

## Benefits of Life-Long Ministry Formation & Certification

*Compiled by the USCCB Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service – updated 2022*

While the certification of ecclesial ministers<sup>1</sup> in professional roles involves a specific procedure guided by established standards and competencies, the procedure is designed to be indicative of an integral process of life-long ministry formation. It is a common practice in most areas of professional competence that learning does not conclude with the formal granting of a credential needed to be an acknowledged competent practitioner in one's field. Rather, professional competence is usually self-assessed by the practitioner and trusted peers on a regular basis. This endeavor usually requires the practitioner to engage in a regular process of updating their education and competencies in certain skills, often in response to important developments in their fields of expertise. This process of renewal enables the practitioner to better evaluate their own progress within their field and enables others to objectively assess their professional growth.

Just as this process is a common best practice in multiple fields, it is that much more valuable in the field of ministry according to the model and pattern of the Gospel and in the name of the whole church. In the case of the formation and certification of both lay and ordained ecclesial ministers, the initial procedure of certification and subsequent re-certifications are in the service of this life-long professional development and formation. As a result, both life-long formation and certification offer significant benefits to the national and local church, academic institutions, the candidates themselves, lay ecclesial ministers as a whole, as well as to agencies, institutions and church communities.

### Benefits to the Church in the United States

Certified lay ecclesial ministers contribute to the continued growth and definition of the rightful position of the 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),<sup>2</sup> reiterated in *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions* (NCCB/USCC, 1999),<sup>3</sup> and reemphasized in *Co-Workers in*

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<sup>1</sup> In this section, the presentation of the specific benefits of lifelong formation and certification are presented with specific reference to “lay ecclesial ministry.” This is done to recognize that a large majority of certification and formation materials presented in this *Handbook* focuses on the development of those laity who serve in ministerial leadership roles in the church. This convention is not meant to diminish the reality of ordained leaders and those in institutes of consecrated life who are also called to the tasks of lifelong formation, and who also may be certified for professional specialized ministerial roles. The use of the term “ecclesial ministry” is often also used in this document to express the need for professional development, formation and certification for specialized roles in ministry for both laity and clergy. However, in places where the term “lay ecclesial ministry” is specifically used the information can equally be applied to ordained leaders and those in consecrated life as well.

<sup>2</sup> Philip J. Murnion and David DeLambo, *Parishes and Parish Ministers: A Study of Lay Ministry* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 1999). Also, while the term "certification" is used throughout, the benefits listed apply to any effort to enhance ministry formation standards and minister preparation more broadly as well.

<sup>3</sup> A Report of the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry, *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1999)

*the Vineyard of the Lord* (USCCB, 2005; hereafter cited as *Co-Workers*).<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup>

## **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.”<sup>6</sup>

Certification promotes collaboration and cooperation among 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 (hereafter referred to as the Alliance).<sup>7</sup>

In the fall of 2018, the Alliance received reapproval from the USCCB Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service for its revised standards for lay ecclesial ministers. 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), the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM), and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM). These common certification standards and specialized competencies offer direction 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 diocese or organization that certifies them.

USCCB Subcommittee standards require 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. Hence these standards serve as *National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministry (NCS)*. The Alliance website and the USCCB Subcommittee website are the primary tools for making the national certification process accessible to lay ministers across the

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<sup>4</sup> USCCB, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005). This document is available for free download in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

<sup>5</sup> *Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition*, New English Translation (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1999), *Code of Canon Law*, c. 231, §1 and *Co-Workers*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Co-Workers*, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Visit the website of the Alliance website for additional information: [www.lemcertification.org](http://www.lemcertification.org).

country. All materials pertaining to the standards and certification process are available on these websites.

### **Benefits to the Local Church**

Certification is a process that enables diocesan officials to formally identify and authorize lay people for key positions and major leadership roles for specialized ecclesial ministries. 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. As stated in *Co-Workers*, “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.”<sup>8</sup>

The USCCB Subcommittee provides the directors of diocesan and organizational programs the resources to assess the competency of candidates for levels of academic formation and skills training required of certified ministers. For dioceses, this assessment can be based on certification standards developed directly by the diocese or correlated in some way to the certification programs in place with national organizations, depending on the specialized competencies needed for the ministers in the diocese. 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*<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 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

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<sup>8</sup> *Co-Workers*, 56.

<sup>9</sup> The most recent version of these standards can be accessed at the website of NALM, [www.nalm.org](http://www.nalm.org).

<sup>10</sup> *Co-Workers*, 30, 56-57.

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 ....<sup>11</sup>

The approval of these standards is overseen by the USCCB Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service.

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.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Benefits to Academic Institutions**

The process of certifying lay ecclesial ministers will enhance collaborative efforts between programs of formation. Academic institutions can benefit from the national certification standards for lay ecclesial ministers because these standards provide a framework to demonstrate how their programs of study assists candidates in the process of certification. It is valuable for academic organizations to consider how their own programs align with these standards as they continue to develop and how they might promote the value of standards and certification in ministry roles to their students. Certification also provides a common language for dialogue and collaboration between diocesan office personnel and faculty members, as well as national ministry organizations, all of whom are responsible, in different but related ways, for providing programs for the formation of lay ecclesial ministers.

### **Benefits to Mentors of Candidates for Certification**

Certification includes the opportunity for mentors to guide candidates through the process of certification. Mentors nurture and foster discipleship with those lay ecclesial ministers who are candidates for certification. Mentors also benefit from the process of guiding certification

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. This list should be seen as descriptions of examples, but not exhaustive of options in the implementation of standards of competence and accountability.

candidates. Both mentors and candidates benefit from the experiences of reciprocity and mutual support. As stated in *Co-Workers*:

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.<sup>13</sup> (29-30)

### **Benefits to Lay Ecclesial Ministers**

Certification recognizes lay ecclesial ministers as professional and competent in their respective areas of specialization. Certification also provides the minister with one of the primary acknowledgements that he or she is able to perform specified duties in a ministerial role(s) with demonstrated professionalism and competence. Certification is also frequently necessary for the authorization by local church authority (e.g. a bishop) as a co-worker in the ministry of a diocese. Such authorization is, in turn, a vital element of affirming the value and capabilities of the lay ecclesial minister. According to *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.”<sup>14</sup> (60)

The specific vocation of lay ecclesial ministers and their authorization by the 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

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<sup>13</sup> *Co-Workers*, 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> *Co-Workers*, 60.

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. (54)

The process of receiving initial certification and then maintaining that certification through periodic renewal challenges lay ecclesial ministers to greater authenticity and integrity. Certification offers a way of documenting 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. As noted in *Co-Workers*, “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.” (30)

This process also provides candidates with a context for ongoing assessment and formation. It emphasizes the need for lifelong intellectual learning and spiritual formation as essential components during the process of initial certification and renewal of certification.

### **Benefits to Agencies, Institutions, and Church Communities**

Certification of lay ecclesial ministers benefits agencies, institutions, and church communities by ensuring 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 those served 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.