

Has “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” achieved its intended purpose 15 years out?  
By Jeff Andrini, D.Min.

Are you ready for some good news? The National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM) has been preparing to celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” in 2020. This landmark document was created to be “a resource for diocesan bishops and all who are responsible for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry (LEM) in the United States” (Co-Workers, 5). As an association, we are excited to champion the vision of this document and ask the question, “How far have we come in 15 years?” As a part of our preparation, we created a survey to check the pulse of those working in the Church today. With over 200 responding, and 41 pages of raw data, it is clear this sample has a strong opinion about our progress toward the vision of the Bishops’ statement.

The good news is that when you read the comments offered through this survey, it is easy to see the investment, the readiness and the desire of Lay Ecclesial Ministers (LEMs) to serve Christ and his Church. Many have done so for 10, 20, and even 30+ years working in parishes, dioceses, universities and in church related nonprofits. There is so much potential and raw human resource in LEM and the laity of the Church, which we must see as good news.

True as this good news is, we have some work to do and unfortunately the results of this survey paint a picture that is somewhat sobering and challenges the Church to ongoing reflection. Perhaps the best news is that, “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” points the way forward in clear and substantive ways. So as we celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of this important document, let us consider where we are as a Church in the U.S. and commit the resources necessary to implement the vision.

The following is a brief summary. The survey was only eight questions, including four multiple choice and four comment questions. As one reads the raw data, major areas begin to emerge and it is clear that Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord is an effort that needs additional focus, renewal and follow through. 92% responded that they have read the Co-Workers statement. To the question, “Do you see the theology of communion being exercised in your pastoral setting between LEMs and the Ordained,” 19% said often and 49% said sometimes. The following comment questions were asked, 1) “Do you see the development of LEM as a priority in the Church? Why or why not? 2) What is fostering communion or is needed to foster communion? 3) What is the greatest area of concern for LEMs working in the Church? 4) What issues in LEM need to be addressed to foster a thriving and vibrant work place in the Church?

The commitment of folks in Diocesan Offices, Parishes, Schools of Theology, Seminaries and nonprofits that comment in this survey is impressive. In fact, 40,000 Lay Ecclesial Ministers serve the Church in amazing ways. Can you imagine if Vatican II never happened and the explosion of lay leaders serving in the Church never took place? We need to praise God for calling these people into service in the Church and honor their dedication, discipleship and self-

sacrificing response. In this light, we need to listen to their comments with sensitivity, discernment, and a sense of holy awe for their commitment and insights as they live out their call to serve as LEMs in the Church today.

As a reminder, the Bishops' statement discusses the "Call of all the lay faithful to work for the transformation of the world" and then specifically highlights "those called to Lay Ecclesial Ministry who are characterized by the following four areas:

- Authorization of the hierarchy to serve publically 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 responsibility" (Co-workers, 10).

These are essential concepts in fostering a relationship of co-workers among the laity and the ordained. According to the survey, in some places, LEM is experiencing the fruit of excellent collaboration, vision and progress. In several comments, the following items are offered as working well. They are:

- Open communication where opinions between ordained and laity are listened to and respected
- Faith sharing between lay and ordained that helps foster communication
- The blessing of a long history of pastors that value and encourage partnership with laity
- When clergy are not threatened by LEMs and LEMs live their call collaboratively not in competition with the ordained, it is very fruitful.

These reflect the values of the Bishop's document and offer great hope that when implemented, the result is good fruit. How can Dioceses and Parishes learn from and implement these ideas, and other best practices, that foster collaboration and partnership? There are other positive comments that affirm the efforts of the ordained; however, these comments quickly give way to deep concerns.

Several respondents point toward their bishop or their current pastor as being open and collaborative, however there is fear that a bishop or pastor change might undue all the progress that has taken place. There are a good number of comments about the blessing of clergy that live the values of the Second Vatican Council and then many comments about some newly ordained priests that seem less enthused about LEM and seem to lead in a manner that undermines collaboration. The question of what some seminarians are being taught is mentioned many times and the need for seminary formation that focuses on working with LEMs, especially women, and issues of delegation, collaboration, and shared leadership were mentioned. Clericalism was also mentioned multiple times, which is clearly a stumbling block to fostering healthy ministerial relationships.

There appears to be a feeling that many clergy do not value LEM or know how to work with these leaders and there has been little effort to affirm, recognize or promote the value of LEM in many numbers of dioceses and parishes. In the comments, rather than a close collaboration, a serious lack of collaboration and even a devaluing of the role of LEM appear in actual practice. Regarding formation, it seems there are fewer options for financial support to pursue ongoing education and 50% of dioceses do not have lay formation programs at this time, quoting one responder that offered this statistic from a CARA study.

As stated in Co-Workers, “The Church is the communion of those called by Christ to be his disciples” (19). Sadly, from the comments in the survey, one gets the impression that there is often a clear separation between the ordained and LEM. Rather than fostering communion, there appears to be a lack of partnership, vision and collaboration that help to create communion. In fact, there is a call for just wages, a humane workplace (does that sound like people experiencing communion?), the need for protection of one’s job and employee rights, recognition of one’s formation and experience, and the need for basic respect and fairness. In addition, the use of international priests seems to have made the concept of communion even more difficult as often their training has not necessarily prepared them to appreciate or work with LEMs in the U.S.

To complete the summary, the sense one gets from looking at all the data is that there is a real need for the things called for 15 years ago in the “Co-Workers” statement that has yet to be realized. We cannot afford to move forward without engaging this vast group of gifted leaders and insuring that future generations are encouraged to answer the call to serve as LEMs. The ongoing formation and education of LEMs is also a need that requires further attention. As stated repeatedly in the comments, the ordained and the laity throughout the Church need to realize how important LEM is and further invest in the very principles that were set forth in “Co-Workers of the Vineyard of the Lord” to create a vibrant workplace and culture for ministry to thrive in the Church.

As we approach the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord,” we must renew our efforts to work toward the vision it presents. Through our commitment we can proclaim the reign of God and live it out in our human resource practices, collaboration and leadership efforts as a Church. Let us strive toward the ideal of a community of missionary disciples, growing in faith together and rooted in shared leadership and vision that is built on best practices. The hope is that the survey and summaries will be one of many efforts to understand the value of “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” and encourage further study and renewal as we strive toward excellence in living the mission of Jesus.

If this article stirs you in some way, or you have the desire for further reflection on Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord, consider discussing the following questions with colleagues.

- 1) Who are the co-workers in my location that I could review Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord and discuss this article?

- 2) What implications do the article and/or the results of this survey have on my/our ministry practice?
- 3) Which of the comments in the survey sound familiar? Can these comments be used as points for dialogue with my/our co-workers in our local diocesan vineyard?
- 4) What are some ways that I/we can work toward the collaboration called for in Co-Workers among LEMs, bishops, priests, deacons, and laity?

Join us in reflection, conversation and prayer as we prepare to celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Co-Workers document and call for renewed focus on its vision.