

The Call to the Lay Faithful: Understanding Lay Ecclesial Ministry

Lay ecclesial ministry is the term adopted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to identify laity who serve the Church working with the bishop, along with priests and deacons. For many in our Church today, this descriptive term is not known nor understood. The first step to understanding lay ecclesial ministry begins by reflecting on the fact that the contribution and gifts of lay men and women is a work of collaboration in building up the body of Christ.

“Lay men and women hear and answer the universal call to holiness primarily and uniquely in the secular realm. They are found in each and every one of the world’s occupations and callings and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, form the context of their existence. There they are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven, in the spirit of the Gospel, by fulfilling their own particular duties.”

(Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry)

Prior to and since the Second Vatican Council, several ministries, that had been performed by priests were returned to the laity and several new forms of ministry emerged. In wake of the liturgical renewal and in response to the Council’s renewed vision of Church as people of God and body of Christ, parish life has become more participative.

It would be hard to imagine a parish liturgy today without lay people who serve as lectors, cantors, ministers of music and extraordinary ministers of communion . Lay people are active in religious education programs. They accompany candidates and catechumens through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), lead programs for returning Catholics and minister to bereavement groups. They prepare children for first Eucharist, first penance, and confirmation, participate in baptism and marriage preparation teams and bring communion to the sick and homebound.

Lay ecclesial ministry includes a broad category rather than a specific job title. Beginning as early as 1977, a standing Committee on the Laity and its secretariat were established as an entity of the Bishop’s Conference. Lay ministry is an element of its mandate.

Three years later at the 1980 Bishop’s Conference the first statement on the Laity was issued, *Called and Gifted*. In this statement the name “ecclesial ministers” was given to lay persons “who have prepared for professional ministry in the church”. The bishops welcomed this development as a “gift to the church”.

In 1985 the Secretariat for the Laity conducted the first national research on lay ministry formation programs and found that 10,000 persons were enrolled. By 1990 the United States Bishops commissioned the first national research about lay ministers on parish staffs. The result showed that 20,000 persons were employed as lay ministers at least part-time.

The Bishop's Conference issued a second statement on the laity, *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*, in 1995. This statement described "ecclesial lay ministers" more extensively. The bishops pledged expanded dialogue and study of this reality as being essential to the "new evangelization".

The USCCB upon receiving a Lilly Endowment grant, in 1995 established a Subcommittee on Lay Ministry to conduct national consultations involving bishops, theologians, pastoral experts and lay ministers that would recommend policies and practices to strengthen lay ministry. A second Lilly grant was received by the USCCB and permission was given to the Committee on the Laity to precede with the development of a more comprehensive and definitive document on lay ecclesial ministry.

Ten years later at its November 2005 plenary meeting, the USCCB approved *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, a resource for diocesan bishops and for all others who would be responsible for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States.

Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord provides 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 responds to contemporary pastoral needs and situations which arise today. It expresses the USCCB's strong desire for successful collaboration of the ordained and lay minister who, in distinct but complementary ways, continue in the building up of the body of Christ, the Church.

Since 1992 the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown has sponsored a process to support lay men and women who are seeking to deepen the influence of Christian faith in their lives. As a result of this vision, the Office of Adult Enrichment and Lay Ecclesial Ministry (AELEM) was formed.

The courses in the AELEM program can be taken either for Adult Enrichment or for certification in Lay Ecclesial Ministry. Courses taken for **Adult Enrichment** help to satisfy a hunger for a deeper understanding of our Catholic Faith and to live that faith more fully within the family, workplace, and society. Individuals are invited to choose any course of interest and will participate with individuals enrolled in the Lay Ecclesial Ministry formation process.

Lay Ecclesial Ministry requires a commitment of two years, combining theological education, study, prayer and prayerful reflection, communication, and group dynamic skills along with leadership training. Participants who successfully complete the two year formation process earn a diocesan certification in Basic Lay Ecclesial Ministry. This certification confirms that the individual has the established framework as laid out in *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, to undertake the emerging roles for laity within parishes, such as Director of Religious Education, Religious Education Catechists, Christian Initiation Team Ministry, and Sacramental Preparation. Those who earn the Basic Certification can also choose to complete a Third Year Track in areas

such as Master Catechist, Christian Initiation Team Ministry (RCIA), Liturgical Foundations, Tribunal Advocate, Advanced Bible Study, and Hospital Ministry.

Since 1994, 452 people have received certification in Basic Lay Ecclesial Ministry and 356 in various Advanced Third Year Tracks in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. Through the encouragement of the Bishop, the Adult Enrichment and Lay Ecclesial Ministry program continues to grow in our diocese.

If you have a desire to serve the Church and its mission and the Lay Ministry Formation process sounds interesting to you, please contact The Office of Adult Enrichment and Lay Ecclesial Ministry at (814) 361-2000 or email mheinze@dioceseaj.org. Full description of classes and registration information can be found online at www.dioceseaj.org/lay-ecclesial-ministry/. All are welcome.