



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry - Frequently Asked Questions



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1. What is the origin of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*?

Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry addresses issues that have been on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' agenda since 1980. At that time, in *Called and Gifted*, the bishops wrote that they welcomed the gift of "lay persons who have prepared for professional ministry in the Church." Such people serve as pastoral associates, directors of religious education, youth ministry, liturgy and music, school principals, and in numerous other roles. Starting in 1995, a subcommittee of the Committee on the Laity focused its attention on the theology of lay ecclesial ministry, the preparation and formation of lay ecclesial ministers, and their identity and relationship within the Church. It is that subcommittee which prepared *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*.

Co-Workers in the Vineyard is similar to the two recent USCCB documents which are concerned with the preparation of priests and deacons (*Plan for Priestly Formation and National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*). There is, however, one very important distinction: *Co-Workers* does not have the force of Church law as do the other two, which are based on universal Church documents. As its subtitle indicates, *Co-Workers* is a resource, which offers guidance but has no binding authority.

The document has two major parts: (1) Foundations which describes the new realities and explains the theological context and the Church's teachings for lay ecclesial ministry and (2) Pastoral Applications which explores how people are drawn to lay ecclesial ministry, prepared (formed) and authorized for it, and includes some suggestions for responding to their role as church employees. The section on formation is the longest in the document and emphasizes the necessity of human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation as well as ongoing formation.

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2. What was the process of preparing *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*?

The process of preparation began when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops approved work on such a document in June, 2003. Subsequently, the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry convened theologians, bishops, formation directors, seminary rectors, priests, deacons, canonists, human resource professionals, attorneys, and lay ecclesial ministers themselves to gather background and suggestions for the document. The same groups have reviewed early drafts of the document, and their consultation has resulted in many revisions of the document.

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3. What is lay ecclesial ministry? Who are lay ecclesial ministers? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 10-11)

The term lay ecclesial ministry reflects certain key realities. Lay ecclesial ministry is:

- *Lay* because it is service done by lay persons. The sacramental basis is the Sacraments of Initiation, not the Sacrament of Ordination.
- *Ecclesial* because it has a place within the community of the Church, whose communion and mission it serves, and because it is submitted to the discernment, authorization, and supervision of the hierarchy.
- *Ministry* because it is the work by which Christians participate in the threefold ministry of Christ, who is priest, prophet, and king and continue his mission and ministry in the world.

Lay ecclesial ministers are women and men whose ecclesial service (lay ecclesial ministry) is characterized by:

- *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

The following understandings should be kept in mind:

- The term "lay ecclesial minister" is generic.
- "Lay ecclesial minister" is not itself a specific position title. It is not used in order to establish a new rank or order among the laity.
- It is the responsibility of the bishop, or his delegate, in accord with the norms of canon law, to identify the roles that most clearly exemplify lay ecclesial ministry. Application of the term may vary from diocese to diocese.

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4. Are deacons considered lay ecclesial ministers?

Because deacons have received the Sacrament of Holy Orders, they are among the ordained, not lay, ministers of the Church.

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5. Are religious brothers and sisters considered lay ecclesial ministers? (See *Co-Workers*, p. 13)

Religious brothers and sisters can and do perform lay ecclesial ministry. However, as *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* states, "it is necessary to offer a clarification regarding religious institutes dedicated to the works of the apostolate and other forms of consecrated life, whose members may participate in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish or of another ecclesial service. Consecrated persons participate in ecclesial ministry by their own title

a parish or of another ecclesial service. Consecrated persons participate in ecclesial ministry by their own title, according to the nature of their institute. Their exercise of ecclesial ministry is imbued with the grace of their consecration. They and the ordained work together with lay ecclesial ministers to carry out the Church's mission."

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6. What are some examples of lay ecclesial ministers? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 11, 13)

In parish life, the pastoral associate, parish catechetical leader, youth ministry leader, school principal, and director of liturgy or pastoral music are examples. Lay ecclesial ministers may also be found in hospitals and health care settings, on college and university campuses, and in prisons, seaports, and airports. Because it is the responsibility of the bishop to identify the roles that most clearly exemplify lay ecclesial ministry, application of the term may vary from diocese to diocese.

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7. How many lay ecclesial ministers are there? (See *Co-Workers*, p. 13)

Today, 30,632 lay ecclesial ministers work at least twenty hours per week in paid positions in parishes. An additional 2,163 volunteers work at least twenty hours per week in parishes. (David DeLambo, *Lay Parish Ministers: A Study of Emerging Leadership* [New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 2005], 88).

In 2004 and 2005, in the United States, more than 2,000 lay persons ministered in the name of the Church in hospitals and health care settings, on college and university campuses, and in prisons, seaports, and airports. The National Association of Pastoral Musicians had a membership of approximately 8,500, and the National Catholic Education Association included 5,466 lay principals of elementary and secondary schools.

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8. Is the number of lay ecclesial ministers growing? (See DeLambo, *Lay Parish Ministers* (NPLC, 2005), pp. 19 and 44)

The number of lay parish ministers working at least 20 hours per week in paid pastoral positions increased by 35% between 1990 and 1997 and by 5% between 1997 and 2005. It now stands at 30,632. Two-thirds of all parishes (66%) have paid lay ministers working at least 20 hours per week, up from 54% in 1990 and 60% in 1997.

9. What is the purpose of this document? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 5-6, 15)

The purpose of this document is to offer:

- Pastoral and theological reflection on the reality of lay ecclesial ministry and a synthesis of best thinking and practice.
- Affirmation of lay ecclesial ministers, conveying an understanding of how their service is unique and necessary for the life and growth of the Church.
- 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 pastoral needs and situations.
- A call for Church leaders, ordained and lay, to become more intentional and effective in ordering and integrating lay ecclesial ministers within the ministerial life and structures of dioceses.

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10. Who is the audience for this document? (See *Co-Workers*, p. 14)

The intended audience for *Co-Workers* includes:

- diocesan bishops
- those who share in the bishops' responsibility to ensure the work of lay ecclesial ministers flourishes for the good of the whole community, especially those who educate and form prospective lay ecclesial ministers in both diocesan and academic programs
- lay ecclesial ministers themselves in gratitude for them and their families and communities

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11. Why issue this document now? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 15-16)

In *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* (1995), the U.S. bishops pledged to "expand our study and dialogue concerning lay ministry in order to understand better the critical issues and find effective ways to address them." In *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (2005) the bishops take a major step toward fulfilling that pledge. In addition, various initiatives and explicit requests from ordained and lay leaders in theological schools and diocesan programs have encouraged the bishops to prepare this resource document as a next step in the process of ecclesial discernment and pastoral leadership.

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12. How do lay people hear and answer the universal call to holiness? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 8-9)

Lay men and women hear and answer the universal call to holiness primarily and uniquely "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." (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 31).

All of the baptized are called to work toward the transformation of the world. Most do this by working in the secular realm; some do this by working in the Church and focusing on the building of ecclesial communion, which has among its purposes the transformation of the world. Working in the Church is a path of Christian discipleship to be encouraged by the hierarchy. (See *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 30, 33, 37).

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13. What are the relationships between lay ecclesial ministers and ordained ministers? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 20-26, 48)

While they differ essentially, the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful are ordered to one another and thus are intimately related. Lay ecclesial ministers and those ordained seek to develop collaboration with each other that is mutually life-giving and respectful, a wonderful witness to the one communion and mission that binds all disciples together in Christ.

In *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* (1995) the bishops wrote that "the Church's pastoral ministry can be more effective if we become true collaborators." Aware of the challenges involved, the bishops call both lay and ordained ministers to learn the skills of collaboration, to value the benefits it brings to Church life and ministry, and to commit themselves to practice it in their places of ministry.

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14. When there are more priests, will lay ecclesial ministry be necessary? (See *Co-Workers*, p. 14)

Lay ecclesial ministry has emerged and taken shape through the working of the Holy Spirit and in response to these new opportunities and situations as lay men and women have responded generously to renewed awareness of the implications of their Baptism and to the needs of their Church communities. As Cardinal Mahoney writes, "...lay ministry rooted in the priesthood of the baptized is not a stopgap measure. Even if seminaries were once again filled to overflowing...there would still remain the need for cultivating, developing, and sustaining the full flourishing of ministries that we have witnessed in the church since the Second Vatican Council" (Mahony, *As I Have Done for You*, Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 2000).

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15. Will the presence of lay ecclesial ministry detract from vocations for the priesthood? (See *Co-Workers*, p. 28)

All in the Church serve as promoters of vocations to ordained ministry and serve to recruit promising individuals for lay ecclesial ministry. Pope John Paul II encourages such initiatives to recruit for leadership in lay ministry: "As pastors of the people of God in America, priests...should be careful to discern the charisms and strengths of the faithful who might be leaders in the community, listening to them and through dialogue encouraging their participation and co-responsibility. This will lead to a better distribution of tasks, and enable priests 'to dedicate themselves to what is most closely tied to the encounter with and proclamation of Jesus Christ, and thus to represent better within the community the presence of Jesus who draws his people together.'" (*Ecclesia in America*, no. 39).

The final document of the Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and to the Consecrated Life in Europe (1997) recognizes the underlying connection of all vocations when it states: "If at one time vocations promotion referred only or mainly to certain vocations, now it must tend ever more toward the promotion of *all* vocations, because in the Lord's Church either we grow together or no one grows" (p. 24).

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16. How might one begin exploring a call to lay ecclesial ministry? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 29-32)

Exploring a call to lay ecclesial ministry involves both discernment of a call to LEM and determination of suitability to LEM.

Discernment of a call to lay ecclesial ministry is a process that requires prayer, dialogue, and evaluation. A variety of experiences may characterize the initial period of discernment, including increased sacramental and liturgical practices, retreats, days of prayer and recollection, and individual or group spiritual direction. Pastors, parochial vicars, deacons, lay ecclesial ministers, teachers, and advisors all play an important role in the discernment process. These connections to the Church provide a supportive environment in which one can decipher, test, and strengthen a call to lay ecclesial ministry. In effect, the discernment becomes not only personal and communal, but ecclesial as well.

As an individual strives to discern and deepen a call to lay ecclesial ministry, a spiritual director or mentor can help determine the individual's suitability for ministry. The individual and his or her director or mentor will carefully consider the individual's human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral readiness.

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17. What is involved in formation for lay ecclesial ministry? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 30, 33-53)

The four areas of formation—human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral—that provide a framework for the formation of deacons and priests provide a framework for lay ecclesial ministers as well. Lay ecclesial ministers need:

- *Human qualities* critical to form wholesome relationships and necessary to be apt instruments of God's love and compassion
- A *spirituality* and practice of prayer that root them in God's Trinitarian life, grounding and animating all they do in ministry
- Adequate *knowledge* in theological and pastoral studies, along with the intellectual skill to use it among the people and cultures of our country
- The practical *pastoral abilities* called for in their particular ministry

The publication *National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers Serving as Parish Catechetical Leaders, Youth Ministry Leaders, Pastoral Associates, and Parish Life Coordinators* addresses these and related qualities as they are developed through ministry formation programs. The standards are a resource that can be helpful in identifying prospective lay ecclesial ministers as well as in setting goals for the formation and certification of those who are completing programs.

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18. How much time is involved in the formation process? (See *Co-Workers*, p. 34)

There is no single answer to this question of extent of formation. Lay ecclesial ministers, their supervisors, and diocesan bishops are best able to discern local need and to set standards and expectations accordingly, seeking always to provide what would best serve a given pastoral setting or community. See page 33-53 of *Co-Workers* for more information about the formation process for lay ecclesial ministry.

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19. Where does formation take place? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 34)

Ministry formation programs can be found in dioceses as well as some colleges, universities, seminaries, and schools of theology. The diocese and such institutions sometimes collaborate and share resources in order to better serve the needs of the Church.

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20. Who pays for the formation of lay ecclesial ministers? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 28, 53)

Ultimately, it is the individual's responsibility to assume the costs of formation and education.

However, there is help. The USCCB Subcommittee on Lay Ministry, in the latter half of 2001, conducted a study in collaboration of the Life Cycle Institute of Catholic University, of the financial assistance made available by dioceses and Catholic graduate schools of ministry to those preparing for lay ecclesial ministry. The survey indicated that over nine million dollars was awarded to those preparing for lay ecclesial ministry, \$1.6 million from dioceses and \$7.7 million from the graduate institutions. Financial assistance was available from 56% of the responding dioceses and 79% of the responding institutions.

The local community where lay ecclesial ministers serve should be helped to recognize the value of their ministry and be encouraged to provide personal and financial support. Parishioners can provide personal support through recognition and affirmation for the ministry that lay ecclesial ministers provide; and they can provide financial support through contributions to the parish that make possible just compensation for pastoral staff, financial assistance toward their formation, and subsequent compensation commensurate with increased competency acquired through formation.

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21. What if one lives in a parish/diocese with limited resources? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 33-34, 53)

Ministry formation is possible in places with limited resources, such as mission and rural areas. Partnerships among dioceses, academic institutions, and other training programs are helpful, in order to seek creative ways of providing opportunities for the preparation and formation of lay ecclesial ministers.

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22. Does a person need an academic degree to be a lay ecclesial minister? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 34, 59-60)

Requirements are established in individual dioceses for specific lay ecclesial ministry positions. Usually, a master's degree, or at least a bachelor's degree, in an appropriate field of study is preferable. If the degree is pursued at a reliable Catholic school and if it includes theology and related disciplines, it can provide a foundation in Catholic teaching and lay the groundwork for a well-informed pastoral practice. However, any process for certifying the qualifications of candidates should include a provision for accepting experience in lieu of coursework for those whose service predates education and formation requirements. Provision should also be made for evaluating and recognizing academic credentials and ministerial experience acquired outside the United States.

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23. Is screening/testing necessary in the formation process? (See *Co-Workers*, p. 29)

23. Is screening/testing necessary in the formation process? (See *Co-workers*, p. 32)

Yes. References, background checks, and various screening instruments are an objective means of determining an individual's suitability for ministry. Lay ecclesial ministers working with children will be required, in accordance with diocesan policy, to submit to a background check.

Psychological screening instruments can assess mental health and confirm the ability to function in typical human interactions as well as guide further growth (May be precluded or otherwise circumscribed by the Americans with Disabilities Act and other authority. Counsel should be consulted). The results of these instruments are helpful in personal interviews, evaluations, and the development of individualized formation plans. The information that results from such instruments must always be used appropriately, with careful regard for the protection of private and confidential information.

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24. How is lay formation similar/different from formation for the diaconate/priesthood? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 34, 35)

Seminarians and deacon candidates are preparing for the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Those preparing for lay ecclesial ministry are not.

However, the four areas of formation—human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral—that provide a framework for the formation of deacons and priests can provide a framework for lay ecclesial ministers as well.

Because lay ecclesial ministers serve the Church as laity, their formation should take on “a special character precisely from the secularity proper to the lay state and from its particular type of spirituality” (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People*, no. 29). This character entails recognizing the different life circumstances of those who are married, single, or non-ordained vowed members of a religious community.

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25. What happens when lay ecclesial ministers finish formation? What does authorization mean? Who is responsible for authorization? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 54-60)

After formation, lay ecclesial ministers may be authorized by ecclesiastical authorities to carry out certain ministerial tasks in the name of the local church.

Authorization is the process by which properly prepared lay men and women are given responsibilities for ecclesial ministry by competent Church authority. This process includes the following elements: acknowledgment of the competence of an individual for a specific ministerial role (often called “certification”); appointment of an individual to a specific position (in some dioceses called “commissioning”), along with a delineation of the obligations, responsibilities, and authority of that position; and finally an announcement of the appointment to the community that will be served by the lay ecclesial minister.

The diocesan bishop is responsible for determining if and how any authorization should occur in his diocese, in keeping with canon law. He may grant to the one who has overall responsibility for pastoral care – for example, a pastor in parish ministry – the necessary authority to appoint someone as a lay ecclesial minister.

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26. What is certification? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 30, 56-67)

Certification is a process that documents the attainment of specific standards and competencies required for the fulfillment of a specialized ecclesial ministry. It requires a process for assessing that a given candidate has the education, formation, and professional skills necessary to serve in a particular role.

One resource for establishing and approving certification standards and procedures is the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Commission on Certification and Accreditation \(USCCB/CCA\)](#).

The Mission Statement of the USCCB/CCA is as follows: The USCCB/CCA serves as an accrediting commission of the Catholic Bishops of the United States, establishes accreditation standards, policies, and procedures, and accredits quality ministry formation programs sponsored by institutions listed in The Official Catholic Directory that prepare persons for ministry. The USCCB/CCA also establishes and approves certification standards and procedures for the certification of specialized ecclesial ministers by arch/diocese and organizations.

The current USCCB/CCA Certification Handbook is being revised for study by the USCCB Department of Education. Please contact Director of Certification, Jean Marie Weber at weberjm@usccbcca.org or call 414-486-0139 ext. 14 for current information.

The publications *National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers Serving as Parish Catechetical Leaders, Youth Ministry Leaders, Pastoral Associates, and Parish Life Coordinators* and the *National Certification Standards for Pastoral Ministers* are resources that can be helpful in setting goals for the formation and certification of those who are completing formation programs. These standards are available from any of the joint publishers: [The National Association for Lay Ministry \(www.nalm.org\)](#), [National Conference for Catechetical Leadership \(www.nccl.org\)](#), and the [National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry \(www.nfcym.org\)](#)

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27. What resources exist for developing policies and practices in the ministerial workplace that integrate Gospel values and best organizational practices? (See *Co-Workers*, pp. 61-65)

Lay ecclesial ministers—and indeed all lay Church employees and volunteers—function in a workplace that shares both the characteristics of a faith community of co-workers, as described by St. Paul, and the characteristics of a modern organization. Thus, in the ministerial workplace, one finds the special challenge of establishing policies and practices that integrate Gospel values and best organizational practices. This is particularly true as regards the management of human resources.

Best organizational practices are consistent with Gospel values. They balance the goals and needs of the organization, its workers and the community in which it is located. They imply respect for persons, justice, integrity, efficient use of resources, successful accomplishment of mission and goals, and an environment in which committed and skilled workers are treated fairly. Furthermore, the *Code of Canon Law*, particularly in its treatment of temporal and human resources, provides prescriptions that are to be followed for best organizational practice in an ecclesial context (see CIC, canons 1273ff.).

The diocese, under the leadership of its bishop, is the primary support for pastoral ministry in the diocese. The diocese can also be a model for the parishes in human resource administration. When centralized diocesan support is not in place, clusters of parishes or diocesan associations of parish administrators with responsibility for human resources can be a significant resource for parish staffs. State Catholic conferences and state or regional associations of diocesan human resource directors can be helpful for training, sharing ideas and experience, and addressing state legislation that impacts the church workplace. On the national level, the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators is a significant resource, assisting in the integration of Gospel values with best organizational practices in human resource management.

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