

## **Regional Discernment Pilot Program Begins in the Diocese of Bethlehem**

By The Rev. T. Scott Allen  
Member—Commission on Ministry

In the Book of Acts we find that the first “replacement apostle,” Matthias, was chosen because he had been with Jesus and therefore could be a reliable witness and he won the lottery (Acts 1:26). Somehow the primitive Church made some significance from prayerful gambling. So if you haven’t won the lottery yet, keep praying!

It was only few chapters later that they decided that the community of the baptized should choose ministers (Acts 6:3) in a little different way. One wonders what Matthias did to necessitate a change from the earlier method.

The Episcopal Church, by tradition, has understood ministry to be not just a call perceived by an individual, but a call which is tested and “discerned” by the community of the baptized under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

Currently, before an aspirant (the canonical name given for someone in the discernment/ordination process) sees the Commission on Ministry (COM), s/he sees the Bishop who may authorize a discernment fellowship to be organized in the aspirant’s parish. Over the course of several months, the discernment fellowship will sit and look together at the call of the aspirant and make recommendations to the Bishop, COM and the aspirant’s rector and vestry.

These parish discernment fellowships have functioned with greater and lesser successes. We are grateful for the many devoted hours parish discernments have seen, and cherish the ministries of those whom parish groups have raised up. Sometimes, however, the parish-based discernment is not the best route. Some of the problems that may occur in these are: 1) the person seeking parish approval is a beloved member or (as one author puts it) a “parish superstar” who has done much work on behalf of the ministry in a local congregation. The problem arises when this person, while having a wonderful lay ministry, is not a good candidate for ordination for a variety of reasons. The local parish discernment fellowship members (rector and vestry as well) may have a hard time saying “no” without this decision becoming personal and an upset in the parish. 2) In some parishes appropriate resources may not exist for the discernment to be fruitful.

Many dioceses are finding that Regional Discernment Fellowships (RDF’s) with standing members who have “charisms” or spiritual gifts in discernment are more helpful and authentic in assessing an aspirant’s fitness for and call to ministry. The COM, in consultation with the Bishop, has decided to test this type of discernment fellowship in the Diocese of Bethlehem.

Drawing on the experience and processes already in use around the Episcopal Church in dioceses that use this type of discernment fellowship, the COM is ready to begin a pilot program this fall.

How does it work?

After the aspirant receives the go ahead from the Bishop to enter discernment, the COM is notified of this action. The COM then refers an aspirant to a Regional Discernment Fellowship. The COM has decided to set up three RDF's consisting of eight persons inclusive of aspirant and a person selected by the aspirant and their rector from the aspirant's home parish. Six persons would be appointed by the Bishop.

Recommendations for the appointment of specific persons may be made to the Bishop or COM by anyone in the diocese who feels either they or persons they know have gifts in the area of spiritual listening and insight.

The RDF will meet with the aspirant in 12 sessions over the course of a minimum of six months. At the end of this discernment process, a written reflection by the RDF will be shared with the aspirant and sent to the Bishop, COM, and the aspirant's rector and vestry.

The COM believes that the implementation of a District Discernment Process will enhance discernment for ministry in our diocese in several ways. By following an established process, each person will follow the same consistent means of exploration. Inviting persons from the district to be listeners in this process enhances objectivity and allows for a variety of perspectives. This group process also enables us to strengthen our relationships with one another beyond our parish walls and encourage one another for ministry.

If you or someone you know is interested in serving on one of the RDF's please contact The Rev. Canon Jane Teter, [jteter@diobeth.org](mailto:jteter@diobeth.org), with the name and the specific reason you would nominate this persons, or why you feel you would like to serve on a RDF. Nomination is not a guarantee of appointment to an RDF. We are trying to get this up and running by late fall/early winter, so please do so soon. Thank you!

*The Rev. T. Scott Allen, rector of St. Elizabeth's, Schnecksville, is a member of the Commission on Ministry.*