

Benefits of Certification

1.1 Benefits to the Church in the United States

Certified Lay Ecclesial Ministers contribute to the continued growth and definition of the rightful position of Lay Ecclesial Ministry in the Church. This responds to a need identified in *Parishes and Parish Ministers: A Study of Lay Ministry*, National Pastoral Life Center 1999, reiterated in *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions*, NCCB/USCC 1999, and reemphasized in *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, USCCB, 2005 (hereafter *Co-Workers*). Certified Lay Ecclesial Ministers also help Catholic Church entities to be in compliance with norms and guidelines for formation as stated in *The Code of Canon Law* and *Co-Workers*:

Lay persons who devote themselves permanently or temporarily to some special service of the Church are obliged to acquire appropriate formation which is required to fulfill their function properly and to carry it out conscientiously, zealously, and diligently (*Code of Canon Law*, 231 #1; *Co-Workers*, p.33).

1.2 Benefits to Provinces, Regions and State Catholic Conferences

When provinces, regions and state Catholic conferences work together toward certification, all can benefit from, and promote the following values as stated in *Co-Workers*:

Whenever possible, provinces or regions can develop consistent certification standards and procedures so that lay ecclesial ministers might transfer from one diocese to another in the region with the approval of the sending and receiving bishops (p. 57).

Certification promotes collaboration and cooperation between arch/dioceses within provinces and regions and statewide Catholic conferences through utilization of the common certification standards and specialized competencies published by the Alliance for the Certification of Lay Ecclesial Ministers (The Alliance), which can be found on the website (www.lemcertification.org).

The Alliance received approval for its revised standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers for the new national certification process from the USCCB Commission on Certification and Accreditation in fall 2011. The standards were written collaboratively by the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions (FDLC), the National Association of Pastoral Musicians (NPM), the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL), and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM). The intended value of these common certification standards and specialized competencies include giving directions to the future of Lay Ecclesial Ministry in the church; recognizing and affirming those already in ministry; and promoting faithful and competent Lay Ecclesial Ministers who are accountable to standards and to the arch/diocese or organization that certify them.

USCCB Subcommittee standards require arch/diocesan offices and national organizations to provide verification that the assessment of specialized ministers seeking certification is based on the competencies outlined by The Alliance. The website is the primary tool for making the national certification process accessible to Lay Ministers across the country. All of the materials pertaining to the standards and certification process are available on the site.

1.3 Benefits to the Local Church

Certification is a process that enables arch/diocesan officials to formally identify and authorize lay women and men for key positions and major leadership roles for specialized ecclesial ministries. Arch/diocesan directors offer vital support to parishes by assisting them in the identification of the need for and availability of certified Lay Ecclesial Ministers with specialized competencies. The following quotation in *Co-Workers* points to this important task:

A diocese must first identify those roles that, in the judgment of the diocesan bishop, are so essential to collaborating in the pastoral care of people that diocesan policies are needed to ensure that those who are given these roles have the appropriate education, formation, experience, and ecclesial recognition to meet the needs of the community (p. 56).

The USCCB Subcommittee provides arch/diocesan directors with certification standards to assess the competency of candidates, and to state their own arch/diocesan standards for levels of academic formation and skill training required of certified ministers. Arch/diocesan office directors, as agents of their bishops, are enabled to provide clear standards for formation that fit the needs and special circumstances of the local church as stated in *Co-Workers*:

The publication *National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers Serving as Parish Catechetical Leaders, Youth Ministry Leaders, Pastoral Associates, and Parish Life Coordinators* addresses these and related qualities as they are developed through ministry formation programs. The standards are a resource that can be helpful in identifying prospective lay ecclesial ministers as well as in setting goals for the formation and certification of those who are completing programs.

The diocese can establish a program that candidates must complete prior to consideration for service within the diocese (p. 30, p. 56-57)

Certification testifies that Lay Ecclesial Ministers have received the appropriate formation required to enable them to be competent ministers in the area of specialization for which they are prepared. The certification of Lay Ecclesial Ministers may also provide legal safeguards for both new and existing individual Lay Ecclesial Ministers and arch/diocesan parish communities. *Co-Workers* points out the importance of formation in this manner:

Ensuring the quality of pastoral care provided by lay ecclesial ministers requires a process for deciding that a given candidate has the education, formation, and professional skills necessary to serve in a particular role. This involves establishing the requirements for education, formation, and experience for specific ministerial roles and evaluating the extent to which individuals meet these requirements. This may vary from diocese to diocese, but the competence of those who serve needs to be verified in some way.

The diocesan bishop has several options for setting certification requirements. Some examples for specific ministry roles can be found in the certification standards established by national associations serving lay ministers in general or role-specific sub-groups and approved by the USCCB Commission on Certification and Accreditation (p. 56). (*Update*

note: This is now done by the USCCB Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service)

Arch/diocesan directors can benefit from the assessment process of candidates. This process will assist them in responding to the continuing education and formation needs of the Lay Ecclesial Ministers. This ongoing process will ultimately establish clearer standards of ministry competence and accountability for specialized ministries. *Co-Workers* provides the following criteria to help guide this process:

Among the criteria the diocese might use in deciding how flexible these requirements can be are the availability of existing formation programs within the diocese or region, the financial and personnel resources of the diocese, the size and location of the diocese, and changing pastoral needs. In all cases, the requirements should be clearly stated and readily accessible to those interested in preparing for lay ecclesial ministry and to those who lead existing programs.

1.4 Benefits to Academic Institutions

The process of certifying Lay Ecclesial Ministers will enhance collaborative efforts between academic institutions such as colleges, universities, and programs for lay formation within seminaries. Academic institution can benefit from the national certification standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers since these standards provide a framework to demonstrate how their programs of study assist candidates in the process of certification. Certification also provides a common language for dialogue and collaboration between arch/diocesan office personnel and faculty members, who are responsible for providing programs for the formation of Lay Ecclesial Ministers and national organizations that certify their members.

1.5 Benefits to Mentors of Candidates for Certification

Certification includes the opportunity for mentors to guide candidates as apprentices through the process of certification. Mentors nurture and foster discipleship with those Lay Ecclesial Ministers who are candidates for certification. Mentors benefit from the process of guiding certification candidates. Both mentors and candidates benefit from the experiences of reciprocity and mutual support. As stated in *Co-Worker*:

Mentoring, formal or informal, can be especially helpful. An experienced Church minister introduces the prospective lay minister into the ministerial workplace. A mentor passes on more than skills. He or she presents an understanding of the particular culture in which the ministry will take place, including the challenges and the opportunities. The mentor helps the prospective minister to develop realistic expectations about ministry, including the limits of what can be accomplished. This can prevent the burnout that results when actual experience fails to meet expectations. By sharing their own stories of progress and accomplishments, sacrifices and frustrations, mentors prepare new ministers to make an informed commitment to ministry (A, pp. 29-30)

1.6 Benefits to Lay Ecclesial Ministers

Certification recognizes and validates the specific vocation of Lay Ecclesial Ministers. Certification affirms these ministers who are called by their baptism, and that they are uniquely commissioned to serve the church through the specialized ecclesial ministries for which they have been certified. The response to this call is often graced with a lifetime commitment and a sincere desire to be faithful witnesses of the Gospel for the purpose of establishing the reign of God and transformation of the world. The specific vocation of the Lay Ecclesial Minister and their authorization by the arch/diocesan bishop is emphasized in *Co-Workers*:

While all members of the lay Christian faithful work to further the Church's mission, some are entrusted with certain offices and roles connected to the ministry of the ordained pastors. The lay women and men who are given these responsibilities are not only distinguished by particular gifts and a willingness to serve the Church – these qualities could apply to all the laity – but are also responding to a call to work in greater collaboration with ordained ministers.

They are authorized by ecclesial authorities to carry out certain ministerial responsibilities in public service of the local church.

Authorization is the process by which properly prepared lay men and women are given responsibilities for ecclesial ministry by competent Church authority. This process includes the following elements: acknowledgment of the competence of an individual for a specific ministerial role (often called “certification”); appointment of an individual to a specific position (in some dioceses called “commissioning”), along with a delineation of the obligations, responsibilities, and authority of that position (and length of term, if specified); and finally an announcement of the appointment to the community that will be served by the lay ecclesial minister (p. 54).

Certification then recognizes Lay Ecclesial Ministers as professional and competent in their respective areas of specialization. Certification also provides the individual with one of the primary elements necessary for the authorization by local church authority and function as a co-worker in the arch/diocese. This is emphasized in the following quotation from *Co-Workers*:

Most importantly, the authorization process can provide occasions for the bishop to demonstrate his support for the lay ecclesial ministers of his diocese and to model collaboration with them as his lay co-workers (p. 60).

The process of becoming certified at the initial or renewal levels challenges Lay Ecclesial Ministers to greater authenticity and integrity. Certification documents credibility and becomes part of the resume of the Lay Ecclesial Minister. The process of certification also provides candidates with the opportunity to reflect on their specialized ministries, engage in self-analysis, and benefit from assessment by their peers whether they are just beginning or are experienced in their ministry:

Throughout the discernment process a person needs to ask: What talents, virtues, and limits do I possess that indicate my ability to serve God's people through a commitment to

lay ecclesial ministry? Lay persons with a call to lay ecclesial ministry possess certain dispositions, which are further developed during the formal preparation process (Co-Workers, p. 30).

This process also provides candidates with a backdrop for ongoing assessment and formation. It emphasizes the need for life-long intellectual learning and spiritual formation as an essential component during the process both for initial and renewal of certification.

1.7 Benefits to Agencies, Institutions and Church Communities

Certification of Lay Ecclesial Ministers benefits agencies, institutions, and church communities by assuring a higher quality of ministry for the people they serve. Both Lay Ecclesial Ministers and those to whom they minister benefit from ongoing effective ministry, and thereby value those certified as a vital part of their communities. As the number of certified Lay Ecclesial Ministers increases, both ministers and those to whom they minister benefit from the additional spiritual resources available to them. Certification reinforces higher expectations on the part of all. Certified ecclesial ministers are challenged to deliver quality service and sustained excellence as they fulfill their responsibilities. Agencies, institutions, and church communities have confidence that certified Lay Ecclesial Ministers are responsible agents of the church and are qualified to serve in the specialized ministry for which they have been certified.

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