

## **GUIDELINES FOR THE PERIOD OF DISCERNMENT**

### **A gift for the whole church**

**“Recognising that discernment of call to ministry belongs to the life of all Christian communities, the Period of Discernment is a gift which provides opportunity for any member of the Uniting Church to explore a call to a particular form of ministry.”**

At the heart of this process is the understanding that all who have been baptized are called into the ministry of Jesus Christ. The essence of the Period of Discernment is to discern where that ministry lies. It is not simply a process to be completed prior to entry into the ordained ministry.

That ministry might be:

- Within the local congregation, faith community or church agency (eg. Youth Leader, Elder, Pastoral Carer, Lay Chaplain, Church Councilor)
- Within your normal place of work or within the wider community
- Within one of the specified ministries of the Uniting Church (eg. Deacon, Minister of the Word, Lay Preacher or Pastor)

### **Goals for the Period of Discernment**

The Period of Discernment aims to:

- 1.1 develop the participant's relationship with God and understanding of themselves as a disciple;
- 1.2 give the participant opportunity to understand God's ministry and mission in the church and the world, the variety of ministries within that ministry, and the nature, function and responsibilities of these ministries;
- 1.3 recognize, affirm and build upon the skills, knowledge and experience that the participant brings to the Period of Discernment and ministry within the church;
- 1.4 enable both the church and the participant to discern confidently the person's gifts and graces for ministry, and the type of ministry in which these may be expressed in the life of the church and the wider community.

### **Criteria for participation**

- 2.1 Any member, member in association or adherent in good standing in a congregation or faith community of the Uniting Church in Australia may participate in the Period of Discernment.
- 2.2 Those persons considering application to one of the specified ministries of the church should note the membership requirements in Regulations.

### **Registration**

- 3.1 Individuals register for participation in the Period of Discernment through their Minister or Church Council with the person or committee appointed by their Presbytery to co-ordinate the process.
- 3.2 Church Councils may affirm the registration but may not reject a registration.
- 3.3 Registration may occur at any time of the year.
- 3.4 The Presbytery, in consultation with the applicant, appoints a mentor to work with the applicant throughout the Period of Discernment.
- 3.5 In consultation with the mentor, the participant develops a discernment plan or learning agreement. This may also involve consultation with the Presbytery Coordinator and other relevant educational bodies. The discernment plan is lodged with the Presbytery.
- 3.6 The Period of Discernment begins with the appointment of a mentor.

- 3.7 The Period of Discernment will normally be one year in duration. However, variations to the duration of the Period of Discernment may be made at the discretion of the Presbytery in recognition of a participant's prior learning and/or ministry experience.

### **The mentor**

A mentor should be a person who can guide the participant through this time of discernment by listening, affirming and supporting, and asking questions that will clarify the issues and explore options.

- 4.1 The mentor will normally be a person with no involvement in a future selection process, to avoid any potential conflict of interest in the future.
- 4.2 Mentors are required to have recognized training in the role. The synod and Congress Ministerial Education Boards are responsible for providing this training.
- 4.3 Ideally, a participant should have the same mentor throughout the Period of Discernment. However, if problems arise in the relationship between the participant and the mentor, the Presbytery Coordinator should be advised in order to help resolve the situation. This may include appointing another mentor.
- 4.4 In the event that a participant discerns a call to a specified ministry, it may be desirable that the same mentor accompany them through the process of candidature.
- 4.5 The specific responsibilities of the mentor are to:
- guide the participant in developing a discernment plan;
  - meet regularly with the participant (a minimum of two hours per month);
  - monitor the implementation of the discernment plan;
  - help the participant reflect theologically and integrate learning and ministry experiences;
  - guide the participant in the development of their portfolio\*;
  - keep the Presbytery informed about the progress of the participant throughout the Period of Discernment;
  - notify the Presbytery that the participant is ready to present their portfolio, and engage with the participant and the Presbytery in the discernment of the ministry to which the participant feels called.

### **Discernment Process**

- 5.1 The development of the process for the Period of Discernment is the responsibility of the Synod and Congress Ministerial Education Boards.
- 5.2 In addition to those outcomes listed under Goals, the discernment plan for the Period of Discernment seeks to achieve:
- opportunity to engage in biblical and/or theological study (a minimum of two semester subjects);
  - opportunity to engage in particular areas of study or ministry and mission, such as ministry with young people, Church Planting, Eldership, Emerging Church etc (a minimum of two elective areas through course work, workshops or similar, each equivalent to 40 – 50 hours);
  - ministry experience, together with appropriate reflection, in a local context. It is desirable that this experience be in areas of ministry beyond the participant's experience to date;
  - ministry experience through exposure to a broad range of ministries (this is an alternative option);
  - awareness of the church's polity, and its policy on ministry ethics, including prevention of sexual misconduct.

---

\* The portfolio is a short account and analysis of what has been the experience and growth during the Period of Discernment. It draws on a much larger collection of material (eg. Diary notes, personal reflections, journal, sermon notes, reports to church councils, photographs) which is the participant's personal archive. Further explanation about the portfolio can be found in the manual *Your resource for the Period of Discernment*, available from Parkin-Wesley College, Adelaide.

- 5.3 The level at which the subjects are taken should normally be appropriate to the participant's background and discernment goals. However, participants testing a call to a specified ministry should fulfill the study requirements at Diploma or Certificate level as a minimum.
- 5.4 Individual Synods may add other components to the process if these contribute to the desired outcomes for the Period of Discernment.

#### **Recognition of Prior Learning and/or Experience**

- 6.1 The recognition of prior learning and experience is a significant aspect of the process. If a participant has recently (i.e. in the last five years) completed identifiable study components or ministry experience that meet the goals or outcomes of the Period of Discernment, such experience may be credited and the participant released from some requirements at the discretion of the Presbytery;
- 6.2 Participants who are released from the study and/or ministry experience requirements will normally spend six months working with a mentor to reflect on and integrate their prior learning with their new experiences and knowledge;
- 6.3 Some participants come to the formal Period of Discernment having already undergone significant discernment through individual reflection but without the intentional and formal involvement of the Church. A period of discernment then provides the process by which the Church discerns, affirms and begins to test a call to ministry.
- 6.4 All participants will demonstrate through the presentation of a portfolio how the requirements of the Period of Discernment have been met.

#### **Presentation of the Portfolio**

- 7.1 After the Period of Discernment, the participant will present his or her portfolio to appropriate persons as determined by the Presbytery and the mentor. Together they will reflect on the ministry directions discerned;
- 7.2 The emphasis of the presentation will be on what the participant and mentor have discerned and on demonstrating whether the specific goals of the discernment plan have been achieved;
- 7.3 After the Period of Discernment the Presbytery will issue a Statement of Completion for the Period of Discernment. The purpose of such a statement is not to determine that the person has discerned a call to a particular ministry, but to indicate the areas of study and fieldwork completed.

#### **Further Discernment**

- 8.1 After the completion of the Period of Discernment a participant who has discerned gifts for congregational or vocational ministries may, with the assistance of the mentor, explore ways of expressing that ministry within an appropriate context.
- 8.2 After the completion of the Period of Discernment a participant who has discerned a call to one of the specified ministries of the Uniting Church may, with the support of the Presbytery, apply to become a candidate for one of these ministries. (In this case, the portfolio and the Statement of Completion of the Period of Discernment may form part of the material the applicant brings to the selection process.)

*Approved by the Assembly Standing Committee, November 2008*