A Critical Reflection:
Naming Lay Ecclesial Ministry –
The Political and Personal Narratives

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Abstract

This study is an analysis of the politics of naming, as enshrined in the construction of the term, *lay ecclesial ministry*. Transformative Learning Theory will reveal the distorted meaning perspectives that shape the sociolinguistic and epistemological relationships within the dominant ecclesiastical structure of a dualistic caste system that supports the uncritical naming of lay ecclesial ministry. The reconceptualist tradition of religious education is offered as a "mediating language", providing a public space and a vocabulary in which to conduct a creative, critical discourse that could open up new forms of mutual ministry for the church in the twenty-first century.

"No need is more fundamentally human than our need to understand the meaning of our experience."

Jack Mezirow 1990, 11

The promulgation of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: a Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (USCCB 2005) has been acknowledged as a step forward (Long 2006, 5) in the recognition of the 30,632 non-ordained women and men employed in full time service to the Roman Catholic Church in the United States (DeLambo 2005, 88). While this document on lay ecclesial ministry and the three that have preceded it - *Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity* 1980, *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* 1995, *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: the state of the questions* 1999, express a desire on the part of the Bishops of the United States to affirm both the people and the work they do, all four documents have been instrumental in the uncritical institutionalization of the term *lay ecclesial ministry* as the description for the 30,632 and their work. The documents' pre-modern sociolinguistic and cultural assumptions that implicitly prohibit the possibility of an inclusive creative discourse support a pyramidal hierarchical structure of authority and power. Despite the well-intended efforts of all those involved in the naming process, the fact remains that the description, *lay ecclesial ministry*, imparts ownership of the term to an exclusive, all male clerical decision-making body and serves to affirm the position and status of the owners of the words (Moran 1974, 31). The language forms employed by this system of authority and power are stumbling blocks to any fruitful discourse regarding the ways in which ministry can be most effectively carried out in the church in the twenty-first century.

This paper will focus the lenses of linguistic resistance and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow 1990) on the politics of naming as it applies to the term *lay ecclesial ministry*, within the Roman Catholic Church. This will reveal a view of ministry painted by the official language of church documents that has its foundation in pre-modern theological systems. Critical

reflection on the meaning perspectives that have shaped the sociolinguistic and cultural relationships within the church will give way to the need for perspective transformation and the prophetic voice within the community. Assistance from Jane Regan's insights into the prophetic mission of the church and its integration into adult learning theory (1997) will shed light on a correlation between Jack Mezirow's phases of transformative learning and Walter Brueggeman's prophetic vocation. The personal narrative that gives shape to this paper is the researcher's own lived experience of intuitive dissonance with the term *lay ecclesial ministry* and her desire to bring about a creative, inclusive discourse that will lead to a more fruitful understanding and praxis of ministry within the Roman Catholic community.

Perspective Transformation

Perspective transformation begins with the emergence of a *disorienting dilemma*, "an inner disequilibrium in which the harmony of the self is disturbed yet the problem is neither understood nor satisfactorily named" (Mezirow 1991, 77). In this case, the process of perspective transformation challenges both the sociolinguistic and epistemological assumptions that undergird the relationship between the lay ecclesial minister and the official decision-making body of the church. Given the lived experience of the researcher, there was an intuitive sense that something was not right with the naming of *lay ecclesial ministry*.

Initial research revealed a sociological description for *lay ecclesial ministry* – "feminized semi-professional" (DeLambo 2001, 12), that added immeasurable discomfort and increased the researcher's intuitive dissonance. The contrast between the knowledge acquired through the practice of ministry within the faith community and that which has been handed down via a process of inquiry, rooted in the medieval theological knowledge systems, revealed an incongruity regarding the function of knowledge. If, as sociologist E. Doyle McCarthy states, "knowledge and experience are coterminous" (4), then, this process of perspective transformation unmasks the discord between official knowledge and the experiential knowledge of the minister. The distorted meaning perspectives that support the clerical hegemony, based on medieval social and cultural relationships, no longer make sense in light of personal experience.

The Personal Narrative

Self-examination prompted the recognition of the need on the part of the researcher to unveil the essence of the lived experience or the praxis of the lay ecclesial minister since the information it provided contradicted the statement made by DeLambo. Beyond contradiction, active reflection on the experience of those engaged in the work, revealed self-understandings on the part of *lay ecclesial ministers* that associated them much more closely with the work of ordained ministry, not only interrelationally, but of similar nature or of the same kind. These observations are corroborated in the writings of Zeni Fox, Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wegner, Philip Murnion and David DeLambo.

Two areas of similarity emerge as integral to this research. The first had to do with principle motivation for entering into full-time ministry and the second with reasons for remaining in full-time ministry. Fox (2005, 25) and Murnion and DeLambo (1999, 39) both note the experience of a call from God as being primary to the full-time participation of the non-ordained in service to the church. One might ask where the difference lies between the call heard

by those responding to the ordained ministry and those responding to non-ordained ministry? Is it with the divine or with man-made disciplines constructed from archaic assumptions and presuppositions that have formed the meaning perspective that produces the social, cultural and linguistic relationships that exclude rather than include?

Fox enumerates job satisfaction, the sense of doing the work in response to a call from God and the understanding that their gifts are being used by God in the work they are doing (25) as motivation for remaining in ministry. Likewise, Murnion and DeLambo cite "the opportunity to be more active in the church's service to people" as motivation for entering into full-time non-ordained ministry (39). The ordained priests who were interviewed by Hoge and Wegner spoke of satisfaction emerging from their functions as presiders and preachers. The next most significant areas of satisfaction for them were noted as "opportunity to work with many people and be a part of their lives" and "being a part of a community of Christians" (2003, 25). The living out of the response to the divine call to priesthood was also noted as a source of satisfaction, but within the context of "spiritual security."[1] It is significant to note that security of any kind was not mentioned by the non-ordained as a source of satisfaction. In fact, Fox states that salary and security were ranked lowest by the non-ordained when discussing the reasons for remaining in ministry (25).

Recognition of the disorientation, and active reflection on the relationship between the lived experience of the non-ordained minister and the official naming of the work, provoked a self-consciousness that allowed this researcher to name the dilemma. What emerged was dissatisfaction with the term, based upon what was known to be the lived reality, not only of the researcher but of the majority of the non-ordained ministers who had been named by the official language of the church.

The Disorienting Dilemma

This was the disorienting dilemma - the sociolinguistic assumptions which contributed to the structural form of the church and the process of naming the work of the non-ordained minister. Dissatisfaction with the term, based upon what was known to be the lived reality, not only of the researcher but of the majority of the non-ordained ministers who had been named by the official language of the church as well, had unveiled a distorted meaning perspective. What had been simmering beneath the surface with regard to prior understandings, categories and relationships now emerged. It was no longer adequate to continue to think, speak or act in relation to the categories articulated through the term *lay ecclesial ministry* or *feminized semi-profession*. The use of language to maintain the power and authority of one group over against another had resulted in denying full participation in the work of ministry to the non-ordained.

The tripartite vocation – the call of baptism to be priest, prophet and king or (as Harris notes), "political people …called first to shape and design our own polity, our ways of being together" (1989, 26), includes the summons to be prophetic. Water Brueggemann's understanding of the task of the prophetic vocation "to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant

[1]Hoge and Wenger note this as "the feeling that solely by being a priest one is responding to God in ways that offer spiritual assurance for one's life now and in eternity. This spiritual comfort underlies everyday life and can provide staying power even when frustration s are at their worst" (26).

culture around us" (2001, 3) challenges us to act as political people. His insights into the prophetic mission of the church have been integrated into Jane Regan's understanding of adult learning theory as it relates to transformative learning and its implications for religious education. Regan suggests transformative learning, as articulated by Jack Mezirow, has a great deal to contribute to the way in which adult religious education can enliven the prophetic voice of the faith community (1997, 104).

Since both meaning perspectives and meaning schemes become the lens through which experiences are perceived in order to revise or reshape their interpretation or to construct a new meaning, they are both involved in the four distinct forms that learning can assume in the process of transformative learning (Regan, 106). The first three forms all involve meaning schemes – learning through them, the addition to them, or the transformation of them. It is the fourth form – perspective transformation – that is the most challenging to achieve. Meaning perspectives are so deeply embedded within cultural and social interactions that they are often not noticed and, even more troublesome for this research, they are so integrally related to emotions and belief systems that attempting to reshape or transform them can be an extremely painful process. Nevertheless emancipatory learning lures one into the way of the prophet so that others may experience the same freedom – eventually.

Table 1 is an attempt to illustrate the correlation between Mezirow's phases of transformation and Regan's presentation of Bruegemann's insights into the prophetic role and its contemporary meaning (Regan 1997, 102-103).

The Prophetic Vocation and Perspective Transformation

Perspective Transformation	The Prophetic Vocation
1. Disorienting Dilemma 2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame.	Recognition of the infidelity of the present interpretation of reality.
Lay Ecclesial Ministry – different in kind from Ordained Ministry	
3. Critical assessment of epistemological, sociolinguistic or psychological assumptions. 4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change.	Perceptiveness to articulate, critique and resist assumptions which served to fix firmly the interpretation of reality.
Pyramidal structure ***Dualistic caste system*** **Lived experience of the community**	
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions. 6. Planning a course of action 7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills	Imagining and energizing (toward) a new future
Establishment of an inclusive, positive counter discourse	
8. Provisional trying of new roles. 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new role and relationships. 10. Reintegration into one's life on the basis of the conditions dictated by one's new perspective.	People validate the accuracy and adequacy of the prophetic viewpoint.
Renaming ministerial work ***Reshaping ministerial structure***	

Table 1.

Critical Assessment of Assumptions

The term *lay ecclesial ministry* emerges from a knowledge system and organizational structure of authority rooted in medieval understandings and practices. The social norms, cultural and language codes and ideology that are the meaning perspectives for the assumptions that produced the term were shaped by the experience of the pre-modern church. The use of these assumptions to shape understandings and relationships in a modern or post-modern culture results in distorted understandings of reality that place the clergy caste over against the laity. Therefore it is necessary to critically examine the meaning perspectives that formed the frame of reference for the institutionalization of the term.

Current authority within the church is, according to official claims, based upon the ancient belief that obedience is due those in power because it was designed that way from the beginning, based upon divine determination (Moran 1982, 31). Consistent with this understanding is the patriarchal image of the father as the giver of life and therefore the one to who is respected and obeyed. When the belief of divine determination merged with the patrimony that was the basis for the family structure in Western culture, what emerged was the understanding of authority that shaped and was experienced by the medieval church. Within the early church and continuing through the centuries, the understanding of paternal authority was associated with the office of priesthood rather than with the individual who was priest, bishop or pope. However, the practice of the church differed greatly from its theological doctrine (Moran 1982, 34). In other words, the way in which the medieval clerical class began to claim authority led to a distorted understanding of that which was the original intent or understanding of the use of power through the exercise of authority in the church. Regardless of the theology (meaning perspective) that was supposed to guide the way in which the exercise of authority was lived out (praxis), it is the lived experience (meaning schemes) that becomes the frame of reference or in this instance, the distorted understanding of the meaning perspective.

The Politics of Naming

The language of both *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: the State of the Questions* and the more recent *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (2005) serves to institutionalize the term *lay ecclesial ministry* within the patriarchal two-tiered organizational structure of the church. *Lay Ecclesial Ministry* establishes the use of the term *lay ecclesial ministry* as "a framework to indicate what is common to many roles and responsibilities undertaken by lay persons" (6),

> The word 'lay' underscores the fact that persons in this group remain first, foremost, and always members of the laity. … we do not refer to all those who minister in response to their baptism within the church community or the world; the word 'ecclesial' denotes not only the that the ministry of these lay persons has a place within the communion of the Church but also that it is to be submitted to the judgment and supervision of the hierarchy (6).

Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord firmly embeds lay ecclesial ministry within the two-tiered pre-modern system,

> We apply the term 'ministry' to certain works undertaken by the lay faithful by making constant reference to one source, the ministry of Christ. The application of 'ministry' to the laity is not something to be confused with ordained ministry nor in any way construed to compromise the specific nature of ordained ministry. The lay ecclesial minister is called to service in the Church and not necessarily to a lifelong commitment as happens in Ordination. Lay ecclesial ministry is exercised in accordance with the specific lay vocation (12-13).

The character of the prophetic voice within the church is to be courageous enough, having recognized the infidelity of the present interpretation of reality, to articulate the need for a transformation of meaning perspectives. Otherwise, whatever takes on the appearance of dialogue regarding *lay ecclesial ministry* will be just that – the appearance of dialogue, focused on questions about the 'what' and 'how' that further institutionalize the term. The voice of the prophet must articulate the absence of the 'why'. As Moran observes, "If the words are not available to ask the right questions, then no new answers are possible" (1974, 31).

Exploration of Options

Perspective transformation at this point in the process requires the acquisition of knowledge and skills in order to be able to try out new roles and relationships. As David DeLambo points out, many of those who are non- ordained, full-time ministers in the church already possess the knowledge and skills needed (ch.9) to do this. The difficulty is with the labeling that has been done in concert with distorted meaning perspectives. In this regard, perhaps critical discourse will lead to the discovery of the need for all who believe they are called to leadership to engage in a broader, more inclusive learning experience that will diminish the possibility of a resurgence of the old order.

The imaginings and the possibilities for new roles and relationships are as numerous as those who would be engaged in the discourse. Perspective transformation and emancipatory learning do not lead to specifically designated alternative structures. They provide a new framework of openness and consensus, igniting creative alternative possibilities.

Reintegration based on new perspectives

The difficulty of engaging in dialogue once the need for perspective transformation to occur takes place is acknowledged by Jane Regan through the words of Jack Mezirow.

> There is no question to the claim that dialogue is often made impossible in society structured by power and inequality and that creating a forum in which participants have the right to speak is inadequate. …People are silenced by being demoralized, unable to believe that what they have to say will be valued, having been previously silenced, frustrated or made insecure by contesting ideas…Participants may be silenced by the belief that discourse cannot make a difference in resolving

> a problem…dialogue can be aborted by deep differences in language, culture and meaning perspective (110).

Even if one were to undergo the process of perspective transformation oneself, how difficult would it be to reintegrate into the existing organizational structure of the church, while maintaining a transformed meaning perspective? Although emancipatory learning enables one to refuse to act out of the existing sociolinguistic assumptions, challenging relationships that are based on distorted meaning perspectives, the impact is usually personal, effecting change and growth in the individual, without altering the social consciousness. However, the individual prophetic voice, which challenges the existing structure of authority and power within the church, could also dispute the existing social consciousness. Questioning the form of community that silences the voices of women and men engaged in non-ordained ministries may evoke a dissonance in others, igniting the process of perspective transformation.

Religious education, as Regan has suggested, can become the spark that produces the flame of perspective transformation. In the case of the naming of *lay ecclesial ministry*, the exclusion of the voices of pastoral ministers unmasks the way in which authority in the church is used to sustain a form of community that perpetuates social injustice. If as Moran suggests, 'to teach' is to 'show how' and "the fundamental correlation with 'showing how' is 'to live'" (1997, 38), it becomes the work of those who educate religiously to challenge this form of community. That work belongs to all the baptized, making the question of shared authority one that must be addressed. Situating authority within the entire people, Moran comments, "When one says that authority in a body resides in the body politic, the contrast is not to God but to any things or castes that would be more restricted than all the people"(1974, 196).

Taking its cue from Regan's insight into its prophetic dimension and acknowledging the emancipatory capacity of transformative learning theory, religious education within the Roman Catholic church must come to recognize its own prophetic mission. The work that religious educators must engage in is the work of showing how – the work of transformative learning - that will lead to recognition of the covenant relationship that is the model for all relationship. In this way, challenging the social and cultural relationships that have been shaped by the pre-modern meaning perspective of a dualistic caste system and establishing a positive counter discourse. This in turn could lead to the formation of alternative perspectives, consciousness and praxis.

In other words, religious education can give rise to the voice of the prophet – the one who has undergone perspective transformation so that the entire church can be challenged and convinced to do the same. All who believe they have something to contribute to the discourse would be invited to do so. The invitation is to 'showing how' the community could function, in order to arrive at a consensus that would free both clergy and laity from the social and cultural norms and codes that have been so restrictive and oppressive for both.

And most significantly, this prophetic challenge could encourage the establishment of communities of discourse that allow for the reclaiming of meaning perspectives from the most ancient beginnings of the faith community. Reclaiming the original and inclusive meaning perspective could open up a way of imagining a new future, allowing ministry and leadership to

develop according to the sensibilities of this time and this place. This would give shape to a new rhetorical system that fashions a people who are able to articulate a new understanding of their life of polity, full participation in tripartite vocation, into which all the people of God have been invited.

Conclusion

At this time and in this place, the impact of transformative learning theory on the narratives both political and personal, regarding the naming of *lay ecclesial ministry*, can be observed. By recognizing the need to attend to the dissonance created by the uncritical application of the term "feminized semi-professional" to the researcher's lived reality, the journey to perspective transformation was begun. This paper has endeavored to map that journey as one that can be of assistance in critically examining the way in which power and authority have been used in the church to name *lay ecclesial ministry*, sustaining the dualistic caste system. It has established the need for religious education to assume the work of assisting all the baptized in reclaiming their rightful role as a prophetic, political people, called to shape a form of community that will encourage inclusive, positive critical discourse in all areas of their life of polity.

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