

LABORING IN THE CHURCH'S VINEYARD: LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS
AND THEIR WORKPLACES – SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Laboring in the Church's Vineyard: Lay Ecclesial Ministers and Their Workplaces
- Convener: Maureen R. O'Brien, Duquesne University
- Moderator: Howard Ebert, St. Norbert College
- Presenters: Mary Beth Yount, Neumann University
C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union
Maureen R. O'Brien, Duquesne University

The coinciding of the CTSA's convention theme on theology, work, and the economy with the fifteenth anniversary of the US Bishops' *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* provided a noteworthy occasion to examine workplace justice and inclusiveness for lay ecclesial ministers (LEMs) in the Catholic Church. *Co-Workers* emphasized the Church's obligation to provide proper workplace environments and supports for LEMs. The bishops advocated that the organizational practices of the church show consistency with Gospel values, and that church and (arch)diocesan structures adequately "balance the goals and needs of the organization, its workers and the community in which [they are] located" (p. 61).

After introducing the major topics for this session, Mary Beth Yount presented "Communion, Inclusivity, and Empowerment: Reaping the Harvest of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard*." She offered a definition of "lay ecclesial minister" that built on the work of the USCCB's foundational documents, emphasizing how LEMs are professionally prepared women and men exercising church service and leadership. Yount outlined the key themes of *Co-Workers*, which begins by articulating a theology of ministry rooted in trinitarian communion and proceeds to differentiate among the various roles and relationships within that communion. *Co-Workers* then outlines the four dimensions of LEM formation as human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. Its concluding section focuses on the ministerial workplace, advocating attention to values such as respect for persons, justice, integrity, diversity, efficient use of resources, and an environment characterized by fair treatment of workers. Yount discussed various initiatives in the last fifteen years to further the vision of *Co-Workers*, especially USCCB- and university-sponsored research and symposia.

C. Vanessa White offered an analysis called "'I'm Sick and Tired of being Sick and Tired': Consequences of Injustice for Lay Ministers Working in Parishes." She began with an account of the exhaustion of LEMs, especially those of color, who find their labors unrecognized and unrewarded. She outlined the recent findings of the researchers and participants in the St. John's School of Theology's project, "Sustaining a Healthy Vineyard," as they explored the dynamics of LEMs' workplace experiences of factors such as vocation, workload, control, reward, and values. She then discussed the demographic features of LEMs in the United States, notably their racial and ethnic makeup and the particular challenges of ministry among underrepresented populations. She honed in on three specific groups: Black, Latinx/Hispanic and Asian-Pacific Islander Catholics, major studies and initiatives related to each group, and the obstacles each faces in achieving full inclusion in the US Church and society. White called for

renewed efforts in the US Church to support LEMs as they in turn support these underrepresented groups, and to sponsor greater equity for the lay ministers themselves, including fair wages and adequate resources.

In “Relational Theologies, Ministerial (De)Positioning, and Cross-Cultural Dimensions,” Maureen O’Brien presented the inherent role ambiguities faced by LEMs as ministers, who are not ordained and yet are distinct from other laity through their extensive formation and sense of ministerial vocation. Drawing on qualitative research with both US LEMs and West African lay catechists, O’Brien posited that these ministers cultivate distinctive patterns of theological-spiritual reflection that sustain them and offer internal stability in the face of role ambiguities and workplace difficulties. She discovered that US LEMs found particular meaning in their in-between status as “sacramental” mediators between clergy and the laity in their everyday realms of family and work. Many West African catechists she interviewed described painful experiences of ministerial displacement when the parish priest occasionally visited the small outstations where catechists were the everyday community leaders. By functioning in their privileged status as ordained sacramental dispensers, the priests “de-positioned” the catechists. Catechists sought solace in kenotically oriented spiritual reflections and devotions, notably through identification with the suffering and crucified Jesus.

Approximately twenty-four participants discussed the presentations, commenting on the practical and everyday challenges of lay ministers and the difficulties of addressing these issues in an era of shrinking parish and diocesan resources.

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