

Brid Long, S.S.L.

The Evolving Role of Lay Ecclesial Ministers in Shaping the Parish of the Future

The U.S. Church will celebrate Jubilee Day for Lay Ministers on November 26, 2000. The purpose of the day is to honor and celebrate the tens of thousands of lay ministers who serve the Church in a variety of ways and to invite all of us to reflect on the gifts these ministers bring to the fulfillment of the Church's mission. The theme for the day, "Together in God's Service," reflects the fact that ministry is a work of collaboration in building up the body of Christ. The day chosen for the celebration is not without significance. It is the Solemnity of Christ the King, the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend, and it falls during the Jubilee Year World Congress of Catholic Laity, which will take place in Rome, November 24–30. This is a time to recognize the enormous contribution that lay ministers are making to ecclesial life in dioceses and parishes, as well as in health, education, and welfare institutions and services across the country.

Nowhere has the emergence of lay ministry and lay leadership been more dramatic or more evident than in parishes. In addition to the leadership exercised by active parishioners on a volunteer basis, there are now almost thirty thousand lay parish ministers employed for at least twenty hours per week. Prompted by ever increasing parish needs, a growing awareness of their own identity as baptized followers of Jesus Christ, and the declining number of priests, more and more lay persons are assuming ecclesial responsibilities and giving shape to parish life and ministry.

This article will examine the evolving role of lay ecclesial ministers in shaping the parish of the future. It will focus, in particular, on (1) the identity and role of these ministers within the parish setting, (2) the Church's response to the need for understanding and stabilization of lay ecclesial ministry in the parish, and (3) some questions which must be addressed as lay and ordained ministers collaborate in the service of God's people through parish leadership.

IDENTITY AND ROLE OF LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS

Since the Second Vatican Council, there has been an explosion of new ministries in the Church. The gifts of the Spirit are being poured out in

unprecedented and unforeseen ways and thousands of lay Christians are choosing new paths other than vows and orders to enter the ministry. As a result, many parishes today are served by a pastor, one or more lay pastoral associates, a permanent deacon, and a large staff of lay people in special ministries. While many lay ministers volunteer their service, more and more are paid on a part-time or full-time basis.

Recent studies show that the nature of parish ministry itself is changing. It is increasingly lay and predominantly feminine, though somewhat less so as women religious currently engaged in active ministry reach retirement age. Parish ministry has also a distinct local quality since its development is originating within parishes themselves around the ministries of education, liturgy and social justice, and is strongly influenced by the pastor. Increasingly, parish ministry is done by people who are designated by their certification such as director of religious education or director of liturgy rather than by a distinct category of person such as vowed religious, ordained minister, or indeed lay ecclesial minister. While the parish population is very diverse, Latinos, African Americans, Asians, and others are poorly represented among parish ministers. Studies note that lay parish ministers are, in general, very well educated and deeply involved in their faith, their Church, and their parish. While many spend years in the same parish, there is a growing pattern of lay parish ministers moving from one parish to another. It appears that some do this for career advancement, others for personal and family reasons, and still others because of employment conditions due especially to a change of pastor. The professionalization of lay ministry has led many parishes to begin to adopt personnel policies and practices to ensure just and adequate treatment of their lay ministers as well as for other staff members (Murnion and DeLambo, 1999).

General Parish Ministries

Parish life has become much more participative especially in the wake of the liturgical renewal proposed by the Second Vatican Council and in response to the Council's renewed vision of Church as people of God and body of Christ. All Christians, according to the Council, are called to the apostolate or ministry which is a sharing in the saving mission of the Church. As stated in the Constitution on the Church, "Through baptism and confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself" (*Lumen gentium*, 33). It would be difficult to imagine a parish liturgy today without lay people who proclaim the word of God, lead the prayers of the faithful, serve as extraordinary ministers of communion, cantors and ministers of music, altar servers and ministers of hospitality. Lay people are active in their parish religious education program. They accompany candidates and catechumens

through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), lead programs for returning Catholics, and minister to bereavement groups. They prepare children for first Eucharist, first penance, and confirmation, participate in baptism and marriage preparation teams and bring communion to the sick, imprisoned and homebound. In addition, lay people are active in parish outreach and social justice programs, parish organizations, committees, service and prayer groups.

Lay Ecclesial Ministries

In addition to increased participation in all aspects of parish life, we have witnessed in recent years a host of lay men and women offering their gifts and talents in the service of the Church. Increasingly, these ministers are hired by parishes to fill staff positions and they have significant responsibility as, for example, pastoral associates, directors of religious education, directors of music, youth ministers, school principals, and ministers of social justice. In some instances, in the absence of a resident priest pastor, bishops have entrusted the daily pastoral leadership of a parish to a lay person. Such ministers are called lay pastoral coordinators, lay pastoral administrators or even resident pastoral ministers. At present, lay people exercise overall pastoral leadership in about 450 parishes and their number is increasing.

The bishops have chosen the term “lay ecclesial ministers” to refer to ministers who are hired or appointed by parishes and other church agencies to fill significant staff positions which had once been filled by priests. These ministers prepare themselves academically, pastorally and spiritually for work in the Church. When they perform parish ministry they do so under the supervision of, and in collaboration with, the ordained. Lay ecclesial ministers are first, foremost, and always members of the laity and what they do is a particular expression of the general vocation of all baptized persons in the Christian community. Their ministry is rooted in the charisms given by the Spirit in baptism: “There are many gifts, but it is always the same Spirit; there are many different ways of serving, but it is always the same Lord. There are many different forms of activity, but in everybody it is the same God who is at work in them all. The particular manifestation of the Spirit granted to each one is to be used for the general good” (1 Cor 12:4-7).

We cannot develop an exhaustive list of who belongs in the category of lay ecclesial minister since this may vary according to the needs of the local church and the perspective of the diocesan bishop. Nevertheless, there are several characteristics which mark such ministers, though not all apply in every case. In general, we describe a lay ecclesial minister in a parish as: (1) a fully initiated member of the Christian faithful who responds to a call or invitation to participate in ministry after adequate discernment; (2) one who has received the necessary formation,

education, and training to function competently in a particular ministry; (3) one who has personal competencies and gifts for ministry and uses them with community or parish recognition and support; (4) one to whom a formal and public role in parish ministry has been entrusted by a bishop or local pastor; (5) one who has been installed in a ministry through the authority of the bishop or his representative; (6) one who commits to performing the duties of a ministry in a stable manner for a certain length of time; (7) a paid full- or part-time member of the parish staff or a volunteer who has responsibility and the necessary authority for parish leadership in a particular area of ministry (*Report of the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry*, 1999).

RESPONSE TO LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTRY IN THE PARISH

The changing patterns of parish life are evident not only in the new faces of ministry and ministers but also in the reorganization of parish structures. The possibility of having a priest pastor present in every parish is no longer assured. For that reason, deacons, women religious, and laypersons are being given pastoral responsibility. At the same time, dioceses are linking parishes in clusters and various other ways, often with a single pastor and/or sacramental minister serving several parishes. There are job descriptions for lay ecclesial ministers, and their ministries are generally clearly defined. Pastoral councils and finance councils offer input into parish decisions, and parishes are engaging in pastoral planning around an articulated mission statement. Parishes also engage in financial planning to support their own increasing ministerial needs and to help parishes which cannot be financially viable.

Many parishes are structured into basic units or small communities of faith in which people come to know one another, break open the word of God and express it in service and love for others. These groups often bring together people of similar careers, professions or interests. As parishes become increasingly multicultural, small communities of faith also enable people from different backgrounds to meet, to forge bonds of friendship and solidarity, to develop a commitment to ministry and to call forth and foster new vocations to ecclesial ministry. On Sunday, parishioners and pastoral ministers gather for liturgy as a communion of communities, enriched by the readings which they have already prayed together, and bonded by the life experiences which they have shared. Their participation in the liturgy is thus formed and informed by participation in the life of the community and, in turn, nourishes and sustains that life. There is a fresh sense of Christian solidarity within parishes due to a new interest in the Bible, a willingness to share faith with one another, the will to live and support one another as sister and brother, and the move to stand as a body in the face of needs and social issues (Power, 1980, 1985).

Lay ecclesial ministers, in collaboration with the ordained, are exercising an enormous role in parish life and leadership. As bishops, pastors, theologians, schools of theology for ministry, professional associations, and lay ecclesial ministers themselves recognize this, they are trying to develop a response in at least four different areas, namely, the articulation of a theology of lay ecclesial ministry, clarification of roles, preparation and formation for ministry, and questions of finances and human resources.

Theology of Lay Ecclesial Ministry

Following the Second Vatican Council there has been a rediscovery in Catholic theology of baptism as the foundational sacrament of ministry. The growth of lay ecclesial ministry has strengthened the sense that all in the parish are responsible—to varying degrees and in different ways—for being and for building the body of Christ. Membership in the body, given in baptism, strengthened in confirmation, and sustained at the eucharistic table, is at the root of both discipleship and ministry (Power, 1980, 1985).

Ministry has moved from being a vocation only for the few to being a gift and work of all the baptized in service of the mission of Christ and the Church. By definition, the Christian community is ministerial and all its members are called to share, according to their gifts, in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal office, or liturgy, preaching and community leadership or presidency. All are gifted with special charisms of the Spirit, which flow from the sacraments of initiation and are meant for the good of the entire community.

The image of concentric circles of ministry, rather than a pyramidal model, describes very well the rich diversity and inclusive nature of parish ministry today. The image moves from the leaders, now the bishop, pastor, or resident pastoral minister, to all full-time and professionally trained ministers, out through levels of part-time ministers to all the baptized (O'Meara, 1999). Such an understanding of ministry takes nothing from the identity of the ordained but locates them clearly among other diverse and parallel ministries within the Church. Leadership is central to the life of the parish community and both lay ecclesial ministers and the ordained are gradually learning to understand and exercise it collaboratively. As we continue to develop a renewed theology of ministry, we must return again and again to the key themes of communion, participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

Clarification of Roles

Official parish ministries, which we describe as stable, public, authorized roles of leadership, may vary over time in response to changing

needs. Also, new ministries emerge while others cease to exist. Nevertheless, bishops, pastors, and lay ecclesial ministers themselves recognize the importance of clarifying titles, roles, and expectations since all of these affect collaboration in ministry, give a point of reference to parishioners, and help the ministers to develop the skills they need for their particular ministry, in addition to a strong sense of ministerial identity. Increasingly, lay ecclesial ministers are receiving or developing a clear job description for the ministry which they will exercise.

In many dioceses, lay ecclesial ministers are designated by the bishop or his representative to their ministerial assignment. Often, they are installed or commissioned in a public ceremony so that the community recognizes and welcomes them. On occasion, especially in the case of lay pastoral coordinators or resident pastoral ministers, the bishop himself participates in the liturgical ceremony of installation, publicly welcomes them into the body of the diocesan *ministerium*, presents them to the community and empowers them to carry out certain acts of ministry which may require the specific authorization of the diocesan bishop. Resident pastoral ministers employed by the Glenmary Home Missions in the Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi, for example, receive from their bishop a document of authorization based on the Code of Canon Law and covering three areas: preaching the word, sacramental and liturgical ministry, and administrative ministry.

Under preaching the word, the document lists the following authorization: to preach the word of God (c. 766) at daily Communion service or Liturgy of the Word; at a Sunday service when no priest is available for celebration of the Eucharist; at a funeral vigil, committal service, funeral outside of Mass; at the Liturgy of the Hours, at the baptism of a child under age seven. In the area of sacramental and liturgical ministry, the bishop grants the following authorization: to baptize children under the age of seven according to the approved rituals (c. 861§2; Rite of Baptism); to serve as an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist and Viaticum (c. 910§2; 911§2); to serve as a minister of eucharistic exposition and reposition (c. 943); to administer sacramentals such as blessed ashes on Ash Wednesday, blessing of throats on the Feast of St. Blaise, blessing of a communicant (c. 1168); to present to the local ordinary names of those to be designated liturgical ministers (c. 230§3). The administrative functions which the bishop authorizes the resident pastoral minister to perform are: to preside over the parish pastoral council and finance councils in accord with diocesan norms (cc. 536, 537); to maintain parish sacramental records and issue authentic sacramental documents (c. 535§1-3); to preserve and maintain parish archives (c. 535§4,5); to serve as administrator of parish property and to make the annual reports requested by the diocese (cc. 1281–1288). The bishop grants the authorization for a specified time or duration of assignment.

Preparation and Formation for Ministry

The preparation, formation and certification of lay ecclesial ministers have received much attention in dioceses, parishes and schools of theology, which take seriously the words of canon 231 that “lay persons who devote themselves permanently or temporarily to some special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation which is required to fulfill their function properly.” Data collected by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University identified as many as 331 lay ministry formation programs in 1999–2000. Though the number seems rather high, the growth of ministry preparation and formation programs in dioceses and graduate schools testifies to the growth in the number of those wishing to prepare for lay ecclesial ministry.

There are four important elements to be included in any preparation for parish ministry: spiritual formation, theological training, supervised ministerial practice with theological reflection, and the acquisition of specialized knowledge and skills appropriate to the particular ministry for which one is preparing. While the content and processes of theological training, supervised ministry, and skill building are already fairly well established, especially in degree programs in graduate schools, the type of formation needed for lay ecclesial ministry is still being developed. Formation programs generally focus on developing a strong sense of discipleship of Jesus Christ and a sound prayer life as well as access to spiritual direction, retreats, and times of recollection. Spiritual formation builds an affinity between the charisms which serve parish life and the minister’s own inner possession of the gift of the Spirit. Beyond programs, it is the Spirit who gives a knowledge of the mystery of Christ, and teaches compassion as well as how to pray. It is on this basis that the minister learns how to speak the word, how to comfort the sorrowing, how to lead the community, or how to heal. Discipleship along with a rich liturgical and sacramental life are essential foundations for parish ministry. Pastoral ministry supposes the ability to relate the experiences of one’s own life to the mystery of Christ and see them in a new way in light of the unconditional love of God revealed in Christ. Moreover, it supposes the ability to enable others to do the same (Power, 1980, 1985).

A growing number of dioceses have developed their own standards and certification processes for different ministerial positions. The National Association for Lay Ministers (NALM) has published competency-based certification standards for pastoral ministers, pastoral associates, and parish life coordinators. The standards have been approved by the USCC Commission on Certification and Accreditation (CCA) and are being used by ministry preparation programs in the ar-

tication and adaptation of curricula to meet the new needs of parish ministry. The CCA has also approved certification standards for directors of religious education and youth ministers. These standards are written as statements of competencies or descriptions of demonstrated behaviors and are expressed as personal, theological and professional competencies. Norms and guidelines for the preparation of lay ecclesial ministers, similar to those for the preparation of priests and deacons, have yet to be developed and the process is rendered more complex by the fact that lay ecclesial ministers do not yet exist as a distinct group.

Finances and Human Resources

The professionalization of ministry follows the lines of professionalization in secular employment. Thus, many parishes have already put in place formal job descriptions and contracts, performance evaluations, and staff meetings. The concerns of lay ecclesial ministers center around salary, benefits and portability of pension benefits. These concerns are exacerbated by the fact that lay ministers often pay for their own studies and are not always in a position to pay off the debt when they enter the ministry (*Report of the Subcommittee on Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, 1999).

SOME QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

The extraordinary way in which lay ecclesial ministry has flourished in parishes in recent decades has blessed parish life. More and more people are encouraged to respond to their baptismal call to full participation in the life of the Church, and to share in the mission of Christ in response to the outpouring of the Spirit's gifts. As the role of lay ecclesial ministers in parish life continues to evolve, we are faced with challenges in the following areas:

Theology of ministry. There is need to develop a common foundational theology of ministry which undergirds and supports the ministry of all, ordained and lay, while respecting distinct vocations and roles in parish life.

Parish structures. We must reshape the ministerial structures of our parishes so that parish ministry will become more collaborative and inclusive. This will require changes in patterns of reflection, behavior, and expectation among all ministers, as well as the development of an understanding of collaborative ministry, and the skills to work collaboratively.

Inclusion in diocesan life. There is need to continue to develop partnership at all levels. This will require continued diocesan involvement in recruitment, training, screening, certification, and commissioning of lay ecclesial ministers. It will also mean including lay ministers, especially

lay pastoral coordinators and resident pastoral ministers, in what have traditionally been gatherings of priests at the level of pastoral regions and deaneries, assemblies and convocations, so that the work of parish leadership becomes truly collaborative.

Financial resources. Dioceses and parishes need to commit resources to prepare lay ecclesial ministers to serve the parish in a variety of ways. This may mean “sponsoring” students at a graduate school for ministry, providing future lay ecclesial ministers with an education equal to that of priests but adapted to the ministry for which they are preparing, or making it possible for them to take advantage of opportunities for education and formation at diocesan level. Sharing financial resources also requires a greater effort to provide a living wage for lay ecclesial ministers and a sharing of resources among parishes so that no parish is deprived of ministry due to lack of financial resources.

Diversity. We must attend to the preparation of ministers for communities which are poor in economic resources or simply do not have access to programs for ministerial preparation. Schools of ministry are challenged to collaborate with underserved dioceses through distance education and other creative means. Finally, our parishes and dioceses and schools of ministry must continue to explore ways to find, train, and support ministers from and for the increasing number of new immigrant populations in our midst so that all may find an equal place at the Table and our parishes truly reflect the rich diversity that is the body of Christ.

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Brid Long, S.S.L., is associate professor and chair of the Pastoral Studies Department at Washington Theological Union.

Lay ecclesial ministry and the ministry of the ordained complement each other within the dynamic communio of the church. They are not in competition. While the phenomenon of lay ecclesial ministry arose during a time of decline in priestly vocations in certain parts of the world, it should not be seen simply as an emergency response. Each expression of ministry is needed in its full dignity and strength if the church is to be fully alive in its communion and mission.

—National Conference of Catholic Bishops
“Lay Ecclesial Ministry: State of the Questions”