

The Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey School for Ministry

This is the first time a full report of the work of our diocesan School for Ministry (SfM) is being presented as a Convention report. As such, this report seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of the development and current state of this ministry.

General Background

The School for Ministry (SfM) was established in August 2019, under the direction of our Bishop, to provide a pathway for persons called to ordained ministry for whom the traditional 3-year residential seminary experience was not feasible. Concrete needs drove the founding of the School. The first was the increasing number of faithful Episcopal congregations in our diocese lacking the resources to attract and hire full time priests. That need could be alleviated by the calling of part time, low-stipendiary, or even non-stipendiary priests. However, full time study at a 3-year residential study is not always feasible for persons called to part-time or bi-vocational ministry as a priest. For these individuals, a comprehensive plan of local formation is necessary.

Our diocese has also struggled to satisfy the demand for vocational deacons. In this post-Christendom world, we have an enduring need for deacons prepared to interpret for the local church the needs, concerns, and hopes of their surrounding communities. (*See BCP Ordination of a Deacon, p. 543*). For decades, our School for Deacons carefully prepared many for faithful diaconal ministry. Still, within the geography of our diocese, the challenge of travel to Trenton for all-day classes sixteen Saturdays each year – as required of students in the School for Deacons – precluded some who might otherwise have followed this path. Examining how other local schools of formation were functioning throughout the Episcopal Church made clear that a local school of formation that incorporated online learning might address both our need for part-time priests and our need for vocational deacons.

From other local schools of formation, a 2017 taskforce appointed to consider these matters recognized that blessings abound when priests and deacons are prepared for ministry together. Yes, there are differences in the call of each order, but the essential elements of formation – a deep grounding in scripture, a capacity to embrace and tend God's people, an appreciation for theology, our understanding of the history of the people of God, our love and appreciation of worship, and spiritual experiences and practices – these are not proprietary either to the order of deacons or the order of priests.

Once we understood the possibilities of forming deacons and priests together, we began to consider the formation of the laity as well. If deacons and priests could be formed together, why should lay leaders be excluded? In the early church, the most comprehensive formation was open to all. It was formation for Christian living. Should not the study of scripture, worship, theology, church history, and ministry be open to all the servant-leaders of God's people? Through these considerations God prompted us to establish a School for Ministry which would serve anyone responding to God's call, whether that call be to lay ministry, the diaconate, or the priesthood.

Against that backdrop, the taskforce set about the work of establishing a local school of formation that (1) meets with rigor the canonical requirements for ordination within each order; (2) integrates a steady stream of opportunities to explore spiritual practices and spirituality; (3) intentionally prepares students for ministry in our post-Christendom, sorely divided world; (4) carefully promotes a strong experience of Christian community. A further requirement was that the school must be accessible to persons located anywhere in our diocese; and, someday in the not-too-distant future, the school should also serve persons whose first language is other than

English. On that foundation, our School for Ministry opened to its first students in August 2019. We are now halfway through our third year of existence.

Program Elements

Formation through the NJ School for Ministry usually requires 3-years of year-round formative activities. The program includes (1) spiritual formation; (2) academic study; (3) practical preparation for ministry (including two planned and supervised parish placements prior to ordination); (4) Clinical Pastoral Education; and (5) the experience of strong Christian community. Although students journeying toward different orders of ministry study side-by-side, programmatic differences are afforded to those who plan to serve as lay leaders, in accord with their call. The academic requirements for those seeking to be licensed under canon III as Lay Pastoral Leaders, Lay Worship Leaders, Lay Preachers, Lay Evangelists, and Lay Catechists are specific to the call of each.

Spiritual formation should imbue every aspect of life in the School for Ministry, beginning with academic study. Instructors must reflect clear understanding that academic theological or scriptural study without spiritual formation is meaningless. Spiritual formation is also a primary focus of every Gathering Weekend, which always includes both a half-day guided retreat and an opportunity to explore diverse prayer experiences. Three 2-day Gathering Weekends are required of all students each year. Students moving toward ordination are also required to engage in regular Spiritual Direction or Spiritual Companionship and to participate in online morning and evening worship regularly.

Academic study: Students typically take 8 academic courses per year. Each course is designed according to the course objectives established by the NJ School for Ministry. At the conclusion of each course, students moving toward ordination must present a project that demonstrates competency in that subject equivalent to the competency required by the Canons for ordination. All academic courses are taught online, in live synchronous manner, with students and instructors in class for 2 ½ hours at a time. In two courses we experimented with that model and students watched an hour of lecture online asynchronously and then had 1 ½ hours of synchronous class time. Our preference for 2 ½ hours of synchronous class time remains strong.

There is a heavy emphasis on study of both the Older and Newer Testaments. One-third of the academic courses require deep engagements with scripture. This is consistent with statement proclaimed by every ordinand at ordination: “I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation.”

Practical preparation for Ministry: There are three facets to the student’s practical preparation for servant-ministry. (1) After the first month in the School for Ministry, students begin to prepare to lead online worship sessions on a regular schedule. These worship sessions are open to all and are periodically highlighted in GNGS. The School for Ministry’s online worship sessions utilize an expanded framework for traditional morning and evening prayer, incorporating music and community reflection on the scripture passage and the psalms. As the students select the music, prepare to lead the reflection, prepare the service bulletins, they begin hands-on work with the Book of Common Prayer and the liturgical calendar. They learn to engage with persons previously unknown to them. In an ideal work, they would receive regular feedback on their efforts in this ministry.

(2) After a student has been named a Postulant, the student begins a cycle of two parish internships. Each internship lasts six to nine months. The focus of the first internship for all persons moving toward ordination (whether to the diaconate or priesthood) is diaconal ministry. Parishes and supervising clergy are carefully chosen for their readiness to receive and support deacon-interns who are seeking to learn specific facets of diaconal servant ministry. Before each internship, the supervising clergy and the deacon-intern complete a

Letter of Agreement which spells out the work plan. Every deacon-internship must include the opportunity to serve the community outside of the church, and to interpret for the church the needs, hopes, and concerns of the world outside of the church community. In addition, between the two internships, the students must have opportunities to experience ministry in each of these areas: liturgical and sacramental ministry, preaching, pastoral care, adult and youth Christian formation, and Christian fellowship. In addition, in their second internship, those being formed to serve as priests must have specific opportunities to learn to exercise the ministry of teaching and to observe the breadth of responsibilities arising from parish administration.

(3) Students participating in internships concurrently participate in Internship Seminars, during which interns can engage in conversation and to build relationships with experienced deacons and priests they might not otherwise meet. This begins to build their bridge so that they understand themselves not as individual servant-ministers but as part of the community of ordained ministry in our diocese.

Clinical Pastoral Education: Clinical Pastoral Education provides the opportunity for a candidate to ordained ministry to come to terms with the truth that the experiences of our lives influence the way we function as servant-ministers. Ordained servant-ministers must “see themselves” as they function in ministry, so that the patterns of their lives do not inadvertently de-rail their efforts to proclaim the Gospel and to serve the People of God. Those who will be ordained to the priesthood are generally required to complete one unit of CPE. Students moving to ordination to the diaconate and students seeking certification are encouraged to consider taking CPE if it is at all possible, whether before or after ordination.

Christian fellowship: During the first three years of the NJ School for Ministry, students have developed strong bonds of fellowship. Initially, this bond was encouraged by carefully designed Gathering Weekends, by the integration of group work in academic courses, and by encouraging their support of each other’s growth through the leadership of online worship. Today, the students themselves embrace and support each other on this journey. They maintain a School for Ministry student text stream and their own closed Facebook page. They support each other with prayer and continually check in on when any one of them hits a rough patch. Students continue to be aware that every person who comes to the school now must be welcomed and embraced with the strong fellowship that developed among the first class of students. Because Christian fellowship requires continual cultivation, new students will continue to be assigned companions from among those longer in the program who can guide and support the new students through their initial months as program participants.

The School for Ministry by the Numbers

Sessions: We recently concluded the 10th academic session of the DNJ School for Ministry

Courses:

- Two courses were offered during each of the first 8 sessions; Four courses were offering been offered during the 9th and during the 10th sessions.
- In total, twenty-four courses were offered to date. Each academic course required 20 hours of in-class time, spread over 8 Saturdays.
- In addition, seminars have been offered and are required of students in parish internships.

Intensive Gathering Weekends:

- Gathering Weekends further spiritual formation and formation for practical ministry.
- Seven Gathering Weekends (two full days each) have been held. Two were in-person at retreat centers; four were fully online; one was in-person one day and hybrid the second day to avoid an overnight stay. Our next Gathering Weekend will take place March 12th and 13th.
- 3 Orientation/Re-orientation days were held, one each year. Each full day session oriented students to the breadth of the school's concern for spiritual, practical, and academic formation and to need to deepen Christian community among the student body.

Students: Forty (40) students have received some formation through the School for Ministry. Of those:

- 9 completed preparation for ordination (6 to the diaconate, all of whom completed the first half of their formation under the School for Deacons; 3 to the priesthood, each of whom was serving as a deacon in our diocese)
- 6 students completed one or more courses and then withdrew
- 4 students have paused their formation but may return
- 21 students are currently enrolled in courses. The status of current students is as follows:
 - 5 presently expect to remain in lay ministry and are considering licensed lay ministries
 - 6 hope to pursue ordained ministry but have not yet submitted an Initial Application toward Ordination
 - 5 are presently working with the Commission on Ministry
 - 3 are postulants to the Diaconate
 - 1 has been referred by the Commission on Ministry to the Committee on the Diaconate
 - 1 is a postulant to the Priesthood
 - Nine of the twenty current students entered the school after taking the Episcopal Servant Ministries seminar

Faculty: The Director and twelve other faculty have served as instructors in the School for Ministry. Clergy and Lay members of the diocese are invited as presenters at seminar sessions. All faculty except the Director receive a stipend for each course of instruction. Seminar presenters are usually compensated in accord with the time and demands of the presentations. Instructors and seminar presenters (other than the Director) have included:

- Doctoral Students: Erin Zoutendam (Duke), Mary Berry (Duke), Leslie Virnelson (Princeton), Ransom Portis (Princeton), Patrick Haley (Princeton)
- Acquired PhD: The Reverend Dr. Kara Slade, The Reverend Dr. Luke Zerra, The Reverend Dr. William Noble, Dr. Kaitlyn Dugan, Dr. James Neumann, Dr. Liza Anderson
- Other instructors: The Reverend Justin Falciani
- Seminar presenters: The Reverend Jayne Oasin, William P. Fenimore, The Venerable Lynn Johnson, The Venerable Carol Pepe, The Reverend Keith McCoy, and the Reverend Dr. Caroline Carson. The Reverend Dr. Maria Sanzo will present a Seminar in the upcoming session.
- Note of concern: We are determined to recruit a student body and faculty that mirror the future of the church. This is easier among students than among faculty. This is a subject I would like to explore with the Directors of other Episcopal local schools of formation.

Episcopal Servant Ministries Seminars (ESM): The Episcopal Servant Ministries seminar is a 3-session seminar sponsored by the School for Ministry at least 6 times each year. The seminar welcomes those who feel drawn to new lay ministries as well. In three 2 ½ hour sessions, the seminar explores (1) the mission of the Church as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer and the avenues open to each of the four orders of ministry for contributing to the mission of the Church; (2) the gifts that support God’s call in each order, including an assessment of the spiritual gifts of the seminar participants; and (3) the avenues open to the participants in taking up their calls in accord with their gifts.

The School for Ministry began offering these seminars in the spring of 2021. The seminars are offered online, usually every other month. To date, 60 participants have completed the program in seven ESM offerings. Some of these participants are in the School for Ministry; some are in seminary; others are seeking to clarify their calls; and yet others have confirmed their call to lay ministry and are seeking new avenues for engagement in ministry. Five additional ESM offerings are planned for 2022.

Parish Placements: To date, 14 students have been placed in parishes. All placements have been made in consultation with the Archdeacon for Diaconal Placement. Sixteen clergy have served as Internship Supervisors. Six additional clergy are prepared to serve as clergy supervisors for placements expected to begin over the next six months.

Clinical Pastoral Education: Four students completed one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education while in the School for Ministry. One of those has been ordained; two are not presently proceeding toward ordained ministry; the fourth has put his formation on hold for reasons of health.

Mentors: We have not yet established a full mentoring program for those proceeding toward ordination through the School for Ministry. With the Bishop’s agreement, Archdeacon Carol Pepe is serving as mentor for the first year of ministry, for each of the six Deacons ordained in August 2021. It is our hope that this practice will not only support those newly ordained but will help us to monitor and identify needed improvements to the School for Ministry programs of academic, spiritual, and ministerial formation.

Other Considerations

To function, the School for Ministry must attend to 5 important concerns:

- Staffing (current staffing includes only a part-time Director);
- Instructors (pursuant to Letters of Agreement);
- Recruiting discerners and lay leaders;
- the Learning Management System;
- Integration with the diocesan discernment process, the Commission on Ministry, the Committee on the Priesthood, and the Committee on the Diaconate.

Although in-depth consideration of the first 3 topics is beyond the scope of this report, the final two concerns should be addressed here.

Learning Platform: For a full year before the opening of the School for Ministry, the taskforce explored various online Learning Management Systems. We selected MoodleCloud, an online learning program that was easy to access, reasonable in cost, and not excessively burdensome in administrative tasks. Presently, the Director handles all course registration set up, the home page for each course, the discussion boards for each course, and project submission pages. Instructors add the syllabus once it is approved by the Director and any course readings that are outside of required textbooks. Students regularly utilize the discussion boards and upload their final reflection papers and projects to the MoodleCloud platform.

MoodleCloud is user-friendly both for students and faculty alike. There are, however, several ongoing challenges, including MoodleCloud's pandemic-initiated bandwidth challenges for live, synchronous classes. In addition, though it is easy to set up courses in MoodleCloud, it is not as easy to maintain student records over time. A fair amount of administrative work continues to require ongoing time and attention.

Coordination with Diocesan Discernment Practices: Over the last two years, our diocesan process for discerning a call to ordained ministry was re-visited and re-fined by the Committee on Priests, the Committee on Deacons, and the re-constituted Commission on Ministry. As part of that refinement, anyone who perceives a call to ordained ministry must participate in the Episcopal Servant Ministries seminar before submitting an Initial Application toward Ordination.

Some Current Challenges

1. Everything takes time, and, in 2022, more time and energy must be directed to these matters:
 - a. Renew relationships with other schools of local formation. We still have much to learn from our colleagues in other local schools of formation. Renewed contacts can only improve our program and to develop relationship with a more diverse faculty.
 - b. Re-structure the school's Advisory Board in a way that expands the spread of information regarding the School for Ministry throughout the diocese even as it provides opportunity for wider diocesan support for this undertaking. The preparation of the Advisory Board requires time.
 - c. Recruit a more diverse faculty

- d. Expand the faculty base and better develop faculty understanding of the expectations of the School for Ministry.
 - e. Develop and implement a publicity plan for the School for Ministry.
 - f. Improve our capacity to serve those called to ministry whose primary language is not English.
2. Process improvements:
- a. Improve management of the MoodleCloud Learning Management platform and the related zoom counterparts which require hours of work for each session
 - b. Recruit, prepare, and support a more diverse faculty
 - c. Improve all administrative components of the School for Ministry.

Closing Reflection

Despite the challenges, these have been years of blessing. School for Ministry students are dedicated, loving, and determined to serve. We have worked with extraordinary faculty and with gifted internship supervisors. The members of the Commission on Ministry, the Committee on the Diaconate, and the Committee on the Priesthood model self-less service and care for others. It is a gift and a privilege to work with each of these and to direct the School for Ministry. This ministry allows me to witness the hand of God persistently at work in individual lives and in our world. I remain grateful and ready to welcome others exploring God's call, whether to lay or ordained ministry.

Should you wish more information either about the School for Ministry or the Episcopal Servant Ministries seminar, or should you wish to assist in this ministry, please email njschoolforministry@gmail.com.