

2011 Collegeville National Symposium on Lay Ecclesial Ministry

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Post-Symposium

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Pastoral ministers digest the insights of Nancy Ammerman, Professor of Sociology of Religion at Boston University School of Theology, who closed the first day of the Collegeville National Symposium on Lay Ecclesial Ministry with an evening keynote address at Saint John's University's Guild Hall titled "The Religious Landscape and its Implications for Pastoral Leadership." The symposium, Aug. 2-5 in Collegeville, Minn., is co-sponsored by Saint John's School of Theology•Seminary and 43 organizations representing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic ministry organizations, dioceses, and Catholic Universities.

Changes in society and church pose challenges, provide opportunities

The changing religious landscape poses challenges for the church, Nancy Ammerman told the gathering of more than 230 church ministers, but it also provides opportunities for shaping pastoral leadership to dovetail with the contours of that changing landscape.

Ammerman, Professor of Sociology of Religion at Boston University School of Theology, closed the first day of the Collegeville National Symposium on Lay Ecclesial Ministry with an evening keynote address at Saint John's University's Guild Hall titled "The Religious Landscape and its Implications for Pastoral Leadership."

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"The task you face is in fact very difficult," Ammerman said, "but what you are doing in forming people of faith is more important than it ever has been before."

The sociological and cultural shifting sands that challenge the church are blown by various winds of change, Ammerman said.

Recent generations have become more mobile, for example. Over a five-year period one in six move, and that rate of movement for young adults ages 18 to 32 is even more dramatic - one in three. One reason is the unstable job market, Ammerman said.

"Young adults of today are not generally settling down like 'real adults' of the past who early in life eased into a full-time (and often life-long) job, moved out of mom and dad's house, got married, and had kids," she said. "But the reality of young adulthood today is much more volatile, more fluid than in the past."

How people relate to and network with one another is also in transition, a phenomenon driven partly by social media and technology such as e-mail, Facebook and Twitter. Just because "we went to school together" or "we live next door to each other," Ammerman said, doesn't necessarily mean "we will relate with each other."

We are a more culturally and religiously diverse society than in past, she said. America now has one in eight so-called 'foreign born' citizens, not just from Europe but from countries like Mexico, China, Korea and El Salvador. It is no longer just a Christian and Jewish society. Other faith traditions also are flourishing.

But there has also been a change in what "Christian looks like," Ammerman said. "We don't look like we used to. Your parish may now feel like it's more connected to Nigeria or El Salvador (than to its local neighborhood.) Community is not geography anymore."

Families are also in flux. They don't look like they used to and there are not as many of them. The percentage of married-with-children households has gone from 50 percent in the 1950s to about half of that today.

Finally, Ammerman said, the incentive to be affiliated with religious tradition is slowing eroding. One in ten American adults is an ex-Catholic. "And we have seen a steady erosion over the past two generations over questions of gender and sexuality. Younger generations are becoming more and more liberal on those issues. Culture is not making it easy for you. If people are going to find their way into your pews you're first going to have to go out and find them."

But Ammerman encouraged her audience of lay leaders, saying that it is well worth the church's efforts to clear those seemingly insurmountable hurdles. And, because of the transformative nature of faith communities, there is reason for hope.

Church congregations, for instance, are crucial to cultural organizations in civic communities, Ammerman said. "Resources that get collected in community get dispersed out in so many ways. Congregations provide places that build up what political scientist Robert Putnam has called 'social capital.' For example, church members communicate, share common labor and common projects, and learn civic skills such as giving a speech, writing letters to editors and representatives, organizing meetings, raising money. Congregations fill a

critical gap in larger society.”

Local congregations, Ammerman said, “provide a real hothouse of ways for people to grow and live by the golden rule, nurtured by stories of selfless parish heroes and by models of volunteerism sitting in pews around them. They then get opportunities to practice it themselves, to take that casserole to the sick person down the street.”

Another reason for pastoral leaders to persevere, she said, is a matter of attitude. Studies have shown, for example, that the unchurched agree that “there are terrible things happening in the world and somebody should do something,” whereas church-goers say, “there are terrible things happening in the world and we should do something.”

Ammerman described three categories of church members: 1. Typical members who like the preaching and music but are not engaged in things beyond worship services; 2. Marginal members who are not very active, seldom attend church but are not completely disconnected; and 3. The truly disaffected who abandoned their religious tradition at an early age and are disproportionately Baby Boomers and Catholics.

The church’s goal and challenge, of course, is to transform all three groups, including typical members, into a fourth category: truly engaged members.

“Church attendance matters,” Ammerman said, alluding to the typical member group. “And preaching and music provide a threshold for them. It’s what they experience inside the church doors. But that’s not enough to hold them, to deepen and develop them spiritually. They need opportunities for friendship, learning, service and conversation.”

And lay ecclesial ministers are well-equipped, well-suited and well-poised for providing such opportunities.

“The bottom line,” Ammerman said, “is that lay ecclesial ministry is essential, both for individuals and for the communities in which they are living.”

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