

***Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord
Affirmation and Challenge***

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During the years when the USCCB Subcommittee for the Fifth Edition of the Program for Priestly Formation was doing its work, Committee on the Laity, through its Subcommittee on Lay Ministry, was preparing a document which the bishops approved in November, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. The two documents are related in more than timing. Each addresses issues of concern to those who minister publicly in the Church, and, therefore, of importance for the whole Church. Although *Co-Workers* makes clear from the beginning that it does not establish norms or have the force of particular law as does the PPF, it is similar in that it addresses the theological grounding for lay ecclesial ministry and gives guidance for the preparation, authorization, and integration of lay ecclesial ministers. Both documents represent affirmation and challenge to priests and to lay ecclesial ministers, particularly in their call for collaboration.

Using the term which the bishops introduced in 1980 in *Called and Gifted*, *Co-Workers* identifies lay ecclesial ministry as characterized by

- 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 assigned responsibilities.

Lay ecclesial minister is a generic term which can be applied to a variety of specific roles; e.g. pastoral associate; director of religious education, youth ministry, liturgy, pastoral music, campus ministry; school principal; hospital or prison minister, roles in which today's Catholics routinely expect to meet a lay person. The document explicitly states that "it is the responsibility of the bishop to identify those roles that most clearly

exemplify lay ecclesial ministry [and] application of the term may vary from diocese to diocese.”

Established in 1994 to address issues of concern about lay ecclesial ministry, the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry published *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions* in 1999. A consultation about what further work was needed on the topics highlighted a desire on the part of many bishops for guidance about the preparation of lay ecclesial ministers. Subsequently, the subcommittee conducted three regional consultations (Regions X, VII, and II) bringing together bishops, pastors, formation directors and lay ecclesial ministers themselves. The consultations confirmed the need for some kind of guidance and the hope for a common terminology and language. The subcommittee began to draw up a tentative outline for what was called a “foundational document” on lay ecclesial ministry.

When the 2002-2005 Subcommittee membership was pending, there was a deliberate decision to invite bishop representatives from what were called “the related committees”: Diaconate, Doctrine, Pastoral Practices, Priestly Formation, Priestly Life and Ministry, and Vocations so that the work of the subcommittee would not be done in isolation from the other committees.

In June 2003, the USCCB authorized the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry to prepare a document which would “seek the further integration of lay ecclesial ministers within the ministerial community and structures of the Church in the United States.” With a \$250,000 grant from the Lilly Endowment, the subcommittee surveyed all bishops, asking for suggestions for each topic in a tentative outline and for ideas about expanding or revising the outline.

The subcommittee then initiated a series of consultations with theologians, ministry formation program directors (from seminaries, diocesan programs, and graduate school), canonists, pastors, deacons, pastoral planners, human resource professionals and lay ecclesial ministers. These consultations focused on the theology of lay ecclesial ministry, the pathways by which one comes to lay ecclesial ministry, formation and authorization for lay ecclesial ministry, and the church as a workplace. Ninety-nine individuals participated in these consultations, the fruit of which provided the ground from which the first draft of *Co-Workers* was written.

Subsequent drafts of the document were sent for consultation to all the bishops, to particular committees and specific individuals. One especially noteworthy consultation was held with the mostly lay ministry professional associations. (NFPC was among the organizations included in the consultation) Twenty-one associations responded to the consultation with each involving as many of their members as possible in submitting a single, group response. As a result of that consultation, the Subcommittee made significant changes in the draft.

The draft which all the bishops received prior to the November 2005 meeting was the seventh in what had been a two-year process. Writing about the process, Dr. Gregory Sobolewski, Director of the Institute for Pastoral Ministry at St. Mary's University, Winona, MN, noted that "the bishops created this document by practicing the collaboration that it encourages. Patiently, they have engaged hundreds of people nationally and internationally, from parishes, chanceries, the academy, and professional organizations."

Conference procedures provided yet two more opportunities for bishops to propose revisions. Before the meeting opened the Subcommittee had accepted 80 of the 130 "modifications" submitted by the bishops; during the meeting, they accepted 35 of 46 amendments. When 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 stressed that it was written "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."

Reports of the discussion before the bishops' vote characterized it as "lively." One bishop, speaking in favor of the document, spoke of his concerns about how some priests of his diocese might view the document, noting that continuing education about lay ecclesial ministry was essential. Much of the discussion centered on the use of *minister*, a term which some bishops would limit to the ordained. Other issues included the need for more consultation. Just before the vote, Cardinal Avery Dulles recommended the acceptance of the document, adding that the subcommittee had consulted very widely and had been "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.

Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord is a clear affirmation of the more than 30,000 lay persons who already share the public ministry of the Church and a resource for bishops and others who share responsibility for the preparation of those people, as well as for their authorization and integration within parish and diocesan structures. It also emphasizes repeatedly the value and need for collaboration between ordained and lay ecclesial ministers. In Part I the document establishes the theological basis for lay ecclesial ministry, grounding it in the communion and mission of the Church which flow from an understanding and appreciation of the Trinity. It notes at one point that “the one true God is fundamentally relational: a loving communion of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” At another, it comments “Ministry is diverse and at the same time profoundly relational. This is so because ministry has its source in the triune God and because it takes its shape within the church understood as a communion.” Throughout the document, it is clear that “the primary distinction lies between the ministry of the lay faithful and the ministry of the ordained, which is a special apostolic calling.” It also emphasizes that the vast majority of lay persons work for the transformation of the world in the secular arena, their unique setting. In the section on theology, *Co-Workers* also explores the relationship of the lay ecclesial minister with the bishop, the priest, the deacon, and the lay faithful.

Part II consists of practical applications. In the first of these the document explores the paths by which individuals come to lay ecclesial ministry. It speaks of the need for ecclesial as well as personal discernment, giving some suggestions about the habits of mind and heart that determine suitability. The most substantial of the practical applications is the section on formation, framed deliberately according to the four categories used for priestly and diaconate formation (human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral), and giving goals, elements and methods for each category. *Co-workers* emphasizes that the formation of lay ecclesial ministers should be ever-mindful of their lay state and “the different life circumstances of those who are married, single or non-ordained members of religious communities.” The document notes that the level of

preparation and extent of formation are important questions that have no single answer and are best left to the discernment of the local bishop, the lay ecclesial minister and his or her supervisor. It comments later, however, that “usually a graduate degree or at least a bachelor’s degree in an appropriate field of study is preferable.” The section on intellectual formation includes some comments on theology for ministry and an ecumenical and interfaith dimension to that formation. The section concludes with comments on the necessity of the integration of the four categories and of ongoing formation, and on the agents of formation, noting in the final paragraph that “all formation is ultimately self-formation and lay ecclesial ministers are themselves the pivotal agents of their own formation.”

The third practical application is Authorization for Lay Ecclesial Ministry and reflects the subcommittee’s deepening conviction about the importance of authorization in the description of the lay ecclesial minister. That is defined as “the process by which properly prepared lay men and women are given responsibilities for ecclesial ministry by competent church authority.” The section distinguishes between certification (verification that a candidate “has the education, formation, and professional skills necessary to serve in a particular role”) and appointment, sometimes called - or accompanied by - “commissioning.” It suggests ways in which diocesan bishops can set certification requirements, citing the standards approved by the USCCB Commission on Certification and Accreditation as a useful resource. The document recommends public prayer and ritual at certain points in the authorization process as “significant for the lay ecclesial minister and the community, highlighting the new relationships that the person is beginning in the life of the community.” The section concludes: “the authorization process can provide occasions for the bishop to demonstrate his support for the lay ecclesial ministers of his diocese and to model collaboration with them as his lay co-workers.”

The final practical application treats the ministerial workplace, recognizing that lay ecclesial ministers function in a workplace that shares the characteristics of both a faith community and a modern organization. This requires the integration of Gospel values and best organizational practices. The document prescribes nothing, but offers helpful suggestions, chief among them the implementation of a comprehensive personnel

system which “includes both the variety of people serving the church (lay people, sisters, brothers, deacons, and priests) and the range of personnel functions.” The section concludes with a reference to available resources and the outcomes that might be anticipated from a comprehensive personnel system.

While Co-workers repeatedly affirms the lay ecclesial ministers of the Church, it also challenges them, calling them to “generous collaboration with ordained and other lay ecclesial ministers alike” and reminding them that their call to ministry “should not foster an elitism that places them above or outside the laity.” Similarly, it reminds the ordained that their collaboration is part of the very definition of lay ecclesial ministers. The final call of the document is a call to “continue to work together as a ‘community of people united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit in [our] pilgrimage toward the Father’s kingdom, bearers of a message for all humanity ‘” (Gaudium et Spes #1)