

Lay Leadership and Lay Collaboration Study Group Report

Study Group Members:

- Fr. Chuck Kullmann, CSP (Senior Ministry, San Diego)
- Fr. Chris Malano, CSP (St. Austin Catholic Parish, Austin)
- Mary Martin (Catholic Information Center, Grand Rapids)
- David Rooney (Paulist Associates)
- Rachael Smit (Old St. Mary's Cathedral, San Francisco)
- Susan Rutkowski (Paulist Center, Boston)
- Dr. Susan Timoney (Paulist Lay Advisory Board)
- Cathy Walz (Paulist Lay Advisory Board)
- Lisa Wellik (St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Community, Los Angeles)



National Landscape

What is the U.S. Catholic Landscape in relation to the Lay Collaboration and Lay Leadership?

The U.S. Catholic landscape regarding lay collaboration and leadership is in a major period of growth and redefinition, shaped by demographic shifts, pastoral needs, and new directions from both the Vatican and national Catholic ministries. The following is an overview based on recent research and Church reports:

1. Expanding Lay Leadership Roles

Laypeople now make up the majority of active ministers in parishes, schools, and diocesan offices. The 2025 National Survey of Laity Working in the Catholic Church, conducted by the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM), found that lay ministers serve in a wide range of roles—from parish administration to catechesis, youth ministry, music, and pastoral care. Many are professionals with theological training or certification backgrounds.

This represents a long-term structural shift, as the number of ordained clergy continues to decline. Parishes often rely on lay pastoral coordinators to manage daily administration, lead liturgies (outside of Mass), and serve as bridges between local communities and the diocese. formationreimagined.org and cdn.ymaws.com

2. Collaboration as a Defining Model of Ministry

There's been a strong move toward shared responsibility between clergy and laity. Many parish and diocesan initiatives – pastoral councils, synodal listening sessions, and collaborative ministry teams – reflect this model.

The Vatican's Synod on Synodality further reinforced this direction, calling for "new spaces" for women and laypeople in Church governance and evangelization. The March 2026 synod report emphasized that collaboration is grounded not just in practical necessity but in baptismal dignity – a theological affirmation of the lay vocation to leadership distinct from ordination catholicreview.org.

3. Ongoing Challenges

Several recurring challenges shape the U.S. lay landscape:

- Compensation and job stability: Many lay ministers work part-time or in volunteer capacities, often with limited benefits.
- Formation and education: Access to theological training varies significantly by diocese. Many ministers have called for more structured lifelong formation programs. Greater focus is needed to form parishioners for engagement in mission.
- Recognition and authority: Even as collaboration expands, questions remain about how decision-making authority is shared in practice.
- Cultural and linguistic diversity: Growth in Hispanic and multicultural communities creates new pastoral and leadership needs – a point noted both in NALM’s findings and diocesan reflections thecentralminnesotacatholic.org.

4. Emerging Vision

The 1988 Apostolic Exhortation *Christifidelis Laici*, acknowledged the role of the broader laity in shaping the missionary direction of their local faith communities, stating: “The lay faithful should accustom themselves to working in the parish in close union with their priests, bringing the Church community their own and the world’s problems as well as questions concerning human salvation, all of which need to be examined together and solved through general discussion. As far as possible, the lay faithful ought to collaborate in every apostolic and missionary undertaking sponsored by their own ecclesial family”.

The current Church vision emphasizes co-responsibility, where ordained and lay ministers work as partners in mission rather than separate spheres. The March 2026 Vatican final synod report describes this as a “charismatic path” open to all baptized people – creating new forms of governance, evangelization, and leadership beyond traditional hierarchical limits , catholicreview.org.

In short, the U.S. Catholic Church is becoming increasingly lay-led and collaboratively governed, with women and laity at the forefront of parish life and evangelization. This transition is driven both by necessity (fewer priests) and by renewed theological emphasis on the lay vocation as essential to the Church’s mission.



Paulist Realities

What are the Paulist Realities related to collaboration and leadership?

The Paulists have a demonstrated history with collaboration, having engaged lay leaders in areas such as Mission Advancement (fundraising), Communications and Marketing, and Paulist Seminarian formation. The last general assembly approved the creation of an advisory board comprised of lay women and men to advise the President and the Presidential Board, which is now active.

Recent developments in Paulist lay collaboration and leadership include the following:

- Appointment of the first lay President and Publisher for Paulist Press in the ministry's 160-year history in September 2024.
- Lay collaborator engagement in the evolution of the Communion Project initiative, through an advisory board that organized an April 2024 summit that further engaged both clergy and lay leaders on topics of polarization.
- Establishment and hiring of the Mission Strategy Officer, in which the incumbent is now facilitating enhanced lay collaborator input during the lead-up phases for the June 2026 General Assembly.
- Initiation of a hiring process for a lay Executive Director for the Paulist Center in Boston.

On the foundation level, Paulists engage lay collaborators at various levels, including: 1) volunteer parishioners/ministers; 2) lay ecclesial ministers; and 3) Paulist Associates. Among these groups, a formal formation process covering the Paulist Charisms exists only for the Paulist Associates. A separate, formal formation process is desirable for lay ecclesial ministers, and a less intensive introduction to the Paulist Charisms could be beneficial for foundation parishioners and volunteer ministers.

Study group members noted that:

- Pastoral Associate positions previously existed in foundations such as Chicago and Los Angeles, but are no longer active due to attrition and the aging out of this talent pool. Should these positions be desired in the future, a capacity-building effort would need to occur.
- It would be desirable to connect and communicate with Paulist foundation lay professional counterparts across the country to build morale and reinforce the Paulist spirituality dimension of their work.

Broader Laity Role and Calling

While a primary consideration is the integration of lay co-workers into the mission of the Paulist Fathers, especially as trained ministers in works of the Paulists, the more fundamental mission of the laity in the vision of Vatican II is not to be church workers, but to carry the Gospel into every strata of society and into the entire world. While the laity have an important and necessary role in working in the structure of the church, their more profound Baptismal call is directed to activity in the world, as emphasized in *Lumen Gentium*:

38. Each individual laity must stand before the world as a witness to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus and a symbol of the living God. All the laity as a community and each one according to his/her ability must nourish the world with spiritual fruits.(212) They must diffuse in the world that spirit which animates the poor, the meek, the peace makers—whom the Lord in the Gospel proclaimed as blessed. (213) In a word, “Christians must be to the world as the soul is to the body.”(9)*



Considerations

The areas of Lay Collaboration and Lay Leadership should be more clearly defined, perhaps with input from the current Lay Advisory Board that advises the Paulist Presidential Board. With that definition in place, we recommend that the General Assembly consider the following:

- The Assembly identify specific paid/voluntary positions within the foundations that could/should be developed with the intention of appointing a lay person.
- Hiring priority be given to women candidate(s) in senior positions when there are equally qualified male/female candidates.
- Each Paulist foundation complete a simple assessment to determine how well they have already incorporated the laity into decision making and leadership.
- A formation path be developed for parishioners, parish ministry leaders, and lay ecclesial ministers in Paulist Foundations to help individuals better understand, embrace and live the Paulist charism and their more profound Baptismal call.
- Paulist Associate formation resources be adapted to serve these broader formation objectives and increase the number of people living the charism in our foundations and beyond.
- The culture of our Paulist foundations be further developed around the primary mission of evangelization, reconciliation, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, even as Paulists are called to serve as Pastors of parishes. Emphasize that we 'make room for the other.'
- The existing purpose and formation structure of the Paulist Associates be continued, but greater awareness of the Associates' role be promoted throughout our foundations.
- A more formal network among professional laity in Paulist foundations be developed to reinforce Paulist charisms in their work and offer support to those who feel tensions within their diocese setting.
- That the Assembly clarify and affirm the fundamental charism of the Paulist Associates
- That the Assembly develop two or three priorities for expanding the role of lay collaborators and leaders and a timeline to meet those priorities

Additional Resources ([Link](#))

- Living as Missionary Disciples, USCCB
- John Cavadini, An antidote to clericalizing the Laity.
- John Cavadini, Eight Characteristics of Lay Formation
- 2025 National Survey Report: Laity Working in the Church
- NALM's commentary of the 2025 survey report