Lay Ecclesial Ministry in the Parish
A New Stage of Development

*Brid Long*

There are some 30,000 salaried lay ministers working in U.S. parishes and many more volunteers. The U.S. bishops have issued a new document, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, to address this reality. The author explores the theology of the document, its understanding of call and formation of lay ecclesial ministers, and implementation policies.

In a recent letter accompanying a pastoral statement, the archbishop of Los Angeles wrote, “At this time we are being called to discern new modes of parish leadership and a more participatory exercise of ministry in which lay, religious and ordained together seek to build up the Body of Christ through the charism of leadership.” This charism is to be exercised, in particular, by parish life directors who “are responsible for the welfare of the parish in the absence of a resident priest pastor.” At the conclusion of the letter, the archbishop states: “I pledge my commitment and my support for the training and formation of our parish life directors as well as for the successful implementation of this form of leadership so that the pastoral needs of the people of this archdiocese can be met by competent ministers of Christ and the church” (Mahony 2005, 299). Such a statement is but one indication of the growing acceptance and recognition of the charism of leadership exercised by lay ecclesial ministers in parishes across the United States.

*Brid Long, S.S.L., former chair of the Pastoral Studies Department at Washington Theological Union, is currently Regional Leader of the Sisters of St. Louis in the United States.*
At its November 2005 meeting, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) considered and approved an important document long in the making: *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. The number of salaried lay ecclesial ministers serving in parishes in the United States reached 30,632 in 2005 (DeLambo 2005), and there are many more volunteer leaders, particularly in poorer communities. This article will examine the theological foundations of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, then explore some pastoral implications for discernment of call, formation for ministry, authorization for ministry, and policies for the implementation of this form of leadership in the parish.

**Theological Foundations**

*Lay ecclesial ministry* has become the accepted term for the ministry of leadership entrusted to lay men and women in parishes, schools, and diocesan agencies. Such ministry requires significant preparation, formation, and professional skill as well as the authorization of the bishop or pastor to act in the name of the local church. At the parish level, where most lay ecclesial ministers serve, the ministry requires close mutual collaboration in the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons; hence, the apt title of the document, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. Vowed religious make a public commitment to follow Christ chaste, poor, and obedient, sharing the particular way of life and mission of their community and living according to a specific rule or constitutions. When they respond to a further call to collaborate in pastoral leadership with bishops, priests, and deacons, they, too, may be said to serve as lay ecclesial ministers.

The call to lay ecclesial ministry is rooted first in the common baptismal call of all Christians to holiness of life, to service in building up the Body of Christ, and to participation in the transformation of the world, according to the gifts bestowed upon each one. All are called to be heralds of the reign of God in their own time and place by promoting the message and mission of Jesus, a message of love and forgiveness. They are called to promote the dignity of the human person, putting the poor at the center of the human community, building relationships and solidarity among people, and caring for all creation.

Within that larger context, lay ecclesial ministers are called to service within the church, in close mutual collaboration with bishops, priests, and deacons. Their service of leadership requires both adequate preparation and some form of authorization. In a parish setting, the generic term *lay ecclesial ministry* covers such leadership roles as pastoral associate, parish catechetical leader, youth ministry leader, director of liturgy, and director of pastoral music.

Another emerging role is that of participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish as parish life director or lay pastoral coordinator. The exact title...
used varies from diocese to diocese, and the Code of Canon Law (CIC) speaks of the role in terms of the priest rather than the lay ecclesial minister:

If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care. (Can. 517 §2)

The document is careful to describe lay ecclesial ministry as a function in the church, belonging specifically to the lay vocation and in no way substituting for ordained ministry. It is a response to a pastoral need, though also a very valid expression and recognition of the charism of leadership given by the Spirit.

Lay ecclesial ministry has its source in the communion of the church, rooted in the loving communion of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is at the service of the mission of Christ, drawing all creation into a sharing in God's life, calling all into the transforming love of Christ, sharing the Good News of the Gospel in the midst of human joy and suffering, and proclaiming, as Jesus did, the reign of God present among us and still to come.

All Christians by their very baptism are called to share in the threefold mission of Christ as priest, prophet, and servant king. According to their gifts and calling, they participate in Christ's mission of celebrating, proclaiming, and serving the reign of God. Gifts or charisms are given freely through the outpouring of the Spirit to “the faithful of every rank” making them “fit and ready (aptos et promptos) to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church” (Lumen Gentium 12). The many and varied gifts given are manifestations of the Spirit at work bringing all into communion and enabling all to realize their own distinct call within a circle of ministry in an “ordered, relational, ministerial community” (USCCB 2005, 21).

Pastoral Implications: Discernment and Formation

The desire to participate in ministry is nurtured in a variety of ways in families, parishes, schools, and service programs. Because much of lay ecclesial ministry is parish-based, future ministers are already involved as volunteers in parishes, as participants and leaders in small faith communities, or in associations of the faithful. At the same time, they may be raising a family, earning a living, and pursuing a career. The call to further preparation for and engagement in ministry evolves naturally in such a context, especially if pastors are “careful to discover the charisms and strengths of the faithful who might be leaders in the
community, listening to them and through dialogue encouraging their participation and co-responsibility” (John Paul II 1999, no. 39).

Lay ecclesial ministers typically speak of experiencing a call or vocation to ministry similar to the call experienced by others to priesthood or the religious life. Often, pastors, other ministers—and even members of the community—encourage them to enter a process of discernment and to begin a period of formal preparation that will lead to readiness and qualification for a specific ministry of leadership.

The process of discernment calls for prayer, dialogue, and evaluation. Experienced ministers can be valuable mentors and resources, providing a supportive environment for new ministers to practice fidelity to a life of prayer, to gain experience in ministry, to develop realistic expectations of ministry, and to understand the workings of parish life in order to make an informed commitment to ministry. Those engaged in discerning a call to lay ecclesial ministry and suitability for ministry may find the national certification standards approved by the USCCB Commission on Certification and Accreditation in 2003 very helpful in identifying qualities for ministry and setting goals for formation. These standards have been developed, in particular, for lay ecclesial ministers serving as parish catechetical leaders, youth ministry leaders, pastoral associates, and parish life coordinators.

Like ordained ministry, lay ecclesial ministry requires human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral readiness. There are well-developed programs that attend to all four dimensions in several colleges, universities, seminaries, and schools of theology. Some bishops supplement such programs with a diocesan formation program that helps the lay ecclesial minister integrate more fully into the life of the diocese and provides an opportunity for the bishop and pastors to get to know their future collaborators in leadership. In our day, the discernment process also includes the use of background checks and screening instruments. To the extent possible, future ministers must be helped to determine their suitability for ministry before they embark upon a lengthy and often costly program of preparation.

By developing a habit of prayerful discernment together, the entire parish community alongside the minister becomes attuned to the work of the Spirit bringing about the reign of God in its midst, evoking a desire to serve the needs of the community and calling forth new and gifted leaders for every age. Through ongoing discernment, lay ecclesial ministers discover the personal implications of
the call to serve as authorized representatives of the local church. However, they do not have to respond to these implications alone when they take their place in the midst of a supportive and praying community.

**Formation for Ministry**

The question of formation for lay ecclesial ministry poses many challenges to laypeople themselves, to parishes and dioceses not yet accustomed to providing for such formation, to mission and rural churches whose resources for education are slim, and to Hispanic/Latino, African American, and Asian American communities with specific needs and insufficient opportunities for formation beyond the confines of their local community. Yet, lay ministers are “obliged to acquire the appropriate formation which is required to fulfill their function properly” (CIC, Can. 231). Rather than place the entire burden on the prospective minister, schools of theology, seminaries, diocesan bishops, and pastors must make serious efforts to partner with one another in the provision of formation opportunities for lay ecclesial ministers just as they are accustomed to doing for candidates for priesthood and diaconate. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (34–49) provides an excellent framework for the development of formation programs covering the same four areas of formation already developed for priests and deacons: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral.

**Human formation** is based in family life experience and culture and seeks to ensure a “healthy and well-balanced personality, for the sake of both personal growth and ministerial service” (USCCB 2005, 36). Some recognizable elements that mark human formation are a growing understanding of self and others; adequate physical, sexual, and psychological health; appreciation and fostering of one’s gifts and charisms for ministry; and a growing readiness to follow Christ in the unconditional love of his total self-giving. Human formation happens most naturally in the context of the lay ecclesial minister’s family-life experiences in welcoming personal joys and sorrows; in interaction with neighbors and the parish community; and in efforts to respond with others to human suffering, injustices, and disasters as they present themselves. The ability to be self-reflective—to understand the human journey on the level of faith and to allow one’s heart to be opened to the poor and suffering—is often sustained through participation in a small faith community, an intentional support group in which the lay ecclesial minister can reflect, pray, and share with other members of the parish community. The fruit of such reflection can then be offered in a very meaningful and transformative way in the Sunday Eucharist where the entire community gathers. Thus, the minister grows in solidarity with the community and does not stand aloof.

**Spiritual formation** is closely linked to human formation and deepens as the minister gradually puts God at the center of life and over and over again enters
into the reality of the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. Preparation for parish ministry offers opportunities for reading, studying, and praying with Scripture; for developing a rich liturgical and sacramental spirituality; for marking the rhythm of the day with the Liturgy of the Hours; for accompanying others in key moments of joy and sorrow, helping them to recognize the movement of God at work in their lives.

Often, lay ministers are nourished by association with one or other of the new communities and movements or through discovery of one of the rich spiritual traditions of the church like the Franciscan, Carmelite, Ignatian, or Benedictine. Such spiritual affinity often leads to communities where the new minister finds a spiritual home and may even receive financial support during preparation for lay ecclesial ministry. An open, ecumenical heart; readiness to dialogue, pray, work in service of those in need; and the promotion of justice with people of other faith traditions are other key elements in the spiritual formation for ministry today (USCCB 2005, 41).

**Intellectual formation** is in some ways the most challenging piece of preparation for lay ecclesial ministry since lay leaders come from a variety of educational backgrounds and are not able to access easily the same opportunities provided to candidates preparing for ordination to priesthood. As the leadership positions available to lay ecclesial ministers increase, “as much as possible, the range, depth, discipline, and vigor of Catholic theology, past and present, as understood in historical and cultural context, should be made accessible to those in formation, consistent with their capacity and ways of learning” (USCCB 2005, 44).

Preparing for “common witness to Christ in the world” with people of other Christian traditions, removing the “obstacles to the full, visible unity of the Church for which Christ prayed,” and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue that are “inherent to evangelization” must be an integral part of the intellectual formation of lay ecclesial ministers. While being clearly rooted in their own tradition, the ministry of leadership requires that they also convey understanding and appreciation of other religions and that they lead their community in informed dialogue, working toward mutual respect, collaboration, and peace (USCCB 2005, 44–45).

**Pastoral formation** may vary greatly according to the role the lay ecclesial minister will have. It includes not just knowledge and skills but also attitudes to
be developed over time with experience in ministry and perhaps with the aid of a mentor. Because the lay ecclesial minister will always have a leadership role of some importance, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (47–49) presents a comprehensive guide of fifteen elements of pastoral formation. These must be developed according to the ministry to be exercised and the charisms of the person and may form part of a program of ongoing formation as lay ecclesial ministers discover the real needs of their particular community.

Until recently, the appointment of lay ecclesial ministers as parish life directors was common only in rural and mission areas. Now, with the increasing decline in the number of priests available to pastor parishes, the lay ecclesial ministers are readily recognized in urban settings and large metropolitan dioceses from Los Angeles to Baltimore. Thus, lay leaders must be adequately prepared to gather and lead the community in prayer for many occasions, including Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest. They must develop skills for preaching and breaking open the Scriptures in the assembly.

Much of pastoral preparation is linked to a specific ministry like youth ministry, catechesis, pastoral care of the sick and dying, discernment, and spiritual direction. In addition to the particular skills needed for a ministry, perhaps one of the greatest challenges to all engaged in ministry is to relate effectively with one another and with the community and to learn and use true skills of collaboration. *Co-Workers* issues a strong call to “both lay and ordained ministers to learn the skills of collaboration, to value the benefits it brings to Church life and ministry, and to commit themselves to practice it in their places of ministry” (USCCB 2005, 48).

**Authorization for Ministry**

In addition to certification for ministry, the growing recognition of the charism of leadership given to lay ecclesial ministers is strengthened when there is some form of authorization to engage in ministry and carry out responsibilities on behalf of the local church. In dioceses where it is given, authorization includes three steps or key 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. (USCCB 2005, 54)

As the role of lay ecclesial ministers becomes clearer and as communities recognize the charism of leadership bestowed on laypeople in new ways by the Spirit,
the role of the bishop entrusted with the pastoral care of the diocese is taking on new meaning. Many bishops are now just as attentive to the preparation of lay ecclesial ministers as they are to the preparation of priests and deacons. Authorization by the bishop or entrusted by him to the pastor helps the community know that the lay ecclesial minister has the trust and support of the bishop and has a recognized share in the leadership of the community. Members of the community can often participate in the preparation of a suitable prayer service or liturgy in which the new appointment is ritualized, and the lay ecclesial minister is entrusted with a particular ministerial responsibility for a certain length of time within the community. The participation of a spouse or family members offers another level of support for the newly appointed minister.

**Policies for Implementation**

The concerns of lay ecclesial ministers who make their living in the church are addressed in the concluding section of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. While recognizing that many parishes do not have a comprehensive human resource system in place, the document stresses the importance of policies and the possible role of the diocese or even a cluster of dioceses in establishing them. It offers a commentary on six important human resource areas significant for the ongoing development of lay ecclesial ministry: (1) recruitment and selection; (2) orientation and support for new lay ecclesial ministers; (3) evaluation and feedback; (4) compensation; (5) transitions and terminations; (6) grievance procedures.

Ministry in the Catholic Church calls for collaboration between lay and ordained because both are both incorporated into the life of Christ at baptism and called to mutual responsibility in the church (Wood 2003, ix). The approval and publication of this new document, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, is a significant step forward in bringing collaboration to a new level. It also provides a much-needed resource for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry, indicating further work to be done especially on the theology of vocation. In support of that development, the document recognizes lay leaders in a very positive way as “gifted and generous co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord” (USCCB 2005, 67).

**References**


