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## **The Formation of Lay Ecclesial Ministers**

**By H. Richard McCord**

If your parish has a lay minister directing the religious education program or a staff member in charge of youth ministry, have you ever wondered how he or she got into professional church work?

Priests are ordained after a seminary education. Deacons and women religious follow a prescribed path of preparation. But what preparation process is necessary for lay ministers who collaborate closely with priests, deacons and religious?

The process is called "formation"; it includes human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions. Much more inclusive than education or training, formation emphasizes the whole person's development in a systematic way under the care of skilled directors and mentors.

In their 2005 document titled "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord," the U.S. bishops apply the term "formation" to lay ecclesial ministers to ensure that they will serve competently and faithfully in public positions of ministerial leadership. Church law says laypersons devoting themselves permanently or temporarily to some special service of the church must acquire the "formation which is required to fulfill their function properly" (Canon 231).

Formation focuses on the candidate's suitability for public service in the church, the development of personal traits and skills for collaboration with ordained ministers, and an understanding and appreciation of church teaching.

Good will is necessary, but not enough.

The bishops write: "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 it 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's not."

Laypersons of all ages entering ministry formation programs come with backgrounds that include many formative experiences: experiences of marriage, parenting and single or religious community life; experiences of God and church; the knowledge they already have acquired about church teaching and the service -- and leadership -- they already have given.

Formation programs build on these experiences and help the prospective lay ecclesial ministers deepen and extend them.

Before their recent commissioning as lay ecclesial ministers for the Diocese of Trenton, the candidates were asked what formation had meant to them.

One said: "I have spent my life working in and for the church. ... Now I will be able to continue to serve God with the blessing of our bishop. It is a true joy."

Another wrote of relationships made during the formation program: "I have been truly blessed to have walked this journey with so many remarkable women and men strongly committed to their faith."

A third looked to the future: "The three years of theological and spiritual formation make me confident that I can serve the diocese with the utmost compassion and dignity."

Formation doesn't end with appointment to a position. The needs of the community change, as do the minister's needs. So gaining new theological perspectives is always important. Ongoing formation, according to "Co-Workers," is "not a luxury ..., but a permanent necessity."

The bishops encourage parishes and dioceses "to make regular provision for time away and for some ... funding assistance for formation whenever possible." They suggest several ways ongoing formation may occur and comment that "experiences of ongoing formation that include all ministers (laity, religious, deacons and priests) can help build the relationships that are key to collaboration in ministry."

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