

Lay Ecclesial Ministry

The years since the Second Vatican Council have seen an increase of lay ministry within the Church. More people serve as lectors, Eucharistic ministers, ministers to the sick and homebound, pastoral council members and catechists, to name a few, than ever before. And then there are lay persons who serve on pastoral staffs in various positions of leadership and responsibility: Directors of Faith Formation, Youth Ministers, Directors of Adult Formation, Pastoral Care Ministers, and Pastoral Associates. They have responded to Christ's call to minister within the parish community as a profession. Some are paid staff members, though some are not. Their baptismal call to serve is augmented by special charisms (gifts) of the Holy Spirit. They are called "Lay Ecclesial Ministers" (LEMs).

At first, the pastoral ministry of lay persons was slow to be understood and accepted. With the passage of time, the gifts and perspectives that LEMs bring to their ministry has been acknowledged and affirmed by clergy and lay persons alike. In 1999, the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions*. This landmark document addressed in a positive way the theological and professional issues raised by the growth of LEMs in parish ministry. Last November, US Bishops approved a follow up document entitled "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry." In our own diocese, Bishop Vigneron affirmed the value of lay ecclesial ministry when invited to address an LEM convocation shortly after coming to Oakland. He told the gathering that even if the priest shortage ended tomorrow, LEMs would continue to have an important and necessary contribution to make to the church.

Currently, there are nearly 300 LEMs in the Diocese of Oakland. In our diocese, a LEM is someone who is educated and formed to take on the responsibility of coordinating pastoral ministries and works at least 20 hours a week. Many have undertaken professional preparation in the form of Bachelor's or Master's degrees in Theology, Religious Studies, Religious Education, Theological Studies, Pastoral Ministry, and Divinity. Our diocese offers a 3-year certificate program through the diocesan School for Pastoral Ministry, and a Master's degree in Pastoral Ministry in conjunction with Holy Names University. All LEMs bring a wealth of gifts, experience, and dedication to their ministries.

Throughout our church's history, the Holy Spirit has unified, sanctified and inspired us, and called the baptized to serve in ways that build up the Kingdom of God in a changing world. The ministry of Lay Ecclesial Ministers is yet another way we are called to serve.

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