NALM Synod Report
June 30, 2022

Introduction

The National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM) conducted 11 listening sessions for a total of approximately 410 participants. These lay ecclesial ministers were largely veteran ministers, mostly non-Hispanic white, from across the US, whose experience has given them the pulse of much of what is happening in our parishes. Collectively they brought a great deal of passion, experience, insight, and commitment to NALM’s synodal sessions. While we heard many familiar joys and concerns, we also came to realize how very different the context and climate in which we minister have become.

In pondering what it means to be church in the 21st century these seasoned and experienced lay ecclesial ministers named the signs of the times. They spoke of ministering in a Covid world, with the collective trauma and grief we are experiencing, exacerbated by the political ideologies and polarities in which they minister. They addressed the impact of the pandemic on lay ecclesial ministers where parish staff were either laid off or given additional duties as their colleagues disappeared. We heard stories of deep caring for parishioners and stories of exhaustion and burn-out. Across the country participants watched as people have left the church and as others who would be members remain unwelcome. In the words of one participant: “The tapestry of our communities is unraveling.” And ministering in a church shrouded by abuse and scandal and the impact of financial settlements was on the minds of many participants. According to one, “the bankruptcy process changed the community experience more than Covid.”

There is hope, however. We learned, once again, of the faith, devotion, and resilience of lay ecclesial ministers as they showed us where God’s grace is active. As those called on to repair the “unraveling tapestry,” they showed us what must be done to move forward, and what must be mended. These seasoned lay ecclesial ministers reminded us that the heart of ministry is relationship. This will become one of the hallmarks of a synodal church. People long for accompaniment, someone to walk with them, to speak of things that are relevant to their everyday lives. Participants invited us to use everyday language and not jargon in speaking of our faith, as we serve the everyday needs of our communities.

They helped us see how those on the margins are calling us to a new way of being church, a missionary church that is willing to take down barriers and build bridges, willing to find new ways of doing ministry. The community of the faithful are invited, in all of our woundedness, to go forth from the building, out into the public square, where all are welcome. Parishioners, we heard, are not interested in politics or the current hyper-focus on polarizing issues, but are longing for community, longing for a place that welcomes them home. The Holy Spirit,
according to one participant echoing the words of many, “is working in amazing ways through each of us, calling us to action in new ways.” This will stretch our Catholic imagination, challenging our enculturated ways of doing things. This is the dream coming through the synodal listening sessions.

In the process of hosting these synodal listening sessions we saw people discover the joys of sharing and the richness found in diversity. In the words of one participant, “Once people of prayer have grasped the synodal vision and have let it sink into their hearts, they are filled with energy.” Together we saw how we are able, as one told us, “to give voice to the voiceless, to listen to one another and find a way forward.” They spoke of longing for a church that brings forth the Gospel and empowers the baptismal call of all.

We are reweaving the tapestry of our faith, even as Pope Francis calls us to remember: “The kingdom is here, it returns, it struggles to flourish anew. Christ’s resurrection everywhere calls forth seeds of that new world... for the resurrection is already secretly woven into the fabric of this history, for Jesus did not rise in vain.” (EG 278)

What follows are specific themes that surfaced in NALM’s synodal listening sessions, as we asked how do we listen for God’s voice and the invitation of the Spirit in the messiness of parish life.

**Theme #1) Hope: Hearing the Gospel call**

“We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

(1Thes 1: 3)

Paul’s “endurance inspired by hope” continues to be the hallmark of lay ecclesial ministers. Alongside the many real concerns that were expressed by those who participated in the National Association for Lay Ministry’s synodal listening sessions, there was an underlying sense of hope for the future of ministry. This hope comes out of a deep rootedness in the participants’ love of ministry, love of their faith and the value they put on the relationships that permeate the life of lay ecclesial ministers.

This hope also came out of the synodal process that gave ministers a renewed desire to conduct more listening opportunities where stories, joys, frustrations and hopes for the future can be shared in safe and supportive spaces; where bridges are built, connections are made, and communities grow and flourish. People expressed hopefulness in the awareness of the Spirit working through the synod, through each of us, calling us to action in new ways.
Theme #2) Lay ecclesial ministry: Responding to a vocational call to serve

“Works of love directed to one’s neighbor are the most perfect external manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit...”
(Evangelii Gaudium 37).

For over 40 years, the National Association of Lay Ministry (NALM) has served lay men and women in parish and diocesan ministry, advocating for those who have answered a vocational call to minister in the Church. Buoyed by the recognition of this vocation in Lumen Gentium and the Synod on the Laity, well over 50,000 lay people in the US have answered this call. What originally started as a grassroots response to parish need and subsequently recognized by the US bishops in Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord, lay ecclesial ministry has blossomed into a way of life in which parishes have come to depend on the presence of parish staff to shoulder much of the day-to-day work in parish life.

The lay ecclesial ministers who participated in the NALM synod listening sessions expressed both joy and discouragement about their ministry. They told us of their love for ministry, especially one-on-one ministry and how life-giving it is to accompany a parish community. They expressed their love for our faith, for liturgy, for truly supportive clergy, inclusivity, collaboration, their vocation and their call. Even in the midst of the sadness and chaos that mark today’s world, they remain hopeful.

At the same time we heard stories of exhaustion, grief, burn-out, and being overwhelmed at the vast need in today’s world. Some are not sure they can continue at this pace and are contemplating leaving their positions. We heard of places where positions go unfilled for lack of applicants. They spoke of colleagues who lost their jobs due to financial shortfalls as well as others whose jobs assumed additional and daunting responsibilities in the face of those departures. There is discouragement that their vocations and contributions to ministry are not only unrecognized, but sometimes actively dismissed. Some have a sense of isolation.

Human resource issues surfaced. In addition to position overload, lay ecclesial ministers discussed a lack of financial support and time for spiritual revitalization. There is a call for education, formation, and guidance, even as diocesan and academic programs are being closed down, apparently, for financial reasons. We learned that parish and diocesan staff, hired without that formation, are desperate for guidance and training in the ministries they are being asked to do.
**Theme #3) Parishioners: Moving towards an adult faith and awareness of baptismal call**

> “Baptism permits Christ to live in us, and to live united with Him, in order to collaborate in the church, each according to his or her own condition, to the transformation of the world.”
> (Pope Francis, General Audience, 2018)

Lay Ecclesial ministers are concerned about the parishes and parishioners they minister to and with. The pandemic had a major impact on the way they were able to minister and accentuated the challenges of parish ministry.

The Covid experience laid bare the importance of dialogue, encounter, and service. Some of the most common themes that came out of NALM’s synodal discussions related to need for the faithful to better understand their baptismal call. With many ministries put on hold or even cancelled, parishioners became more reliant on one another, sometimes placing unrealistic demands on pastors and parish staff. With fewer people at Mass, participants felt that the liturgical experience suffered greatly, as did the community experience. In its absence people became clearer about what is important to them about liturgy, such as the Eucharist and relevant homilies which address the needs of the times and varied perspectives in light of the Gospel. We learned about the importance of relationship and community, and the need for the church to accompany people in their daily lives, rather than hyper-focusing on politics and sexuality.

However, the experience also created an opportunity for the Church to develop technological expertise. Covid has brought more of us together around the table thanks to technology. Those parishes that understood how to provide a liturgical experience in an online platform, made a difference to their communities. We also heard of on-line faith-sharing groups in numbers not seen before. Participants spoke of the need for more effective pastoral councils and community building.

Where synodal listening sessions did happen in parishes, they were well received, seen to develop a sense of community, and an understanding of the richness of diversity. Participants spoke of pastors and bishops who feared what might be discovered by listening, and how laity were skeptical that their conversations would not be reported. There was deep sadness and concern that so many of those who are marginalized or disaffiliated were harder to find and not at the table of discussion. Most notably, these include those who have left the Church (the “Nones” and the “Dones”) as well as members of other communities that do not feel welcome in the Church.
Theme #4) Discrimination/Exclusion: Opening wide the doors to all

“The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded.”

(En veli Gaudium 23)

The theme of discrimination and/or exclusion of many persons and groups emerged clearly in our listening sessions. Lay ecclesial ministers expressed great sensitivity and care for excluded people. Much frustration was expressed about parishes and dioceses routinely ignoring persons who are LGBTQ, BIPOC, Latino/a, immigrants, the elderly, women, and many other marginalized communities. We saw how parish vitality is aligned with the ability to welcome the other or with outreach to those in need. While the synodal process is intended to reach those on the margins, we heard of dioceses which did not include parishes in planning for, in formation for, nor in carrying out synodal listening sessions. Thus, many voices on the margins were not included in this process.

Participants expressed pain at so many being excluded, and with the polarity growing in our parishes. They called for education and formation experiences in parishes that are intergenerational, intercultural, and interracial and show openness to varied perspectives.

Theme #5) Women: Honoring their significant role in the church

“I readily acknowledge that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more inclusive female presence in the Church.”

(En veli Gaudium 103)

One of the groups that have traditionally experienced exclusion are women. A significant theme that emerged from our sessions is the role and treatment of women in church and ministry. Participants reflected on how women carry out the much of the day-to-day work in parishes and are in a majority serving on parish staffs. That reminded us that since all ministry is rooted in Baptism the Church is called to greater openness to women in ministry with respect for their gifts and service. And while some pastors are unable to work well with women, others intentionally include women in parish and diocesan roles.

Participants named experiences that left women parishioners and parish staff feeling underappreciated, marginalized, ignored, isolated, or overwhelmed by the amount of service expected of them. In many parishes women are finding themselves increasingly excluded from ministries, especially liturgical ministries, by pastors and bishops tending to prefer deacons and/or laymen in these roles. The loss of their voices as they exit from parish ministry is felt as a
loss by many. They believe much more dialogue and education of both the ordained and those in the pews regarding the role of women in ministry is a great need.

Theme #6: Clericalism: Moving from a hierarchical to a collaborative, synodal church

“To say no to abuse is to say no to all forms of clericalism.”
(Pope Francis - Letter to People of God, Oct 9, 2019)

Pope Francis named clericalism as one of the issues for the Synod to address. We heard it from the NALM participants many of whom feel the role of the priest must change for the Church to thrive in the future. Lay ecclesial ministers want shepherds that “smell like the sheep” as Pope Francis said to priests in the early days of his papacy, saying pastors should be, “people capable of living, of laughing and crying with [their] people, in a word, communicating with them.” Participants worry about pastors who are disconnected from the laity appearing to be more preoccupied with the business of the parish than their parishioners. And they were full of gratitude for those who relate well to staff and parishioners.

Some participants felt that ordination has become more important than having access to the Eucharist, an issue which has become an acute problem due to the lack of available priests and parish closings. They spoke of a hierarchical “authority of position” where many clergy - and even people in the pews - believe there would not be a need for lay ministers if only there were enough priests. One participant commented that it seemed to be more important to have a MAN (priest or deacon) in charge than a qualified leader.

Many of the participants felt the roles of lay ecclesial ministers are not being recognized, formed, or utilized because the emphasis is on the governance powers of the priest in the parish. Many felt some clergy see the only role of the laity is their missional call in the world and to their families. We heard about some clergy discriminating against women. Others spoke of some pastors lacking in the ability to work and collaborate well with them.

There were comments from participants that pastors and bishops are not willing or do not have the skills for quality dialogue with their flocks. A major frustration also expressed by the participants were the theological and cultural divides that are common between lay ecclesial ministers and the newly ordained and international priests which can make collaboration, mutual respect and inclusivity almost impossible.
Theme #7) Finances: Calling for an equitable use of human and material resources

   “Lay persons have the right to decent remuneration appropriate to their condition
   so that they are able to provide decently for their own needs and those of their family.
   They also have a right for their social provision,
   social security, and health benefits to be duly provided.”
   (CIC 231.2)

Canon Law is quite clear about the just treatment of employees, both lay and ordained. It has long been understood that parish staff positions can be underpaid or even expected to be voluntary. However, in NALM’s listening sessions it was the latter part of Canon 231.2 that surfaced. How is the church caring for the social as well as the temporal needs of the person of the minister? Both the Covid pandemic and the bankruptcies resulting from the clergy abuse scandal have greatly diminished the financial resources of many parishes and dioceses. Lay ecclesial ministers have been disproportionally impacted by layoffs, loss of benefits, increased responsibilities, and lack of support.

One troubling trend has been the closing of lay ministry formation programs, educational opportunities, mentorship programs and the like. Participants worry because they have not seen published pastoral vision or strategic plans for dealing with the lack of funds. They felt decisions were being made without consultation with those affected leading to inequities and a lack of collaboration. Another is the lack, in some places, of due process for either lay or ordained ministers to report abuses without fear of retribution.

Theme #8: Synodality: Walking together in the richness of community

   “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of
   the church of the 3rd millennium.”
   (Pope Francis, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” - 2018)

Synodality is seen as a welcome gift by the lay ecclesial ministers who shared their long-time experience with us. They spoke of the importance of the dialogue of life, encounter, and service and how enriching, informative, and enlightening such experiences are. They are grateful for those - lay and ordained alike - who are able to truly listen. As Bishop Daniel Flores noted: “As human beings we simply cannot know how to justly and compassionately respond to other human beings unless we are listening to them.”

Believing that listening is mandated by baptism, and not something one needs permission for, they greatly appreciated the safe spaces created in living out the synodal process. More than that, they are excited about the synodal process as a way of establishing coresponsibility.
Believing in the importance of life-giving, enriching dialogue, participants shared experiences of how dialogue leads to a deeper appreciation of our faith, and its expression in people’s stories as a source of hope.

These taught us the importance of building bridges and making connections, and how communities can grow through these processes, as they, themselves, experienced the result of honest sharing in a safe, sacred space. Joy, they believe, is one of the fruits of the synod process, just as there is joy in coming together for the celebration of the Eucharist. It is this accompaniment, communion, and participation in mission that people long for.