

Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord—Ten Years Later: What Do We Have to Celebrate?

Keynote Address for: A Celebration of Co-Workers in the Vineyard

Presented by: H. Richard McCord

St. John's University School of Theology and Seminary, Collegeville, MN

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*H. Richard McCord was honored at this event with the **Wisdom and Service Award**, presented in honor of his leadership in church ministry for more than forty years and his significant contributions to the wisdom of the Church in its formation and development of lay ecclesial ministers.*

Introduction

Thank you. I am deeply grateful for the “Wisdom and Service” award. I love the joining of those two realities: wisdom and service. I believe that wisdom is a gift never given for its own sake but for some service to the community and, in addition, that service can lead to an ever deeper wisdom. May these two gifts and their fruits be realized in all of us, in all we do!

I feel especially fortunate to receive this award in a year when we are celebrating several important anniversaries. First, and most relevant to this gathering and to your ministries, is the 10th anniversary of the U.S. Bishops’ statement on lay ecclesial ministry, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. Barbara Sutton has asked me to offer some ideas about this anniversary by answering the question: what do we have to celebrate now ten years later?

But, before taking up her request, I’d like to mention two other important anniversaries that occur this year because these help me to contextualize the significance of *Co-Workers* and to reflect with you on what it is we can celebrate on its 10th birthday.

In this year of 2015 we’re also observing the 35th anniversary of the first statement the U.S. Bishops ever wrote about laypersons’ roles in society and in the church. I’m referring to *Called and Gifted* which was published in 1980 and then updated in 1995. *Called and Gifted* was a brief, affirming, and ground-breaking statement written to mark another important anniversary, namely, the closing 15 years earlier of the Second Vatican Council and the council’s promulgation of a first-ever *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*.

So, happily, in this present year we now have a convergence of three important and related anniversaries. Fifty years ago Vatican II opened a new door inviting lay people to come in from the cold, to move from the margins of church life to its center. Thirty-five years ago our bishops welcomed laity at the threshold of that new door and described in general terms many new possibilities for them. And, finally, a mere ten years ago the bishops recognized that lay women and men had already crossed the threshold and had embarked on various pathways of discipleship – one of which is the specific pathway and vocation of lay ecclesial ministry.

So, recognizing the sequence and significance of these three anniversaries, I'm proposing that the main thing we're called to celebrate ten years after *Co-Workers* is the ongoing and widely-shared journey of faith – both personal and ecclesial – that began a half-century ago. It's a journey in which the dual realities of being called and gifted have been a strong, consistent point of reference for the Catholic layperson's experience and identity. It's also a journey that reached a point of timely focus, needed clarity, and official recognition for a specific group of U.S. Catholic laity when the bishops issued *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*.

Co-Workers is a high point in our journey, to be sure, but it wasn't the starting point and neither will it be the ending point. It's one of many points, many places on this journey we've been traveling. And so, in addition to the achievement of *Co-Workers*, it's the total 50 year journey that needs to be celebrated with realism and hope, with pride and gratitude. For indeed, it is truly right and just, always and everywhere, that we do so!

But what more specifically can we say about this journey so as to understand and appreciate what we're celebrating? In the remainder of my time I'm going to use the journey metaphor to respond to these questions:

- 1) What kind of a journey have we been taking?
- 2) What have been some milestones on our journey?
- 3) What progress and what challenges have we experienced on the journey?
- 4) Who have been our companions on the way?
- 5) And finally, what still lies ahead on our journey?

(1) What kind of a journey have we been taking?

Has our journey as lay ecclesial ministers had a goal, a sense of direction? Has it been a purposeful one and not an experience of wandering in the desert?

Yes! I think we've been heading in a direction that is worthy of all our striving. The bishops imagined *Co-Workers* as a roadmap for the journey which they described as a call to "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." And, as a corollary to this, they also said they wanted their document to express their "strong desire for the fruitful collaboration of ordained and lay ministers who, in distinct but complementary ways, continue in the church the saving mission of Christ for the world, [which is] his vineyard" (*Co-Workers*, pp. 5-6).

Cardinal Avery Dulles, of happy memory, played a major role in the early development and eventual approval of *Co-Workers*. Shortly after it was published he gave his 2006 McGinley lecture in which he expressed his hope that, as a result of *Co-Workers*, lay ecclesial ministers would now receive "the recognition they so richly deserve" and that this recognition by the

church would in turn “help the laity [as a whole] to rise to the challenges and opportunities that are theirs today.”

Finally, noted theologian Dr. Richard Gaillardetz has described *Co-Workers* as an important moment in the process of ecclesial reception. This process was taking place before the bishops’ statement was ever conceived and continues now ten years after it.

And so, based on these notions and also on personal experience, I’d say that the kind of journey we celebrate today is a search for fuller reception by the church, more lasting integration into its structures, more effective ordering by its hierarchy, and overall greater recognition and affirmation of what the bishops first welcomed in 1980 as the “gift” of lay ecclesial ministry.

To describe the journey in these terms is to acknowledge that lay ecclesial ministry is indeed a new reality in the church – something that takes time to absorb and make sense of. It began to take shape in our country shortly after the close of Vatican II with the emergence of parish directors of religious education (DREs) and youth ministers. Gradually our bishops acknowledged this significant new development and began to study it. Similar developments occurred in other countries as lay persons began to undertake various roles of pastoral leadership for which they had received the necessary formation and authorization.

When thinking about the relative newness of lay ecclesial ministry, well-known theologian Dr. Edward Hahnenberg has called the emergence of lay ecclesial ministry one of several very important ministerial transformations in the church’s history. Why? Because it’s a new way of experiencing ministry, a new way of thinking about the scope of ministry, and a new set of people doing it. Ed compares this to the transformation in ministry that took place with the rise of monasticism in the 5th century, or the birth of mendicant religious orders in the 13th century, or the flowering of women’s religious communities in the 19th century. In each of these cases, ministry was re-imagined and expanded. The new form being introduced did not replace the previous one but rather the two began to coexist – with the newer form gradually being integrated into the life of the church. And now, centuries later, it’s as if it was always there! Dr. Hahnenberg expresses the hope, which I share, that lay ecclesial ministry will follow the same path.

This gradual integration into the church’s life is what we call ecclesial reception. It’s the journey we’re making right now. We have historical precedents for it. And so we can appreciate why it takes time. Fifty years represents a task well begun but far from done. Nonetheless, today we can celebrate a purposeful journey.

Now let’s turn our attention to the milestones we might observe on our journey...

(2) What have been some significant milestones on the journey?

Milestones mark our forward progress and remind us of how far we’ve come. In our 50 year history there have been many and so I want to name just a few.

First, there are the official church statements from both the universal and the local levels. These are building blocks that rest one upon another and progressively fill out the structure. Together they have shaped and directed our journey.

From Vatican II we have the *Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* and the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*. These enunciated important teachings on the universal call to holiness, the participation of laity and clergy in the one ministry of Christ as priest, prophet, and king, the place of charisms in the life of the community, and the right of lay persons to be appointed to public roles of service in the church.

In the years after Vatican II the U.S. bishops began a uniquely inductive process of observing, describing and reflecting upon the different forms that lay ministry was taking. As early as 1980 with their first statement, *Called and Gifted*, they identified a group of laity who were preparing themselves for professional ministry in the church. They called these persons “ecclesial ministers” and welcomed them as a new development and as a gift to the church (*Called and Gifted*, p. 5).

Fifteen years later in *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* the bishops spoke about this new development in greater detail distinguishing between two legitimate areas of lay activity, namely, witness and service in society and what they called “ecclesial ministry” in the church. This ministry, they pointed out, is being exercised in various areas of church life and, for many persons, it means more than a job because it is experienced as a true calling from God (*Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*, p. 17).

Co-Workers, as you are well aware, builds on these two documents and takes a giant leap forward by offering a comprehensive theological rationale for lay ecclesial ministry that is anchored in the conciliar and post-conciliar magisterium. It also sets forth practical guidance for the discernment, education, formation, authorization, and employment of lay ecclesial ministers.

In addition to these important milestones represented by statements from the bishops, there is a second type of milestone consisting of research projects (some of which were sponsored by the bishops), national symposia (notably the ones convened by this university’s School of Theology) and the contributions made by many national ministry associations over the course of the past four decades. An example of the latter is the creation of a national certification process for several different lay ecclesial ministries.

Pastoral research, deepening theological reflection and precision, and the convening of individuals and organizations around issues and projects – all of these activities have advanced the process of ecclesial reception. Each of them has marked an important and necessary step in our journey. Together they have given us a way to measure progress. They are integral to the journey of lay ecclesial ministry we celebrate today.

So, yes, we can speak of progress on the journey but we also have to acknowledge challenges that have meant setbacks or produced course corrections. Most journeys include both elements. Let’s turn our attention to them and ask the next question.

(3) What progress have we made and challenges have we experienced?

The growth and development of lay ecclesial ministry over the past fifty years is something that we can measure – thanks to periodic national research conducted first by the National Pastoral Life Center and then by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). Here are a few highlights about parish-based lay ecclesial ministry from a recent report by CARA at the end of 2014.

- 1) Today there are more than 39,600 lay ecclesial ministers in the U.S. This is nearly double the number there were in 1990.
- 2) Lay ecclesial ministers account for 40% of all parish staff members involved in ministry. Nearly 60% work full-time. 80% of them are women.
- 3) Although the median age of the parish lay ecclesial minister is 55 (still less than priests or religious), there is an increase in younger generations with an estimated 40% being under the age of 50.
- 4) The younger generation of parish lay ecclesial ministers is more racially and ethnically diverse. While only about 10% of those currently serving are Hispanic, nonetheless 47% of the 22,000 persons now enrolled in formation programs are Hispanic. So the future face of lay ecclesial ministry will more closely resemble the face of the U.S. Catholic church.
- 5) Because a younger generation of lay ecclesial ministers tends to be better educated, the total percentage holding graduate degrees is nearly 50%. Over 75% of students enrolled in diocesan ministry formation programs say they receive at least a partial financial subsidy from their diocese.
- 6) In the past 15 years there has been a steady increase in the percentage of priests who say that parish life would be enhanced by more full-time lay ecclesial ministers and that, in general, the church needs to move faster in empowering lay persons for ministry.
- 7) The percentage of lay ecclesial ministers who consider their work to be a vocation, not just a job, continues at a high level with 89% responding yes to this statement.
- 8) Around 90% of lay ecclesial ministers report a high level of satisfaction with their parish and about the same percentage of parishioners report that the ministry they receive is good or excellent.

All of these data points are strong indicators that lay ecclesial ministers – especially those serving in parish positions – have become an essential and defining characteristic of how the church carries out its mission here in the United States. There is no longer any reason – if there ever was one – to regard them as temporary help, as substitutions for clergy, or as aberrations. The harvest is still great and many different kinds of workers are being called into it at every hour of the day.

While we have good reason to celebrate these signs of growth, we also need to acknowledge the bumps in the road, the detours and the roadblocks we've been encountering on the journey. Here are a few that occur to me:

- 1) The "language" of lay ecclesial ministry still may not resonate well enough in minority communities. I have been part of many conversations in which African Americans and Latinos say that they don't see themselves reflected in much of what *Co-Workers* says. There is a perception that the bar is set too high when it comes to educational and professional credentials. Leadership that arises from and is formed by grass-roots experience does not seem to be valued enough.
- 2) Lay ecclesial ministers themselves regard a diocesan process of authorization as extremely important for validation, support, and for the clarification of relationships. However, nearly 40% of dioceses have no formal process and only 27% have a written policy on authorization. Only 20% of lay ecclesial ministers report that their diocese has a certification requirement and 40% say that there is no public commissioning or installation ceremony for lay ecclesial ministers. In addition, we are seeing very slow response to the national certification process for lay ecclesial ministers. Clearly, we have a long way to go regarding diocesan and national support for the bishop's responsibility to bring order to the ministries in his care.
- 3) Members of the younger generation who are moving into lay ecclesial ministry are doing so after earning academic degrees as preparation for their work. But this means that most of them are carrying debt from student loans. But the median full-time salary for a parish lay ecclesial minister is a little less than \$28,000. This would be even more problematic except for the fact that 81% of married lay ecclesial ministers have a spouse who is bringing home a second income. But how long is this situation sustainable for younger families who want to have children? Continuing to pay better salaries is essential but so also is finding additional ways to support the livelihood of a lay ecclesial minister.
- 4) I'm not in a position to say how much or how little the current crop of bishops supports what their older brethren wrote in *Co-Workers*. I've heard anecdotally that some have stricken "lay ecclesial minister" from their diocesan vocabulary and/or have withdrawn support from diocesan formation programs. It's not always clear what this means. So, as we measure the steps forward we've taken, we also note the ones that slowed our progress or even moved us backward – all the while trusting that most of the forces are propelling us ahead on our journey. Let's celebrate them and persevere through the others!

To speak of perseverance reminds me to move on to my next question about people who have persevered with us on the journey of lay ecclesial ministry and to ask who are some of these heroic women and men.

(4) Who have been our companions on the journey?

At the risk of leaving out many I can only name a few as examples. No doubt you know of many more!

In the early days of the 1970s and 80s what we now call lay ecclesial ministry was championed by gifted, generous priests and religious. Among them were Brother Loughlan Sofield, Sr. Florita Rodman, Msgr. Philip Murnion, Fr. Joe Merkt, Bishops Edward McCarthy, Raymond Lucker, and Albert Ottenweller – all of whom brought theological and pastoral expertise to help a new group of church ministers become established. Beginning around the same time and extending for many years thereafter we were also blessed with the leadership of Dolores Leckey at the Bishops' Conference, Dr. Zeni Fox for theological scholarship and teaching, Lucien Roy, Zoila Diaz, John Reid, and Sue Elsesser for building and leading the National Association for Lay Ministry.

As the U.S. bishops began a process in the mid-1990s that eventually led to producing *Co-Workers* we came to recognize the contributions of people like Fred Hofheintz of the Lilly Endowment, Sr. Amy Hoey, Dr. Ed Hahnenberg, Dr. Marti Jewell, Dr. Bill Johnston, Sr. Brid Long, Jean Marie Weber, Cardinals Francis George and Avery Dulles, Bishops Phil Straling, Joe Delaney, and Gerry Kicanas – all of whom joined forces with many others to bring us to where we are at this 10th anniversary moment.

Then too, as we lift up these individual companions on our journey, I must also mention some collective, organizational companions which have contributed significantly. I'm thinking particularly of this university's School of Theology for sponsoring and organizing two national symposiums and for two research forums that produced books of great scholarly and pastoral value. Many of us are immensely grateful for the leadership and creativity of Jeff Kaster, Bill Cahoy, Barbara Sutton, Vic Klimoski, and the community here at St. John's.

Then, too, CARA's consistent research efforts and reports on parish life and ministry have made it a welcome companion on the journey. The same is true of the National Association for Lay Ministry for convening five national ministry associations to carry out the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership project which came to a conclusion in 2012. And a shout out is also in order today to the Canon Law Society of America for its valuable work on the authorization of lay ecclesial ministers that was reported on and discussed yesterday in the program.

Finally, let's recognize how we have been companions to one another in the process of bringing lay ecclesial ministry where it is today. Gatherings like this one are welcome oases on the journey where we can offer mutual support, share stories, learn new ideas and practices, engage in conversation, commiseration, and celebration. Thank you, St. John's University and Benedictine community for all these opportunities!

Our journey has been truly blest to include so many individual and corporate companions who have pointed the way and given us reasons to keep going forward.

With that I come to my final question:

(5) What lies ahead of us on our journey?

I said earlier that the publication of *Co-Workers* was not the end of our journey. It did, however, introduce a renewed sense of energy and a sharper focus for continuing our work. It has been, in a very true sense, a new point of departure.

Why is this so? If we acknowledge that the thrust of our journey is the full integration or ecclesial reception of lay ecclesial ministry into the life of the church, then I suggest that *Co-Workers* presents a methodology for doing precisely this. It's a three-step process. The very structure of *Co-Workers* exemplifies the process. And I think the same process provides us with an agenda at least until the next significant anniversary!

The three steps are these: *naming, claiming, and sustaining* lay ecclesial ministry. Taken together, they are the components of what I mean by ecclesial reception. They are the general tasks we need to address if we want to move closer to the goal of integrating lay ecclesial ministry into the life of the church, as *Co-Workers* proposes.

Co-Workers itself begins by naming or identifying the realities associated with lay ecclesial ministry. How did it arise within the church? What are its distinctive characteristics? How is it similar to and different from other kinds of lay participation? What sorts of ministerial roles might be examples of lay ecclesial ministry? How many people are serving in these roles? *Co-Workers* draws upon the experience of the U.S. church to answer these and other questions. It names our experience, it honors it, and makes it a starting point for deeper reflection. But we know that the realities are ever changing.

Therefore, naming is an ongoing task. Through research, through collecting the stories of lay ministers themselves, through convening people for study and conversation, through staying in touch with new questions, new models, new voices, new issues in the church and world, we continue the task of naming the realities and using them as the starting point for responding (following the pattern of *Co-Workers*) in the next two steps of the process, namely, claiming and sustaining.

Claiming – the second step -- is a task of affirming and legitimizing. To claim is to bring someone or something into a firmer relationship, making a connection between it and a larger whole. *Co-Workers* does precisely this for lay ecclesial ministry when it explains the new reality in theological terms, showing how it can be understood as consistent with an ecclesiology of communion and mission. This activity sets lay ecclesial ministry on a firm foundation and helps us to claim it as legitimate.

Claiming, too, is an ongoing task. We will need to continue the conversations that help us to connect lay ecclesial ministry with what is best in our theological tradition and canonical practice. So I encourage universities, schools of theology and ministry, and other institutions to

continuing pursuing this goal, especially in collaboration with bishops, priests, deacons, and lay ecclesial ministers themselves.

Finally, there is the third step of sustaining what we're naming and claiming. This is the step of setting up institutional structures and services that support lay ecclesial ministers. *Co-Workers* begins to identify some of these such as a diocesan certification process, a procedure for authorization, a set of policies for the workplace, formation programs with a comprehensive curriculum, methods to help a person to discern a vocational path, and so on.

I think we're just at the early stage of figuring out what is needed at institutional levels and responding in a helpful way. There are still many gaps in coverage. Too many lay ecclesial ministers are still left to fend for themselves and do not experience two-way accountability between themselves and church authorities. So, collecting, analyzing, and publicizing good models and practices for the sustainability of lay ecclesial ministry as a stable feature in church life will continue to be essential.

Working on each of the three tasks of naming, claiming, and sustaining will move us forward on our journey especially when lay ecclesial ministers come together in peer gatherings such as this one today and the ones which took place here in recent months. These conversations are so essential now and in the years ahead for mutual support, for sharpening a sense of identity, for building collaborative skills, and for renewing our commitment to be the missionary-oriented church of mercy to which Pope Francis so insistently calls us.

As that famous gospel hymn says: "we've come this far by faith...and can't turn around now!"

So, on the 10th anniversary of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* we've got a lot to celebrate. It's not only the continuing value of this document from the bishops that we celebrate but also the continuing journey of 50 years so far in which *Co-Workers* has become a guiding beacon.

Let's celebrate that journey – a journey with a clear direction, a journey marked by many important milestones, a journey that includes steps forward, backward, and sideways, a journey made with so many blessed companions, and a journey that's far from completed.

And, with that in mind, let's re-commit to journeying onward in faith, in hope, in love as co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord.

Amen. Thank you.