

The Church as a Field Hospital: Caring for our Own
The Catholic Church and Lay Ecclesial Ministers in the United States

A Draft of a Position Paper of the National Association for Lay Ministry

In 2007, 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 crises, declining membership in the Church, and the COVID-19 pandemic as well as Pope Francis’ call for synodality, we believe it is time to review and revise this statement.

In the Catholic Church in the United States today, 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.

The National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM) applauds the bishops of the United States for their 2005 document on lay ecclesial ministry, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* that 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” (p. 6).

Further, the Church expects lay ecclesial ministers, who are “authorized by ecclesiastical authorities to carry out leadership responsibilities while serving publicly in the local Church” to be gifted, well-formed, skilled, and holy (p. 54). In this regard, we recognize competencies for cultural diversity as a priority for all lay ecclesial ministers. It is also essential that lay ecclesial ministers reflect the diversity of the Church.

By assuring 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. It is essential, then, that the Church assures that Gospel values inform the development of healthy working relationships. These values include: the dignity of the human person, the common good, justice, the rights of workers, collaboration, and participation in community.

Focus on the Co-Worker

Creating and sustaining a healthy ministerial workplace is both a theological and practical task. The doctrine of the Trinity, as the perfect model of community, is the lens through which ministerial workplace is imagined. It concerns God’s life with us —and our life with each other. Throughout history, the dignity of the worker and work have received the Church’s attention. Pope John Paul II wrote that “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” (*Laborem Exerces*, 1981, no. 6). Recognizing the lay ecclesial minister doing the work is essential. Too

often the tendency is to focus on the work. While the value of work is important, the value of the worker above all is essential.

Contracts for lay ecclesial ministers can help to clearly distinguish the rights, duties and compensation for lay ecclesial ministers. Yet, more is needed to collectively plan and order the ministerial workplace and build up co-worker relationships so that the ministry is life-giving for all. To contribute to building up the ministerial work environment, lay ecclesial ministers and their co-workers commit to self-awareness. This requires both human and spiritual awareness as all change begins from the inside out. At the same time, Catholic institutions and those who oversee lay ecclesial ministers must share responsibility for paying attention to the work-life and work-structures of its lay ecclesial ministers so that they and their gifts flourish for the good of 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 many places they serve, utilizing the gifts of all.

Lay ecclesial ministers and their co-workers and community have been called by Pope Francis (2013) 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. In recent years, many lay ecclesial ministers and their co-workers experienced deep wounds. The news story in August 2018 of more than 1,000 children and adolescents abused by more than 300 priests in Pennsylvania had a demoralizing impact of the Church. As diocese after diocese claimed bankruptcy, it was lay ecclesial ministers who lost their positions or were asked to take radical cuts in salary. Pope Francis named the clergy abuse scandal an “open wound” and wrote “it requires the church to be firm and decisive in the pursuit of truth and justice.”¹ And yet, often disenfranchised and even demoralized, lay ecclesial ministers were faithful to their vocational call to serve in the name of the Church.

Ministry by its very nature is not static. Lay ecclesial ministers respond daily to the work defined in their job descriptions as well as the unexpected needs of the day. This requires openness and adjusting to what becomes immediately important. For instance, intercultural competence is one of the most important skills for ministry in today’s world. Many are not sufficiently prepared for this work where it is essential to form warm, personal relationships with those who are different so that all have the same ‘nearness and proximity’ to the Church.² Lay

¹ Pope Francis, speech in Ireland, August 26, 2018

² Antonio Spadaro, S.J., “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis.” *America Magazine* September 30, 2013.

ecclesial ministers work with people of various life experiences, ethnicities, citizenship, races, sexual orientations, abilities and socioeconomic status. No one can ever arrive at a full understanding of the variety of cultures in the world, but those in ministry can *learn how to learn* about different cultures. This capacity to learn and lead has intensified as we grapple with the heightened awareness of white supremacy and systemic racism. Flexibility is needed to account for different cultures, perspectives, and conflicting interests. When this is not practiced, our pastoral leaders are often saddled with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of personal accomplishment.

We are called into the hard and necessary work to care 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. At the same time, 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.

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:

- **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.
- **Control** and agency are necessary in making choices and decisions, solving problems, and fulfilling ministerial responsibilities while being accountable to the common good. The locus of control has a direct impact on job satisfaction and motivation.
- **Fairness** communicates respect for co-workers. It requires the generosity of God. There are clear, consistent, and equitable guidelines for everyone, and resources are allocated according to generally understood and consistent procedures.
- **Reward** is the financial and social recognition 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.
- **Values** are congruent on both a personal and organizational level and benefit the wider community. This fosters an internal and external integrity that are rooted in the mission.
- **Vocation** is a calling and forms a lay ecclesial ministers’ life 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.
- **Workload** is 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.

- **Financial Well-Being** and security enable lay ecclesial ministers to have control over day-to-day, month-to-month personal finances. A lay ecclesial minister should have the capacity to absorb a financial shock. They should be able to invest their talent and energy in the work of the institution without fear for long-term employment, health benefits, or retirement.

Work Life Practices

Creating and sustaining a healthy ministerial workplace is both a theological and practical task. Lay ecclesial ministry, as *Co-Workers* describes, “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.”³ We commit to aligning core Gospel values and work-life practices and offer a new organizational practice that builds on the contractual model typically used in human resource practice while offering a *Covenant for Sustaining a Healthy Ministerial Workplace* (Appendix)⁴. Both include the obligations that protect human dignity. In *Just Ministry*, Gula writes “Covenant clearly keeps God as the source and center of this call, and it opens us to seeing all actions as responses to God and governed by what we can know about what God is calling us to do. Contracts have no necessary relationship to God.”⁵

1. **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 that 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.

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

Salary scales should offer a living wage, comparable to the salaries of other professionals with similar education, experience, responsibility, and geographic context.

³ *Co-Workers*, p. 25

⁴ This 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.

⁵ Richard M. Gula, *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010) p. 25.

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. Resources need to be made available for ongoing spiritual, theological, and pastoral formation of lay ecclesial ministers. Care should be taken to separate compensation from employment and parishioner giving if the employee is a member of the parish. Such efforts respect both the dignity of the worker and the Church's need for well-formed lay ecclesial ministers.

3. **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 fosters 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.

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

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

The change of pastor and staff is a sensitive time for all involved: the departing pastor, the new pastor, departing and new parish staff, and the whole parish community. Special orientation of pastors and staffs to the issues involved in the change of pastors 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 in transitions. *While some staff changes may occur during transitions, a change of pastor 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.

6. **Grievance Procedures:** Lay ecclesial ministers should have access to individuals and procedures that insure they are treated fairly in their employment through their Diocesan Human Resource 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 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 addressed the need for security against arbitrary dismissal in *Economic Justice for All*, 103.

7. **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 United States democratic norms offers empowerment and protection that uphold human dignity and ethical practices.

8. **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.

The national standards and core competences 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 a life-long learning leading toward human and professional 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 insure an adequate number of lay ecclesial ministers serving the diverse needs in the Church.

This draft of the position paper is a call to action that comes first from an inner vision. 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 their co-workers hold the possibility of becoming a ministerial community, reflecting the household of God with right relationships, mutuality, and respect for the divine presence in each individual and the connectedness to others and God.

Reflection Guide

The statements below are meant for your organization's leadership to reflect on as you formulate your feedback. Please offer your input through our website:

<https://www.nalm.org/surveys/?id=draftresponse>.

Organization Leadership Reflections:

1. The most invigorating or helpful part of this position paper for our organization is...
2. This position paper is challenging to our organization because...
3. We hope that you will take a position on these additional ideas and experiences...

Member Reflections:

1. I wonder...
2. I hope...
3. The significance of diversity in the Church and with lay ecclesial ministers is
 - a. Well positioned
 - b. Needs a stronger position
4. To build greater ecclesial unity in the Church, this position paper offers...

Appendix I

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!*

Psalm 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, 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.

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.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 <u>5</u>	We function like a business.
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.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 <u>5</u>	We work in silos.

3. Our mission and vision provide the values we seek to embody in every aspect of our work and ministerial leadership.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	There is little alignment between mission and action
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.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	We don't know how to work as a team.
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,	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	We are regularly overextended.
6. We have a regular system of evaluation that provides insight into our work performance and finds resources to address areas of needed growth.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	There is no feedback loop
7. To be in right relationship with all employees and volunteers, we practice being open to receiving and giving skilled and compassionate feedback.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	It is safer to say nothing
8. We understand how the quality of our professional relationships significantly impacts those to whom and with whom we minister.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	We don't understand the ripple effect of our relationships.
9. Each of us actively contributes to developing and sustaining a healthy workplace.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	We do not share a sense of mutual responsibility for the health of our workplace.
10. We work at creating an inclusive community that actively promotes respect for diversity of cultural traditions, languages, theological visions, devotional and spiritual practices.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	We pay lip service 'to all are welcome'.
11. We provide for the just and financial wellbeing of all employees in a just and transparent manner.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	We have yet to apply stewardship principles with just salaries.
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.	<u>1</u> 2 3 4 5	Decisions are made in isolation.