

Milestones on the Way to “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord”

The following decisions, actions, and events were undertaken by the U.S. Catholic Bishops. In direct and indirect ways they were part of a long process that produced the USCCB document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*.

1977

A standing Committee on the Laity and its secretariat are established as an entity of the Bishops' Conference. Lay ministry is an element of its mandate.

1980

The Bishops' Conference issues its first statement on the Laity, *Called and Gifted*, in which the name “ecclesial ministers” is given to lay persons “who have prepared for professional ministry in the church”. The bishops welcome this development as a “gift to the church”.

1985

The Secretariat for the Laity conducts the first national research on lay ministry formation programs and finds that 10,000 persons are enrolled. In subsequent years this research is conducted regularly by CARA and becomes more refined and accurate.

1990

The U.S. Bishops commission the first national research about lay ministers on parish staffs finding that 20,000 are employed at least part-time. This research is published and replicated in 1997 and 2005 showing continued growth and development. CARA continues research on the topic and related issues to the present day.

1995

The Bishops' Conference issues a second statement on laity, *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*, describing “ecclesial lay ministers” more extensively. The bishops pledge expanded dialogue and study of this reality as essential to the “new evangelization”.

1995—1996

The bishops establish a Subcommittee on Lay Ministry. The USCCB receives a Lilly Endowment grant to conduct national consultations involving bishops, theologians, pastoral experts, and lay ministers that will recommend policies and practices to strengthen lay ministry.

1996—1999

The funded project includes a symposium of bishops and theologians (published by the USCCB as *Together in God's Service*), a conference involving bishops from Latin America, Canada, and the U.S., and workshops of bishops, priests, and deacons in five geographic regions to identify key issues in the theory and practice of lay ministry.

1999

The Subcommittee on Lay Ministry issues a national report as a result of the funded project entitled *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions* to summarize its findings and to spark discussion. Additional national consultations are conducted.

2001

The USCCB receives a second Lilly Endowment grant to research and produce a more comprehensive and definitive document on lay ecclesial ministry. The Committee on the Laity receives Conference permission to proceed with the development of a document. The Subcommittee on Lay Ministry undertakes this project.

2002—2005

The Subcommittee continues its study, dialogue, and consultation with bishops, theologians, canonists, educators, pastoral experts, leaders of cultural groups, representatives of national organizations, and lay ministers. Seven drafts are produced, critiqued, and revised.

2005

At its plenary meeting in November 2005 the USCCB approves, by more than the required two-thirds majority, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. Publication follows in English and Spanish.

What the bishops say about “Co-Workers” – in their own words:

What is it?

“*Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* is a resource for diocesan bishops and for all others who are responsible for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States. It expresses at this point in history what we bishops have learned from the experience of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States. It suggests concepts, goals, strategies, resources, and ideas to consider. It invites local adaptation, application, and implementation to achieve consistency where possible and to encourage diversity where appropriate. It calls Church leaders, ordained and lay, to become more intentional and effective in ordering and integrating lay ecclesial ministers within the ministerial life and structures of our dioceses.”

Why did we write it?

“We intend *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* to be a common frame of reference for ensuring 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.”

What do we hope for it?

Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord expresses our strong desire for the fruitful collaboration of ordained and lay ministers who, in distinct but complementary ways, continue in the Church the saving mission of Christ for the world, his vineyard.”

Source: Introduction to *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, pp. 5-6

Prepared for a presentation on the origins and background of lay ecclesial ministry and “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” given by Rick McCord. Former Executive Director of the USCCB Secretariat for Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth – USCCB Lay Ecclesial Ministry Summit, June 7, 2015

Four Choices Which Shaped “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” and Which Can Continue to Guide the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry

To adopt an inductive methodology which begins with observed realities and honors the experience of the Catholic Church in the U.S. and of those involved in ordained and lay ecclesial ministry

To focus on the particular group of lay ministers who have been entrusted with roles and responsibilities of pastoral leadership

To develop a generic term (lay ecclesial minister) that would encompass many specific titles already in use for lay ministers who have pastoral leadership roles

To speak about ordained and lay ecclesial ministers in relationship and in the context of a theology of Church as an ordered communion for mission

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