



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women & Youth

Email us at flwymail@usccb.org

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Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: History and Background

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. In 1992, *New Parish Ministers: Laity and Religious on Parish Staffs* (Murnion, National Pastoral Life Center) described the leadership of lay people in parish ministry. At that time 21,500 lay persons had leadership roles in parish ministry (that number had grown to 30,632 in 2005 [*Lay Parish Ministers*, DeLambo, National Pastoral Life Center]).

In 1995, the U.S. Bishops issued *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*. They wrote, "The new evangelization will become a reality only if ordained and lay members of Christ's faithful understand their roles and ministries as complementary and their purposes joined to the one mission and ministry of Jesus Christ." To support their commitment, 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. The Subcommittee on Lay Ministry designed its Leadership for Lay Ecclesial Ministry Project with goals of: (1) providing bishops and their collaborators with assistance to understand the implications of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States and to help develop their abilities for leadership, (2) to encourage dialogue and collaborative work among national ministerial associations, lay formation programs, and educational institutions and (3) to propose to the bishops' conference a plan for how it might exercise leadership for lay ecclesial ministry.

In 1999, the USCCB Subcommittee on Lay Ministry published *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions*. The four years prior to the publication of this document included a process of consultation and dialogue with bishops, theologians, canonists, priest, deacons, lay ministers, educators, diocesan and parish staff, representatives of various cultural and ethnic communities, and representatives from episcopal conferences of Latin American and Canada. Among those surveyed the six areas of greatest interest and concern included: (1) The term "lay minister" (2) A theology of lay ministry (3) The formation of lay ministers (4) The relationship between lay ministers and ordained ministers (5) The financial and human resources issues connected with lay ministry and (6) The multicultural issues connected with lay ministry. *The State of the Questions* included conclusions and proposals that "warrant[ed] further study" and that would "move the questions themselves to new levels of awareness, commitment, and action."

The process of preparation for *Co-Workers in the Vineyard* began when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops approved work on such a document in June of 2003. Subsequently, the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry gathered theologians, bishops, formation director, 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 reviewed early drafts of the document, and their consultation resulted in many revisions of the document.

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.

The draft of *Co-Workers* that the bishops received before the November 2005 meeting was the seventh they had received during the two-year consultation process. Bishops Dale Melczek, chair of the Laity Committee, and Gerald Kicanas, chair of the Lay Ministry Subcommittee, introduced the document for the bishops' vote. They said it was "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 pastoral needs and situations." The bishops' debate of the document was reported as "lively." Some of the discussion focused on the use of "minister," a term which some bishops would use only when referring to the ordained. Before the vote, Cardinal Avery Dulles urged the bishops to accept the document, noting that the subcommittee was "very careful to see that the terminology is in accord with the documents of the Holy See, and with a whole series of documents previously published by the Conference." The document was approved with 190 votes in favor, 45 opposed, and 5 abstentions.