

# Shortage goes beyond priests

A shortage of religious and clergy means that lay ecclesial ministers assume more duties in parishes, running religious education programs, designing youth programs and serving as pastoral associates.

But the much-publicized priest shortage has overshadowed another problem: The lay ecclesial ministers are themselves in short supply, a problem that will worsen in a few years when the profession gets hit with a wave of retirements.

“Across the board there’s a need to attract more qualified lay ecclesial ministers,” said Ruth Puls, director of ministry formation and development for the archdiocese. The archdiocese is in the middle of Project 2010, which first examined the baseline of lay ecclesial ministry and next will focus on retaining ministers, increasing their competence and recruiting additional lay ecclesial ministers.

Recruitment is key: Students may not even realize these are paying jobs as opposed to volunteer positions. Individual parishes set the pay scales for their ministers, and depending on the affluence of the parish, the individual’s experience and the varying duties, salaries range from \$28,000 to \$80,000.

Ms. Puls notes poorer parishes struggle to afford lay ecclesial ministers.

“Some areas can’t afford them and that’s a great concern; the ones that need the most resources have the least to hire,” she said, adding churches are sharing ministers.

But the first step is to get people into the field.

“We know we need to recruit and we’re looking at the best way to do that with colleges,” Ms. Puls said, adding that the archdiocese has paired with some colleges and will waive up to one-third of tuition for those working in a church and majoring in theology or religious studies.

Susan Keating, director of religious education and youth minister for the SS. Matthew and Thomas More Religious Education and Youth Ministry Center in Baltimore, benefited from the tuition assistance. Without that assistance, she said, she never could have gotten her master’s degree “because I had three kids in

college.”

Degreed candidates are a must as the field has become more professional.

“We used to give the young priest the youth ministry and now we’ve grown to see youth ministry as a special field. We’ve recognized the baptismal call of everyone to serve people,” Ms. Puls said, noting that lay ecclesial ministers always work in concert with the clergy.

In fact as young people discern whether they have a vocation, lay ministry is part of that process.

“Are they being called to be priests or ministers,” Ms. Puls said. “We want to see if they’re being called to serve the church in other ways.”

The church offers something that makes recruitment easy: the chance to make a difference.

That’s why Ms. Keating loves her job.

“What keeps me in the church is the ah-hah moments,” she said, “being able to share that faith with adults who are not comfortable sharing their faith with their kids and then seeing them become comfortable with that. When I first became involved I did it as a job – now I do it as a ministry. I don’t need the work but I do it because I love it.”

For just that reason, the profession is attractive as a second career, too.

Tim Janiszewski, pastoral associate with an emphasis in youth ministry at Our Lady of the Chesapeake, is a licensed civil engineer. While he enjoyed that work, he knew something was missing, but he didn’t know what. He began to volunteer in youth ministry and then realized he had found his calling. After 11 years as a full-time minister, he still enjoys the peace of “knowing I’m where I’m supposed to be.”

He loves working with youth “and the real reward is knowing I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing,” he said. “I have the best job in the world.”

“There’s so much work to be done in the church and we’re just trying to invite

people to follow that," Ms. Puls said.