



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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Remarks by Bishop Dale J. Melczek**Chairman of the Committee on the Laity
Introducing *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*****November 14, 2005**

The Laity Committee and its Subcommittee on Lay Ministry are pleased to present for your discussion and vote *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. We think this document makes a significant contribution to the stream of pastoral attention that has been given to the roles and responsibilities of lay persons in the life and mission of the Church.

The teaching of the Second Vatican Council on this topic provided a necessary starting point forty years ago, particularly in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (whose anniversary we observe this week). Twice in the past 25 years, our own Conference of Bishops has issued statements on the roles of laity in the Church and in the world. While we have focused in large measure on the call of lay people to transform the world according to a Gospel vision, we have also acknowledged the important roles and functions laity have within church ministries. In 1980 our document, *Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity*, we identified as "ecclesial ministers" those lay persons who have prepared for professional ministry in the Church and we welcomed them as a gift to the community. Fifteen years later our Conference took note of the widespread work of lay ecclesial ministers in parishes and in other church institutions where "the Church's mission is being carried forward and far by all these lay ministers who tirelessly serve the Church and God's people". In 1988, Pope John Paul II wrote *Christifideles Laici: The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World* and in 1997 several Vatican offices published *Ecclesiae de Mysterio*, popularly known as the "Interdicasterial Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests."

All of the above are the sources from which *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* has drawn and to which it offers a practical, yet limited, response.

Our document also responds to a growing reality within our Church – the increasing numbers of appropriately prepared lay men and women who work with us in the pastoring of our people. They are the competent and committed lay persons on whom we depend for the work of the Church. They are the persons we need to keep before us as we discuss this document.

When you approved the preparation of this resource document in St. Louis in 2003, it became the task of the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry. That Subcommittee has worked collaboratively in many ways. It has solicited your feedback on drafts at least three times through written consultation. It has worked closely with other Conference committees, namely, Diaconate, Doctrine, Pastoral Practices, Priestly Formation, Priestly Life and Ministry, and Priestly Vocations, who each have designated one of their members to serve on the Subcommittee. Finally, the Subcommittee has consulted widely with respected theologians, educators, pastoral experts, and with lay ministers themselves. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* is a gift shaped and blessed by many hands.