

THE CHURCH AS A FIELD HOSPITAL

CARING FOR OUR OWN

The Catholic Church and Lay Ecclesial
Ministers in the United States



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A Position Paper of the National Association for Lay Ministry addressed to our Bishops and those tasked with carrying out their directives

The Church is the visible sign of God’s reign in our world and although we are humbled by our human failings, the Gospel calls us to a renewed mission and vision. In union with God, led by the Holy Spirit, let us be healed in the name of Jesus and renewed as a Church to live and reflect God’s love in word and deed to all humanity. This work starts within our Church structures and will ripple out Gospel values to the world.

In 2007, the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM) issued a position paper, “Working in the Vineyard: A Statement on Employment Practices for Lay Ecclesial Ministers.” Today, in light of continuing challenges, including the abuse crisis, bankruptcies, declining membership, and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as Pope Francis’ call for synodality, we believe it is time to address the situations impacting lay ecclesial ministers, whom our organization serves and for whom we advocate.

NALM was founded in 1977 and our vision is to promote the co-responsibility of ordained and lay ministers to embody the saving mission of Christ for the world. We are a collaborative organization of lay, religious and ordained ministers that empowers, advocates for, and develops lay pastoral leadership and promotes the growth of lay pastoral ministers in the Catholic Church.

FIELD HOSPITAL

The image of a “field hospital” is especially helpful as we recognize the need to care for the spiritual and mental health of all ecclesial ministers in our current context. Pope Francis introduced this metaphor in 2013¹ – and it has been used by him and many others ever since as the need for pastoral care has increased globally in recent decades.

To be a healthy and vibrant community of missionary disciples, we must attend to the healing and pastoral care that is needed in our organizations. We must foster a vision and practice of collaboration that is grounded in the baptismal call of the People of God. It is clear that contemporary challenges impact all ordained, consecrated religious, and lay ecclesial ministers. Just as the Church itself is one Body, a communion, so too its leaders are linked in communion. Although this paper focuses on one of these groups, it does so in a manner that respects the needs for the health and wellness of all Church leaders.

FOCUS ON THE CO-WORKER



In the Catholic Church in the United States, tens of thousands of lay women and men serve in ministerial roles in dioceses, parishes, schools, and other ecclesial agencies. Their call has repeatedly been affirmed and clarified through their experience of serving the People of God, through their collaboration with others in ministry, and by the fruits of their labor. In the Code of Canon Law, canon 208 states

that “flowing from their rebirth in Christ, there exists among all the Christian faithful a true equality regarding dignity and action by which they all cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ according to each one’s own condition and function.”²

Pope Francis has called the world to synodality as we work to fulfill the Church’s mission, which will require an atmosphere of co-responsibility, collaboration and mutual respect to be primary focuses within our workplaces. “Best organizational practices are consistent with Gospel values”³ and, as a Church, we must be the national and global leader in fostering healthy and vibrant workplaces that are attractive and life-giving.

NALM worked with the bishops of the United States on their 2005 document on lay ecclesial ministry, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, which affirmed lay ecclesial ministry and called for its continued development. *Co-Workers* challenges “Church leaders, ordained and lay, to

become more intentional and effective in ordering and integrating lay ecclesial ministers within the ministerial life and structures of our dioceses.”⁴ The reality is that lay ecclesial ministers are now serving in every level of Catholic organizations across the U.S. and there are many best practices that can be learned from where this integration is working well. Organizations like NALM, the Leadership Roundtable, and the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators (NACPA) are excellent resources to help draw attention to these best practices and provide a compelling vision that is advocating for just, fair, and dynamic leadership from all who serve the Church’s mission in a variety of settings.

Furthermore, NALM supports the very language of “co-worker” as used in the USCCB document, itself inspired by Romans 16:3-16, where St. Paul acknowledges and thanks those who shared in his mutual efforts to spread the Gospel as “co-workers in Christ Jesus.” This notion of co-responsibility for the work fuels our current reflection on our situations.

The Church today needs lay ecclesial ministers who are “authorized by ecclesiastical authorities to carry out leadership responsibilities while serving publicly in the local Church”⁵ to be gifted, well-formed, skilled, and holy. These attributes contribute to a vision of discipleship that is grounded in Christian maturity and fosters effective leadership and professionalism. This must also be accompanied by a clear vision to foster cultural competencies for all lay ecclesial ministers and to ensure the development of lay ecclesial ministry in all major cultural families and communities across the U.S.

By promoting fair and just treatment for lay ecclesial ministers, the Church gives these co-workers the support they need to focus their time, energy, and gifts on the mission of Christ. The Church must therefore ensure that Gospel values inform the development of healthy workplaces and relationships.

FOCUS ON THE WORKPLACE

Creating and sustaining a healthy ministerial workplace is both a theological and practical task. The doctrine of the Trinity, as the perfect model of communion, is the lens through which the ministerial workplace is imagined. It concerns God’s life with us — and our life with each other. In the Paschal Mystery, we are invited into relationship with the Trinity. Here we experience the love of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Our workplaces must be environments where this joy and love of God are manifest through our participation together in covenant union with the Trinity. There should be no separation in the body of Christ, the Church, where Jesus is the head. As the body, we are called to work together in union with God and one another. A greater awareness and





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focus on our common baptism is needed to foster the kind of ecclesial structures that are humble, Christ-centered, and lead us on mission together.

Throughout history, the Church has upheld the dignity of the worker and human work. St. John Paul II stated, “The basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done, but the fact that the one doing it is a person.”⁶ Recognizing the lay ecclesial minister doing the work is important. While this is of great value, the value of the worker above all is essential. The vision of *Co-Workers* is inspiring and suggests forward movement and growth. However, as an association listening to the stories of lay ecclesial ministers, there is a clear disconnect that needs further understanding, honest conversation and prayer. Instead of making steady progress in implementing the vision of *Co-Workers*, there is a growing sense and empirical evidence that this vision is not being implemented universally by Church leaders. As we listen to the words of life-long servants of the Church in full-time lay ecclesial ministry, we hear their concerns for job security, a healthy workplace rooted in Gospel values and the importance of a living wage.

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microcosm of the reign of God in Catholic organizations where the values of the kingdom are lived and experienced. As time, energy, and prayer are invested in building up our co-responsible relationships and ensuring that the workplace is life-giving for all involved, the fruit of this good work will be experienced throughout the Church. To contribute to building up the ministerial work environment, lay ecclesial ministers commit to self-awareness. This requires both human and spiritual awareness as all change comes from within. At the same time, Catholic institutions and those who oversee lay ecclesial ministers must share responsibility for paying attention to the work-life and workplace-structures of its lay ecclesial ministers so that they and their gifts flourish for the good of our mission.

Lay ecclesial ministers have a deep sense of vocational call and purpose rooted in covenant, which is both personal and communal. Covenant-making requires care for the other as well as care for self, building relationships, and designing solutions that will have a lasting impact on the Church to be a just and compassionate ministerial workplace. These Church leaders need to be cared for properly and encouraged to use their gifts in leadership in the many places they serve.

WOUNDED HEALERS

Lay ecclesial ministers and their co-workers and communities have been called by Pope Francis to be a “field hospital” to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful. Today many in pastoral leadership find themselves simultaneously serving and needing a field hospital as “wounded healers.”⁷ In recent years, many lay ecclesial ministers and their co-workers have experienced deep wounds. The abuse scandals have deeply affected Church employees; bankruptcies and the loss of trust, and the global pandemic have created stressful realities. Some lay ecclesial ministers have lost positions or have been asked to take cuts in salary. And yet, often disenfranchised and even demoralized, many lay ecclesial ministers have worked to be faithful to their vocational call to serve.



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Ministry is naturally dynamic. Lay ecclesial ministers respond daily to the work defined in their job descriptions as well as the unexpected needs of the day.⁸ This requires openness and adjustment to what becomes immediately important. The pandemic gave us many examples of how ministry leaders found new ways to care for the People of God.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Many in the Church are not sufficiently prepared for work in the diverse cultural environments which are the reality for most communities across the United States. We must learn to form warm, personal relationships with those of all cultural families so that we all have the same ‘nearness and proximity’ to the Church.⁹ Lay ecclesial ministers work with people of various life experiences, ethnicities, citizenship status, races, sexual orientations, abilities, and socioeconomic status. Those in ministry can learn how to learn about different cultures, a necessary skill when grappling with problems in our wider culture such as white supremacy and systemic racism. Flexibility is needed to respond to different cultures, perspectives, and conflicting interests. When this is not practiced, our pastoral leaders often suffer emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of personal accomplishment.

We are called into the hard and necessary work of caring for our workplace relationships. Lay ecclesial ministers caught in the forces of disengagement may wonder if it is worth it and resort to the language of cynicism and defeat. Yet many excellent ministers believe that everyone has the capacity to be attentive to what weakens or strengthens their engagement. **The assertion about personal agency rests on our conviction that renewal, regeneration, and re-imagination are not out of our control, even in complex organizational settings.**

WORKPLACE CULTURE

We propose a practical work-life culture for the ministerial workplace that anticipates what is good for others and ourselves marked by eight key and challenging coordinates:



- 1. Community.** Where ministerial leaders thrive through support, collaboration, and positive feelings. Community provides the space for “impossible tasks” that become possible when done in a spirit of community with a vision of work which is always embraced with a higher purpose. Communion as a goal and practice is central to our tradition.
- 2. Control and agency** are necessary in making choices and decisions, solving problems, and fulfilling ministerial responsibilities while being accountable to the common good. Subsidiarity has a direct impact on job satisfaction and motivation.
- 3. Fairness.** When solidarity is lived, fairness communicates respect for co-workers. It requires the generosity of God. There are clear, consistent, and equitable guidelines for everyone. Resources are allocated according to generally understood and consistent procedures.
- 4. Recognition** is the financial and social respect for contributions in the workplace. A meaningful reward system acknowledges a person’s contributions to work and provides clear indications of what the organization values.
- 5. Values.** The common good should frame organizational life. When this is so, values are congruent on both a personal and organizational level and benefit the wider community. This fosters both internal and external integrity rooted in the mission.
- 6. Vocation** is a calling which forms a lay ecclesial minister’s lives in prayer and work, keeping God’s presence always before them. Recognition and active support for the vocational call of a lay ecclesial minister furthers a sense of personal satisfaction and positively impacts the ministerial organization.
- 7. Workload** must be addressed. On the seventh day, God rested (see Genesis 2:1-3). Workload for those in service to God should be balanced with time for family, recreation and Sabbath. A manageable workload is life-giving, providing the opportunity to do what is expected as well as what one enjoys.
- 8. Financial well-being** provides lay ecclesial ministers the security to balance day-to-day, month-to-month personal finances, and the ability provide for their future. A lay ecclesial minister should have the capacity to absorb a financial shock, should that come to pass. They should be able to invest their talent and energy in the work of the institution without fearing a lack of employment, health benefits, or retirement.

WORK LIFE PRACTICES

Lay ecclesial ministry “flows from an explicit faith commitment and is animated by the love of God and neighbor. It also entails an explicit relationship of mutual accountability to collaboration with the Church hierarchy.”¹⁰ We commit to aligning core Gospel values and work-life practices while offering a *Covenant for Sustaining a Healthy Ministerial Workplace* (Appendix I).¹¹ Both include the obligations that protect human dignity and the following practices offer essential aspects of workplace health and wellness.

Position Expectations: Lay ecclesial ministers should understand the scope of their position and the necessary flexibility to foster a healthy work/life balance.

All full and part-time lay ecclesial ministry positions need clear and realistic written position descriptions. These should define responsibilities, relationships, and expected work hours each week, including availability during evenings and weekends. Care should be taken for flexible work hours when staff is expected to work evenings and/or weekends. Clarity about the ability to negotiate additions or changes to position descriptions should be available initially and through an annual appraisal process. Part-time positions require even greater clarity since excessive demands are too often placed on part-time employees.

Compensation and Benefits: Fair and just compensation and employee benefit packages are essential to attracting and retaining well-trained lay ecclesial ministers.

As canon 231- §2 states, “...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 the right for their social provision, social security, and health benefits to be duly provided.”¹² Therefore, salary scales should offer a living wage, comparable to the salaries of other professionals with similar education, experience, responsibility, and geographic context. NACPA provides excellent resources to support fair compensation across the country. Adequate health insurance for lay ecclesial ministers and their families should be normative. Portable retirement plans that ideally would vest employees within five years are increasingly critical. Opportunities for employee contributions to retirement plans are also recommended. Financial resources need to be made available for ongoing spiritual, theological, human, intercultural, and pastoral formation of lay ecclesial ministers.

Incorporating and Supporting New Hires: Generous and friendly welcoming processes, a pledge of ongoing care and support, and employment best practices foster a vibrant workplace and member engagement.

Lay ecclesial ministers benefit from well-organized orientation programs



which explain employment policies and procedures, review the mission and vision of the ministry organization, and foster interpersonal and work familiarization. Lay ecclesial ministers and pastors need to be updated regularly on diocesan policy and notified of any changes. Diversity training should be required, with special attention to local racial and cultural diversity contexts. Regular gatherings of lay ecclesial ministers, together with their pastors, key members of the parish staff, diocesan staff, and the bishop(s) of the diocese, for prayer, appropriate consultation, professional enrichment, and facilitation of ministerial networking foster communion and collaboration.

Supervision and Evaluation: Meaningful employment and effective working relationships require regular interaction with one's supervisor and ongoing efforts in goal setting and evaluation.

Lay ecclesial ministers should know who their supervisor is and have regular interaction and support from this person.

All supervisors, both those who are ordained and lay leaders need to receive training in the supervision and evaluation of ministerial employees. Care should be taken to ensure the role of supervision is not overloaded on one person and be limited to no more than six people per supervisor. Reflective and respectful supervision and annual performance appraisals should be provided, including a written evaluation of the employee's service, a review and adjustment of the position description in light of actual work, an assessment of progress on work related and professional goals, and a plan for continued formation.



Transitions and Terminations: Special care should be given to ensure employees are respected, protected, and cared for during regular transitions and in the event of a termination.

The change of pastor/bishop and staff is a sensitive time for all involved: the departing pastor/bishop, the new pastor/bishop, departing and new parish staff, and the whole parish or diocesan community. Special orientation of pastors/bishops and staffs to the issues involved in the change

of executive leadership can provide guidance and support for all involved, build collaborative relationships, and foster a healthy transition. At times, outside assistance may be helpful for parishes, dioceses, and communities in transition. While some staff changes may occur during transitions, a change of pastor/bishop in itself is not sufficient cause or reason for the dismissal of a staff member. Likewise, since the work of lay ecclesial ministers is essential to the life of the Church, ample notification of retirement or resignation is encouraged.

Grievance Procedures: Lay ecclesial ministers should have access to individuals and procedures that ensure they are treated fairly in their employment through their diocesan human resources office.

Processes that identify and address any problem areas that arise in the relationship between pastor and staff or among staff members are beneficial to all. Often these issues can be addressed successfully through conflict resolution, professional development, or outside assistance. Clear grievance procedures are needed for all

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involved when unresolved conflicts arise, including the possibility of anonymous reporting. The development of an impartial due process board is encouraged and will assure a fair and balanced hearing of grievances. The U.S. Catholic Bishops have specifically addressed the need for security against arbitrary dismissal in *Economic Justice for All*, 103.

Ethical Practices: Healthy organizations and relationships foster just and fair practices that protect and affirm the dignity of each person.

Lay and ordained employees must respect the legal rights of others, treat one another and parishioners with respect, and strive to love one another as Christ loves us. Each should exercise responsible stewardship and ethical practices, including accountability, confidentiality, and transparency. The best of our democratic norms in the United States offers empowerment and protection that uphold human dignity and the ethical practices desired by the Church.

Professional Competence and Ongoing Development: Lay ecclesial ministers are called to human and professional maturity which flows from a living relationship with God and a life-long pursuit of personal, spiritual and professional growth.

As stated in canon 231- §1, "Lay persons who permanently or temporarily devote themselves to special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation required to fulfill their function properly and to carry out this function conscientiously, eagerly, and diligently."¹³ The national standards and core competencies for lay ecclesial ministers are founded on the same four standards that form training for ordination: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. The core competencies for each area express a holistic view of personal and professional growth that is essential for those called to work within the Catholic Church and associated organizations as lay leaders. An initial encounter with Christ, and the sense of being called to serve as a lay ecclesial minister, must be augmented by adequate training to begin in such a role and continue with life-long learning leading toward human and Christian maturity. This formation should be available to all the diverse cultures that make up the U.S. Catholic population and offered through organizational structures in an equitable manner. Funding for this training and formation needs to be a priority to ensure an adequate number of lay ecclesial ministers are serving the diverse needs of the Church.



AN INVITATION

This paper is an invitation to further action that comes from an inner vision fostered in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. Without a serious alignment of core Gospel values and workplace practices, the results might simply be a new layer of regulations. It is an invitation to ecclesial transformation and spiritual leadership. Lay ecclesial ministers and all “co-workers in Christ Jesus”¹⁴ hold the possibility of becoming a truly ministerial community, reflecting the household of God with right relationships, mutuality, and respect for the divine presence in each individual and our connectedness to others and to God.

We surrender the invitation of this position paper to the Holy Spirit, from the very place it comes forth from our prayer and discernment on how we need to move forward with a clear vision of the reign of God in our ecclesial structures and workplaces. Rooted in the Spirit and aligned with the Church’s recent synodal processes – with a profound attentiveness to the voice of God in our midst – may this invitation lead us to reflection, prayer, and a vibrant future living the mission of Christ in our Church and world.

Questions for Further Reflection

We invite all who read this paper to take a moment in quiet prayer and discernment to hear the call of the Holy Spirit on their hearts. These questions can be a helpful tool in that process.

1. What is one thing that gives me hope in this paper?
2. What is one thing that challenges me in this paper?
3. What is one step I can take to care for those who serve as lay ecclesial ministers in the Church today?
4. How can I take the contents of this paper into my personal and communal prayer life?
5. Consider ways you could share Appendix 1 and discuss it with your co-workers and prayerfully consider a next step in addressing any shortcomings.

APPENDIX

Covenant Assessment Guide: A Reflection Tool for Church Staffs

This assessment guide emerged from a project at Saint John's School of Theology in Collegeville, MN focused on developing and sustaining healthy ministerial workplaces. Its purpose is to bridge the distance between aspiration and action by fostering deep, honest reflection as church work groups seek to improve the health of their workplace. Each of the twelve principles reflects an important aspect of an embodied covenant. To use this guide, individuals on a staff first assess the principle based on his or her perception and experience, citing examples to support their choice of ranking. Individual assessments are then pooled to provide a staff with an overview of the organization's health. The results can help guide the group's discussion and its decisions for action.

Covenant for a Healthy Ministerial Workplace

A GUIDE FOR REFLECTIVE ASSESSMENT & PLANNING

How good and how pleasant it is, when brothers and sisters dwell together as one!

Psalms 133:1

Statement of Workplace Covenant

A vocation to pastoral ministry is a call to advance the mission of the Gospel. The work we share finds expression in evangelization and catechesis, worship, pastoral care, outreach, formation, community building, stewardship, and leadership. We measure our success by growth in knowledge of God, co-responsibility for the Reign of God, and spirit of hope we cultivate in ourselves and in those to whom we minister. Ours is collaborative work, as ordained and lay ecclesial ministers. We form a community of ministerial leaders bound together by a commitment to Christ, his Gospel, and the care of God's people. We will risk being transformed. We recognize that creating a healthy ministerial workplace is a responsibility each of us shares. In fulfilling that responsibility, we commit ourselves to the following principles below.

As you read each principle on the next page, circle the number that best describes where you feel you are on the continuum. 1 means you identify with the statement on the left; 5 means you feel best described by the statement on the right. 2, 3, or 4 mark various positions in between.

<p>1. As ordained and lay ecclesial ministers, we believe that the Sacrament of Baptism forms the common basis for our shared ministry in Christ who is priest, prophet and king.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>We function like a business.</p>
<p>2. We gather for prayer and learning, knowing that the inspiration of Scripture and theological reflection ground our capacity to sustain a healthy ministerial workplace.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>We work in silos.</p>
<p>3. Our mission and vision provide the values we seek to embody in every aspect of our work and ministerial leadership.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>There is little alignment between mission and action.</p>
<p>4. We practice the skills needed for effective teamwork and ministerial leadership, including strong interpersonal communication, intercultural competence, shared decision-making, management of conflict, and collaboration.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>We don't know how to work as a team.</p>
<p>5. We define together criteria for a manageable workload that enable us to meet the needs of the community as well as cultivate our individual gifts and professional development.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>We are regularly overextended.</p>
<p>6. We have a regular system of evaluation that provides insight into our work performance and finds resources to address areas of needed growth.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>There is no feedback loop.</p>
<p>7. To be in right relationship with all employees and volunteers, we practice being open to receiving and giving skilled and compassionate feedback.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>It is safer to say nothing.</p>
<p>8. We understand how the quality of our professional relationships significantly impacts those to whom and with whom we minister.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>We don't understand the ripple effect of our relationships.</p>
<p>9. Each of us actively contributes to developing and sustaining a healthy workplace.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>We do not share a sense of mutual responsibility for the health of our workplace.</p>
<p>10. We work at creating an inclusive community that actively promotes respect for diversity of cultural traditions, languages, theological visions, devotional and spiritual practices.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>We pay lip service to 'all are welcome'.</p>
<p>11. We provide for the just and financial wellbeing of all employees in a just and transparent manner.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>We have yet to apply stewardship principles with just salaries.</p>
<p>12. The principle of subsidiarity (when those closest to a problem or pastoral concern are consulted for deeper understanding) enriches our efforts to work in covenant.</p>	<p><u>1 2 3 4 5</u></p>	<p>Decisions are made in isolation.</p>

Endnotes

¹Antonio Spadaro, S.J., "A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis," *America: The Jesuit Review*, vol. 2019, no. 8 (September 30, 2013) paragraph 51.

²New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law, Edited by John Beal, James Coriden, & Thomas Green, Paulist Press 2000, pg. 258.

³USCCB, Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord, December 2005, pg. 61.

⁴Ibid, pg. 6.

⁵Ibid, pg. 54

⁶Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, September 14, 1981, paragraph 6.

⁷As outlined in Henri Nouwen's seminal work, *The Wounded Healer*, 1972.

⁸Marti R. Jewell and David A. Ramey, *The Changing Face of Church: Emerging Models of Parish Leadership*, Chicago: Paulist Press, 2010, 89.

⁹Antonio Spadaro, S.J., "A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis." *America: The Jesuit Review*, vol. 2019, no. 8, September 30, 2013.

¹⁰*Co-Workers*, p. 25

¹¹This model was developed by Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary, Collegeville, MN in partnership with the Association for Graduate Programs in Ministry, Diocese of Saint Cloud, Federación Institutos de Pastorales, and the National Association for Lay Ministry for the Symposium on Sustaining a Healthy Ministerial Workplace, 2020.

¹²New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law, Edited by John Beal, James Coriden, & Thomas Green, Paulist Press 2000, pg. 301.

¹³New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law, Edited by John Beal, James Coriden, & Thomas Green, Paulist Press 2000, pg. 301. (See also canon 229- §1/2/3 on the right of the lay faithful to theological formation).

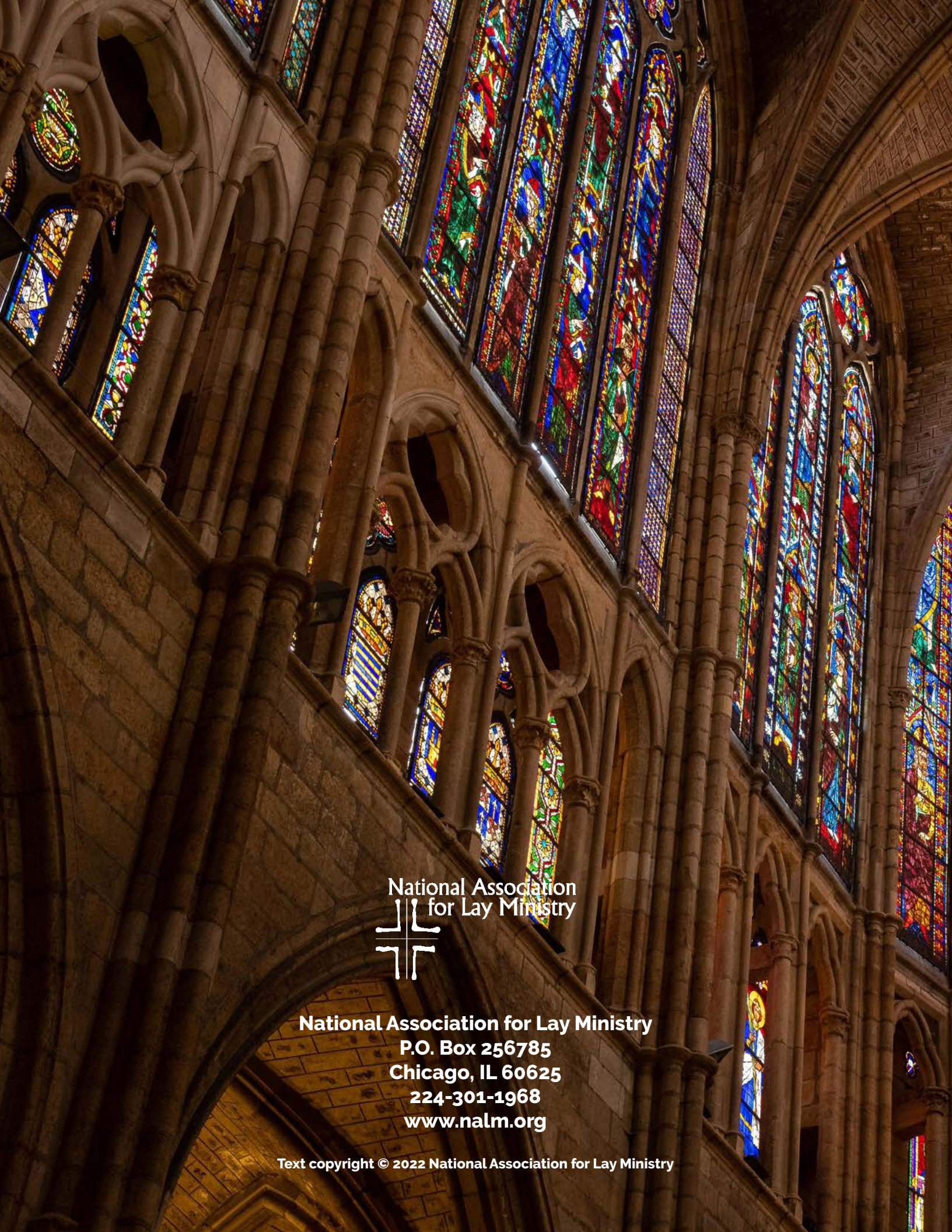
¹⁴Romans 16:3

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