

Co-Workers Leads to Cohort
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Background and the First Step

In 2005 *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* was issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as a resource to guide the development of lay ecclesial ministry in our local dioceses. As a Director of Faith Formation for a small rural diocese in East Texas for 18 years, it was a document which addressed real issues for leadership development, formation of the laity, and just compensation for laity in Church ministry which resonates real needs. Now 7 years after that document, our diocese has 14 individuals who have completed the formation explained in the document.

The document details theological foundations, discernment, suitability, policies, practices, and authorization of these ministers. Leadership in the Diocese of Tyler discussed the value of this document and what it could bring to the growth of our diocese. However, while the aims of the document were valid, providing for every detail was not possible. Rather than relinquish it completely a “compromise” occurred and the response was to take direction from the document and adapt it to our diocesan needs, resources, and realities.

The Agreement and First Hybrid Model

A Cohort between the University of Dallas School of Ministry and the Diocese of Tyler was created, focusing on formation of lay and diaconate leadership in the diocese who were already in active ministry. The formation was targeted at the four pillars of formation utilizing the School of Ministry professors for the intellectual pillar and diocesan personnel for development of the additional three pillars of the apostolate, spiritual, and human.

Conversations among the two groups lasted about a year; delays in beginning the program took another year due to financial concerns. In January, 2009 with the cooperation and commitment of both groups, the Cohort was named “JPII Faith Formation Program” as it was dedicated to the vision of Vatican II which our beloved Pope JPII emulated.

The first “hybrid” model of formation was utilized of face to face once a month for three hours for one course and additional online work for the 6 remaining hours including blackboard postings, video presentations, and independent assignments throughout the month. School of Ministry professors traveled 200 miles once a month to provide these live sessions. Additionally, the online videos were of a format which exceeds other online courses. The professors who write the courses are the ones who present on the videos.

The Four Pillars

Students were asked to take two courses per semester. Additionally, the Office of Faith Formation provided personnel once a month for a two hour session to develop the three additional pillars. Reverend Gavin Vaverek, Pastor, Promoter of Justice, Defender of the

Bond, Moderator for Pro-Life, in addition to other pastoral leadership positions, became instrumental in assisting my office in this formation. Dedicated to lifelong faith formation for every person has been a high priority for this diocese and Father Vaverek implements that same vision in his parish and diocesan work.

Topics for discussion on the Sunday formation days included saint presentations by the students, biblical personality profiles, Myers Briggs assessment, teaching authority in the Church, liturgical renewal, Christian Initiation, and others. Time was allowed for feedback and concerns the students may be experiencing within their classes, with professors, homework challenges, doctrinal issues. Also the session always included Evening Prayer before the group dismissed.

Can Our Diocese Afford This Program?

Financially, the School of Ministry was generously supportive and provided actions to their dedication to the mission of the Church as a Catholic University to provide formation to all areas of the People of God who may not have access to such formation. Students were asked to pay a portion of the cost, the diocese was to supplement the cost, and the School of Ministry offered discounts. Additionally, a grant of \$40,000 was achieved through a foundation for this program. My office for faith formation budget also provided hospitality, stipends, travel expenses, gathering expenses for the program in the beginning stages as well as the celebration for families and friends when the program was completed.

Over 100 individuals attended the celebration January 14, 2012 when 14 students completed 36 graduate study hours in theology and scripture to satisfy the Masters of Theology Studies degree. Five of the 14 students received a Certificate for Advanced Studies since they did not have Bachelor's Degree when they began. While the cost for the certificates was a third less, the demands of the courses requirements were exactly the same for all students.

Some students could not pay anything; however, their parishes were willing to supplement their tuition. All students were asked to purchase their own textbooks. No student was turned away for lack of ability to pay.

Approximate tuition Cost for 14 students JPII Faith Formation Program: \$160,000

Approximate cost for additional expenses: hospitality, travel, meetings,
Stipends \$5000

Approximate revenue provided by students and parishes \$159,000

Additional revenue provided by foundation grant: \$40,000

This program paid for itself and there was no additional cost needed from the Diocesan budget.

Who Are Those Guys?

The individuals who participated in this program have been involved in ministry in the Church prior to their participation in this program.

- Amy is a Catholic School Principal
- Sandy is a Parish Faith Formation Leader and Christian Initiation Coordinator
- Peggy is a Parish Director of Sacramental Formation
- Deacon Rick is Diocesan Director of Discipleship
- Deacon Ruben is the Diocesan Chancellor
- Deacon Blue is Parish Faith Formation Leader
- Deacon Blue's wife participated and also serves as a Catechist
- Michelle is a Parish Catechist
- Lyndia is a Parish Faith Formation Leader
- George is a Parish Catechist and a Cardiologist
- Susan is a Parish and Catholic High School Catechist
- Sister Angelica is a Diocesan Coordinator for Catechetics
- Sister Susan Catherine is a Daughter of Divine Hope – Foundress of this order which was created during the three year program in our diocese
- Ann is a Catholic School Religion Coordinator

Among these individuals there are 15 children under the age of 14. Over the three years of formation they faced illnesses, deaths of loved ones, birth of a child, personal financial difficulties, and the frustrations of time management with respect to the demands of the course work. They traveled from 9 cities covering our 22,000 square miles.

Here are some comments from some of the individuals who participated in the program.

“As a Pastor, the blessing of having 5 parishioners with this type of formation is simply huge. It deepens our programs and formation opportunities in so many ways. Having encouraged people already involved means that our parish has been blessed throughout their formation time. It certainly has been worth the financial and time help that we provided for them.” *Reverend Gavin N. Vaverek, JCL*

“I am very grateful for this providential opportunity that was a significant component in the establishment of the Daughters of Divine Hope, a new religious community in the Diocese of Tyler. The formation and education required in the comprehensive curriculum of this unique program helped prepare me for my profession of vows and my responsibilities as foundress.”

Sister Susan Catherine Kennedy, DDH

“The JPII Faith Formation Program is a prime example of what can happen when partnerships are formed and love is put into action in a concrete way.”

Catholic School Principal Amy Allen

“The opportunity to study for a Master’s Degree in Theological Studies was truly the answer to my lifelong prayer. My faith journey brought me into a realm of hunger for more knowledge, and the Diocese of Tyler with the University of Dallas filled me, even including study in Rome!”
Sandy Bunch

“I would just say that the program was such a blessing for me to learn more deeply and grow more spiritually. This was not just in the book learning but the experience with the other members of the group and the professors. I will never be the same. The program helped me focus my efforts in the right direction for myself, my family and the diocese. I hope to continue to use this knowledge to follow the needs in these areas in my life. I will be forever grateful for the experience.”
Michelle Reynolds

“The JPPII program gave me a much broader foundation in the faith which I find I use every day in my Faith Formation Ministry but also deepened my own spiritual life and enriched my own personal call to holiness on a daily lived experience. It has increased not only my knowledge base but in how I direct catechesis in helping all members of a household grow ever deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ.”
Peggy Hammett

The Result

The Diocese of Tyler now has 14 more individuals who are well formed, dedicated to their ministry, their own faith formation, and are witnesses that discipleship of Christ is not an option but an expectation for all Catholic adults in their present life situations.

Many of the elements of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* were key in providing this cohort in the Diocese of Tyler. The formation, the dedication, the sacrifices both on the part of the students, the professors, the coordinators, and the unconditional support of Bishop Alvaro Corrada, SJ, and Dean Brian Schmisek of the School of Ministry has provided this small East Texas rural diocese an academic presence that never existed in its 25 year history and will continue to help the growth of the kingdom of God here. It is our hope that this program will provide the fertile ground to continue this type of ecclesial formation.

It is my prayer that as a Faith Formation Leader in this country other dioceses will investigate opportunities for adult faith formation and ministry and look to the documents provided by our Church for the vision to make this a priority in order to make Christ ever present.