

Institute focuses on need to invite young people to be church leaders

WASHINGTON - Approximately 70 leaders of youth, young adult and campus ministries from 13 U.S. dioceses met June 25-29 in Washington to discuss ways of more effectively inviting the youths of the Catholic Church into leadership positions within the church.

The leaders met at a training institute held by the Washington Theological Union.

Paul Jarzembowski, executive director of the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association and leader of several institute sessions, said that in the past youths were interested in ministry and church leadership and the number of young people looking for ministry positions often outnumbered the positions that were available.

He said trends have changed and that those who work with youths now need to become intentional in their presentation of ministry in the church as a career option.

"In our programs we have a lot of young adults who want to participate and not a lot who want to lead," he said. "Now is a time when we just can't let chance guide the leadership."

The weeklong institute was one part of a five-year, \$1.8 million grant project called Eye on the Horizon. The project's focus is studying and responding to changing trends in pastoral leadership. The Washington Theological Union, a Catholic graduate school of theology and ministry, was awarded the grant in 2004 by the Lilly Endowment.

Pat LeNoir, director of the grant, said the idea for a project to draw the interest of the youths toward full-time ministry has existed for some time, and the grant allowed it to finally become a reality.

"The dream of this happened long before the planning grant," Ms. LeNoir told Catholic News Service. "There have been major cultural changes, and we have to develop intentional structures for encouraging leadership."

Conceptual meetings for the institute between the union and its partners began as early as March 2004, Ms. LeNoir said. The union is partnered with the National Association of Diocesan Directors of Campus Ministry, Catholic Campus Ministry Association, National Catholic Student Coalition, National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association and National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

During the institute, representatives and youth ministry leaders from the participating dioceses discussed the strengths of their ministries, shared ideas and laid out individual, concrete plans with deadlines for integrating their youth and young adult ministries and giving youths a chance to learn more about ministry positions.

The leaders came from the Baltimore Archdiocese and the Archdiocese of Hartford, Conn., and from the dioceses of Allentown, Pa.; Austin, Texas; Charlotte, N.C.; Cleveland; Harrisburg, Pa.; Lexington, Ky.; Raleigh, N.C.; Reno, Nev.; Richmond, Va.; Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va.; and Wilmington, Del.

Sister Mary Ann Spangler, a Sister of the Humility of Mary, who works with campus and young adult ministry in the Diocese of Cleveland, said she and the four other representatives from the diocese developed a plan to implement a mentoring program bridging the youth and young adult ministries in the diocese by May 2008.

Some of those who led the institute, including Mr. Jarzembowski, will check in with the diocesan groups throughout the year and serve as guides to help each group reach its goal.

The overarching goal is to provide continuity among youth, young adult and campus ministries so that those who are involved in these ministries will feel comfortable taking on leadership positions when they graduate from high school or college.

Both clergy and lay positions are suffering from a shortage of new leaders who belong to younger generations, said Chris Anderson, executive director for the National Association for Lay Ministry.

"We talk about the clergy shortage quite a bit, but there's also a lay minister shortage," he said.

Mr. Anderson said he hopes the most important concept dioceses realize after this institute is the need for a demystification of ministry. He said the youths need to hear from a minister what it's like to be a minister before they will be attracted to the priesthood, diaconate or career in lay ministry.

Franciscan Father Louis Iasiello, president of the union, said he is confident that younger generations will answer the call to serve. He said he sees in youths a hunger for spirituality, meaning and faith.

"There are great leaders in that cohort of young people," he told CNS. "The challenge is in identifying them, nurturing their interest and helping them to identify those leadership qualities in themselves."

In the coming years, the institute will document the progress of participating dioceses through quarterly reports and an online forum, then prepare a permanent resource in the form of a manual to assist future groups seeking to implement similar programs, said Krista Bajoka, facilitator of the institute and director of young adult and campus ministry for the Archdiocese of Detroit.