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Document delivers on its promises

Dennis Coday | Sep. 8, 2010

David Heimann, pastoral associate at St. Ignatius Parish in Chicago, gives a presentation to parishioners. (CNS/Karen Callaway)

After the U.S. bishops approved with a two-thirds affirmative vote the document ?Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord,? their guidelines for the development of lay ecclesial ministry, in November 2005, it was hailed as ?the most mature and coherent ecclesiastical document ever produced on a theology of ministry.?

Those were the words of theologian Richard Gaillardetz, speaking at the first gathering of the National Association for Lay Ministry after the bishops approved the document.

At the same June 2006 gathering in Cleveland, Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., who chaired the bishops? committee that wrote the document, said that the bishops wanted to show appreciation for the ?value and the contribution? of lay ecclesial ministers.

?This document was meant to say they?re appreciated, they make a difference and they?re not going away,? Kicanas said. ?Lay ecclesial ministers are a full flowering of our mission of communion in the church.?

Gaillardetz, who is the Murray/Bacik professor of Catholic studies at the University of Toledo in Ohio, said the strength of the statement ?is the way in which it successfully integrates lay ecclesial ministry within a broader theology of church and ministry.?

The document, he said, ?develops the relational nature of the church, attending to the ways in which the sacraments of initiation establish our primary mode of relating within the life of the church, that of discipleship.?

?Co-Workers? affirms ?the complementary relations of both ordained and lay ecclesial ministries,? he said, and ?rejects any approach that would grant to lay ecclesial ministry a mere auxiliary status.?

As the five-year anniversary of the document?s approval approaches, the document is delivering on its promises, according to the lay experts interviewed for this story. It is shaping the life and mission of the U.S. church at the parish and diocesan levels.

?Co-Workers? is like the passage from Habakkuk, said Mercy Sr. Diane Koorie, board president of the National Association of Lay Ministers. ? ?Write down the vision ... wait for it, it will surely come.? And I think we work for it too. That is what we are doing. [?Co-Workers?] has set out a vision for us to work together in ministry.?

She said that it ?is a first step on a journey that we are all on. I think of it as a vision document that is hopeful and challenging at the same time.? Koorie is also director of the Office of Pastoral Ministry for the Oklahoma City archdiocese.

Gaillardetz stands by his original assessment of the document. ?It has been very well received by lay ecclesial ministers who read the document and say, ?Ah, yes, finally here is an ecclesial document that articulates what I think I have been doing.? ?

When the document was written, there were 30,632 lay ecclesial ministers working at least 20 hours a week in paid positions in U.S. Catholic parishes, and 2,163 more who were working at least 20 hours a week on a volunteer basis. There were about 1.6 paid lay ecclesial ministers per U.S. parish, outnumbering priests engaged in parish ministry. The numbers are much the same today.

?The day-to-day work of the parish, whether it is administrative or pastoral, is in the hands of the laity,? said Marti Jewell, who teaches in the School of Ministry at the University of Dallas.

?There couldn?t be parishes as we know them today? without lay ecclesial ministries, and the document is the bishops? recognition of that reality, said Jewell, coauthor of *The Changing Face of the Church: Emerging Models of Parish Leadership*.

H. Richard McCord, executive director of the bishops? Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, worked with the subcommittee that wrote the document. ?Co-Workers? did not create lay ecclesial ministries, he noted. But it did recognize, at a very high level, ?a reality that had already been growing and developing for at least 40 years in the church.? The document placed lay ministry in ?an accepted theological framework,? he said.

?So what ?Co-Workers? did was give [lay ministry] an extra push, an important push, to continue to grow and be incorporated into the church?s life,? McCord said.

The longest section of ?Co-Workers? is the one on formation. While it doesn?t spell out a definitive formation process, it established guidelines for formation programs built on the four pillars of human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation, which parallel the language in church documents for programs of priesthood and diaconate formation.

This may be the most immediately recognizable result of the document. Gaillardetz said, ?It is increasingly a standard text for theology of ministry

courses and that is good measure of its reception at one level.?

Koorie said that it has become the reference source for diocesan and university-level programs of lay formation. ?We have looked at our program from the viewpoint of ?Are we including all the elements from ?Co-Workers,? are we addressing what ?Co-Workers? calls us to?? ? Koorie said.

?A lot of university programs ... have within the last five years looked at their programming and how the total

experience is put together to make sure that it has got those four pillars -- that human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral formation -- well developed and clear,? she said.

A sign of the document?s acceptance among the U.S. bishops, McCord notes, is that it is commonly referenced in diocesan pastoral letters, and the Chicago archdiocese has developed a commissioning ceremony for lay ecclesial ministers that gives the authorization of those ministers a public character and ritual component.

But five years on, the document?s implementation has not been uniform.

Koorie described it this way: ?There is variety in how it is used from diocese to diocese. ... I think a lot of it depends on the leadership of the individual bishop. What he is hoping for, what he is expecting in his diocese, how he wants his ministers to be prepared, how many roles for lay ministry there may be in his diocese or not.

?There are different flavors in every diocese and what they emphasize in one diocese might not be emphasized as much in another.?

Jewell said, ?There are those who don?t want to pay attention to the document or refuse to admit that there is such a thing. That is a source of enormous pain to those faithful ministers in those dioceses who are giving their lives to their service to the church as lay ministers.?

But she added quickly, ?On the other hand, and this is the positive side of the coin ... lay ecclesial ministers are the backbone of the parishes and many of the diocesan offices in this country. Without them we would not have the ministry and parish life that we have today. Period. End. We wouldn?t.?

Tension comes, she says, from ?the fact that our understanding of vocation is changing. ... It was assumed that the lay ministry state in life was married or single. But the understanding of vocation is moving and shifting within the church. ...

?So you have laypeople who are responding to an ecclesial call, to service within the church, for whom it?s a vocation, for whom it is a sacrifice, who are repositioning their relationship to the church by moving into these positions.?

Gaillardetz also spoke of tension. ?We have some seminarians and young priests who fear that celebrating that document may undermine the distinctiveness of their own priestly ministry. I think they are mistaken in that assumption, but I think that assumption still rules. It is still creating difficulties in parishes where you have some young priests who get very nervous about how lay ecclesial ministry is a complementary ministry and not an auxiliary to the ministerial priesthood.?

He said, ?You can affirm lay ecclesial ministry and affirm the unique and necessary ministry of the ordained priest. But it tends to be viewed as a zero sum game, I think.?

As lay ministry continues to develop, other challenges are very practical.

Gaillardetz said there remains much serious work to do about the professionalization of lay ecclesial ministry.

?Many dioceses need to come to terms with some of the things that document suggested about the ways in which we hire lay ecclesial ministers, ways we evaluate them, the need for just wages. Those kinds of things.

?A bigger problem is the code of canon law. It didn?t really know how to accommodate lay ecclesial ministry very well. Until we get a further revision of the code of canon law and a revision that takes into account the theological vision of ?Co-Workers,? we are going to continue to be handcuffed to some extent.?

Cultural diversity is a challenge, according to McCord. ?We hear that different cultural groups have different ways of naming leaders, different ways of identifying leaders, different ways of forming and preparing leaders that don?t follow the more professional, academic trajectory we are often more accustomed to in the more mainstream, middle-class church. That needs to be factored into what we expect of lay ecclesial ministers in other cultural communities and groups.?

Koorie said that ?cultural diversity is a challenge in everything we do? as church. She said has has been told that the current Spanish translation of the document needs more work ?to get across the right idea. We all share the ideas, but finding the appropriate language to describe them is the challenge.?

Money, too, is a challenge.

Part of the vision of ?Co-Workers? is ?just and appropriate compensation? for lay ministers, Koorie said. ?Considering the economic times, that is a challenge.?

It is a concern the bishops share, McCord said. They worry that the current economic downturn may be establishing ?some permanent patterns in our life.?

Beyond these practical challenges are what McCord calls ?developing questions.?

?What is the nature of the call to lay ecclesial ministry? Is it a distinct vocation? Is it a call within a larger call?? He said the bishops are encouraging that kind of theological thinking.

Jewell said the church has ?yet to catechize the faithful that this is a vocational call and not employment only. The document addresses this, but I think we still have a long way to go in understanding what the document tells us.

? ?Co-Workers? as a document is strong enough to hold that. I think the theology of lay ministry in the document is wonderful. It is not finished, but it is a wonderful, grounding, foundational document.

?What I want to focus on is that fact that people continue to answer this call, that people continue to serve in their parishes. This is the future of parish life in this country.?

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What is a lay ecclesial minister?

Lay ecclesial minister is intended to be a generic term, not a specific role description or title. ?It is meant to encompass and describe several possible roles. In parish life -- to cite only one sphere of involvement -- the pastoral associate, parish catechetical leader, youth ministry leader, school principal, and director of liturgy or pastoral music are examples of such roles,? says the U.S. bishops? ?Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord.? The term also describes ?laypersons who minister in the name of the church in hospitals and health care settings, on college and university campuses, and in prisons, seaports and airports.?

The document says the ministry is lay ?because it is service done by laypersons. Its sacramental basis is the

sacraments of initiation [baptism, Communion and confirmation], not the sacrament of ordination.? The ministry is ecclesial ?because it has a place within the community of the church, whose communion and mission it serves, and because it is submitted to the discernment, authorization and supervision of the hierarchy.? It is ministry ?because it is a participation in the threefold ministry of Christ who is priest, prophet and king.?

In ?Co-Workers,? the bishops say lay ecclesial ministry is characterized by:

- Authorization of the hierarchy to serve publicly in the local church;
- Leadership in a particular area of ministry;
- Close mutual collaboration with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests and deacons;
- Preparation and formation appropriate to the level of responsibilities assigned to them

-- *Dennis Coday*

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