experience, just that we give more attention to the other. The work around the aspirant's story will be deepened if the those in the process come with a stronger mix of competent, empathetic engagement.

What is it that the parish could contribute in a person's formation process at this early stage? I see three things: prayer, resources, and acknowledgement. The rector's personal intercessions and the parish's formal liturgical intercessions include the aspirants. The parish can bring the person into its action – reflection – learning process. The person is invited to participate in the parish's formal process.

The two key elements in using the parish for priestly formation are some work or ministry to participate in and a disciplined process of reflection and learning (i.e., looking at the experience and drawing learning from it – what did you feel?, what options for your behavior were you

aware of?, what might you do differently in a similar situation? In many situations there needs to be training and coaching associate with the process either before or after the action.

Any parish church offers multiple opportunities for work or ministry that can be the base for learning. For example:

- Offering homilies at mid-week Eucharists
- Serving in various liturgical roles – server, Eucharistic Minister, lector, thurifer, Crucifer, sacristan
- Being part of decision making groups or sitting in on decision making meetings of the vestry, rector and wardens and other groups
- Participating in or observing meetings in which sensitive pastoral issues are addressed
- Playing some pastoral role
- Participating in or observing meetings in which strategic issues are addressed
- Taking on a teaching role or participating in designing an educational program
- Working on congregational development projects

It can help focus the learning process if the person is asked to state specific learning goals that relate to the five elements or other stated criteria. Training, coaching and reflection can then be directly connected to the areas that the person needs work in. For example, many young clergy report having a difficult time worshipping when they are first presiding or officiating. Those who serve in parish liturgical roles have an opportunity to learn how to be in role and also worshipping. A candidate for ordination who is also on the vestry can be helped to reflect on group process, teamwork, the vestry's role in the parish system, the way in which they participate in the vestry and the impact they have on others.

Participation in experiential training programs can provide the person an opportunity to make quick progress on learning goals related to leadership, emotional intelligence and spiritual life. Done early in the formation process it can enrich the reflection – learning process that works with the person's parish activities.

Those leading the *action – reflection – learning process* need training in experiential education methods; especially in offering and receiving feedback, how to coach, and designing and facilitating a process of learning from experience. They also will need to be personally flexible and imaginative in assisting people work out role conflicts and all the various triangles in any system. For example, if the candidate is also a warden it may need to be someone other than the rector that facilitates the person's reflection process.

#### 5. Make special use of parishes that generate larger numbers of people interested in ordination

Some parishes seem to consistently produce large numbers of people for ordination, other never produce anyone. All too often these parishes have experienced skepticism, suspicion and my guess is jealousy from other parishes and some on the bishop's staff. If that's true in your region it may be time for an appreciative stance and some better theology. It's always been something of a scandal that God works through particularity as much as universally. That a particular has been the ground out of which generations of priests have come to serve the church is a blessing for the church. It is also a reality we could make more use of. Diocesan leaders could make an effort to work with these parishes and help them become centers of priestly recruitment and formation.

One thing possible in such parishes that we can't do in a place that has just one candidate is use group learning processes. We could involve a wide range of people. I'd include everyone that has "crossed-the line" in this or another parish. The group might be made up of people who have just been invited into the parish process, those in it for many months, and seminarians doing intern or field work at the parish. Having a group allows us to engage in a shared and more energized way of exploration and learning. The group can meet every so often to:

- Read and discuss books and papers about priesthood and parish ministry
- Share and reflect on their stories. Be open to affirmation and challenge.
- Offer feedback on here and now behavior in the group. Use this as an opportunity for people to increase their awareness of the impact they have and what options that have for more effective behavior.

Using groups will increase our ability to move beyond everything being on a one-to-one basis between rector and candidate. The circle of influence and formation would be wider and more diverse. It also allows something else, possibly a bit magical to take place.

Recently I saw the Gee's Bend quilter's exhibit. One of the cards interpreting the work told of how the women referred to the quilting method as "my way." The women insisted that each person develop her own style, "my way." The display said, "Their traditional emphasis on independent, personal invention has fostered a degree of creative and artistic competence that is unusual in a community as small as Gee's Bend. This individuality, however, develops within the framework of a shared community experience and aesthetic legacy that undoubtedly shapes, and to a degree, contains it." That kind of synergy and mutual encouragement is something we can nurture in groups, in these special parishes.

## 6. Recruit

Let's experiment with being less passive. Every 12 – 16 months have a conversation that includes the rector and a few apostolic Christians in the parish. Go over the parish list seeking people to approach about becoming priests. There's no need to force the conversation. In some years we will not identify anyone.

You aren't making a promise, just inviting a conversation. We especially need to look at two groups of members -- 1) those who are apostolic Christians and match the other elements needed for priesthood, and 2) young people 17 – 26.

It's still fine for people to put themselves forward. We just need to enhance that with more initiative on our part.

If we are serious about taking more initiative it will also entail changing the process so it has three qualities: efficient in its use of people's time and energy, productive in formation, and clear about the criteria for decisions that move a candidate along in the process. If we really want our most talented younger members to consider ordination we need to make the process work with the life of people in their twenties. If graduate school level education is in the person's thinking then the church's process needs to be realistic about the competition we face.

## 7. Provide adequate focus to the discernment about priesthood

Separate the processes for priesthood from those for other vocations. In many cases people come into the process wanting ordination. They are already clear in their own mind; they have usually already talked with others. The church needs to avoid wasting everyone's time and putting on a façade.

All organizations, including the church have a responsibility to focus on the process of selecting and equipping its critical positional leaders. We keep adding elements to the process, all have some merit, all are well intentioned. But there is also a value in some efficiency and in a kinder and more direct process. We can be better stewards of our time and energy. That will not mean doing less but it will mean more focus in what we are doing.

Broad processes that are for everyone wanting to discern vocation can be a mix of those jumping through a hoop toward ordination, the young seeking a place to give their hearts, the mid life vocation changers, and "the lost." It may better serve people if we separate the processes for those who are clear about ordination and those who may be considering that along with other possibilities. We can offer a mix of spiritual discernment and life planning for some and an action – reflection process around ordination for others.

8. Shape a climate that is supportive and challenging, fair and kind, just and attentive to quality

In too many places we have created a climate that is unkind, fearful and excessively concerned with control. The roots of that climate may be in our values about safety and fairness in the church. At times it appears that we are so anxious about preventing "a sheep in wolf's clothing" from being ordained that we screen out the truly creative. Our instinct seems to move toward attempts to create bureaucratic and structural solutions to the problems posed by some current clergy rather than the healthier option of increasing our capacity to confront the specific issue and person. It's another example of choosing to manage our anxiety by structure rather than competent engagement. Ed Friedman use to say something like, "anyone can be non-anxious by being non-present."

Most clergy can point to a few people that early on encouraged them toward ordination. Who said, "do it, be a priest", and said it as often as needed and in many different ways. As I hear priests speak about the role such people have played in the journey to priesthood what comes through most strongly is that they came with affirmation and acceptance but also with challenge and sometimes confrontation. We often hear the most important feedback about ourselves from those we trust and those who love us. How do we take this way of being into our formal processes?

Flannery O'Connor put it this way, "You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you odd." All too often what we see coming out of our discernment processes is people who are safe, conformists, and frequently resentful toward the church and the world. More recently we have seen the worst of corporate culture show up in seeking entrepreneurial people. What we miss are those who are odd; the shamans, the holy ones, the enchanters. We need priests who others feel drawn to in that strange mix of attraction and hesitation that speaks of God's presence. They also need to be able to take initiative and be sensitive to the impact they have on others. Our task is to develop the process so it finds and shapes such people.

What might it mean to have a system that did better at being supportive, challenging and also able to make the necessary judgments? Here are elements that occur to me.

The support and challenge come together in real life. It is those who care about us and have a capacity for empathy that we are most able hear when there is a hard message to receive. There are two critical pieces of this, 1) people with the ability to be empathetic and also to be direct and honest and 2) processes and skills that help us learn from our experience.

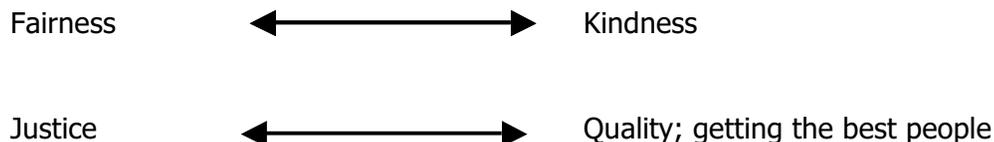
There need to be enough people with empathy and directness to set the climate. The others involved in the discernment processes could make do with a few days of training in self awareness, feedback skills, and how to learn from experience. Those exploring ordination need to have opportunities to engage the work of priesthood and to reflect on and learn from those experiences. In the parish we could make an initial decision to encourage, or not, a person's exploration. Once that decision was made the person would then work and test themselves within a climate of support. Along the way they or the parish will discover things that conform or disconfirm the initial discernment.

Achieving a climate of real support does mean that the parish can't be in a constant state of judgment. If we see the process as one in which the parish's discernment and related judgments are always "on", it will be emotionally impossible to engage in real learning from the experience. One possibility is to have check points along the way.

- An initial decision by the rector (and a couple of lay members with an apostolic faith) about seeing enough capacity, in terms of the criteria, to move forward.
- Eight to ten months later the same or an enlarged group gather twice; once with the person exploring and the second time on their own. Each party makes another decision to continue or not. The parish group might include some who have been involved in the ongoing action – reflection process along with others.
- At any place in the process the candidate or the rector could ask for a meeting to make a formal assessment.
- Rector and vestry formal action to send the person into the diocesan process.

As long as the person is attending the parish, even after entry into the formal diocesan process, the process of the action, reflection and learning from experience can continue.

We are often managing polarities in a parish. Two that relate to discernment for priesthood are:



As a church we value inclusiveness, fairness, justice; we want to give everyone an opportunity. We also value kindness and we have a responsibility to secure the best possible leadership for our parishes. Too often we trade off one value for the other. By thinking of our work as one of managing the polarity between the two values we may have more success in achieving both.

We need an open process that treats people much the same in all basic respects and we also need to be willing to engage the uniqueness and special issues of a particular person.

There needs to be both a formal process that everyone interested in ordination works within and there needs to be special efforts to recruit and develop those who show the greatest promise. We need both even if it is difficult to manage.

## 9. Focus on those with the greatest capacity – give special attention to the best

Allow your guts, in consultation with your brain, tell you who are the best among those interested in priesthood. While we may need a fair process for everyone in “the process”, we also need to make responsible judgments about how to encourage those who show the most promise. Find ways to bring them together for prayer and conversation. Allow them to influence one another, share their struggle and joy, and know that they are being strongly encouraged on the pathway.

Giving special attention to those with the most potential will mean dealing with some political issues in a parish. Those afraid to acknowledge differences among people may create pressures leaders will need to manage. We need to beware of flattening-out life in our desire to be seen fair and reasonable. Doing that is a disservice to the church’s life and future.

## 10. An action-research process in the parish and the diocese

Parishes and dioceses need their own action-research process around how we recruit and select people for priesthood. All too often the individuals and groups responsible for the process create and revise the process without data from candidates or other parts of the system. Frequently we don’t really look at options but have a “group think” dynamic that avoids disagreement with those in the room and creates solutions with limited internal commitment. We brainstorm our way to a “vision” without any ground under it.

Having an action – research process may allow us to better design our process based on how people really make these decisions, and what the church needs, rather than in the abstract, or how we think people “should” decide these things.

### **Leaders with the Ability to Develop the Parish**

In the formation process we can also look for ways to equip the skills, knowledge and stance needed for a developmental approach to parish ministry. This is an extension of the leadership abilities mentioned earlier. While not all priests need the competence to do developmental work, the church needs more priests who can do that work. My hunch is that the need for such priests will continue to grow. Many, possibly most of our existing parishes need developmental leadership now. It’s essential that search committees be equipped to know what to look for as they seek a priest for the parish.

The formation of priests able to be parish developers can be addressed at all phases of the candidate’s journey. Important work can be done in the parish in the first year after the person has expressed interest in priesthood, some will be addressed in seminary, and a very significant part could be dealt with by diocesan programs in the first few years after ordination.

The ability to do developmental work includes the following areas.

1. As a leader he or she can: 1) Define and present his or her own vision and sense of direction for a community of faith; be in touch with the needs and desires of the congregation, be as collaborative as the commitment and competence of members allows; cope with their own tendencies toward excessive control and/or passivity; and

- efficiently deal with dependent personalities. 2) Modify their approach to leadership to fit the current needs of the parish, sub-group or individual. An ability to match their leadership style to the system's competence for a task: maturity in faith, practice and emotions, and level of commitment.
2. The leader can responsibly use "positional authority." We need to allow for strong positional leadership that is accountable for making a competent effort toward developmental goals. The priest needs to be able to work with all the oversight areas and activities connected to the primary task of a parish, e.g., formation, development of spiritual life, and bringing people into that process of formation; and also help the parish increase its capacity to solve problems and engage new opportunities.
  3. The priest needs to accept the pastoral oversight role. Most of us have come to understand that this primary aspect of ordained priesthood is deeply related to the ministry of sacrament and word. One presides at the Eucharist because – and for the same purposes as – one presides in the overall life and ministry of a Christian community.

The abilities needed for pastoral oversight include:

- a. A capacity to develop pastoral strategy for nurturing and revitalizing life and ministry that is based on: sound pastoral theology; a grasp of the primary task of a congregation, and an understanding of the parish's dynamics and its role in its community. The parish's primary task can be described as a cycle: nurturing *and* sending; renewal in baptismal identity and purpose *and* apostolate with friends and family, at work and in the community; an oscillation between conscious attention to God and formation *and* subconscious reliance upon God as incorporated members of Christ's Body.
  - b. Authenticity, seen in a congruence: between the priest's beliefs, intentions and behavior: and between the public and private dimensions of life.
  - c. A capacity to cope with the typical stages of relationship between priest and congregation, revolving around acceptance of the priest as both symbol and person.
  - d. A collegial stance that is rooted in Anglican spirituality and appropriate for the context of the priest's life. There needs to be some form of common life with other priests. In some dioceses the clergy gather each week for biblical reflection and prayer. In others the clergy join together in groups around a discipline of prayer, study, work, stewardship, and rest/recreation. There are also religious orders and Christian communities that offer connection and support for parish priest. The Order of the Ascension brings together clergy and laity for a week of retreat, study and community each year and provides a Benedictine way of life in work, civic life, family and friends.
4. An ability for mutuality in decision-making. This is increasingly an expectation in parishes. We don't usually develop parishes on our own. There is a need for collaboration within the parish, among priests, and with the Bishop. Consultation with others in the parish and diocese is being looked for in all significant decisions. Priests increasingly need a capacity for such mutuality. Mutuality requires both firmness and flexibility on the part of the priest, qualities we often tend to separate. The methods used in many organizations to empower people and create self-managing working groups, are something we might experiment with in more congregations. Mutuality in ministries of worship, education, formation and Christian action is now often looked for by lay members performing such ministries. Priests are increasingly asked to include people in the planning. The parish priest needs training and guided experience for assessing and acting on the leadership style needed in a particular situation. Along with a capacity for mutuality, the

church needs priests who are able to self define themselves and make difficult and at times popular decisions for the well being of the parish.

5. Discernment and decision making process skills. Discernment is frequently held up as a mode of decision-making fitting for the People of God. Our planning processes and development of mission strategy can become more grounded in a process of respectful listening, meditation on the Scriptures and waiting on God in prayer. A priest's spiritual formation might appropriately include training in communal discernment methods and group development.

6. An understanding of and appreciation for the daily life ministry of the laity. In some places there is a renewed emphasis in the primary ministry of the laity in work, family and community. The priest's first task may be to listen to peoples' stories and struggles, see the prayer and work of Christ in them, and learn to be efficient about parish institutional needs so as not to draw people away from their primary places of ministry.

There is a need for increased diocesan responsibility in several areas:

1. A supervision and training function as transitions take place, e.g., from the testing-training stage to functioning as a priest; the first time a priest serves as a rector or vicar; from one staff structure, size or context to another.
2. A support/accountability role in relationship to the clergy serving, and the parishes that are the most vulnerable to contextual influences, e.g., those that are small, lack resources, have an unstable history, or are in transition, (of size, life cycle or community context), etc. Ongoing collaboration between such congregations and the Bishop's Office can help the congregation more effectively respond to the situation it faces.

### **The placement of parish priests**

This section is a set of observations and wonderments about our placement system.

Back in the 1970's we linked the parish's search process to its developmental process. There were reasons to do that at the time. The link no longer makes sense. The thinking then was that when the parish was between rectors this was a "prime time for renewal." Dioceses had the ability to intervene with developmental processes and well-trained consultants and assist a parish in exploring its history, needs and gifts as it prepared for a future with a new priest.

The model has worked well in some cases and been a disaster in others. (A caution: That will be true, to some extent, of any model we replace it with.) There have been several issues:

- Many parishes have an ongoing process of development taking place. On the whole there is more parish-based competence in that work. Many priests and lay leaders have received training in the Church Development Institute and the Leadership Training Institute, or just priests, at Seabury Institute. The link between developmental work and the search process has been severed.
- There is generally less competence for the developmental work at a diocesan level. Deployment officers are frequently focused on a human resources approach to deployment and the search process (though they often lack HR training). They are almost never people with training in congregational development or the process skills assumed in the existing process. They are usually intelligent people, who learn a lot on-the-job, and do the best they can. When the current process was being established more and more dioceses were creating networks of highly training consultants. Most of those networks no longer exist. In their place are systems of overworked diocese staff who make a visit or two and deliver a manual

of steps through the process, or people being called “consultants” after a day or two of orientation to the diocesan manual. We are taking the same amount of time for parishes to go through the search process but without the resources that made some sense of why we should take all that time. The process has become bureaucratic in the worst sense.

- The assumption may still be true that a search process is a time when a diocese can intervene and have a parish look at itself. But that doesn’t mean that since we went down this road most parishes have had a readiness for such work. Often the readiness would be stimulated by the skilled efforts of a consultant and the parish would end up having a productive experience.
- We have the parish set goals for the future without the primary leader in place. That sets up the implication that the new rector is coming to carry out our predetermined goals. So, we don’t really need a collaborative leader, we need an administrator or manager. We are undermining the new priest and the process of relationship development that needs to occur between the priest and lay leaders.
- We have separated the search process from the real power in the parish. Vestries get reduced to approving a person selected by the search committee with limited vestry participation. A new rector arrives with a search committee, now disbanded, that knows the priest fairly well and has great hopes, and a vestry that has almost no experience with the priest but has to do the real work with the priest. In most cases clergy and lay leaders work things out. But the additional hurdle just makes it more difficult.
- The transition process has some large blind spots. The time that elapses between one priest leaving and the other arriving, combined with a tradition of not talking with your predecessor, means that critical information is not passed on. Frequently the exiting priest leaves notes about pastoral care issues. That’s fine. But from a leadership perspective what’s needed is an understanding about why some decisions were made about processes, structures, liturgy and ministry. The new priest needs to have this information to make sense of what he or she is experiencing and to make wise decisions about any changes. There’s also a need for the two clergy to talk when there are irruptions and “odd” behavior during the first couple of years.

### **Things we might try out**

1. Many dioceses have been quietly breaking with the old ways. Let’s gather them together and hear the stories. Include a couple of outside people skilled in organization development who can challenge, probe, and coach the participants.
2. Diocesan leaders need an ability to be strategic in the search-deployment process. Some parishes need a priest in place before the current one has left, others need a long interim period. Some need to be closed for six months and reopened with a new leadership. Some will need a priest who will work in a very collaborative manner, others will need someone to get in there, take charge, and make changes. For diocesan leaders to make such decisions they need training, or resourcing, in assessing parish culture, understanding life cycles, and negotiation skills.
3. The keys to developing the health and strength of our parishes include: priests and lay leaders trained in parish dynamics and development, the availability of skilled third party consultants, attention to fostering readiness to engage the developmental task, and diocesan leaders working in support.
4. The search - deployment process does need to include having a profile that describes the context of the parish, the parish’s life and ministry, and the results of an assessment. In most cases that would be the task of the parish leaders. In some cases a team in the diocesan office. Candidates need the information in considering the position.

5. The new priest needs to start with the assumption that the task is to build on what has been done. There is a narcissistic quality involved when so many new rectors see a need to dismantle what went before. Unless we come in with, or discover, contrary information, an appreciative stance needs to become the norm.
6. We need a strong integration between the lay leaders and power brokers that the priest will need to deal with once in the position and the search process. Vestries need to be more involved. In larger parishes help the vestry delegate many of the standard oversight functions to a working group while it pays attention to the search process. In smaller parishes additional we might try a mix of adding a few meetings and dedicating some vestry meetings to search process issues.
7. The new priest needs to talk with his or her predecessor several times during the first two years. The first call needs to be within the first month in the parish.
8. We need more attention to monitoring, and as needed intervening in, the two years of transition beginning with the new priest's arrival. There are unique transition dynamics and issues that few clergy understand.
9. A second assessment of parish life and ministry needs to take place once the new priest is in place. That can serve as a starting place for setting common goals.

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