

LAY LEADERSHIP AND LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTRY IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF OMAHA

February 20, 2007

Most Reverend Elden Francis Curtiss

Welcome and note of appreciation

I am glad to have so many here today, to share with you my reflections and conclusions about Lay Ministry here in the archdiocese. I appreciate you taking the time during these busy pre-lenten days to allow me to speak to you about this important subject. Thank you for coming.

I think all of us are proud to be part of this archdiocese. For us to maintain the vitality of this local church, we have to be men and women of deep faith and prayer, totally committed to the mission of Jesus in our midst, manifest in a visible way through the ministry of priests, and deacons, and lay ministers. All three ministries are important to the health of our church and its future vitality. This afternoon I want to share with you my thoughts and position regarding lay ecclesial ministry in the archdiocese, and the use of our resources to develop this ministry.

Decisions about the future

As you are aware, in November 2005, the bishops of the United States voted overwhelmingly for the document entitled *Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. This is an important and forward-looking document that had my vote and support.

Over the past six years our Office of Lay Ministry Formation has brought several prominent bishops and theologians knowledgeable about lay ecclesial ministry to the archdiocese to address the topic lay ecclesial ministry. All of them were instrumental in the preparation of the document that was voted on by the bishops' conference. I was grateful to each of them, Bishop Kicanas of Tucson;

Bishop Wcela of Rockville Center; Dr. Zeni Fox, advisor to the subcommittee on Lay Ministry; and Dr. Richard Gaillardetz and others. I think their input has helped us understand better lay ecclesial ministry as it is developing throughout this nation. Now it is time for me to speak to the clerical and lay leaders of our archdiocese about the development of lay ministry here in northeastern Nebraska. I would like to address five topics.

1. My gratitude for the dedicated service that has already taken place:

I extend my gratitude to all who have pioneered the development of lay ministry here in the archdiocese.

I want to thank, first of all, the lay ministers present here today for your patience, dedication, and the sacrifices you have made in order to serve the Church in ministry. I remember the phrase used by Bishop Kicanas that we “need to listen in order to guide”. There have been several sociological studies done about the growth and development of lay ministry here in the United States. What we have learned is that there are over 32,000 lay ministers in leadership roles who are working more than 20 hours per week in our parishes. The bishops’ conference has been following and discerning this phenomenon in parish life. I personally have had several occasions when I have been able to listen to our lay ministry leaders about the call they received to serve God’s people, and to listen to ways they have responded to that call. I have been edified by their commitment to the Church, their personal love for Jesus, and their generosity to serve his people.

Let me share with you one example of the kind of generosity that is involved in following the call to lay ministry. I met a middle-aged lay woman who left the corporate world to follow what she believed was God’s call to a role of pastoral ministry in her parish. She told me how satisfied she was and proud of her many years of faithful service, but then she had to face a dilemma with her husband about a decision whether to send their son to a Catholic high school or not. In order to afford his

tuition at the school, she would have to return to the corporate world for the salary she could make. After weeks of prayer and deliberation and discernment, she and her husband decided to rid themselves of one of their two cars. They decided to live with this inconvenience so that she could remain a parish minister, and still be able to afford the Catholic education for their son. This is just one example of the kind of sacrifices that many of our lay ministers are making in order to serve the Church. I am grateful to you for this spirit of sacrifice and service for our people.

2. The importance of formation

I am aware that there are people in this room who are directing religious education programs or are staff members in charge of youth ministry. Have you ever wondered how you ended up in this ministry? Most often your pastor tapped you on the shoulder and invited you into this leadership role. Through a discernment process and prayer, you realized that God was asking something special of you and this insight lead you to accept your pastor's invitation. You knew, of course, that you needed more education and formation, but the question was, "where to receive it?" Stories I have heard from our lay ministers tell me that they had to prepare themselves by taking random theology courses, attending conferences, receiving a certificate in various areas, and networking with colleagues in ministry. Like a "patchwork quilt" you have cut and pieced together a variety of experiences that have helped you survive in ministry. Because you have undertaken the task of being adequately formed for special ministries, your parish and the whole archdiocese has benefited from it. This is the reason that our priests and people need to be supportive of lay ministers who are struggling to receive the proper preparation they need so the mission of the Church can be carried on properly.

Over the past six years we have been moving toward a more holistic understanding and approach to lay ecclesial ministry in the archdiocese. We have been in a process of refining the preparation our lay ministers need in order to collaborate closely with our priests and deacons and

religious. In the U.S. Bishops' document on lay ministry, *Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, the term *formation* is applied to ecclesial ministers to insure they will serve competently and faithfully in public positions of ministerial leadership. Formation builds on the candidate's suitability for public service in the church, the development of personal traits and skills needed for collaboration with others in ministry, and their understanding and support of church teaching.

The bishops state in paragraph 41 of *Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* that: "Lay ecclesial ministers serve publicly in the local church, so they need to accept this role with fidelity and loyalty, and be able to fill it with integrity, fully versed in church teaching, supportive of it, able to defend 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".

The bishops' document called lay ecclesial ministers "co-workers". The bishops recognize their special call and value their contribution, and have entrusted to them an important role in caring for God's people. Formation counts much. Just as Bishop Gerald Kicanas's mantra is "Learn, Learn, Learn, Grow, Grow, Grow", I say to you lay ministers, as I constantly remind our ordained ministers, you need and deserve formation opportunities of the highest standards.

3. Creating a comprehensive formation program for future lay ministry leaders

I realized that our local church needed to have a comprehensive approach to the preparation and formation of future lay ministry leaders. We had to provide academic course work in theology, pastoral applications, and spiritual formation that would allow our lay ministers to have the competence that is and will be needed for effective ministry in our parishes. My question was this – how can our lay ministers acquire the quality of education, formation, and spiritual competence they will need to assume a wide variety of significant roles necessary for church ministry in the 21st century? (cf. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, page 5). The answer to this question would be

an important development in the “patchwork quilt” type-of-formation that many of you described about your previous experiences.

To provide for competency in lay ministry, in 1999 we began the LIMEX Program (Loyola University’s Institute for Ministry, Extension Program). I realize that 3 cohorts have graduated, and cohort #4 is still working the academic program and will graduate in the spring of 2008. I would like those who have attended LIMEX for our archdiocese to please stand and be recognized.

In 2001, the Office of Lay Ministry Formation contacted Creighton University, requesting a partnership in providing a Master’s degree in Ministry for our future lay ministers. I am glad to see that some of the leadership of Creighton University, who made this happen, are present here today. I am grateful to you and your willingness to help us meet the ministerial needs of the archdiocese. Presently we have the first cohort in the Creighton program – there are 21 students – who will be graduating in May of this year. Would the students who are attending Creighton University’s Master of Ministry program please stand and be recognized.

In 2003, the Office of Lay Ministry Formation began offering formation events to the participants in LIMEX and Creighton’s Master’s of Arts in Ministry. I know that over the years, members of my own staff – Fr. Michael Gutsell, Fr. Gregory Baxter, and Fr. Joseph Taphorn – have worked with Fr. Tom Greisen and Marge Koenigsman to plan this formation program. I know, too, that several other pastors have helped them – Fr. Owen Korte, Fr. Damian Zuerlein and Fr. Richard Reiser – along with several lay minister leaders – Susan Naatz (Pastoral Minister at St. Vincent de Paul) and Marcia Potts (Pastoral Associate at St. John Vianney) and Carl Wirth (Youth Minister at Sacred Heart) and Sr. Marie Micheletto. I know too that Fr. Tom and Marge have met regularly for consultation with a dozen or so lay ministry leaders from our rural parishes.

Thanks to all of you for your assistance in building the first steps of a comprehensive formation program for the first lay ecclesial ministers in our local church.

Several of the lay ministry formation events that were organized each year by the Office of Lay Ministry Formation have been open to the priests of the archdiocese and all lay ministry leaders. The topics these past four years have addressed the building blocks of a formation plan for lay ecclesial ministers in the archdiocese. This was the foundation for my presentation today. These past several years I have met with the participants in the present two lay ministry development programs, to share with them my expectations as archbishop and to listen to their questions and concerns and visions about the future of lay ministry in the archdiocese. It has been another venue for us to build communications and to allow me to be able to get to know them personally, and for them to know me. Mutual respect and trust is basic to collaborative ministry, between lay ministers and myself, and between lay ministers and our priests.

While the present programs we have in place have provided us with a first step in guiding and developing the beginning of formation for lay ecclesial ministry in the archdiocese, we still have much work ahead of us to provide academic and pastoral formation programs that will meet the needs of all who seek to be lay ecclesial ministers. We have to explore all the avenues available to us that will provide solid formation for our people, especially those that cultivate the dispositions that *Co-workers in the Vineyard* highlights as essential, some of which are the following:

- Ministering joyfully and faithfully within the hierarchical communion of the Church;
- Serving from the motive of love of God and His people;
- A deep commitment to personal prayer and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Penance;
- A zeal for living an exemplary Catholic-Christian life;
- A willingness to live and teach as the magisterium teaches, knowing and adhering to Church doctrine;
- Mature emotional balance and freedom from any personal agenda;

- Commitment to intellectual growth and disciplined study;
- Possessing requisite skills for good communication, conflict resolution, and other required professional competencies.

Consequently, it will be necessary for our Office of Lay Ministry Formation to provide both preparatory and on-going formation opportunities for lay ecclesial ministers that will help them implement the directives contained in *Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, and help us measure their suitability for lay ecclesial ministry in the archdiocese.

4. A theology of ministry that is helpful in promoting collaboration among priests, deacons and lay ministers

The starting point for understanding lay ministry, as it is outlined in the document of *Co-workers in the Vineyard* is an ecclesiology that finds as its source and purpose the life and activity of the Triune God, the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the ecclesiology of *communio*, the communion of those who share in the life of God. There is One God in three persons, distinct according to their relationships to each other, one in nature. It is the same oneness that all of us who are baptized into Christ have in common, despite our distinctive personalities and calls. We, though many, are one in Christ, one in his mission of announcing the reign of God and transforming the world into the light of Christ. From this foundation of *communio* we have an understanding of the Church that looks upon different gifts and functions, not as adversarial, but as enriching and complementary to the mission of the Church (see page 20 *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*). Within this broad understanding of ministry, based on our communion together, distinctions in ministry are necessary and good. They illuminate the nature of the Church as an organic and ordered communion made up of diverse parts.

It is our *communio* together that makes possible and necessary the collaboration between ordained and lay ministers. From *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (pages 20 – 21) we read, “This primary distinction lies between the ministry of the lay faithful and the ministry of the ordained, which is a special apostolic calling. Both are rooted in the sacramental initiation, but the pastoral ministry of the ordained is empowered in a unique and essential way by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. This recognition of the unique role of the ordained is not a distinction based on merit or rank; rather, it is a distinction based on the sacramental character given by the Holy Spirit that configures the recipient to Christ the Head and on the particular relationship of service that Holy Orders brings about between ecclesial ministry and the community. The ordained ministry is uniquely constitutive of the Church in a given place. All other ministries function in relation to it”.

This means that ordained ministers can never be substituted by any lay ministers since the ordained ministry is at the very heart of the pastoral ministry of the Church. All other ministries are of assistance to the pastoral ministry of the ordained priest. The lay ecclesial minister places his or her gifts at the service of assisting the pastor as he coordinates the gifts and talents of all the faithful to see that the pastoral needs of the parish are met in an adequate and orderly manner.

It takes much patience and good will to balance and enrich the ministries that are present in every parish. It is time consuming for a pastor and those who are ministering with him to build the kind of relationships and collaborative spirit that is required for unity in a parish. But this is surely the mind of Jesus for his Church that both ordained and lay ministry should be complementary to each other and enriched by each other for the building up of the Body of Christ.

This need, this reality, highlights the importance of collaboration. For the sake of Christ’s mission, for the health and vibrancy of our parish communities, all of us need to grow in the spirituality of collaboration that is required for communion, so that together we are able to develop all the gifts and skills that are required today to minister well to our people.

As I speak to you today – to pastors and associates and deacons and lay leaders – I call each of you to be committed to collaboration in carrying out the pastoral ministry of the Church. A spirit of competition and a lack of appreciation for ordained ministry or a lack of appreciation for lay ministry harms all of us and diminishes Christ’s mission in the world today.

As St. Paul wrote centuries ago to the Philippians, each of us must see that our “attitude is that of Christ” (Phil 2.5). Paul made the point that Christ’s attitude was one of “emptying himself” and “taking on the form of a slave”. He came among us to serve and not be served. As we gaze upon the crucified Christ, we believe that we gain a glimpse into the very nature of God. This is where we find the inspiration for collaborative ministry.

I encourage you to read and study the theology of ministry that is contained in *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. I believe that it offers a rich reservoir of reflection and guidance for our local church. This document by the U.S. bishops highlights the importance of lay ecclesial ministry in the life of the Church, even in its developmental stages. There remains a need in the future for continued development, evaluation, and refinement of this formal lay ministry.

5. The next steps in fostering communion among the ordained and lay ecclesial ministers in the archdiocese.

In keeping with the theology of *communio* and the importance of collaboration between all the ministers in the archdiocese, it is my responsibility as archbishop to be at the center of communion in the local church and to be the pontifex, the bridge-builder, between priests and deacons and lay faithful in the archdiocese. As we bishops stated in *Co-Workers in the Vineyard the Lord* (pages 21 – 22), “The bishop is to create structures and venues for fostering communion with priests, deacons and religious, those in lay ecclesial ministry, and people of the diocese”.

This is the reason that I established, almost six year ago, an Office of Lay Ministry Formation in the archdiocese, in order to prepare people for different layers of ministry within the archdiocese, from the many hundreds of volunteers working in our parishes and institutions to lay ministers with professional Maser's degree credentials. When the office was created, I charged it with several duties, one of which was to help me in my responsibility of "guiding and development lay ecclesial ministry in our archdiocese" (see *Co-Workers* page 5).

The bishops' document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard* gives me guidance regarding the importance of clarifying what lay ecclesial ministry means for the local church. It lists four characteristics:

1. Preparation and formation appropriate to the level of responsibilities that are assigned to ecclesial lay ministers;
2. Close mutual collaboration with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests and deacons;
3. Authorization of the bishop to serve publicly in the local church;
4. Acknowledge leadership needed for a particular area of ministry in a parish or institution.

It is in regard to authorization and leadership in a particular ministry that requires a decision from me and direction for the future. First of all, I need to identify "those roles deemed essential to collaborating in the pastoral care of the people" that would be understood as lay ecclesial ministry here in the archdiocese to which I would give ecclesial recognition. In *Co-Workers* the bishops have said that "The diocese must first identify those roles that, in the judgment of the diocesan bishop, are so essential to collaborating in the pastoral care of the people that diocesan policies are needed to ensure that those who are given these roles have the appropriate education, formation, experience, and ecclesial recognition to meet the needs of the community. This is true regardless of whether the lay ecclesial ministers are a paid staff member or a volunteer. The nature of ministerial responsibilities is

what determines the importance of authorization, not whether the lay ecclesial minister is salaried” (*Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* page 56). Therefore, after consulting with the priests and lay ministers of the archdiocese, I hereby identify the following roles for authorization as lay ecclesial ministers:

- a) Pastoral Assistants*
- b) Catholic School Principals
- c) Directors of Religious Education (DRE’s)
- d) Directors of Youth Ministry
- e) Directors of Adult Faith Formation
- f) Campus Ministers
- g) Directors of Liturgy
- h) Directors of Liturgical Music, and
- i) Directors and Program Coordinators within archdiocesan agencies

As pastoral leader of this archdiocese, I understand that the ministries listed above, these leadership roles within our church, are important to the pastoral care of our people and require “close mutual collaboration with me, and with the priests and deacons of the archdiocese and that they require proper preparation and formation (cf. *Co-Workers* page 10).

Second, I am planning to begin steps of authorizing future lay ministers as “lay ecclesial ministers” according to the directives of the U.S. bishops in *Co-Workers*:

“While all members of the lay Christian faithful work to further the Church’s mission, some are entrusted with certain offices and roles connected to the ministry of the ordained pastors. The lay women and men who are given these responsibilities are not only distinguished by particular gifts and

a willingness to serve the Church – these qualities could apply to all the laity – but are also responding to a call to work in greater collaboration with ordained ministers. They are authorized by ecclesial authorities to carry out certain ministerial responsibilities in public service of the local church.”

“Authorization is the process by which properly prepared lay men and women are given responsibilities for ecclesial ministry by competent Church authority. This process includes the following elements: acknowledgement of the competence of an individual for a specific ministerial role (often called “certification”); appointment of an individual to a specific position (in some dioceses called “commissioning”), along with a delineation of the obligations, responsibilities, and authority of that position (and length of term, if specified); and finally an announcement of the appointment to the community that will be served by the lay ecclesial minister” (*Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* page 54).

* A definition of pastoral assistant is: “the pastoral assistant is a professional minister who supports the pastor in the overall care of the parish. He/she is a member of the parish staff, usually full-time, and is accountable to the pastor. This ministry is comprehensive, relating to all aspects of parish life with designated responsibilities, i.e., liturgy faith formation and development, administration, pastoral care and social outreach. The designated responsibilities of the pastoral assistant are dependent upon the needs of the parish, and the gifts of the other members of the parish staff”

I have been given a proposal about the way we might initiate these policies in our archdiocese. The proposal has already been discussed at the Priests' Council, and Fr. Tom Greisen and Marge Koenigsman are in the process of going to deaneries to discuss it with all our priests. The proposal states:

- a) Those to be authorized:
 - 1. The first ones to be authorized as lay ecclesial ministers in the archdiocese will be the graduates from the LIMEX and the Creighton Master's program who have participated in the archdiocesan spiritual formation program.
 - 2. When these graduates have been hired in one of the ministerial roles as outlined above, then they are free to seek authorization from me.
- b) The authorization process:
 - 1. We are in the process of identifying certification requirements.
 - 2. Also, we are looking at the ritual used in the Archdiocese of Chicago that recognizes the call to ecclesial ministry. I am seriously considering using this process of authorization for our archdiocese.

We are still in the process of shaping this proposal for our archdiocese. I am envisioning authorization for the first time in the Spring of 2008, if all the pieces are in place.

I encourage Fr. Tom and Marge to continue meeting with priests in the deaneries about this proposal, and I also encourage them to organize evenings to share the proposal with lay ministry leaders who are here today and those unable to be here who are interested in this process and would like to share their ideas with us.

Thirdly, I realize that we need to examine the matter of authorization beyond the small, focused population of the present students in LIMEX and Creighton's MAM program. We also need to resolve

the question about how we are going to grandfather those who have already completed their education and formation and have a rich experience in ministry into a process of diocesan authorization. The Office of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation has been working with a few priests and lay leaders regarding this proposal. I await the results of their deliberations.

In Conclusion

I want to thank Fr. Tom Greisen and Marge Koenigsman for the commitment they made to the development of ecclesial lay ministry in the archdiocese. Fr. Tom Greisen will be taking another role in the archdiocese this coming June but will continue as a consultant for the Office of Lay Ecclesial Lay Ministry. I am hoping that Marge Koenigsman will continue as Director of the Office under the leadership of Fr. Matt Gutowski who has the overall responsibility of Religious Formation in the archdiocese. Finally, I would like to repeat a statement that I have made many times, that for the pastoral ministry of the Church to be strong in this archdiocese we need a three-pronged approach:

- We need to promote vocations to priesthood for the archdiocese consistently, positively and enthusiastically.
- We need to foster vocations to the diaconate, and finally
- We need to develop appropriate structures to help those called to lay ministry, specifically to lay ecclesial ministry, so that we have adequate numbers of trained and committed lay ministers in the future.

The reason I have met with you today and have presented this paper to you is to clarify and strengthen the third of these important ministries in our archdiocese, lay ecclesial ministry, its development and formation and future in our local church. A strong priestly presence, a strong diaconate presence and a strong ecclesial lay ministry presence in our archdiocese will guarantee the

future of vibrant ministry in northeast Nebraska in the years ahead. If we work at this task collaboratively, I am convinced that we will have a stronger, healthier and holier church in the future.

Thank you for being present and for listening to me today.