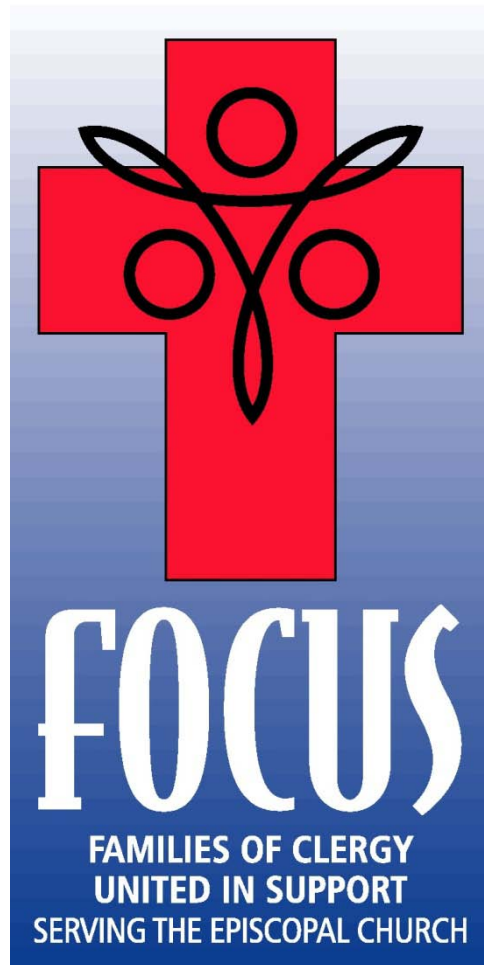
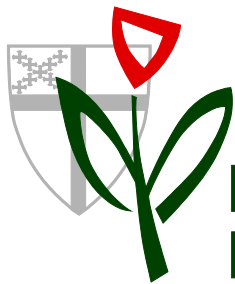


Ordinations



Prepared in partnership

with:



National Episcopal
Health Ministries

Ordinations

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Families of people in the ordination process

This section is specifically designed for people living with someone who has “heard a call to ordained ministry.” You know this person well, you’ve seen his or her faith grow and change over the years, you may first have known him or her (or even married that person) in another career, or maybe ordained ministry is this person's first venture into the world of work. Warning: ordained ministry is a vocation that spills over, sometimes dramatically, into family life!

It is true that other careers affect family life, such as being a physician who needs to be on call, or a CPA at tax time, or a retail salesperson with holiday rushes. However, being called to the ministry creates other tensions as well. A spouse, who used to always honor commitments to dinner with family, friends, or dates, may be forced to call to cancel or change those commitments due to a death in the congregation, a leaking boiler, an upset church leader, or youth group child waiting long past the meeting for a parent to come. This can affect any relationship. Even the children can be affected, finding that switch from a more conventional career to parish ministry could change their peers' perception of them.

Here are some things to consider as the spouse or partner proceeds along the path to ordination:

- Is your marriage is already showing signs of serious strain?
- Do you have a place to talk about how the change in career path, possible seminary, change in finances, will affect the marriage?
- Do you feel your spouse is paying sufficient attention to the marriage or is he/she wrapped up in this new commitment?
- Do you have a place where you can talk about your feelings?
- Are you worried that expressing these concerns to your priest might jeopardize your spouse’s “process” towards ordination?

The supportive spouse needs to know from the clergy (or her or his spouse, if relevant), the Commission on Ministry (COM), the Seminary, and the Diocese, what changes can be expected as the spouse or partner goes through the process, and what resources are available to help him or her negotiate these changes well.

In most employment situations, questions about family life are off limits: family and work are hermetically sealed from each other. But discernment of a call is different from employment. Suitability of an aspirant for employment as an ordained person is one criterion among many about whether a call should be affirmed. Ordination is part of a larger network of commitments to spouse/partner, children, aging parents, adult siblings, etc., all of which have something to do with God. The felt call to ordination is also usually intertwined with psychological traits,

strengths, and issues that will only be resolved when Jesus returns—something true for all clergy. Being as aware as possible of vulnerabilities is essential. Most members of COM are not clinicians, which is why they often recommend both therapy and spiritual direction and why clinicians are involved at some points in the process.

There are guidelines for involving family members and raising family issues in the discernment process. A number of models follow, varying in the amount of involvement.

Basic Information Family Members Of Clergy Should Request Directly From A Diocesan Staff Member (not their clergy spouse/partner)

1. Health Insurance Coverage

2. Counseling for Clergy and Families

- A. Recommendations from diocesan staff for therapists on the diocesan plan, or good local resources throughout the diocese.
- B. Financial help from the diocese. For example, the Diocese of Ohio has set up a plan where insurance pays a portion, the family member pays a portion, and the diocese pays a portion. The counselor bills the diocese through a contact person without listing the name of the client.
- C. Determine what safeguards for confidentiality are in place.

3. Resources for your spiritual wellness

- A. Retreat centers in the diocese, and whether financial help available.
- B. List of spiritual directors recommended by the dioceses
- C. Chaplain for family members
- D. Retreats for family members of clergy

4. Financial Wellness

- A. Clergy compensation guidelines
- B. Financial planning and Counseling for family of clergy
- C. Pre-retirement conferences
- D. College scholarships
- E. Help with family emergencies (e.g. children with special needs, short term loan for job loss, other crises)

5. Specific programs/support for family members of clergy

- A. A listserv or some other way for children of clergy to connect with each other
- B. Contact information for spouses/partners/children of clergy in the diocese
- C. Gatherings/workshops or any regularly scheduled activities for family members of clergy
- D. A local CFLAG chapter (Family of Lesbian and Gay Clergy)?

Raising spouse/partner awareness

A letter

As early in the discernment process as possible, the sponsoring clergy or COM should send a letter to the spouse/partner, and separately to the clergy person, naming some issues he/she should talk about together, and give the family member a chance to raise red flags first with the prospective ordinand and then with other appropriate folks such as clergy, therapists, etc., as necessary.

Parish and diocesan discernment committees should follow up on the letter's reception whether any questions arose, and what insights they revealed. The prospective ordinand can choose to be as forthcoming or silent as he or she would like; however, any input would be valuable for the process of ordination.

Potential ordinands and appropriate family members ought to discuss certain issues very early in the process of deciding to pursue ordination.

Why does the discernment/ordination process include families?

1. Because the church system ought to look at potential ordinands as whole people with vows and commitments made to family members that the church should uphold.
2. Unlike most other professions, congregations usually have implicit and explicit expectations of family members of clergy. The more they are made explicit, and spouse/partner and potential ordinand discuss their desires, the healthier everyone will remain. Often family members of clergy are very present in the clergy person's work place.
3. Clergy are seen as models of how to participate in family life, as is made explicit in ordination vows and this perception will impact family members of clergy.

This letter from the sponsoring clergy or COM gives the spouse/partner and the potential ordinand some tools to think through how the decision to become ordained will affect the entire family.

How will one person's shift from lay to ordained person change the spirituality or church practice of the family?

There will be small changes, such as no more sitting in pews together, or possible limits on what family member can do (e.g. vestry participation). There will be bigger changes as well such as a shift in authority as potential ordinand becomes a leader in the parish, changes in parishioner perceptions of people seeking ordination, changes in dynamics between partners as the potential ordinand expresses spirituality differently and as a relation to a larger church system emerges. Post ordination, if the clergy person and family worship in the same congregation, the family often loses a pastor, and needs to work out where they will go for spiritual support when necessary.

Boundaries

- A. **Between the time and energy spent on home and work:** Church work often happens on evenings and weekends, which can impact family members' expectations about honoring family commitments and church commitments. What constitutes a pastoral emergency should be examined. When liturgical and/or pastoral and/or capital campaign/program duties take up more time and energy than usual, how will family members express their feelings about this? What can clergy members do to compensate/repair strained relationships and restore balance?
- B. **Between church and home:** How will the partner want to be involved in the church system, at either congregation or diocesan level? This includes logistical questions of where or whether to worship with a congregation, in what capacity, with what limits, etc. For family members involved in the church, a host of new issues emerges such as what information gets shared between clergy and family, confidentiality, how family members can be asked by congregation members to influence clergy, how family members can be targets for anger or other emotions congregants feel toward clergy, etc.
- C. **Change in career:** This includes the logistics of time and money needed for discernment, study, and eventually for new positions. Accompanying questions can arise, such as how strong the communication skills are between spouse/partner and clergy person, and what support do, or will, each person and the couple and/or children need along the way.

Information sessions for family members

Optional group sessions for family members at the time of key steps such as postulancy, decisions about seminary, candidacy, what to expect as well as suggestions for what issues to discuss, etc.

Offers of diocesan support for family members of people at postulancy stage and beyond.

A third step for is a formal letter to spouse/partner from a chaplain to families or diocesan staff member charged with family wellness, acknowledging that the health of clergy families is vital to the church. The letter should include a description of resources available to family members when they are in crisis caused by due to their clergy's church responsibilities, as well as a promise of resources to strengthen clergy families as they become available.