

## Energized by the laity

By Katharine Bird  
NC News Service

"Well, bishop," the lay president of the parish council said, "you take care of drawing up the mission statement for the parish and we'll implement it."

"I said, 'No, you won't really think the mission statement is yours if we proceed that way,'" replied Bishop James Hoffman of the Diocese of Toledo, Ohio.

Retelling that story during a recent interview, the bishop said he considered that exchange a "great teaching moment."

For Bishop Hoffman, the incident was illustrative. Our expectation of who does what in the church grows out of our particular vision of the church, he indicated.

"Vatican II moved the church forward" in that regard, Bishop Hoffman suggested. "It stressed the common bond of all people" and developed the theology of lay people's responsibility for the church's mission.

Bishop Hoffman recently stepped down after three years as chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Laity. He found his six years on the committee "exciting and energizing" since it put him in touch with so many lay people.

He especially benefited from his encounters with "non-church types" at meetings such as the laity committee's 1983 conference

on work and faith at the University of Notre Dame.

They were people "we have no effective way to tap into" under ordinary circumstances, he explained. When church leaders want to consult with lay Catholics, it's usually those who are active in church ministry, he said. And "the number of people involved with church ministry is miniscule."

"The greatest number of lay persons work in society," Bishop Hoffman said. "Their primary role is to shape institutions by their work there."

The church hasn't yet found sufficient ways of supporting them — the Catholic politicians, the corporation executives, the teachers in public institutions, he added.

"There needs to be a way these folks can have spiritual nourishment — I'm willing to look at that," he said.

The bishop thinks this could be a two-way street. "My sense is a lot could be gained by the total church if the voices of the many could be heard," he said.

On the bishop's wish list is finding some way of reaching more of these lay Catholics. "But we have no established forum now for consulting on a regular basis with them," he said.

He suggested one way might be to establish a National Council of Catholic Laity.

He also suggested starting on the local level first, where some framework for consulting these "experienced, talented folks" might be established.

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Bishop Hoffman indicated he learned a great deal during his tenure on the laity committee.

An important lesson was discovering that the bishop's primary concerns are not necessarily those of the laity.

"I could come in with an agenda — say, to implement the bishops' pastoral letter on peace in the nuclear age — and I'd have to back up and address what the laity wanted to talk about first," the bishop said.

For many lay persons, "marriage and the family are the heart of the matter," he said.

Once he discovered this, Bishop Hoffman said, the way to proceed often was close at hand. For example people readily can see that war and peace issues affect family life and children — since they affect the very future of the world as well as each family, he said.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

## FOOD...

### ...for thought

"Groups like this one are great because they are an opportunity for me to discuss my faith with others who also are interested in it," Joan was saying. "I don't get many opportunities like that otherwise."

Joan was a wife, mother and real-estate agent with a profound interest in the church's social-justice ministry. She was one of 12 lay parishioners meeting in a home as part of a parish renewal program.

Joan had done a great deal of thinking about her faith. Clearly she was bringing that faith to bear on her real-estate work. But she did not feel she had as much contact with others of her faith as she needed, outside of Sunday Mass. She valued the support offered by the renewal program, a point on which several other group members readily concurred.

Parish renewal groups are bringing a new twist to lay Catholic life. They bring together those in the parish who always support parish activities. But they also attract many others who rarely participate in formal parish activities outside of Sunday Mass.

Their diverse backgrounds and interests offer group participants an opportunity to share insights and to learn from each other in refreshing ways. But their varied backgrounds also pose a special

challenge: to find some common ground. One group leader told how his group began to move forward when it developed a common mission — a simple project to aid poor families in the local community.

The participants in Joan's group experienced a sense of growth over the weeks they met. And, although most in the group were only casual acquaintances at the beginning, they came to care much about each other.

At the same time, their different backgrounds didn't disappear from view, with everyone becoming identical in their approaches to daily Christian living. Perhaps, as one parishioner suggested, that isn't the goal of such groups.

Groups like the one Joan participated in are becoming an increasingly common dimension of the life of the church's lay people. Individuals say the groups are not only an opportunity to discover what it means to serve the church and the world as Christian people, but an opportunity to get to know each other better.

They say they learn to call each other by name. They come to realize how much the Christian life is valued by others close at hand. They say they hope that will build new bridges in the church.

### ...for discussion

1. When it comes to your work in the world as a teacher, a salesperson, an office worker, a farmer or a doctor, what difference does your Christianity make?

2. What is the difference between Mike and Paul in the article by Dolores Leckey? What does she mean when she writes that the laity's church ministry — as catechists, parish council members, readers at Mass, etc. — need not be exclusive of their active witness to Christianity at home or at work?

3. Mrs. Leckey tells the story of a woman named Gail. At home, Gail discovered there are ways her Christianity comes into play — in her approach to resolving conflicts, for example, and in making the home a place of hospitality. What are other ways of putting Christianity into action at home?

### SECOND HELPINGS

"Lay Minister" is a 31-page pamphlet published by the National Catholic Vocation Council. Personal statements by nine lay persons who tell how they live out their values and beliefs today are included. Suzanne Elsesser writes that the "most basic and important" way lay Catholics minister is through their witnessing to the good news in the world. She gives some concrete examples of how this is done: "Managers, salespeople, government workers — all are asked to do what they do in a manner that lets Christ's love of people show through them. They are asked to wait on tables or administer government programs with a smile and attentiveness, to manage departments or entire corporations with a respect for people and to sell with the realistic needs of people in mind." (National Catholic Vocation Council, 1307 S. Wabash, Suite 350, Chicago, Ill. 60605. Single copy, \$1.75.)

## unity living

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fitness club, where people simply come together to accomplish a specific task.

The unity of Christians is truly organic: It comes from sharing in the same vital principle — the life of the risen Christ.

This unity is expressed very beautifully in St. John's image of Christ as the life-giving vine and Christians as the branches.

Obviously a branch which is separated from Christ is one that is separated from other branches — with the same results. It follows that we have life, true life, in community, in vital union with our brothers and sisters.

Since we are feeling, caring, loving, needing human beings, this union cries out for expression in real sharing among Christians.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

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