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Who Are These People Called "Lay Ecclesial Ministers"? **By Sister Amy Hoey, RSM**

At their November 2005 meeting, the U.S. bishops approved a statement titled "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry."

It was 25 years ago that the U.S. bishops first identified a relatively new phenomenon in the church in the United States. In a document titled "Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity," they said:

"Ecclesial ministers, i.e. laypersons who have prepared for professional ministry in the church, represent a new development. ... We welcome this as a gift to the church."

In the intervening 25 years, that gift has grown and developed. In 1990, for example, a study by the National Pastoral Life Center indicated there were 21,569 lay parish ministers; by 2005 that number had increased to 30,632.

"Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord" is intended to ensure 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."

Lay ecclesial ministry is 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, and preparation and formation appropriate to the level of assigned responsibilities."

The term can be applied to a variety of specific roles such as those of pastoral associates or directors of religious education, youth ministry, liturgy, pastoral music and campus ministry. The term also can apply to school principals and hospital or prison ministers, in which today's Catholics routinely expect to meet a layperson.

"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," the document states.

"Co-Workers" begins with the theological basis for lay ecclesial ministry, noting that just as the one true God is "fundamentally relational," so "ministry is diverse and at the same time profoundly relational." The text emphasizes that "the ordained ministry is uniquely constitutive of the church in a given place and that all other ministries function in relation to it," and that most of the laity work for the world's transformation through their lives in the secular sphere.

Before addressing the formation of lay ecclesial ministers, "Co-Workers" has a brief chapter on "Pathways to Lay Ecclesial Ministry," commenting on an individual's desire for such ministry (which can develop at any point in life), the discernment of a call to lay ecclesial ministry and the determination of one's suitability.

The church has a centuries-old tradition of establishing standards for the preparation of priests and deacons. "Co-Workers" gives some guidelines for the preparation of lay ecclesial ministers. It uses the same categories of formation that are used for priests and deacons: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation.

Because lay ecclesial ministers serve the church precisely as laity, the document notes that their formation should “recognize the different life circumstances of those who are married, single or nonordained members of a religious community” and that “their particular life commitments significantly shape and form them as persons and influence them as ministers.”

The document notes that there is no single answer to what level of preparation and formation should be expected, suggesting that lay ecclesial ministers, their supervisors and diocesan bishops are best positioned to discern local needs and to set standards accordingly, seeking always to provide what best will serve a given pastoral setting. It adds that “usually a master’s degree or at least a bachelor’s degree in an appropriate field is preferable.”

Where do prospective lay ecclesial ministers receive such formation? The 2005 Catholic Ministry Formation Directory published by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate lists 289 programs in 143 dioceses and 46 states. These programs are sponsored by dioceses, Catholic colleges and universities, seminaries and schools of theology. Some are co-sponsored by dioceses and academic institutions; many are offered at multiple sites; some are offered online.

Depending on where they are based, programs offer certificates, associate, baccalaureate and graduate degrees. Wherever located, most programs offer some opportunities for specialization, for example in religious education, youth ministry, pastoral counseling, etc.

The document's chapter on formation is followed by a chapter on the authorization process, which includes the recommendation that “prayer and ritual can be significant for the lay ecclesial minister and for the community, highlighting the new relationships that the person is beginning in the life of the community.”

"Co-Workers" concludes with a chapter on the ministerial workplace, noting that “lay ecclesial ministers -- and indeed all church employees and volunteers — function in a workplace that shares both the characteristics of a faith community of co-workers as described by St. Paul and the characteristics of a modern organization.”

The document's concluding paragraph begins: “We are blessed indeed to have such gifted and generous co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord to which we have all been called.”

(Sister Amy Hoey, RSM served as Project Coordinator for Lay Ministry at the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth.)