



Roman Catholic Lay Ministers

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About the Religious Workforce Project

Building on previous research, the Religious Workforce Project is an effort to understand the nation's religious workforce in a comprehensive way. The Project includes a national meta-analysis and a qualitative study in the Washington, DC, metro area. Funding for the project is generously provided by The Lilly Endowment, Inc. This project seeks to answer the following questions: Given today's changing religious landscape, how are leaders of U.S. congregations adapting? How do these changes shape the staffing, financial models, priorities, and the work of U.S. congregations? And what is the state of the religious workforce today?

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Introduction

Before Vatican II, staff positions in the Roman Catholic Church were held primarily by priests or nuns. Laity held very few positions on staff. This held true in the Catholic schools, as well, which were primarily staffed by nuns. One observer described the mid-twentieth century in this way: “Parishes were growing, pastors and associate pastors were the sole providers of ministry. There was no parish staff other than a housekeeper and maintenance personnel.”¹ Another said that “nearly every parish had a resident priest, and many had at least a couple of associates—younger priests in residence, gaining experience as they worked in parish while they waited to be appointed pastor in a parish of their own.”²

All of that would change in the coming decades as there were fewer priests, and associate priests for parishes became rare.

Vatican II (1962-1965) contributed to a major shift in the role of laity. One of the first documents to emerge from Vatican II was *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* in 1963. This document changed the role of laity by validating the work of ministry of laity within the church. Zeni Fox said the language shift “marks a breakthrough in church teaching about possible roles for laity. It also reintroduces the term ministry in Catholic circles, for at this time the word was not commonly used.”³ Claiming the whole Catholic Church as the People of God and shifting beyond the importance of the apostles, or priesthood, and toward the movement of charism, or the Holy Spirit’s action toward all the baptized, revolutionized the power of

Vatican II (1962-1965) contributed to a major shift in the role of laity. One of the first documents to emerge from Vatican II was *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* in 1963.

1 Charles E. Zech, Mary L. Gautier, Mark M. Gray, Jonathon L. Wiggins, Thomas P. Gaunt, *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), viii.

2 Ibid., 21-22.

3 Zeni Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry: Lay Professionals Serving the Church* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2002), 235-236.



the laity as cooperative partners in the work of Christ in the world.⁴ Yet, a report after the Second Vatican Council stated, “Sharing in the function of Christ, priest, prophet and king, the laity have an active part of their own within the life and activity of the church. Their activity within the church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect.”⁵

In addition to laity as staff, Vatican II created several documents that described a shift in the understanding of what constituted a minister.⁶ As this shift occurred, there were, and probably continue to be, growing pains around profession, vocation, and the definition of minister. In *New Parish Ministers*, Philip Murnion captures these growing pains:

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access to its primary resources — the grace of relationship with God and with one another or the creative and redemptive power of the Spirit — nor even of the right to exercise ministry.

... we want to suggest that formal parish ministry is not a profession. It shares many of the qualities we assign to or expect from professions — the need for a grounding in theory (theology), its own special language and terms, the ability to apply one’s learning to particular situations, the value of some form of accreditation, the ethics of behavior — but in two critical ways it is distinct from a profession. Parish ministry is not trying to control access to its primary resources — the grace of relationship with God and with one another or the creative and redemptive power of the Spirit — nor even of the right to exercise ministry. Neither can it see or treat parishioners as clients. Rather, ministry is a category of its own. This is becoming clear in the evolution of ministry.⁷

4 Ibid., 239.

5 Zech, et al., *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*, 35.

6 Philip J. Murnion, *New Parish Ministers: Laity & Religious on Parish Staffs* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 1992), 14-17.

7 Ibid., 17.



Zeni Fox concludes with a statement that may assist in understanding the transformative nature of adding laity under the umbrella of ministers.

The category of charism is more central to the life of the Church than that of order — especially when ministry is viewed as part of a theology of grace. The centrality of God’s action in the life of the individual and in the community, an action of the Father, of Jesus, of His Spirit, as the sources of ministry, are what is at the center of the experience of ministry. This centrality must be safeguarded.

One practical application of this is that those whose ministries are regulated, by informal or formal means, have a duty to discern, nurture, and safeguard the charisms of all in the community. An essential insight of our time is that the entire Church is ministerial. A role of designated ministers is precisely to enable the entire Church to minister.⁸

In other words, the Spirit gives these gifts or charism. To deny this gift is to block the work of God. As the Catholic Church adjusts to what the Spirit is doing with laity and the Church transforms, there are incredibly diverse understandings of how to care for and define these lay ministers. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*⁹ defines laity as “all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church” (paragraph 897). The different ways in which the laity can participate in church leadership positions are outlined in paragraphs 903, 906, and 910-911 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

As the church has seen a decline in the number of priests and an increase of laypeople working within the church as paid professionals and volunteers, new language has been created to identify these lay leaders. Some common terms include pastoral associates, parish life coordinators, and lay ecclesial ministers. Lay ecclesial ministers can refer to laity working in any position within the church. Pastoral associates often assist a resident or non-resident priest who is overseeing more than one parish. Parish life coordinators often serve a church when there is not a resident priest available for that parish.

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8 Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry*, 318.

9 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019).



Categories of Lay Ministry

Below is a description of several categories of leaders within Roman Catholic parishes other than priests. This list is not exhaustive but assists in understanding better the roles of individuals other than priests in parish ministry.

Pastoral Associates:

A minister who shares with the pastor, the parish life director, or on-site pastoral team in the overall care of the parish. They are members of the parish staff and accountable to the pastor or parish life director. They are an application of Canon 519.¹⁰

Parish Life Coordinator (PLC):

A lay person (could also be a deacon or consecrated religious) entrusted under Canon 517.2 with the pastoral care of a parish without a resident priest. A priest-moderator is appointed by the bishop to oversee the PLC. There is also a sacramental minister who is a priest who regularly celebrates Mass and other sacraments at the parish.¹¹

Lay Ecclesial Ministers:

Catholics who are not ordained but are engaged in substantial public leadership positions in church ministry, collaborating closely with the ordained leadership and working under their authority.¹²

Trends

As the Roman Catholic Church sees trends with fewer men entering the priesthood and women religious retiring without younger women coming behind to continue the work done in the past, more laity are stepping into roles of leadership. Philip Murnion and David DeLambo, in describing statistics in the mid-1990s, report that pastoral responsibility was assigned to someone other than a resident priest in 2.3 percent of the parishes. This means that in about 450 parishes a deacon, woman religious, layperson or some combination had pastoral responsibility.¹³

10 *Guidelines Concerning the Ministry of Parish Pastoral Associate* (Syracuse, NY: Diocese of Syracuse, 2015), 1.

11 "Understanding the Ministry and Experience: Parish Life Coordinators in the United States," Special Report, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Washington, DC (Summer 2005), 1.

12 "Glossary of Catholic Terms," [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#).

13 Philip J. Murnion and David DeLambo, *Parishes and Parish Ministers: A Study of Parish Ministry* (New York, NY: National Pastoral Life Center, 1999), 2.



At the same time, the number of parishes is decreasing while the number of Catholics increase. In 2000, there were 19,000 parishes, and in 2010 this number decreased to 17,800 parishes.¹⁴ By 2021, the number was 16,579.¹⁵ This decrease was due to several factors including fewer priests and demographic shifts in the population. The number of diocesan priests has declined from 30,607 in 2000 to 24,204 in 2021.¹⁶ This has meant that more priests have become responsible for multiple parishes. In 2016, it was estimated that at least half the priests in the United States served two or more parishes.¹⁷

The result of fewer parishes and priests, with the increasing number of Catholics, was the need for more laity to serve. Thus, far more people are engaged in professional ministry despite there being fewer parishes. It appears that there is likely to be a limited presence of priests in areas where parishes cover large geographic areas, and thus the need for a greater reliance on a lay leader.¹⁸ In addition, larger and wealthier parishes engage more laity today in professional ministry. In some cases, poorer parishes may need to function without a resident priest or adequate lay professional leadership.¹⁹

In 2015, it is estimated that 39,651 laity served as lay ecclesial ministers in 17,337 parishes. The number of lay ecclesial ministers exceeded that of priests in 2015, and more than 3,500 parishes operated with no resident priest.²⁰ The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) in Washington, DC, a major research resource for Catholic data, estimates there are currently about 40,000 lay ecclesial ministers serving in parish ministry.²¹

In 2010, CARA estimated the total number of people on Catholic parish staffs in the United States was 168,448. This included both ordained and lay ministry staff and volunteers as well as non-ministry staff and volunteers. The average parish had a total

14 Zech, et al., *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*, 15.

15 Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), [Frequently Requested Statistics](#).

16 Ibid.

17 Schuth, "Who Pastors," 154.

18 Zech, et al., *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*, 43-46.

19 Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry*, 304.

20 Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, "Living Testimonies: How Catholic and Baptist Women in Ministry Both Judge and Renew the Church," *Ecclesial Practices* 4, no. 2 (2017): 177, citing CARA data.

21 Zech, et al., *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*, 38.



staff size of 9.5, with 5.4 individuals in ministry positions. The estimated number of lay ecclesial ministers at that time was approximately 38,000. This represents 23 percent of all parish staff and 40 percent of all staff members involved in ministry.²² A 2014 survey report indicates that the average parish employs 4.5 paid staff (full time or part time). Of these, 85 percent are lay men and women, and the remainder are deacons and vowed religious.²³

When no priest is available, bishops can utilize canon 517.2 and entrust the pastoral care of a parish to a deacon, a religious sister or brother, or a lay person, who is most typically referred to as a parish life coordinator. The parish life coordinator is technically not the pastor. A priest is assigned by the bishop to provide a sacramental presence. The parish life coordinator manages the operations of the parish and fulfills other ministry duties. The parish life coordinator presides at services in the absence of a priest when the sacramental priest is not available. At these services communion hosts that have been consecrated previously by a priest may be distributed.²⁴ In 2015, there were 369 parishes entrusted to parish life coordinators under canon 517.2.²⁵ In 2014, parish life coordinators who led worship services averaged two worship services each weekend with a total of 352 parishioners, reflecting their serving of primarily small parishes.²⁶ Keep in mind that parish life coordinators also include deacons and religious orders.

Race and Gender

Due to a growing number of Catholic immigrants, the percentage of Roman Catholics in the United States has held steady or slightly increased. The share of U.S. Catholics who are Latino/a grew by 5 percentage points between 2007 and 2014 (from 29 percent to 34 percent), while the percentage of all U.S. adults who are Hispanic grew by 3 points (from 12 percent to 15 percent).²⁷ In the 1980s, about one quarter of U.S. Catholics were

²² Ibid., 39.

²³ Ibid., 86.

²⁴ Ibid., 42-43.

²⁵ Ibid., 45, citing the *2015 Official Catholic Directory*.

²⁶ Ibid., 51.

²⁷ Michael Lipka, "[A Closer Look at Catholic America](#)," September 14, 2015.



Latino/a. Today the Latino/a percentage is reported between 35 and 40 percent.²⁸ One in four Catholic parishes (24 percent) celebrates Mass at least once a month in Spanish.²⁹ About one in ten lay ecclesial ministers is Latino/a. However, 28 percent of lay ecclesial programs are offered in Spanish.³⁰

Among lay ecclesial ministers in 2012, two percent were Black and 1 percent Asian. Whites constituted 58 percent of U.S. Catholics and 88 percent of lay ecclesial ministers.³¹ Using 2021-2022 data for those enrolled in lay formation certificate and degree programs, increasing diversity is evident. Forty-six percent are White, 40 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Asian, 4 percent Black, and the remainder Other.³²

In 1992, 85 percent of laity assisting the priest were female with 6 out of 10 working on a Roman Catholic Church staff.³³ In 1999, 82 percent of laity assisting were female with the decline partially due to the declining number of women religious.³⁴ In the early 2000s, men comprised 44 percent of religious education positions, 41 percent of full-time youth ministry, and 52 percent of music ministry positions.³⁵

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The number of female religious decreased from 180,000 in 1968 to 48,500 in 2013. The number of brothers saw a similar decrease in numbers from 11,700 in 1968 to 4,200 in 2013 as fewer women and men entered religious orders.³⁶ During these same years, the number of lay ecclesial ministers increased significantly, and women's proportion of lay ecclesial ministers ranged between 80 and 85 percent.³⁷

28 Zech, et al., *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*, 38. Cary Funk and Jessica Martínez, "Fewer Hispanics are Catholic, so how can more Catholics be Hispanic?" [Pew Research Center](#), May 7, 2014.

29 "Fact Sheet: Hispanic Catholics in the U.S.," CARA, May 27, 2014.

30 "U.S. Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation Programs," *The Cara Report*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Fall 2022), 5.

31 Zech, et al., *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*, 37.

32 "U.S. Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation Programs," 5.

33 Murnion, *New Parish Ministers*, v.

34 Philip J. Murnion and David DeLambo, *Parishes and Parish Ministers: A Study of Parish Ministry* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 1999), iii.

35 Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry*, 12-13.

36 Zech, et al., *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*, 34.

37 *Ibid.*, 34-37.



Age and Education

In 2012, only 5 percent of lay ecclesial ministers were under the age of 30; about 40 percent were under the age of 50; and a majority, 62 percent, were 50 or older. The median age of lay ecclesial ministers in 2012 was 55, down from 58 in 1990, and 64 as recently as 2005.³⁸

The Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Study in 2009 found that just under half (46 percent) had a graduate or professional degree. Over half had gone to Catholic schools for a portion of their education, and almost half had received all their education in Catholic schools.³⁹ Those who serve as parish life coordinators are among those who have more education.⁴⁰

There appears to be support for laity to have degrees, formation programs, and continuing education. In 1994, the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry was formed to assess how lay ecclesial ministers might be cared for through education, compensation, and grievances.⁴¹ The subcommittee agreed that education needed to be a vital aspect of this growing ministry of laity, and many dioceses developed standards and certification processes. In 2021-2022, there were 116 confirmed programs and another 52 unconfirmed programs most likely in existence, according to CARA statistics. The confirmed programs were in 33 states and 70 dioceses.⁴² The amount of support for education began to rise. Fifty-six percent of dioceses provided support for laity attending school in preparation for working within the church. This was a tremendous shift from 1986 when virtually no dioceses provided financial support for this type of lay ministry education.⁴³

Roles

It is important to note that, pre-Vatican II, almost all parish responsibilities were carried out by priests, deacons, and the religious orders with few exceptions. Vatican II enhanced the possibility of laity serving in myriad leadership roles. These lay ministers have become increasingly important as the numbers entering the priesthood

³⁸ Ibid., 37.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Hendricks, *Parish Life Coordinators*, 16.

⁴¹ Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry*, 286-288.

⁴² "U.S. Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation Programs," 5.

⁴³ Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry*, 30-31.



and orders declined. Forty percent of ecclesial lay ministers serve as coordinators of religious education. Their other key ministries include general pastoral associate, youth minister, music minister, and liturgical planner or coordinator.⁴⁴ Other ministry areas in which lay staff serve are social concerns, family ministry, campus ministry, ministry to the sick, spirituality, marriage preparation, elder ministry, bereavement ministry, support groups, and migrant ministry.

According to the 1983 Code of Canon Law, priests' roles may be expanded to serve more than one parish and may include the assistance of parish life coordinators, the religious orders, or other teams of laity. This option allows a priest to serve more than one parish while ensuring that a parish is being adequately cared for in their absence.⁴⁵ This change with canon 517.2 created opportunities for laity that had never been explored before. Below is a listing of expectations for a parish life coordinator in the Diocese of Portland:⁴⁶

- Promotes evangelization and spiritual renewal
- Supports the full and active participation of the community in celebration of liturgy and sacraments
- Fosters faith life of the parish community
- Contributes to parish needs assessment, planning, communication, and decision-making
- Helps to develop a consciousness of the social teachings of the Church among parishioners
- Coordinates designated parish programs
- Leads communal prayer when liturgically appropriate
- Accesses appropriate resources for persons in need
- Directs the work of pastoral staff
- Promotes ways to make the parish a welcoming community

44 "Glossary of Catholic Terms," [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#).

45 Kathy Hendricks, *Parish Life Coordinators: Profile of an Emerging Ministry* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2009), 3-4.

46 <https://portlanddiocese.org/olff/plc> accessed March 14, 2022.



Mixed Feelings about Parish Life Coordinators

As one might expect, not all are comfortable with these emerging new patterns of congregational leadership growing out of theological factors from Vatican II as well as practical concerns raised by the shortage of priests. Bishops are not of one mind. Some have embraced the expanded roles for laity while others are more cautious and fear unintended consequences for the place of priests. For these reasons, among others, there are mixed patterns of the ministry of laity, especially employing parish life coordinators in the absence of a priest. Some of these concerns surfaced in an instruction released by the Vatican in July 2020 that seemed to some to reflect a hesitancy on the part of bishops to embrace lay leadership on the parish level.⁴⁷

The concern expressed in the Vatican document is that the central role of the priesthood in the sacramental and pastoral life of the Church cannot, by definition, be assumed by the laity. The statement said that pastoral leadership might be seen as merely “functional” rather than sacerdotal. The distinctive roles of the laity and the priesthood must be secured; an “essential difference...exists between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood.” It also maintained that the appointment of parish-life coordinators cannot be made for reasons of convenience or “ambiguous advancement of the laity.”

An Example of a Parish Life Coordinator

Eleanor Sauers was named by her bishop as parish life coordinator for St. Anthony of Padua Church in Fairfield, Connecticut, in December 2018.⁴⁸ Their parish priest had died in March. She was the first parish life coordinator in the Diocese of Bridgeport. Beginning as a volunteer, she became director of religious education in 2002 after leaving her secular work and entering master’s and doctoral programs at the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University. Sauers shares characteristics common among parish life coordinators in being lay, female, and highly educated.

⁴⁷ [“The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church,”](#) Congregation for the Clergy, July 7, 2020.

⁴⁸ Paul Baumann, [“The Life of a Parish-Life Coordinator: An interview with Eleanor Sauers,”](#) Commonweal, October 29, 2020, . Details for this section all come from this article.



Her reflections on her work in an interview in 2020 with Paul Baumann for *Commonweal* would be familiar to clergy pastoral leaders. She reports being surprised at how much time goes toward upkeep of facilities, meetings, budget, and fund raising (the part she and other pastoral leaders find hardest). She led the parish through the challenges and adaptations required by the pandemic. She finds her greatest satisfaction from time with parishioners, working with others to plan liturgical celebrations, and helping the parish make plans, all while trying to remain visible and accessible.

There is one big difference for her parish with a parish life coordinator. Sauers does not preside at weddings, baptisms, funerals, or Mass. She gives a short reflection after Mass and meets with families to plan sacramental services. The priests of the Fairfield University Jesuit Community are sacramental partners. They preside at Masses and at most of the weddings and funerals. A deacon assigned to Fairfield University and to the parish meets for preparation and presides at most baptisms. She reports that collaboration between the parish and the Jesuits works well.

Sauers believes concerns about confusion of roles between priest and laity where there are parish life coordinators are minimal. “In my experience,” she says, “no parishioner confuses my position with that of the priests who serve our parish. Parishioners view me as the administrator of the parish and as a spiritual leader, but do not view my role as sacramental. People are savvy and can easily distinguish between the two vocations.”

While Sauers was the first parish life coordinator named in her diocese, it is promising that the bishop met with her monthly for the first six months for encouragement and support.

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Findings

Factors Leading to the Growth of Lay Ministers

- Vatican II. Prior to Vatican II (1962–1965), almost all ministry responsibilities were accomplished by priests, deacons, and the religious orders, with a few exceptions. Vatican II increased the possibility of laity serving in myriad leadership roles. The ministry of laity was validated based on their baptism as cooperative partners in the work of Christ in the world.
- Decline in priests. As priests and women religious retired without younger persons coming behind to continue their work, more laity stepped into roles of leadership.
- Reduction of parishes. Fewer priests and demographic shifts led to almost 2,500 fewer parishes in 2021 than in 2000. Since the decline in priests surpassed that of parishes, fewer priests had to serve more parishes, now spread farther apart geographically.
- Fewer associate priests. Once common, associate priests are increasingly rare.
- Sharing a priest. About half of U.S. parishes now share a priest with another parish, leaving many without a resident priest.

Expanding Lay Ministry

- In smaller and more rural parishes with fewer resident priests, more lay ministers took responsibilities.
- Larger and wealthier parishes engaged more laity in professional ministry as they grew and associate priests were not available.

Lay Ecclesial Ministers


- In 1990, there were 21,569 lay ecclesial ministers. By 2015, the number was 39,651 lay ecclesial ministers serving in 17,337 parishes.
- The number of lay ecclesial ministers exceeded that of priests in 2015.



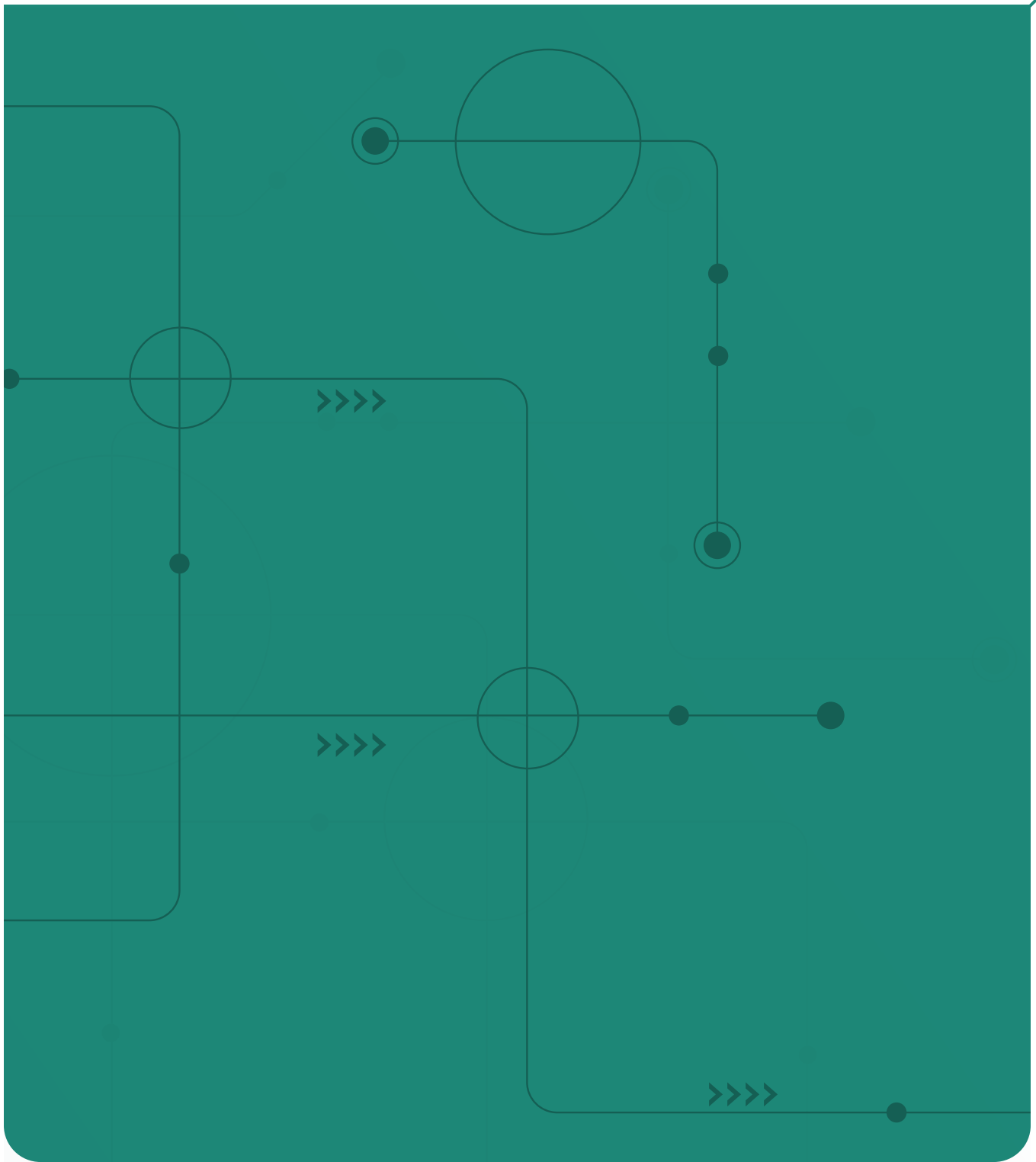
Parish Life Coordinators

- When no priest is available, bishops can entrust the pastoral care of a parish to a deacon, a religious sister or brother, or a lay person, most typically referred to as a parish life coordinator. The parish life coordinator is technically not the pastor. A priest is assigned by the bishop to provide a sacramental presence.
- In 2015, there were 369 parishes entrusted to parish life coordinators.
- Bishops vary in their openness to the role of parish life coordinators and thus their involvement varies somewhat by diocese.

Demographics of Lay Ministers

- **Age.** The median age of lay ecclesial ministers in 2012 was 55, down from 58 in 1990, and 64 as recently as 2005.
- **Gender.** Women typically make up 80 to 85 percent of lay ecclesial ministers.
- **Race.** About one in ten lay ecclesial ministers is Latino/a. However, almost half (47 percent) of lay ecclesial formation programs are Latino/a. Among lay ecclesial ministers, 2 percent are Black and 1 percent Asian. Whites constitute 58 percent of U.S. Catholics and 88 percent of lay ecclesial ministers.
- **Education.** Just under half of lay ecclesial ministers hold a graduate or professional degree. Those who serve as parish life coordinators have even more education. 

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