

Three Ways to Lean In to Discernment Processes

This summer at the 78th General Convention in Salt Lake City, many of us gathered to discuss how we can prepare and encourage more women to lead larger congregations and to serve in the House of Bishops. Those conversations reflected an increasing common desire to see greater gender balance in the House of Bishops and in all levels of church leadership.

What kind of gender and cultural bias is blocking the church from achieving gender equality in our discernment? What kind of training and awareness are needed for our vestries and electing conventions to remove cultural and gender bias from our prayerful discernment? As we have more conversations about church leadership and particularly about the role of gender in our call processes, it is very clear that there are biases that shape our discernment.

There are many ways transition ministers and consultants can help lift awareness about gender and cultural bias in discernment and work toward equity in our clergy placement in all levels of the Church. While it is clear that women are applying for these positions in statistically viable numbers, I also hear common themes of uncertainty and reluctance to engage in a process that can be so painful and time consuming. It can feel daunting to consider entering into a call process. Here are three primary ways that women can lean in to discernment.

Do your own discernment and have support in that process.

You are a unique person, with skills, experiences, aptitudes and passions. Take the time to honor yourself by discovering and articulating your particular strengths in ministry. Like much of our Christian discipleship, this happens best in community.

One of the most powerful forces we have in our journey towards gender equality is each other and our relationships. It takes courage to be vulnerable enough to convene a circle of support, but it is worth it. During a time of intense discernment, I had been turned down for several positions. Reaching out to a few trusted colleagues was difficult, but turned out to be incredibly rewarding. These tough, savvy, loving

women interviewed me as, and gave me honest feedback about their perceptions. I felt extremely nervous hearing their comments, and I felt strong and confident when receiving their insights about my ministry. They saw things I could not see – both positive and negative. Overall, it was an immeasurable gift for us to wade together into the tender arena of feedback and honesty, and I am better for it. It was an honor to have this gift of time, support, and care.

There are cultural hurdles that can make it difficult for a call committee to attribute competencies to some candidates. Many clergy have been told repeatedly, “Wow, you don’t look like a priest!” Those messages over time erode the sense of call and openness to new possibilities. Accurate, honest affirmation from your surrounding community builds up confidence and security. This becomes a self-fulfilling reference point: we gain the confidence to become that which the community can see and encourage.

It is essential to have clarity about who you are, what your call is, and to be in a community of discernment and support that will strengthen your ability to engage authentically with a call committee.

Let the call committee do their discernment.

How often have I either said or heard the comment... “I couldn’t be called to this” or, “they would never elect me.” This is the concluding statement to a 30 second call process conducted entirely in your imagination. It is a misguided impulse, actually, for us to discern on behalf of a congregation or an entire diocese and then decline to enter a process. So let the church discern, too. If you have a sense of call to a church, a ministry, or a specific order – then honor that sense of call by entering into the discernment process.

Our theology is incarnational and relational. Likewise, our discernment processes play out in the messy reality of actual relationships that we enter into with the very real people who are discerning this call for the church. Yes, there is a chance you could be rejected. If it is a more public election, like the episcopate, it might hurt deeply and for a long time, and a lot of people will see it. Should that stop you from applying? No, it should not. We need to create

communities of support that normalize the entire process of discernment – including the difficult parts.

How often has a talented person looked at a position description and thought, “Well, I don’t have the exact number of years of service,” or “I haven’t led a capital campaign,” or “I haven’t been a rector, so I wouldn’t be elected bishop” and then refused to put their name forward? In about 10 minutes that person has discerned on behalf of an entire church or diocese that they would not be adequate to the call. How do you know?

Call committees establish criteria, qualifications, and skill sets as aspirational, and those screening criteria matter. But those things can change when we enter into the relationship of discernment. No one has 100% of the attributes that are listed in any position description. Your job is to show up and to be clear about who you are and what you bring to this call, and to be vulnerable enough to enter into real discernment in community – not in your imagination.

Build relationships

If you sense a connection with a diocese, make the effort to build a relationship with the people there. It is perfectly acceptable for you to call or email an inquiry to the diocesan transition officer about open positions. The most successful candidates show genuine interest in the diocese, have looked at their website and know something about the culture and direction of the ministries there.

Successful candidates also talk about themselves, and are forthright about their passions, interests, successes and challenges. It is also helpful when someone is honest about a difficult call, or describes the ways they have grown through a complex situation. Do you know the best ministry setting for your skill set? The more specific you can be about your discernment, the easier it is to help find a position that fits. Some priests love to serve in rural, smaller communities. Others thrive on the busy urban life. One priest came to me and clearly said that she wanted to serve in a particular suburban community. She was certain about that. When a position came open in that location, we were able to place her exactly where she felt called to be. Another priest set up a meeting with me and shared her skills and experiences, articulating that

she felt called to be a rector and what she felt that she had to offer our diocese. She had researched our website and knew about our ministry initiatives and some specific areas where we needed clergy. We never know how discernment processes will end up, but when you're clear about your goals, it is easier to reach them.

Sometimes you reach out, and positions are simply not open at the moment or things are moving slowly. That can happen, and it may not be about you. This is about developing long-term relationships, and so it is important to stay connected. Transition ministry is not always linear, and frequently we can be surprised by the unexpected opportunities that open. When you have made the connections and cultivated relationships, it positions you to enter into discernment more readily in this fluid and dynamic system.

Going forward

The question of balance and bias in discernment is complex, with many variables. Doing your own discernment work, allowing the church to have their own discernment process, and building relationships with other church leaders are three primary ways that candidates can take to enter into discernment for new opportunities.

Addressing our gender bias is a complicated process, with many parts to consider. This is one small thread in a large tapestry that we're weaving together. It is my hope and dream that we are weaving a picture of our clergy leadership that includes the wonderful variety of personality, race, gender and cultural experience that God has blessed our church leaders with. As our church continues to mature in this way, we will increasingly call leadership in all areas of our church that reflects the beautiful face of God.

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