

**Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord [intends] to be a common frame of reference for ensuring that the development of lay ecclesial ministry continues in ways that are faithful to the Church's theological and doctrinal tradition and that respond to contemporary needs and situations.<sup>1</sup>**

by Charlotte McCorquodale

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I have served the church as a lay woman in youth ministry in various settings (parish, school, and diocesan) since 1981; and yet, I really believe that my dad is still waiting for me to get a *real* job. Somehow, I can understand his confusion about the work I do for the church, since the church itself has struggled for the past forty or so years to clearly articulate the place that the over 30,000<sup>2</sup> current lay people in ministry have in the ministerial life and structure of the church.

I remember the day in 1979 when I approached my parish youth minister to ask, "How do I become a youth minister without becoming a nun?" Her response even to this day amazes me. She began with a long pause, saying, "Well, um, well, you could go to college and get a teaching degree or a psychology degree, and then there are Master's degrees offered in summer programs where you can get some theology." The part that astounds me is that she could not and did not share with me any clear or direct path indicating how I could act on the call to ministry I was expressing. Twenty-six years later, the path toward, as well as the clarification about, the identity of lay ecclesial ministers and their ministerial role is still unclear and undecided.

However, there is good news to report about the progress the church is making in this area. In November 2005, the body of Catholic bishops in the United States approved a resource to assist bishops and those responsible for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry entitled, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. This resource provides insights to understanding of the ministry of the church, especially lay ecclesial ministry. New realities within the church are causing ministry roles for ordained clergy, vowed religious, and lay ministers to be more clearly defined, however, "the Church's experience of lay participation in Christ Ministry is still maturing."<sup>3</sup> Each of these aforementioned groups faces distinct challenges as the church continues to live out its mission in the modern world. The emergence of lay ecclesial ministers presents numerous, complex questions and challenges for the church.<sup>4</sup> In many ways, the growth of lay ecclesial ministry has

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<sup>1</sup> *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, USCCB, 2005, 6

<sup>2</sup> According to the recent study, *Lay Parish Ministers: A Study of Emerging Leadership* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 2005) there are 30,632 lay parish ministers serving the Church, an increase of 42% since the first study in 1990 of lay parish ministers by the same organization.

<sup>3</sup> *Co-Workers*, 15

<sup>4</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference (NCCB/USCC), *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000). In 2001, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference (NCCB/USCC) became the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

outpaced the church's ability to establish policies and structures that are needed to respond adequately to this growth.<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion of the 1999 research study of the National Pastoral Life Center (NPLC) on lay ministry, *Parishes and Parish Ministers*, identified the need for the establishment of a more formalized set of defining concepts and boundaries.

It appears that the practice of pastoral ministry that led to engaging more and more lay people in parish ministry outstrips the theology and Church policy regarding lay ministry. This is to be expected. In fact, it is beneficial that the practice has a chance to develop before it is codified too tightly. Nonetheless, the need to continue theological reflection, ministerial clarification and Church policy development is evident if we are to make the most of the gifts of the Church represented by these parish ministers and provide the kind of support for them and their pastors to foster appropriate collaboration.<sup>6</sup>

As a document of the church, *Co-Workers* is a major step towards addressing the need identified in the conclusion of the 1999 study. The document identifies, for the first time in the history of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States, parameters for what constitutes lay ecclesial ministry, including characteristics that help to clarify the role of lay ecclesial minister. More importantly, it grounds this understanding of lay ecclesial ministry within the ecclesial and theological tradition of the Catholic Church.<sup>7</sup> "Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other.... In its broadest sense, ministry is to be understood as service (*diakonia*) and is the means for accomplishing mission in the communion of the Church."<sup>8</sup> To carry out its ministry, distinctions are necessary; the community calls some individuals to positions of leadership, charging them with particular tasks for and on behalf of the community. The characteristics of those men and women whose ecclesial service is identified as lay ecclesial ministry are:

- *Authorization* of the hierarchy to serve publicly in the local church
- *Leadership* in a particular area of ministry
- *Close mutual collaboration* with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons
- *Preparation and formation* appropriate to the level of responsibilities that are assigned to them<sup>9</sup>

The generic title *lay ecclesial minister* has been used to describe all those serving in the variety of roles identified above, but not "all of those who minister in response to their Baptism within the Church community."<sup>10</sup> At the current time, *lay ecclesial minister* best describes this new role that has been evolving in the church. In breaking down the term, *lay* refers to members of the laity, who are not ordained; this group includes vowed religious women and men, whose sacramental basis is in the sacraments of initiation. The word *ecclesial* denotes not only that the ministry of these laypersons has a place within the church but also that this ministry is to be submitted to the discernment, authorization, and supervision of the hierarchy. Those with the title *minister* include those who perform public service on behalf of the church communion and its mission. This use of the word, *minister*, as it applies to lay ecclesial ministers, is not to be confused with the specific nature of ordained ministry.<sup>11</sup> These ministers serve in a variety of ministerial roles, such as director of religious education/faith formation, coordinator of youth ministry, hospital chaplain, pastoral associate, or director of music and liturgy. Although this list is incomplete, it demonstrates the assortment of ministerial roles that fall within the field of lay ecclesial

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<sup>5</sup> Murnion, Philip, and DeLambo, David, 1999. *National Pastoral Life Center: A Study of Parish Lay Ministry*, Executive Summary and Concluding Chapter.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 74

<sup>7</sup> *Co-Workers*, Section One B: Understanding the Realities in Light of the Theology and Church Teaching

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 20

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 10

<sup>10</sup> NCCB/USCC, *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions*, "The Term 'Lay Ecclesial Minister,'" Conclusion One.

<sup>11</sup> *Co-Workers*, 11

ministry.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that the bishops' intention in characterizing lay ecclesial ministers is not to create another level in the hierarchy, but to bring understanding to this distinct group of ministers serving the church. *Co-Workers* explains,

'Lay ecclesial minister' is not itself a specific position title. We do not use the term in order to establish a new rank or order among the laity. Rather, we use the terminology as an adjective to identify a developing and growing reality, to describe it more fully, and to seek a deeper understanding of it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

The document goes beyond identifying who lay ecclesial ministers are by providing practical insights into four pastoral applications that impact dioceses and parishes in the development of lay ecclesial ministry. In reviewing each of these four practical applications, I will share a quote from the corresponding section of *Co-Workers*, along with a brief summary. These four pastoral applications include:

- Pathways to lay ecclesial ministry
- Formation of lay ecclesial ministers
- Authorization of lay ecclesial ministry
- Workplace issues for lay ecclesial ministry

### **Pathways to Lay Ecclesial Ministry**

*The pathway to lay ecclesial ministry for any individual is as unique as that individual. No typical path exists, only a multitude of examples. Most of the paths are quite circuitous; few are direct.*<sup>14</sup>

This quotation may be the biggest understatement in the document. Unlike ordained ministry, which has a clear, structured path and process toward ministry, lay ecclesial ministers come to ministry through a variety of doors, taps on shoulders, and life choices. The following concepts are discussed in *Co-Workers* Part 2A: Pathways to Lay Ecclesial Ministry:

- Personal invitation
- Discerning call (initially and ongoing)
- Determining suitability

### **Formation of Lay Ecclesial Ministers**

*Lay ecclesial ministers, just like the ordained, need and deserve formation of high standards, effective methods, and comprehensive goals.*<sup>15</sup>

What an important and powerful statement about the formation of lay ecclesial ministers! The bishops identified four areas of formation that provide a framework for the formation of lay ecclesial ministers, which are explained in detail in *Co-Workers* Part 2B: Formation of Lay Ecclesial Ministers. The four areas include:

- Human
- Spiritual
- Intellectual (theological and theoretical)
- Pastoral

The key decision of the bishops, with regard to their description of formation for lay ecclesial ministers, is that they chose to use the same four areas of formation utilized to describe the ministerial formation of priests and deacons.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 11

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 27

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 33

## Authorization

*By virtual of their call, lay ecclesial ministers take on a new relationship to the mission of the Church and to the other ministers who work to accomplish it.*

While the quotation above is from an earlier section in the document, it provides part of the basis for the need for authorization. This new ministerial relationship with the church—designation to carry out ministerial responsibilities in the public service of the local church—and the call to work in greater collaboration with ordained ministers, requires authorization by the residential bishop. In *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, authorization is explained as “the process by which properly prepared lay men and women are given responsibilities for ecclesial ministry by competent Church authority.”<sup>16</sup> The three elements included in the process of authorization include:

- 1) Acknowledgement of competence
- 2) Appointment to a specific position along with the delineation of obligations and responsibilities of the position
- 3) Announcement of the position to the community served by the lay ecclesial minister<sup>17</sup>

## Ministerial Workplace: Issues Affecting Lay Ecclesial Ministers

*...in the ministerial workplace, one finds the special challenge of establishing policies and practices that integrate Gospel values and best organizational practices.*<sup>18</sup>

If the quotation regarding formation from the Pathways section of the document was the biggest understatement in the document, then the above quote about workplace issues names one of the biggest challenges in the development of lay ecclesial ministry. Although not all who fit the characteristics of lay ecclesial ministry discussed earlier are employed by the church, the majority is, according to the 2005 NPLC study on lay ecclesial ministry. The following issues related to the ministerial workplace are discussed in *Co-Workers* Part 2D: The Ministerial Workplace:

- Comprehensive personnel system
- Resources and outcomes

The document also identifies the six human resource areas within a comprehensive personnel system, which consist of:

- Recruitment and selection
- Orientation and support for new lay ecclesial ministers
- Evaluation and feedback
- Compensation
- Transitions and terminations
- Grievance procedures

## Conclusion

What is the next step for the leadership of parishes and dioceses, regarding the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the church? This question is not easily answered, however, in many ways *Co-Workers* begins to provide the answer as it calls those using it to apply its guidance to their local ministerial context. The following quotation names the special challenge that the church faces in using the resources located within the document:

*It [Co-Workers] invites local adaptation, application, and implementation to **achieve consistency where possible and to encourage diversity where appropriate.** It calls Church leaders, ordained and lay, to*

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 54

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 54

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 61

*become more intentional and effective in ordering and integrating lay ecclesial ministers within the ministerial life and structures of our dioceses [emphasis added].*<sup>19</sup>

Focusing on the second part of that quote first, the purpose of the document is to integrate and order lay ecclesial ministers into the ministerial life of the local church. This is an essential act if we are to support the important ministry performed by lay ecclesial ministers on behalf of the church. Being both intentional and reflective are key to this activity. However, the first sentence notes the current reality; namely, that our dioceses are in very diverse places regarding the development of lay ecclesial ministry and they bring the unique needs, resources, and situations of the local church to bear on this development. The bishops challenge us and each other to identify within the four pastoral applications how the church can take strategic action to implement consistency in practices and policies where possible so that we can move forward together in the development of lay ecclesial ministry. Doing so will only bring more clarity about the role and situation of these ministers. And yet, the same needs, resources, and situations often dictate the need for diverse responses and actions in the development of various aspects of lay ecclesial ministry. The decision of what should be consistent and what should be done diversely should not be taken lightly, because it is our consistent action that will move us forward together, and the inappropriate dictation of a common action that does not fit the unique situation that will cause us to stall in this development.

Even though this document was written to serve as a resource for those developing lay ecclesial ministry, it is also an important resource for the individual lay ecclesial minister. Understanding clearly the theology of ministry and the ecclesiology (theology of church) within the document is critical for all those serving as a lay ecclesial minister. Additionally, the guidelines on formation can be very helpful in assisting lay ecclesial ministers in selecting and evaluating ministry formation programs and opportunities. However, beyond these benefits, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* is a document about *who we are* as lay people serving the church in this unique way. This is by far not the final word on lay ecclesial ministry, as the bishops state in the conclusion of the document, as they call for a revisiting and deeper exploration of various concepts outlined within the next five years. It is vital that the voices of the many lay ecclesial ministers serving our community join in this dialogue and exploration; this will happen only when lay ecclesial ministers embrace this document and utilize it for continued dialogue and self reflection.

One final thought: beyond resourcing the local church in the development of lay ecclesial ministry, the bishops clearly intend to affirm the current ministry efforts of all lay ecclesial ministers, as they say, "We are blessed indeed to have such gifted and generous co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord to which we have all been called."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>20</sup> Co-Workers, 67