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Dialogue with bishops, leaders of professional organizations, and other lay ecclesial ministers may further the goals of *Co-Workers*.



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*Co-Workers* identified lay ecclesial ministers as those who possess a significant degree of preparation, formation, and professional competence, with responsibilities or leadership in areas of ministry and who work in collaboration with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons.

# Lay Ecclesial Ministry: Where We Have Come, Where We Need to Go

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## EVOLUTION OF THE TERM: ROLE OF THE BISHOPS

This article is titled quite definitively with the phrase “lay ecclesial ministry.” For many in our Church today, this descriptive term is not known, for some there is a sense that we have always used it, and some oppose its use. Why is this so?

A historical overview is helpful for considering this question. We can trace the origin of this language to initiatives of our bishops, noting that the language has evolved over time. The earliest description is found in 1980:

Growing numbers of lay women and men are also preparing themselves professionally to work in the church. In this regard religious sisters and brothers have shown the way with their initiative and creativity. Ecclesial ministers, (i.e. lay persons who have prepared for professional ministry in

the Church, represent a new development. We welcome this as a gift to the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Here the bishops reflected on what was unfolding in the United States.<sup>2</sup> However, if viewed from a sociological perspective, we would note that, in parishes and dioceses, “ecclesial ministers” was not an operative term. Rather, persons with the titles director of religious education, youth minister, and others were serving in parishes, and often their work was called lay ministry; sometimes they were called lay ministers, but use of that term evolved more slowly. A key difference here is that, at the local level, this new phenomenon was defined functionally, whereas the bishops gave a more theological, certainly more ecclesial descriptor—ecclesial ministry. A second key difference is that the bishops used a collective name for the diverse functional titles that were emerging.

Another notable point is the exploration in *Called and Gifted* of this new phenomenon as a subset of the call to ministry common to all the baptized, a call exercised by laity as “Christian service in the world,” and “ministry in the Church.”

Multiple forms of ministry by the laity other than ecclesial ministry were named: “volunteers and part time workers who serve on parish and diocesan councils, boards of education, and financial, liturgical, and ecumenical committees, as well as those who exercise roles such as special minister of the Eucharist, catechist, and pastoral assistant.”<sup>23</sup> It is evident that the bishops perceived a difference between this broader category of workers and those they named ecclesial ministers. The struggle to adequately express this difference continues today as a challenge that is both linguistic and conceptual, meaning that we have neither adequate language nor an adequate definition.

Fifteen years later, the bishops took up this theme again; this time using the descriptive name, “ecclesial lay ministers.” On the one hand, they spoke of “cantors and music directors, readers, eucharistic ministers, and altar servers” and those “teaching young people as well as adults” and serving “in peace and justice networks, in soup kitchens and shelters, in marriage preparation, in bereavement programs, and in ministry to the separated and divorced.”<sup>24</sup> Then the bishops note, “Recent research indicates that at least half of our parishes have lay people and vowed religious in pastoral staff positions. . . . The pastoral needs of this moment are being ably and generously served by many kinds of ecclesial lay ministers.”<sup>25</sup> Here, there is not as clear a demarcation between these two groups, and in the section “Challenges for the Future,” three of the four points use the language “lay ministers,” referring, it seems, to both groups. The fourth point mentions “ecclesial ministry,” though even here both groups may be intended. This signals the difficulty the bishops experienced. They desired to honor all forms of lay ministry that have developed since the Second Vatican Council. Secondly, they did not want to create an elite. Finally, some bishops thought—and still think today—that the word *ministry* should not be applied to the work of laity in the Church, preferring *apostolate* or *discipleship*.

In 1997, the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops held the theological colloquium “Toward a Theology of Ecclesial Lay Ministry.”<sup>26</sup> This was one of the many consultative gatherings this committee would hold, all leading to the publication of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, in 2005.<sup>27</sup> Bishop Howard Hubbard captures something of the lived experience of the search for ways to adequately describe this unfolding of lay ministry.

As a diocese, we have not developed formally or explicitly a definition of ecclesial lay ministry. Our emphasis has been on the baptismal call to holiness and ministry extended to all the faithful and on formulating policies and programs that facilitate this vision. In other words, as a diocese, we have not addressed directly the question to be considered by the colloquium, namely, what is to be included in ecclesial lay ministry (i.e., the participation and service to the community as such by some of the baptized) and

what should be seen as a part of lay ministry broadly conceived (i.e., the participation in the mission that is to be given by baptism to all the faithful in our diocese). However, there is no question about the fact that we have been dealing with the reality of what is being described as ecclesial lay ministry.<sup>8</sup>

Participants (invited bishops and theologians) submitted questions for discussion after reading the prepared papers. Some of their questions echo, at least implicitly, points Hubbard made. Among the queries, were: “Is there a difference between those who volunteer to participate in lay ministry and those who are paid to be lay ministers? Does this lead to differing notions of ministry?” and “Is there with this reality [of new ministers] a single group, ‘ecclesial lay ministers’? Or multiple groups?” “For what reason is ‘ecclesial’ added to lay? What does it clarify? What questions does it raise?”

The methodology that informed the colloquium was that followed by the subcommittee in its decade of working toward defining the bishops’ role relative to “this new reality” that eventually led to the publication of *Co-Workers*. Consistently, the starting point was the lived experience of the church community in the United States.

*Co-Workers* marks the final step in the evolution of the term we have been exploring; the bishops state: “We identify them in a generic way as ‘lay ecclesial ministers.’” They further specify who they mean by this term: those who have “a significant degree of preparation, formation, and professional competence . . . require authorization of the hierarchy to serve publicly in the local church . . . [have] responsibilities for leadership in particular areas of ministry . . . and [work] in a close mutual collaboration with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons.”<sup>29</sup>

Compared to earlier documents, the bishops more clearly describe the demarcation between lay ministers, in a more general sense, and lay ecclesial ministers. Furthermore, the theological grounding for their acceptance of this lived reality of the Church is carefully articulated. This document is widely taught in lay ministry formation programs. Many have enthusiastically received the sections describing God’s call and the theology and Church teaching relevant to the involvement of laity in ministry in the Church. And yet, the term lay ecclesial ministry is not widely used, and often not even recognized. Furthermore, although the description of what characterizes lay ecclesial ministry, as given earlier, is helpful, it does not truly define, in the dictionary sense of “to limit,” or “to mark a boundary.”

## ANOTHER EVOLUTION

At the grassroots, the choice of language also was evolving. First, it should be noted that prior to the 1970s, the word *ministry* was not used in Catholic circles. In the next decade, it was sociologist John Coleman who noted that this word had become “a pervasive catch phrase in Catholic circles of religious professionals.”



Praying for vocations for lay ecclesial ministers shows that the Church values the work of these ministers.

He found it especially important to note that the term was both deeply motivational and, at the same time, “taken for granted, undefined and unreflected on.”<sup>10</sup>

In my 1985 study of lay persons employed in professional roles in parishes, I wanted to know the language they chose to describe their work. Sixty percent chose “ministry” and 13 percent used words associated with Church mission: vocation, discipleship, apostolate. Philip J. Murnion, a sociologist and churchman, in the report of his 1992 survey of lay persons employed in parishes in professional roles, called them “new parish ministers”<sup>11</sup>. And in his 1999 report, he repeated that term and added “lay ministry” in the title of the book.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, Murnion knew the bishops’ documents from 1980 and 1995, but still did not use the evolving official language.

### THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE TERM

One way of explaining why most Catholics, including many actively involved in ministry, do not know this term is that parish bulletins generally list the parish priest(s) and deacon(s), naming them with their status in the church, and the other ministers on the staff by naming them functionally—director of religious education (or faith formation or catechetics), youth minister, etc. Similarly, in most dioceses, offices assist the work of parish ministers, and these offices also are named functionally; for example, office of catechesis. Very few dioceses have an office focused on lay ecclesial ministers/ministry.

A second reason is that, as the diverse roles in ministry developed, organizations and associations were formed, usually around the functional roles individuals held. For example, the National Association of Pastoral Musicians, the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership, and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry all focus on the particular area of competence each group supports. These groups strengthen the identities of their members (and, through their publications and conferences, even nonmembers), identities as catechetical leaders, as pastoral musicians, as youth ministers.

Starting in the 1990s, various of these groups worked to identify the competencies needed for effective performance of the roles their members filled in the Church. Even the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM), whose mission is broader, focused on two ministerial groups, pastoral associates and parish life directors. Subsequently, at the urging of the colleges, seminaries, and universities offering lay ministry education programs, some of these groups worked collaboratively to develop common competencies for lay ministry and, eventually, standards for lay ecclesial ministers, including a focus on their specific roles in parishes. Furthermore, they petitioned the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Commission on Certification and Accreditation to accept these standards. The standards were accepted in 2003. In *Co-Workers*, the bishops noted these efforts and offered them as a resource to bishops developing an authorization process.<sup>13</sup> All of this was important for the professionalization process and for the more effective exercise of ministry. At the same time, many of these efforts strengthened the predilection for functional names for lay ministers.

In various collaborative efforts, these groups have done much to enrich the understanding and practice of ministry



The term lay ecclesial minister has theological import in that it names the ecclesial work done by a lay person.

through educational, organizational, and advocacy efforts. The Emerging Models Project, shepherded by NALM in partnership with six national associations and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), was responsible for the largest body of research in decades on parish life and ministry.<sup>14</sup> The Alliance for the Certification of Lay Ecclesial Ministers, a partnership of five national Catholic ministry organizations, has developed standards for seven specialized ministries that, in 2011, the Commission on Accreditation accepted. A great deal of time and effort has been spent developing the standards and process for applying for certification. However, a bare handful of persons have sought certification as lay ecclesial ministers.<sup>15</sup>

### WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

I think that here are three important reasons for seeking to implement the use of the descriptive “lay ecclesial ministry” more widely. The first is that the bishops have made this choice. More important, and why they did so, is that this title has theological import. It names: an ecclesial work, a ministry, done by a lay person. Functional titles are helpful, almost the way job descriptions are, but they do not have the theological value of this ecclesiastically chosen title.

A second reason is that within the field of lay ministry there is great fluidity. Persons move from one role to another, for example, a youth minister becoming a director of religious education. Furthermore, at times role titles are combined, for example, youth minister/director of religious education.<sup>16</sup>

The third reason has to do with the place of lay ecclesial ministers in the local church. In his first study of “new parish ministers,” Murnion identified four principal themes. The third of these was: “For all our protests that ministry in the Catholic community is not congregational, the dynamics in place are leading to an increasingly local or congregational source and shaping of parish ministry.”<sup>17</sup> But the model for ministry in the Catholic Church is *not* congregational but an ordered ministry around the bishop. The bishop and his ministers, with the people,

constitute the local church. This can be expressed in hierarchical terms, the traditional view, or relationally.<sup>18</sup>

*Co-Workers* was developed because the bishops recognized that they needed to have a role in response to the grassroots developments in ministry. The document's subtitle is important to note: *A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, "a resource for diocesan bishops and for all others who are responsible for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States."<sup>19</sup> The bishops stated: "By reason of his ministry it is the role of the bishop, often through the pastor, to give oversight (*episcopate*) to order these new ministerial relationships within his diocese and to affirm and guide the use of those gifts that lay ecclesial ministers bring—not to extinguish the Spirit, but to test everything and retain what is good."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, lay ecclesial ministers "are authorized by ecclesiastical authorities to carry out certain ministerial responsibilities in public service of the local church."<sup>21</sup> While the use of authorization processes is in varying states of development throughout the US Church, an ideal is presented. Individuals are authorized for lay ecclesial ministry by their bishops, authorized to be public servants of the local church, authorized to serve *in the name of the Church*.<sup>22</sup>

In Germany, all professional lay ministers hold advanced degrees in fields relevant to church ministry. Lay ecclesial ministers are authorized by their local bishop, and placed in a ministerial position in a local parish. Should that position not work out, the bishop places the person in another parish. This is a clear example of the bishop giving "oversight (*episcopate*) to order these ministerial relationships in his diocese."<sup>23</sup> Our bishops have emphasized the importance of authorization of lay ecclesial ministers. However, a recent CARA document shows that 80 percent of (arch)dioceses do not require certification for all lay ecclesial ministers, and 38 percent say their (arch)diocese has no process for authorizing lay ecclesial ministry.<sup>24</sup>

## TOWARD THE FUTURE

Despite the fact that those we now call lay ecclesial ministers began to emerge in the United States around 1965, and that our bishops published *Co-Workers* ten years ago, much still needs to be done to integrate these ministers more effectively into the structures of church life. The work of various individuals and groups is needed so that the Church's ministry is more effectively served, and also so that lay ecclesial ministers are more justly treated. The brief sketch of some possibilities offered here is an attempt to further the discussion.

### The United States Bishops

In June 2015, several committees of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops convened a Lay Ecclesial Ministry Summit. Participants, bishops, and pastoral leaders and academics, gathered "to explore the realities, challenges, and opportunities facing the field of lay ecclesial ministry" and "to consider possible next steps for advancing the conversation."<sup>25</sup> Presentations were given relative to various topics from *Co-Workers*; group dialogue sought to identify possible next steps. The convening of this summit demonstrates the commitment on the part of several committees at the conference; and the willingness of individual bishops

to participate demonstrates their personal commitment to this agenda. The dialogue identified many issues that need attention if the intent of *Co-Workers* is to be more fully realized: that the bishops guide the development of lay ecclesial ministry. Two points that I would name as especially important are: strengthening authorization processes, especially with ritual celebrations<sup>26</sup> (this is an important way to both better define and value lay ecclesial ministry), and developing ways to invite a more diverse (culturally and generationally) group of individuals into lay ecclesial ministry. Part of this inviting must show a valuing of this role in the life of the Church, including a practice of publicly praying for vocations to lay ecclesial ministry, and praying for those who are lay ecclesial ministers today.

### Professional Organizations and Associations of Lay Ecclesial Ministers

These groups have done significant work in developing standards for the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation needed for professional lay ministry. But as noted earlier, few of their members have sought certification as lay ecclesial ministers. Many reasons could be given: in 80 percent of dioceses, certification is not needed; the process is laborious and has no payoff for the individual; *lay ecclesial minister* is not part of the self-identification, the identity, of most of these men and women. Two initiatives these leaders could take to further this agenda would be to develop models of authorization processes (for example, preparing samples of rituals of authorization) and resources for furthering the identity of their members as lay ecclesial ministers.

### Pastors

The emergence of lay ecclesial ministers began with pastors pondering needs and hiring individuals to lead areas of ministry. Clearly, they looked for persons with good preparation; in 1999, almost 50 percent of the full-time lay ministers (this statistic did not include vowed religious) had at least a master's degree.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, "among the full-time ministers, all but about 15 percent say that the pastor's support is adequate."<sup>28</sup> Because we are more likely to hear stories of the hiring of ill-prepared individuals, and of lay minister-pastor conflict, it is valuable to note these statistics. This good beginning needs to continue. As parishes and staffs grow, the challenge for pastors is increasing. More assistance in activities such as preparing job descriptions and developing supervisory practices would be helpful.

### Lay Ecclesial Ministers

Key parts of *Co-Workers* were discussed at NALM's conference this year. "Tending the Vine," the title of the conference, describes the intent of the meeting's extensive small group work, noting what is working and what is not working, relative to each topic. The process allowed stories of pain and frustration to emerge, as well as stories of initiatives and spiritual grounding. These stories evidenced the lay ecclesial ministers' commitment. This is the most important contribution they can offer to the future. However, to further the development of structures to integrate lay ecclesial ministry better into the life of the Church, they could take various initiatives. These initiatives would include: a dialogue with their bishops about *Co-Workers* as a

whole and the authorization processes and rituals it suggests, a dialogue with the leaders of their professional associations about furthering lay ecclesial ministry *as such*, and a dialogue with each other, about how to strengthen their ministry and themselves, in their service to the Church.

## CONCLUSION

The bishops' documents referenced in this article name lay ecclesial ministry as a gift to the Church, a gift of the Spirit. The words of St. Augustine could be a directive for us: pray as if everything depends upon God—praising and thanking God for this gift of the Spirit; work as if everything depends on you—striving to guide and support the continued development of lay ecclesial ministry.



For the intent of *Co-Workers* to be realized, the authorization process should be strengthened with ritual celebrations.

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## Notes

1. *Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1980), 4.
2. There were similar developments in Canada and some European countries, but these were not widely known in the United States.
3. *Called and Gifted*, 3.
4. *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*, United States Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1995), 16.
5. *Ibid*, 17.
6. The proceedings of the conference are published in *Together in God's Service: Toward a Theology of Ecclesial Lay Ministry* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1998).
7. *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, D.C: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).
8. "Reflection on the Experience of Ecclesial Lay Ministry," Bishop Howard Hubbard, *Together in God's Service*.
9. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 5.
10. "The Future of Ministry," *America*, March 28, 1981, 243.
11. Philip J. Murnion, *New Parish Ministers: Laity and Religious on Parish Staffs* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 1992.).
12. \_\_\_\_\_, *Parishes and Parish Ministers: A Study of Parish Lay Ministry* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 1999).
13. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 56.
14. For information about the Project and the sponsoring groups, cf. <http://emergingmodels.org>.
15. Telephone conversations with the executive directors of their organizations, Robert McCarty (NFCYM), on March 27, 2015, and Msgr. Richard Hilgartner (NPM) on April 23, 2015, indicated that fewer than a dozen persons have sought certification as lay ecclesial ministers. NPM also has a process for roles such as cantor and pianist.

16. For a fuller discussion of this, cf. Zeni Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry: Lay Professionals Serving the Church* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2002), esp. 5–23.

17. *New Parish Ministers*, 13.

18. See the work of Edward Hahnenberg, *Ministries: A Relational Approach* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2003).

19. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, Introduction, first sentence, 5.

20. *Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 23; *Lumen Gentium*, 12, and *Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, 3, and Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, 17.

21. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 54.

22. Cf. *In the Name of the Church: Vocation and Authorization of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, ed. William J. Cahoy (Collegeville: Liturgical Press,

2012). This paper contains papers by ten theologians who gathered at Collegeville in 2011. Their discussion yielded eight "points of convergence," the fifth of which was "Lay ecclesial ministers serve in the name of the Church." Cf. 210–215, esp. 213.

23. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 23.

24. "Authorization of Lay Ecclesial Ministers for Ministry: A Report for the Canon Law Society of America," October 12, 2012. Distributed by CARA at the Collegeville "Celebration of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*," May 20, 2015.

25. The Summit was held June 7–8, 2015; the goals are from the program booklet, p. 1.

26. Cf. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, "Blessings and Rituals in the Authorization Process," 59; see also Catherine Vincie, "Lay Ecclesial Ministry and Ritual," in *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: Pathways Toward the Future*, ed. Zeni Fox (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 85–100, and Graziano Marcheschi, "Rituals Matter: What Diocesan Rites Can Tell Us about the Emerging Theology of Lay Ecclesial Ministry" in *Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, 153–188.

27. *Parishes and Parish Ministry*, 27.

28. *New Parish Ministers*, 56. ♦

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