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Lay ministry association shows us our inheritance

NCR Editorial Staff | May. 12, 2012

Years ago a campus minister at a prominent Catholic university bemoaned the fact that much of the institutional church was squandering its inheritance of laypeople committed to a ministerial call within the church in favor of a continued call for prayers for vocations to priesthood and religious life. Fortunately, for 35 years the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM) has been working to counter that impression. It has given a public and unified voice to the many lay ministers who work in parishes, prisons, universities, diocesan offices, hospitals and retreat centers, to name just a few.

In 1977, when the association began, lay ministry -- now known more specifically as lay ecclesial ministry -- was unexplored territory, a wilderness. Rapt discussions were held in parish offices and diocesan centers and were echoed in people?s kitchens: What does it mean for laypeople to be called to service in the church? The association and its early members were pioneers in this vast new field. And like any wilderness, it was full of possibilities, opportunities and dangers.

In its brief history as a national association, NALM and its members have worked tirelessly on behalf of the church and those striving to serve within it. Lay ecclesial ministers have found support and challenge in the association. Every year it has led a national conference. It has published more than a dozen books, tools and studies in areas that have shaped lay ministry in the years since the Second Vatican Council sparked the possibility. The association led a collaborative effort along with other national organizations to develop and publish standards for lay ministry specifically for pastoral associates, parish life coordinators and pastoral ministers. The National Association for Lay Ministry fundamentally understands that the future of Catholic parishes in the United States will depend on these laypeople not only for survival but to thrive as dynamic communities of faith and evangelization.

When the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops published ?Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry? in 2005, they did so with the assistance and consultation of many NALM leaders and members. No U.S. diocese -- and probably no single parish, campus ministry or other Catholic institution anywhere in the country -- has not been enriched by the work of laypeople who have responded to a call from God with both serious theological and spiritual study and service in public ministry in the church. A study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate published in 2011

estimates there are 38,000 lay ecclesial ministers in parishes alone.

A decade ago, the National Association for Lay Ministry, along with other national organizations and funded by the Lilly Foundation, began the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project (www.emergingmodels.org). This ongoing project focuses on providing research, recommendations and tools to create ?fully collaborative, competent, and mission-focused pastoral leadership.? NALM has served its mission faithfully in developing imaginative leadership to support the continued development of a Vatican II model of collaborative ministry.

If demographic trends hold, two things are clear: Our Catholic population will continue to grow and we will have far fewer ordained and vowed religious to serve our church?s needs. The need for collaborative lay ministry would seemingly be self-evident, but we know that it has not been as widely embraced as it should be.

Yet hope is always present where people seek to serve God. The leaders, past and present, of the National Association for Lay Ministry and its many members have shown us our inheritance -- an abundant, hope-filled future in lay ministry unfolding before us.

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