

Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: From Publication to Implementation

Shortly after I began work staffing the USCCB Subcommittee on Lay Ministry, *Commonweal* had a cartoon which I clipped out and put on my bulletin board. It was a simple bookshelf with a small vase of flowers and two bookends holding two books, one at least six times the size of the other. The larger book was labeled *Questions*; and the smaller one *Answers*. I mention that cartoon, not simply to suggest that we've made some progress toward answering some of the questions, but also because I want to use two bookends for this talk, both of them anecdotes that happened in the course of the ten years that the bishops were working on *Co-Workers*.

The first happened after I'd been there maybe three or four years. I met a bishop in whose diocese I had worked many years ago. He asked how this work was going. I responded, "Well, OK, but it's slow. I sometimes console myself by remembering that it took the Church a couple of centuries to work out ordained priesthood, so I shouldn't be surprised that it's taking 30 years to figure out lay ecclesial ministry." He looked at me a little wistfully and said "What makes you think we've worked out priesthood"? That's a bookend that should be kept in mind as we consider all that follows.

Let me begin looking at the implementation of *Co-Workers* by citing that most current and least authoritative source of information: a google search. The last time I looked, *Co-Workers* produced 9,930 entries. *Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, on the other hand, produced close to 16,000 entries! That is a distinct accomplishment. I remember when people used to glaze over when the term was used. It is not a phrase that comes trippingly off the tongue. I don't think I know any bishop, or theologian for that matter, who would not prefer a different term, but it has not been possible yet to come up with one that better describes the essence of what they are talking about. *Co-Workers*, on p. 11 explains: "The ministry is *lay* because it is service done by lay persons. The sacramental basis is the Sacraments of Initiation, not the Sacrament of Ordination. The ministry is *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. Finally, it is *ministry* because it is a participation in the threefold ministry of Christ, who is priest, prophet, and king."¹

When the bishops were working on *Co-Workers*, they recognized that it would not have the force of law as do the other documents on formation, *The Plan for Priestly Formation* and the *Diaconate Directory*. I remember the late Bishop Joe Delaney of Fort Worth, who served as chair of the Subcommittee, saying it would have the weight of its own internal authority, not the force of particular law. They also decided that the tone of the document would be invitational and reflective rather than prescriptive or dogmatic. Notice even the subtitle – it is a resource to guide; not a law to be observed. Attractive as that is, it makes implementation a matter of choice, not obligation. On the other hand, this is a resource which was approved by the full conference and I believe that giving someone such a resource, even giving it ever so gently, is giving someone a challenge.

So, who is challenged? The bishops are at the top of the list, both as those responsible for their own dioceses and as a conference guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States. It is the responsibility of the bishop to identify those within his diocese whom he considers lay ecclesial ministers. The document is helpful, giving the characteristics of such individuals, (p.10 – *Authorization* by 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 assigned). These characteristics are helpful, but they are by no means a simple template, like ordination or vows,

Bishops are making the decision about who is to be designated a lay ecclesial minister in various ways. Let me admit up front, that there are some dioceses where it appears that no decisions are being made and the document is being quietly ignored. I heard recently about a bishop who told someone that he had voted against the document, but now would have to respond since it had been approved. There are many dioceses where the term *lay minister* and *lay ecclesial minister* are used interchangeably, although *Co-Workers* attempts to distinguish between them on the basis of the four characteristics just mentioned and the acknowledgment that lay ecclesial ministers are frequently employed by the church on a full or part-time basis and often have a sense of being called by God to this ministry.

Let me give a couple of examples. For several years now, the Archdiocese of Chicago has recognized as lay ecclesial ministers all those who serve as pastoral associates or directors of religious education. The cardinal assembles those individuals, their parish communities and their

families for a liturgical celebration in which he publicly acknowledges their vocation to lay ecclesial ministry.

Just last week, the diocese of San Jose held its first recognition ceremony. The bishop, using ministry within the worshipping community as the framework for his designation, brought together the pastoral associates, directors or coordinators of religious education, master catechists, directors of youth ministry, directors of liturgy, directors of RCIA, pastoral care coordinators, parish life coordinators, the chaplain for detention ministry and the director of the catholic campus center at the state university. They celebrated morning prayer together, joined by their parish communities and families; the bishop designated them as lay ecclesial ministers within the diocese, and presented them with pins with that name and the diocesan crest.

You may have seen the March 15 issue of *Origins* in which Archbishop Elden Curtiss of Omaha has an article titled “Lay Leadership and Lay Ecclesial Ministry.” He identifies the following roles for authorization as lay ecclesial ministers: pastoral associates, catholic school principals, directors of religious education, directors of youth ministry, directors of adult faith formation, campus ministers, directors of liturgy, directors of liturgical music and directors and program coordinators within archdiocesan organizations.² You may have noticed that the two lists are not identical – something *Co-Workers* anticipates when it assigns to the bishop or his delegate, “the responsibility, in accord with the norms of canon law, to identify the roles that most clearly exemplify lay ecclesial ministry.” The document continues, “Application of the term may vary from diocese to diocese.”³ What is important to the bishops as a group and to the community of lay ecclesial ministers is that designations are being made. The recognition of the call to lay ecclesial ministry is being celebrated in a public way.

Once that designation is made, a secondary, but not insignificant, challenge for the bishop is his need to consider how the diocese provides for the formation, authorization, and integration of these lay ecclesial ministers. The diocese of Austin, TX, for example, has instituted an on-line formation program with the goal of having a minimum of three lay ecclesial ministers with a master’s degree in each of its 10 deaneries,

There are specific as well as general suggestions for the bishops in this regard: for example, the section on Agents of Formation (p.52) states that “regular communication between diocesan representatives and those institutions preparing lay ecclesial ministers is particularly desirable.” In the section on Pathways, (p.32) the document states that some institutions “rely on

the diocese to supplement what they provide for their students, just as some dioceses rely on the institutions to provide academic preparation for prospective lay ecclesial ministers. We encourage such collaborative arrangements, avoiding a costly and unnecessary multiplication of Church services.”

Your own collaboration with the archdiocese is a model. I was in Portland, ME last week and the bishop there was expressing his great pleasure that the one Catholic college in the state has just announced that they are introducing both an undergraduate and graduate program to prepare people for ecclesial ministry.

For the bishops as a conference, there are also challenges to be found in the conclusion, where they state (p.67) that “within the next five years it will be helpful to revisit the material here and refine it in the light of our experience.” They also indicate the need for a more thorough study of “our theology of vocation” and acknowledge that this document could not address the request for a common title for those appointed under C.517.2. (According to CARA, there are no fewer than 37 titles such persons throughout the US.)

The next group to be resourced or challenged are those who are responsible for ministry formation programs. The section on formation provides guidance for program and curriculum development; if bishops use it to evaluate candidates to be authorized as lay ecclesial ministers it may become even more significant. Articulation between diocesan programs and graduate programs is critical, as is continued reflection on the relationship of certification and authorization.

A third group to be challenged by *Co-Workers* are the priests (bishop during discussion) There are repeated calls for collaboration and mutual respect, while also acknowledgement of the distinct role of the ordained (p.20,21,23,24) and the pastor. Along with the priests are the deacons. *Co-workers* is careful to acknowledge the sacramental basis of their ministry and comments that (P.25) “Deacons and lay ecclesial ministers often work together as members of parish staffs under the direction of the pastor. The mutual respect and close collaboration of lay ecclesial ministers and deacons in this setting and in all pastoral endeavors can be a wonderful witness to the one communion and mission that binds all disciples together in Christ.”

Lay ecclesial ministers themselves could also be challenged by *Co-Workers*. Along with the several expressions of gratitude and affirmation, lay ministers are reminded of the need to accept their public role in the Church (p.25) “By virtue 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. Therefore, they must be persons who are known for a genuine love for the whole Catholic Church, who exist in full communion of heart and mind with the pope as successor of Peter, and whose ecclesial identity is shaped by obedience to the bishop of the diocese and to the universal magisterium and is expressed by generous collaboration with ordained and other lay ecclesial ministers alike.”

That notion is repeated in a somewhat gentler tone in the section on spiritual formation (p. 41): “Lay ecclesial ministers serve publicly in the local church, so they need to accept this role with fidelity and loyalty and be able to fulfill it with integrity, fully versed in authentic Church teaching, supportive of it, able to defend it, and present it with clarity. Spiritual formation can help persons discern if this calling is for them, embrace it with joy if it is, or move on in peace if it is not.”

Parishioners, especially those on parish and finance councils, can also find challenges in the document. The goals for the preparation of lay ecclesial ministers should be kept in mind when staff positions are created or evaluated. The document’s comments about compensation and support for on-going formation also have significant implications for parish finance councils and for each of us especially when the offertory collection is gathered.

Those are some of the challenges to be found within *Co-Workers*. Let’s look at what else has been happening since the document was first printed in December 2005. It is currently in its third printing with over 14,000 copies sold. It’s available on the USCCB web site as well as related resources. There is a Spanish version on the web site and I understand that the Publishing Office and the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs are editing and formatting that version in preparation for disseminating a Spanish print edition.

The USCCB Committee on the Laity, the parent committee of the subcommittee which produced *Co-Workers*, is pursuing three general strategies to foster implementation at local levels. The first is to promote the document and develop resources to accompany it. Examples of this include collaboration with the National Association for Lay Ministry in preparing *A Study Guide for Co-Workers*, (a guide initiated by a group of offices of the Archdiocese of Detroit) and a power point presentation that outlines and explains *Co-Workers* which will be available for down loading. Laity Committee staff also worked with Ministry Training Source to develop a

four-session online course based on the content of *Co-Workers*. Seven dioceses began offering the course last month.

The second strategy of the Committee is to collaborate with dioceses and groups on projects. Several associations and committee staff have been working with St. John's College in Collegeville to design a National Symposium on Lay Ecclesial Ministry to be held this summer at Collegeville. The Religious Education Department of NCEA newsletter for parish catechetical directors has featured a series of four articles on *Co-Workers*. Both the National Association for Lay Ministry and the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry devoted their annual meetings to *Co-Workers*. The National Association of Pastoral Musicians devoted an issue of their bi-monthly journal to *Co-Workers*. Four associations, NALM, NCCL, NFCYM, and NPM, are working together on a revision of their standards for certification so that they more completely reflect *Co-Workers*.

The third strategy of the committee has been to respond to invitations and opportunities to speak about the document. Those opportunities have included academic symposia like this one, diocesan gatherings of pastoral associates, meetings of the presbyterate of a diocese, gatherings of parish staffs, and groups as diverse as the National Council of Catholic Women and the Apostleship of the Sea which brings together those priests, deacons and lay ministers who serve seafarers in the name of the Church. They have taken place from Boston to San Jose, from Maine – and now to Texas. *Co-Workers* has been received by the vast majority of the people participating in these sessions as what the bishops intended: an affirmation of lay ecclesial ministers and a guide for its development that is consistent with the theological and doctrinal tradition of the church and that responds to contemporary and local needs.

With the exception of the National Council of Catholic Women, the gatherings just referred to are of folks who come with a definite interest in the document. I heard recently of another group that went beyond that.

Sister Maria Riley, OP, who coordinates the Global Women's Project at the Center of Concern in Washington, was invited to deliver the John Henry Newman Lecture at the Oratory in South Carolina. Invited to speak about the social mission of the Church, Maria did that in the morning lecture reflecting on the universal call of all the People of God to engage in the social mission of the Church. For the afternoon lecture she focused on *Co-Workers*, noting that the document emphasizes lay ecclesial ministry as the work of the Spirit, not as a solution to a personnel gap,

and citing the emergence of lay leadership as one of the most vital signs of the times in our Church. I mention all that because it's the first experience I've heard of where *Co-Workers* was discussed and gratefully received by "ordinary" Church folk who don't already have an interest in the document.

I recently read that in the early days of Vatican II, one observer commented that in its two thousand year history, the Church has been described, "not so much by verbal definitions as in the light of images."⁴

That reminded me of the work of Michael Downey who suggests what he terms "iconicity" as a way of understanding the distinctiveness of diverse ministries. He reminds us that "In the Christian spiritual traditions, an icon does not so much represent or stand for another, invisible reality, but rather discloses, manifests, or conveys that reality in and through itself....In the diverse ministries of the Church something of the nature of the whole Church and its mission is disclosed."⁵

For the ordained priest, Downey offers the icon of "the Church's pondering heart" inasmuch as "the priest's most important ministry is opening the Scriptures and breaking the Bread in a way that allows all present, by the gift first given in Baptism, to behold the Body of Christ and the gift/ing of the Spirit in their midst."⁶

For the lay ecclesial minister, he offers the icon "of the Church ad-vent-ing," reminding his readers that "The flourishing of gifts among the laity, in unprecedented numbers and in unforeseen ways is a reminder that the Church is always coming to be, participating in the mission of Word and Spirit in a particular time and place....The Lord is in our midst no less than on the road to Emmaus, as the Church is yet coming to be in its fullness."⁷

And that brings us to the second bookend. Early on in the years the Subcommittee was developing *Co-Workers*, I heard the Jesuit theologian, Michael Himes speculate about the future. He acknowledged that the astro-physicists and other scientists see no indication that our universe is coming to an end soon and reminded us of Christ's promise that the Spirit will be with the Church until the end of time. He then envisioned a time when one Catholic might ask another, "Vatican II - was that before or after the Council of Chalcedon?"

Co-Workers was never intended as the final word on lay ecclesial ministry. Rather it was a platform, a well-grounded platform, but a platform, from which the bishops, theologians, the Church itself could continue to reflect on the development of lay ecclesial ministry,

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¹ USCCB, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC, 2005. p.11.

² Curtiss, Archbishop, "Lay leadership and Lay Ecclesial Ministry," *Origins*, March 15, 2007, p. 623.

³ *Co-Workers*, p.11.

⁴ Gustave Weigel, "How is the Council Going?" *America*, 109 (1963) 730.

⁵ Michael Downey, "Ministerial Identity: A Question of Common Foundations," *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood: Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry*, ed. Susan Wood, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2003, p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.23.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.21.