

More Catholic Parishes Are Hiring Lay Ministers Than Ever Before

A National Look at Trends in Lay Ministry



Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest." (Matthew 9:37-38)

The percentage of U.S. Catholic parishes that employ lay ministers at least 20 hours per week has grown significantly, from 54 percent in 1990 to 66 percent in 2005, according to a new study conducted by the National Pastoral Life Center for the nation's Catholic bishops. *Lay Parish Ministers: A Study of Emerging Leadership* (published November 1, 2005), finds that today 30,632 lay ecclesial ministers work in such paid positions, a 1.61 to 1 ratio of lay ecclesial ministers to parishes. The percentage of parishes with lay ecclesial ministers is rising in every locale, especially in the inner city, urban business districts, and small towns. Most lay ecclesial ministers (74 percent) work full-time. "Lay" in the study includes both laypeople in the ordinary use of the term and also religious sisters and brothers. One especially significant finding is the marked decrease in the number of women religious working in parishes. In 1990, women religious constituted 41 percent of the lay ecclesial ministers, but in 2005, women religious make up just 16 percent.

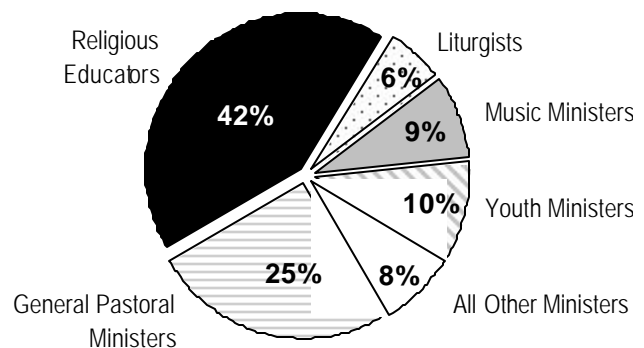
Over the last fifteen years, while the number of resident priest-pastors and of parishes has decreased, the Catholic population has increased. How have parishes provided quality worship, education, and other services? Part of the answer is that the number of lay ecclesial ministers has grown markedly. Today parish priests and lay ecclesial ministers, 80 percent of whom are women, are working together. The findings show that the proportion of those laywomen, who are not vowed religious, in parish ministry has grown from 44 percent in 1990 to 64 percent in 2005. The percentage of laymen in parish ministry has also grown, from 15 percent in 1990 to 20 percent in 2005.

The Untold Story

While media have focused on the shortage of clergy, the untold story is that laity have entered parish ministry in numbers never seen before to work with ordained priests and permanent deacons. Some people have speculated that the increasing number of lay ecclesial ministers may resolve the critical shortage of ordained priests. "Not really," says the Rev. Eugene F. Lauer, director of the National Pastoral Life Center, "Lay ministers do not take the place of priests. Rather they are doing the ministries that come from their baptismal commitment that both complement and support the central role of the priest leader of the parish, especially in his ministry of presiding at Eucharist and sacraments."

Religious educators (42 percent) make up the largest percentage of lay ecclesial ministers, followed by general pastoral ministers (25 percent), youth ministers (10 percent), music ministers (9 percent), liturgists (6 percent), and all others (8 percent). Parish Life Coordinators, classified under "general pastoral ministers," comprise 2.5 percent of all lay ecclesial ministers.

Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministers in the U.S. by Category
(Those working at least 20 hours per week in paid positions)



The national study also documents the lay ministers' education and preparation, experience in the workplace, financial compensation and benefits, and job satisfaction.

Will the Infusion of Laity Last?

Is lay pastoral leadership a passing fad? Consider these findings: nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of lay ecclesial ministers believe they are pursuing a lifetime career in ministry; 54.2 percent of those say that a "call from God" led them to parish ministry; and 51 percent of lay ecclesial ministers have obtained their highest degree in a pastoral field. Moreover, 18,847 laity are now enrolled in degree or certificate programs in ministry.

The author of the study is Dr. David DeLambo, a sociologist who co-authored two previous parish studies with Msgr. Philip J. Murnion, founder of the National Pastoral Life Center. DeLambo is the Associate Director of the Pastoral Planning Office for the Diocese of Cleveland.

Going Deeper:

1. Can you think of activities that take place in your parish today through the leadership of lay ecclesial ministers that used to be conducted by priests? How do you feel about this transition?
2. Have you felt a "call from God" to more fully live out your baptismal commitment at the parish or in other areas of your life? Tell about how you have responded to that call.

A copy of the study's Executive Summary, published in CHURCH magazine as part of a 16-page booklet called "Ministries: A Parish Guide," can be ordered for \$2.50. The complete study, Lay Parish Ministers, is available to the public for \$19.95 plus shipping+handling. www.nplc.org (new publications)