

[LAITY, ROLE IN CHURCH](#)

Forming laity, for life and ministry



Bishop Joseph A. Galante at a commissioning service at St. Anthony of Padua, Hammonton, N.J. Photo by Christine Scheller

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In a time of great change in the Catholic Diocese of Camden, NJ, a program gives laypeople the skills they need to bring a new vibrancy and passion to the local parish.

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When Bishop Joseph A. Galante arrived at the Catholic Diocese of Camden, N.J., in 2004, he didn't introduce

himself by issuing directives. He began by listening.

For 15 months, he hosted “Speak Up” sessions at every parish throughout the far-flung South Jersey diocese. He wanted to know: What were the most important pastoral issues facing his flock?

In meeting after meeting, some 140 sessions in all, people expressed concerns that would have been familiar in Catholic parish halls -- and more than a few Protestant churches -- across the country.

They were worried about young people leaving the faith. They wanted more compassionate outreach programs. They were concerned about the shortage of priests; where would new ones come from?

But again and again, they also told their new bishop they wanted better opportunities for theological formation. Across the diocese, laity -- who today serve the church in almost every capacity short of administering the sacraments -- said they needed deeper, richer theological and pastoral formation so they could perform the tasks of lay ministry well.

Based on those conversations, Galante and his staff created an extensive program of lay ministry formation. With few resources in the area -- South Jersey has no Catholic institutions of higher education -- they looked elsewhere for help, putting together a network of Catholic colleges and seminaries to provide both

undergraduate and graduate instruction, online and in local classrooms.

“Basically, we’ve created a university without walls,” Galante said.

Questions to consider:

- How well do your organization's leaders listen? What can they do to listen better and to help people "speak up"?
- How well does your congregation prepare laity for ministry? How can it form and prepare them more effectively?
- What other institutions could you leverage to help you respond to the challenges your institution faces?
- What is the most surprising concern or comment you have heard recently in your organization? How might it help you effect change?

Launched in 2009, the [Lay Ministry Formation Program](#) now has more than 300 students enrolled in both degree and certificate programs, taking classes in everything from spiritual direction to youth ministry. Without leaving the diocese, they’re studying catechesis at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio.

They’re pursuing M.A. degrees in pastoral theology at

Georgian Court University in Lakewood, N.J., and St. Joseph's College of Maine in Standish, Maine. They're working on M.S. degrees in church management at Villanova University in Radnor Township, Penn.

Patrick McGrory of Vineland, N.J., a Philadelphia-area financial adviser and a member of the diocese's Lifelong Faith Formation executive committee, has high praise for the program and Galante, who will retire next month at age 74 because of health problems.

In a time of great change in the diocese and the Catholic Church, the program is giving laypeople the skills they need to bring a new vibrancy and passion to the local parish, McGrory said.

This is your church

"Bishop Galante is saying to the laity, "This is your church,"" he said. "He is challenging us as individual Catholics to participate actively in our parishes, schools and other Catholic organizations."

The Lay Ministry Formation Program is part of a much larger change process that has dramatically reshaped the diocese in a few short years. Shifting demographics, a shortage of priests, declining attendance and other factors have forced dioceses across the nation, especially in the urban centers of the Northeast, to close or consolidate parishes, and Camden was no exception.

In what he called a "rip off the Band-Aid" approach,

Galante closed or merged almost half the diocese's parishes between 2008 and 2011, cutting the total number from 124 to 70. The Philadelphia Inquirer recently called it "the most sweeping consolidation of any Catholic diocese in the history of the United States."

The Lay Ministry Formation Program is separate from the restructuring effort, but they are both part of Galante's overall vision to create vibrant parishes where people are excited to be part of a Catholic community, McGrory said.

"The lay ministry training program was intertwined with the mergers as a way to provide for training and education, but more importantly, to lay out a foundation of leaders who could then inspire the vibrancy within others," he said.

The growing role of lay leadership in Camden and throughout the Catholic Church is clearly prompted in part by the priest shortage, but it is also about much more than that, said Linda K. Robinson, the director of the Lay Ministry Formation Program. Laity today are claiming and exercising the ministry that is and always has been theirs by virtue of their baptism, she said.

"Laity have always performed ministry," she said. "This is about laity becoming theologically prepared and pastorally formed to do it."

In the Camden diocese and across the church, laity

today serve in a variety of roles, some as paid staff, others as volunteers. They work as youth ministry directors and business managers; they lead preparation classes for baptism and the Rite of Christian Initiation. They counsel couples before marriage, lead prayer groups and Bible studies, and serve as catechists and lectors.

The need for theological formation

But, as Galante heard in the listening sessions, many believe they lack the theological formation to do their ministries well. For most laity, formation comes haphazardly, if at all, through the occasional parish program or self-initiated study, Robinson said. Most have had no formal religious study since grade school.

Sister Roseann Quinn, the bishop's delegate for lifelong formation, said traditional educational models, focused primarily on children, are not as effective as they once were.

"Those models worked for a while, when Catholic homes were stronger in their immersion in faith," she said.

"What we're trying to do is not to cut the schooling model out completely but to have faith formation from early childhood through senior adulthood."

The need for qualified lay ministers will only increase in the future, and most pastors realize that lay ministry is essential for the future of the church and the faith, she said. Even so, it's going to take time for priests and laity

to become completely comfortable in their evolving roles.

“Many [parishioners] never saw themselves as having a leadership role in the church, because they thought the priests and the nuns would do it all,” Quinn said.

Laity and clergy have complementary roles to play in today’s church, Galante said.

“Laity are not in competition with the clergy, but there should be a complementarity between what the clergy has been ordained to do and what the laypeople are commissioned to do,” he said.

A national issue

Though new to Camden, lay ministry formation programs are not new to the Catholic Church. Dioceses across the nation have been developing the programs for a quarter-century, said Christopher C. Anderson, the executive director of the [National Association for Lay Ministry](#).

About a third of U.S. dioceses have lay ministry formation programs, with 18,493 students enrolled in 2011, he said. Because of economic pressures, some dioceses have been cutting the programs, with notable exceptions such as Spanish-language programs, which are flourishing both nationally and in the Camden diocese.

“Places where they are being discontinued always cite it

as a budget issue, but every budget is a priority statement, too,” Anderson said. Moreover, cutting these programs can be counterproductive, because they help dioceses make up for limited resources by training a cadre of well-educated, well-formed volunteers, he said.

Twenty-five years ago, parish staffs averaged 10 non-school employees, six of whom were priests. Now only 1 in 10 is a priest or ordained minister.

“If we don’t have these kinds of programs that provide a true basis in Catholic teaching and Catholic theology, then we’re really going to have a brain drain,” he said. “We’re going to have a lot of burned-out people.”

The development of Camden’s program got underway in 2005, when Galante lured Quinn away from her post as dean of graduate studies at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia to head the diocesan Office of Lifelong Faith Formation.

She and other diocesan leaders soon met with Catholic college representatives from outside the diocese to hear about their offerings in pastoral theology and ministry, religious education, and other areas that could equip laity for service.

From those initial visits, the diocese eventually identified four colleges whose offerings best aligned with the pastoral priorities that emerged from the Speak Up sessions. Currently, eight institutions partner with

the diocese to provide instruction to laity.

Under their agreements with the diocese, most give students a 50 percent tuition discount. The reduced costs are shared equally by students, their sponsoring parishes and grants from an endowment fund established by the bishop.

A diverse portfolio

The schools offer a diverse portfolio of classroom, online and hybrid courses that lead to a variety of degrees and non-degree certifications in areas such as spiritual direction, youth and young adult ministry, social justice and catechesis.

Georgian Court University, for example, offers a master's degree in theology with a concentration in pastoral ministry through courses at two South Jersey locations, said Johann Vento, the director of the school's graduate program in theology. Vento said the Camden diocese has done a particularly good job of providing diverse educational experiences.

"They've partnered with several different educational institutions, but they're not doubling up," she said. "In other words, they haven't partnered with several different schools who are all offering the master's in theology. They're partnering with others who are doing things that we don't do."

Being a financial adviser, McGrory is especially excited

about the partnership with Villanova's M.S. program in church management. Lay ministry and formation is not only about things spiritual.

"To be able to manage the parishes to ensure a strong financial footing is integral to the success of any parish," he said.

As a relative latecomer to lay ministry formation, the diocese was able to benefit from the experience of others. It borrowed heavily -- with permission -- from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in developing its program. Robinson had taught in the Philadelphia program and was impressed with the faith community that had developed among the students.

"I knew the energy that came with it, both on the part of the instructor, but especially the students," she said.

In November, the diocese held its third annual celebration honoring program participants. This time, 65 people received certificates marking the completion of some kind of formation program. In addition, five lay ecclesial ministers, who completed or already held master's degrees in relevant fields and serve in significant leadership roles within the diocese or their parishes, were commissioned.

One of those, Andres Arango, who serves as the bishop's delegate for Hispanic ministry and director of evangelization, said the lay ministry program has

particular resonance for Hispanics, who now account for 20 percent of the diocese's laity.

"It's very important to show that there are not just opportunities for Hispanics here in the church in the United States but also a big need for Hispanic people in lay leadership positions," Arango said.

Another newly commissioned lay ecclesial minister, Mary Lou Hughes, co-director of faith and family life formation in the Office of Lifelong Faith Formation, said her courses gave her concrete language for communicating with parishes about the ministry she was already doing.

Tender shoots

Galante, a diabetic who undergoes dialysis for kidney failure, has said he never expected to see the "full flowering" of his vision for the diocese -- he would have faced mandatory retirement at 75 even if his health were good. Yet he has been able to see the "tender shoots" coming up.

To help ensure the lay ministry program's long-term success, Galante established the Lifelong Formation Endowment Fund, with a goal of raising \$12 million to support formation programs. Though the economy has made fundraising more difficult than expected, the fund is over the \$2 million mark, and the diocese is "going to have to keep working at it," Quinn said.

As chairman of the board of the Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities, a private foundation that supports Catholic projects around the world, McGrory knows the world of philanthropy and praises Galante for establishing an endowment to support the lay ministry program.

“Part of the bishop’s brilliance in all this is the endowment, because that does allow the program to continue even beyond his retirement,” he said. “Bishops are individuals, and they obviously have their own hopes and dreams for each diocese that they become a part of, but my hope would be that the next bishop would be as committed to the laity as our current bishop.”

McGrory, who also serves on the diocese’s finance council, said it can be a challenge to get potential donors to grasp the importance of a program that is not about buildings. Those who buy into Galante’s vision for lay ministry formation are typically either focused on education or have seen how students are able to enrich parish life, he said.

“The challenge is just to continue to spread the word around this program and what it’s doing,” he said.

“When people see it in action, they get it.”

Fortunately, as evidenced by the many graduates at the November celebration, more “tender shoots” are coming up every day.

“Parish life blossoms, grows, deepens, and it keeps attracting people when their needs are being met, when they are being welcomed in a whole variety of ways,” Galante said after the ceremony, as the crowd finally dwindled.

Galante will officially step down Feb. 12, when his successor, Bishop Dennis J. Sullivan, an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of New York, will be installed.

Two days after Galante’s retirement was announced, an editorial in the South Jersey Times noted that his tenure had “not always gone smoothly, but Galante will leave the 75-year-old Roman Catholic diocese in a stronger place than he found it.”

The [editorial](#) closed by noting a particular mark of Galante’s leadership: “The bishop never stopped listening, and that is one mark of an effective spiritual leader.”