Good Practice in Diocesan Formal Discernment Processes

January 2017
A brief summary of best practice in the discernment of vocations to ordained ministry

Introduction

The following comments are offered to support the consideration of best practice in the discernment of vocations to ordained ministry by dioceses of the Church of England. They are based on the results of telephone interviews with the DDOs of six dioceses that currently raise a higher than average number of candidates per average Sunday church attendance and some candidates from some of the same dioceses who have recently been in the discernment process. The intention is to assist those responsible for planning and delivering the process for the discernment of ordained vocations in their diocese. Throughout this report, people in the process are referred to as ‘candidates’ although it is acknowledged that they begin as ‘inquirers’ or ‘explorers’ only becoming ‘candidates’ quite late into the process. The document explores four key aspects of best practice:

- Honouring the vocation of everyone.
- Helping candidates navigate the process.
- Maximising objectivity whilst engaging personally
- The use of group events and exercises

and four ‘under-represented’ groups

- Younger candidates
- Young women
- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) candidates
- Candidates with less formal education or from areas of social deprivation

Each is in the form of feedback from candidates followed by some considerations to inform ‘best practice’ taken from the comments of the DDOs. The final part of the document offers summaries of the process followed in each of the dioceses consulted.
Key aspects of best practice in the discernment process

Honouring the vocation of everyone.

It was encouraging to hear from recommended candidates their unequivocal response that even if the outcome had been different, they would still have valued the process. This was particularly strong where they were able to articulate a process that spoke from the beginning of, not whether they were called, but to what they were called, of being ‘accompanied’, rather than ‘measured’ in their exploration and having a real confidence that the same quality of conversations would continue post-BAP if they were not recommended. One non-recommended candidate who felt they had been well supported in processing the experience endorsed this. Candidates valued the time spent with them one to one as they explored their vocation.

Specific good practice included:

- Process designed from beginning to end to be an ongoing exploration of vocation of which ordination is one possible outcome
  - Using Vocations Advisors, with open access, to explore vocation broadly early in the process helped to start the conversation on these terms
  - Ensuring the language used by everyone at all stages speaks of the candidate being supported and challenged in the discernment of their own vocation; others walk with them in this.
  - Commitment to meetings continuing after BAP if the individual is not recommended – these being with the same person DDO/ADO, at least initially, emphasises that they are not of a ‘lesser’ standing
  - Specific consideration given to the ongoing support of those not recommended
    - The importance of time to reflect and recover before talking through, fully, a non-recommended outcome.
    - 3 monthly phone call for the first year
    - Availability of ‘special’ advisor for non-recommended candidates at all stages of the process.

Helping Candidates navigate the process.

Processes in dioceses were stronger when they did not assume clergy support and involvement was present at the start of formal discernment for every candidate. Instead, DDOs made sure partnership became established as the process progressed. This was particularly important for candidates moving across diocesan boundaries or worshipping in multiple parishes. One candidate spoke of having involvement with four different churches but no close contact with the clergy of any of them. This candidate entered the process directly with the DDO, who subsequently left. Their paperwork got lost and they didn’t feel able to chase up what was happening and had no clergy advocate to help. About two years were lost before they re-started the process. Another candidate studying in one diocese whilst exploring their vocation in another spoke of the importance of the strong working relationship between the DDO and the incumbent of the church where they were worshipping.

Specific good practice included:

- Involvement of incumbent/clergy sponsor from the start
  - Ensuring the individual receives local support
  - Ensuring the individual is grounded in the church – setting guidelines for expected pattern of regular attendance
Candidates appreciated very clear and repeated guidance of where they were 'up to' and what they might expect, even when this was not what they wanted to hear! Where the whole process had taken considerably longer than first expected by the individual, or had had to be slowed down for some reason, they clearly recognised the merits of this when clear and timely communicated. In contrast however, candidates who had not understood the possible implications of a small slippage potentially delaying training by a whole year would have liked this kept clearly before them. There were significant delays reported by some candidates when personnel changed. For some this was the relatively minor frustration of having to repeat stages of the process; of more concern were candidates who were 'stalled' for several months or 'dropped' from the process through lost paperwork and poor handover.

Specific good practice included:

- The candidate is made aware of the overall programme at the beginning and throughout, verbally and in a form to which they can refer; hardcopy or online. This ensures realistic expectations from the outset.
- Variance from the 'expected' path is discussed in a timely manner.
  - Ensuring the candidate is aware of the potential impact of slippage i.e. the possibility of a year's delay.
  - Ensuring they understand what is happening if they are proceeding more slowly or quickly than initially expected.
  - Demonstrating an appropriate respect for their personal circumstances and commitments; family, job, church.

As the candidate works their way through what can be a lengthy and involved process it is important that they don’t become passengers. Candidates described how much they valued and appreciated the activities and exercises they were asked to do between meetings as sources of deeper learning and reflection. High levels of candidate engagement and responsibility was achieved in a number of ways:

- Candidate is given ownership of the pace e.g. by taking responsibility for booking the next meeting. This provided the DDO with a good sense of the levels of commitment and enthusiasm and allows a realistic pace for the individual.
- Candidates are given clear information about who does what and why at every stage. Candidates are given something to do after each meeting using a pre-prepared portfolio of exercises. A 'library' of exercises is efficient for the DDO/ADO/VA and allows a responsive approach to development needs as they arise, bringing a sense of focus. This:
  - increases engagement with the process;
  - prepares for conversations with the DDO, allowing these to more quickly go deeper;
  - allows focus on areas of specific need.
- Candidates understand from an early stage what will happen if they are at any stage 'not-recommended' and to whom they can appeal if they don’t understand or agree with the outcome.

Necessary paperwork can be used to mark transition between phases in the process and help candidates to sense that they are being taken seriously. The correct timing for paperwork was viewed as important; too late and it can cause unnecessarily stressful hiccups, but introduced too early it can be somewhat overwhelming or set false expectations as to where the process is headed.

Good practice included:
• Using the national paperwork under a diocesan banner to ensure the right information is collected early without setting the expectation that it commits to engagement in the national process.
• Considering paperwork as a tool in the process rather than just ‘admin’ to be got through
• Using paperwork to mark the transition from one phase in the process to the next and to give a sense of progress.

Maximising objectivity whilst engaging personally

One of the finest balances to be sought in the process is that between the development of a personal searching relationship between the individual and the DDO and the ability to continue to offer an objective commentary on the individual’s progress. Candidates universally commended the relationship with the DDO speaking of trust, support and care. One candidate spoke of the usefulness of meeting with people who didn’t know them when nearing their BAP whilst another spoke of the danger of re-telling their story to the point where they no longer ‘felt’ it. The process needs to be designed to minimise repetition whilst continuing to offer objectivity all the way through. Dioceses were achieving this by:

• Introducing an ‘outsider’ at a late stage in the process e.g. ‘Examining Chaplain’. This:
  o Helps candidate prepare for BAP by telling their story afresh in the light of their development journey
  o Providing additional objective information to the Bishop
  o Providing a check on their ‘readiness’
• The use of a diocesan panel can also provide late stage objectivity.

The use of group events and exercises

Candidates all spoke warmly of how much they valued the individual conversations they had with Vocations Advisors, DDOs and ADOs. Those who had the opportunity to meet with other candidates in the process said how helpful they found this, whilst those who were not offered this opportunity in most cases volunteered how much they would have welcomed it. Participation in group activities was largely welcomed, particularly where it helped them to know more of what to expect from a BAP.

Specific good practice included:

• Opportunities to participate in group discussions/exercises on aspects of the criteria.
• A weekend away for worship, prayer, reflection and opportunities to practice presentations with a friendly audience.
Under-represented groups

There are common and unsurprising themes for all of the under-represented groups. They are prone to self-select themselves out both before and during the process. This cannot be managed passively. These candidates need to be helped to see that even if they see themselves as different to both other candidates and those in ministry and leadership, that they are just as much the ‘right shape’. This requires attention and creativity by those who walk with them. Efforts must be made to try and ensure that those involved formally in the discernment process are, as far as possible, representative of these under-represented groups.

Younger candidates

Young candidates spoke of the challenges of exploring their vocation at a point in their lives when lots of things were changing and developing. They are often making significant geographical moves, they are settling into long term committed relationships which find them navigating the needs of a partner alongside their own for the first time and they are looking to establish themselves in a career, all of which can mean they very easily get lost in the system. They highly value a champion who will carefully and patiently walk the path with them. Given the complexity of their life stage they need a clear message – ‘the church is open for business’ – age is no barrier and it is ok to mature in ministry. Young people can’t afford to equivocate about the job market, they very easily get caught up in work for twenty years if they don’t have a clear view of where they are in what is a complex process.

Good practice included:

- Placement are doing a double job of enabling experience other traditions and working as a ‘reality check’.
- Offering internships with vocational intentionality such as the CofE Ministry Experience Scheme (CEMES).
- Having young team members such as Vocations Advisors.
- Running Young Vocations conferences/events.
- Promoting access to Young Vocations Champions
- Offering a Young Vocations group(s) facilitated by younger curates
- Ensuring the emphasis is on potential rather than experience
- Avoiding patronising – if God is calling let us act

Young women

Young women spoke very clearly of the lack of role models but also acknowledged that the problem is wider than this. Young women are de-selecting themselves before the process starts, very often because of the scepticism of others who ask them if they have ‘really thought about’ how they will cope with the work. Given that they face this kind of challenge right through the system, including at BAP, they need really clear information from the start about how others, not just cope, but thrive. Young women use the language of ‘vocation to marriage and family’ more than young men do and therefore their need answers to practical questions from the start. One candidate spoke of how she had assumed that when she became pregnant during the process that she would have to wait some years saying that before she was pregnant she felt she didn’t fit and once pregnant she ‘really, really didn’t fit’. The patient encouragement of the DDO won her round.

Good practice included:

- Special vocations conference for women, potentially shared with neighbouring dioceses and including a crèche
Internship schemes are attracting young women as they feel that once on the scheme their discernment is taken seriously.

Making sure there are role models and images of young women and young families visible in literature and events.

Providing information on training pathways, finance and examples of how family life can work early in the process.

Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) candidates

Difficulties for BAME candidates exist both within the discernment process and beyond. They are under-represented in many churches compared to the surrounding population, which is beyond the scope of this work. It is right therefore to target those churches that have BAME representation in their congregation and ensure that these potential candidates are appropriately supported. Once in the process they need care and encouragement. One candidate spoke of the experience of feeling all the way through that they didn’t ‘fit’ but were helpfully reassured by the DDO that they didn’t need to, only to be who they were.

- Holding BAME Vocations Conferences
- Ensure there are mentors in the process
- Making sure there are role models and that BAME people are visible in literature and in conferences, events, etc.
- Having team members such as Vocations Advisors who are BAME

Candidates with less formal education or from areas of social deprivation

The lack of candidates from more socially and educationally deprived areas is felt to be a reflection of a problem at grassroots level. Incumbents are, as ever, the front-line and need to be very proactive in considering and nurturing the possibility of vocations from this group. Once in the system, candidates spoke of needing help to feel that they ‘belong’ as candidates and a great deal of support to gain the confidence that enables them to be full participants.

- Offer them close mentoring to build confidence
- Give support with study skills – make sure they are not set up for a fall
- Lay ministry scheme with open access – ability to try out a module without commitment as a ‘warm up’ - enrolled as ‘ministry explorer’
- Certificates and foundation level courses in Christian ministry can act as an intermediate step.
- Ensuring information about financial support is available early in the process – most people think training has to be paid for as in other professions.
Introduction to the summaries of diocesan processes

A brief summary of the approach of each diocese consulted is offered below. These are presented in a common format to enable ease of comparison. In some cases this gives a rather more restrictive view than is the case in practice. Colour coding is also used to try and highlight common elements; again this needs to be interpreted loosely.

Colour Key
- Administration
- Vocations Team
- Events and Activities
- Other individuals
- BAP

Abbreviations
- DDO  Diocesan Director of Ordinands
- ADO  Assistant Director of Ordinands
- ArDO  Area Director of Ordinands
- VA  Vocations Advisor
- VO  Vocations Officer
Diocese of Chelmsford Summary Process

Incumbent refers candidate to Area Ordination Assistant (AOA) who sees them 2-3 times (one at home if there is a partner).

They are then given a registration form covering all the legal aspects to complete and return to AOA when they are ready. AOA allocates them to DDO/ADO.

DDO/ADO meets with them a number of times over the next approx. 8 months. They attend a number of Sat. am seminars with speaker and group work mainly on criterion B, Particularly 'Ministry in the CofE'.

Candidates are then interviewed by someone else who produces a report which is discussed with them and given to the Bishop.

Opportunity for a 6-8 week observation placement.

Bi-annual weekend away, they are strongly encouraged to attend. A 'house-party' not mini BAP - prayer and worship, practice presentation with feedback and spirituality session with a spiritual audit for them to take away and work on.

Candidate meets with sponsoring Bishop who decides whether they should go forward.

Candidate meets with DDO to go through papers.

Candidate attends BAP.
Diocese of Chelmsford Quotes

I did hear from other candidates that their pathways were different which made me feel ‘this is my journey’ – this has got to be about you – not a competition – took away a sense that I would be a failure if I didn’t get though – this is about finding out whether or not I have a calling.

*Chelmsford candidate*

The weekends - not compulsory but worthwhile - networks are built that sometimes last through training - bond of prayer and worship - work Friday eve and sat - Sunday morning quiet time –

*Chelmsford DDO*

Seeing such a variety of people during the process – can feel unending at the time but a really helpful experience

*Chelmsford candidate*

“Not me judging you, this is you looking at yourself – I walk with you”

*Chelmsford DDO*

The balance between one to one sessions and group sessions was perfect – 2-3 group elements – Anglicanism really good day – meet others at the same stage – learn that I was not alone – others experiencing the same things

*Chelmsford candidate*

The use of seminars and weekends allow the DDO to enjoy a balance between one-to-one and seeing them in a crowd. “I see them personally even when they are assigned to the ADO; also enables a team approach between DDO and ADOs”.

*Chelmsford DDO*
Derby Summary Process

Candidates are invited to a deanery vocations exploration day - one per month somewhere, looking at wide sense of vocation but each with a different emphasis

Those wishing to continue in the process are matched with a Vocations Advisor who they meet with 3-4 times and agree which pathway

Meet with DDO or ADO

“What really works for us is using vocations days at the start of the process, with lots of creative input”

Candidate attends BAP.

Meet with the Bishop

“Derby”

Attend Diocesan panel - February or August

“We do say ‘no’ before BAP, and then actively seek another expression of their vocation”

DDO Derby
Candidates are either referred by clergy or self refer to DDO

Complete a brief biographical form including ensuring that they have talked to a clergyperson

Referred to a vocations advisor, who may be lay or ordained, for a broad vocational conversation

Meet with DDO or ADO around seven times

More complex form completed

If they are considering proceeding for possible ordained ministry they are referred to DDO

Meet with one of two Diocesan Assessors (examining chaplains)

Meet with the Bishop

Candidate attends BAP.
Diocese of Ely quotes

Building great relationships is at the core of the process. Candidates need to be able to be open and honest so we work hard on setting the tone and building trust. We do give them quite a lot to do; reading, visiting, building a portfolio, which gives us a great insight into their level of enthusiasm. Placements are used to ensure they have a breadth of experience.

DDO Ely

What really works for us is using an informal portfolio, supported by a list of habitually used activities. We have to ensure that candidates understand that it is intended as a tool of development not ‘qualification’ otherwise they start to think of it as ticking boxes or jumping through hoops!

Ely

At times I felt quite lonely in the process – didn’t know anyone else – would have been good to meet and talk and pray, to foster a great sense of support and community – especially as (initially) I didn’t know anyone else who was going through it.

Ely Candidate

What was helpful? Probably the pace – to my surprise I found it was rightly more involved and searching than I had anticipated

Ely Candidate

What would have helped? – a greater clarity about the timetable and implications but do recognise that it does need to lie with the candidate to set the pace

Ely Candidate
Diocese of Exeter Summary Process

Initial contact with VO who refers to one of the team of VA for one or more broad vocational conversations. VA then writes report to VO copy to DDO if ordination on the cards.

DDO's P.A. contacts incumbent to check support, timing and any reservations or areas for particular work. Incumbent confirms support in writing. Initial paperwork sent to enquirer asking for basic biographical information and an outline of their personal story.

Initial 1½ hour meeting with the DDO. Explore their journey, introduce the criteria, a flow chart of the process and a pack of information including 5 Principles, Guidelines for Conduct, Ordinal, Oaths and Declarations etc.

After three or four meetings, gather references and discuss these with the candidate. If references are satisfactory, complete National Form under Diocesan banner to ensure that expectations are not wrongly raised.

Monthly meetings with DDO for about a year drawing on a standard set of assignments to help cover 9 criteria with a recommended reading list.

Interviews with 3 Diocesan Advisors; Educational, Pastoral and Vocational (may be BAP Advisors). Each write a report for the Bishop; if 2/3 are positive (one of which must be Pastoral) they can proceed.

DDO discusses training options. P.A. arranges meeting with sponsoring (Suffragan) bishop.

Candidate reflects on information received (with spouse) and decides if they want to go on into the process.

Candidate to BAP
What really works for us is perhaps a bit basic, but having the suite of assignments laid out and up to date is very helpful. It includes guidelines for three short placements in churches of different traditions.

Exeter

Also having everything above board and transparent – hope it will be a genuinely enriching experience – they will know themselves better at the end

DDO Exeter

We have considered holding mini-BAPs but our candidates are widely dispersed across Devon so this is not easy logistically. Instead we have three assessor interviews. These interviews work well to give a good trial run of BAP interviews and the interviewers give good feedback. They give a brief report of their overall impressions, then an in depth paragraph on each criterion under their interview category (V, P, E). DDO/ ADO can have declining objectivity as they work with someone, so it really helps.

DDO Exeter
Diocese of Peterborough Process Summary

Process initiated by candidate being referred to the DDO

PHASE 1 - meet with DDO to tell their story and be given a pack of information. Second meeting 6-8 weeks later including spouse if there is one to follow up on questions and further detail

DDO reflects and talks to incumbent to agree one of three paths - exploration of ordination with DDO / ADO, exploration of vocation more broadly with VA or "not sure we are seeing what you are?"

PHASE 2 - 5-6 meetings with DDO / ADO to explore 9 criteria. Given something to do for each criteria before or after the meeting. Finish with written exercise 'What is Ordination and what do I bring to it?' 1.5-2K words

PHASE 3 - Formal process - reports prepared by a lay person and an ordained person and if they recommend proceeding

Candidate meets the Bishop and paperwork prepared

Small group of candidates meet to go through what a BAP will involve

Candidate attends BAP.
Diocese of Peterborough Quotes

What really works for us is full time DDO at the front of the queue!

Peterborough

They are not doing things to you but working with you – if its not ordination well help you find what it is – to find God’s plan for your life – taking time to do it properly.

Peterborough Candidate

We get candidates to visit 2 or 3 clergy and to interview them about their diary, what they expected to be doing this week, what they are doing and what they would like to be doing! It really helps increase their understanding of what the life is like.

DDO Peterborough

It would have been great to meet other potential Ordinands – sometimes it felt like me against the system; a collaborative exploration would have been good.

Peterborough Candidate
Diocese of Southwark Process Summary

Candidate has contact with clergyperson for 6-12 months including regular worship of at least three times per month

Clergyperson contacts DDO / ArDO / Admin assistant who checks what has already been done and advises to ensure basics have been covered and issues Registration form when appropriate

Individual may be given resources or referred to specialist support e.g. young vocations conference

DDO/ ArDO works with them on criteria which may include sending them on a placement. If they are to continue, they are then sent to an Examining Chaplain

Candidate has 3-5 meetings with Vocations Advisor over 3-4 months and if they are to continue are referred to DDO or ArDO

Invited to Vocations Forum - 1 every 8 wks on a sat am upto 15 delegates - run by 1 of 3 VA Team Leaders assisted by 3 VAs. Work done on their story, bible and vocation - realistic and informed. Asked at end if they wish to be allocated to a VA.

Examining Chaplain makes recommendation about whether candidate should attend BAP and if so they see the Area Bishop and sponsoring papers are prepared

candidates attend a group event (runs 3 times per year) where they can have a run-through of the group exercise

candidate attends BAP.
Diocese of Southwark Quotes

What really works for us is rigour and consistency all the way through the process. Thinking things through and working collaboratively with colleagues has helped to ensure the resources we need are available.

Southwark

There doesn’t seem to be any stones unturned which feels very heartening – wouldn’t like to feel like getting in through the back door – that included timely schedule of meetings – doesn’t feel rigorous if it’s meetings once in a blue moon.

Southwark candidate

The use of ‘specialist’ Vocations Advisors for candidates not recommended at any stage in the process has proved really helpful. Along with keeping the incumbent involved.

DDO Southwark

When the decision is made about whether I go any further I know that I have had the chance to say and explore everything I need to.

Southwark candidate

We get really positive feedback about the vocations forums that we run.

DDO Southwark

This has been an enriching process

Southwark candidate