

Not only priests hear the call to serve

Catholic laity acquire diverse ministry skills at Caldwell institute

By Meg Nugent
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Mary Carroll is an accountant, not a theologian.

But at St. Matthew the Apostle Church in Edison, where she is benefits coordinator and a lay minister, she fields as many questions about the rituals and positions of the Catholic Church as she does about health insurance.

"When you work for a church, everyone expects you to know all the answers," said Carroll, who instructs adults converting to Catholicism.

Carroll is among 20 people who enrolled in the new Caldwell Pastoral Ministry Institute established last summer at Caldwell College. It offers a master of arts degree in pastoral ministry tailored for men and women involved in Catholic lay ministries.

"I would like to be able to know about anything that has to do with the Catholic religion," said Carroll. "I want to be better informed because, then, you're better able to help other people."

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—MARY
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Donna Cole is a research scientist at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-New Jersey Medical School in Newark. She is also a lay minister at St. Catherine of Siena Church in Cedar Grove and a master's candidate at the Caldwell Pastoral Ministry Institute.

She enrolled because she wanted to learn more about her faith through the study of church doctrines and documents.

"It has had a great impact on my ministry already. It's given me a lot more confidence that when I speak about, and on behalf of, the church, what I say is not just my opinion but is grounded in solid theology and solid doctrinal information," she said.

Today, there are more than 26,000 paid lay ministers working in U.S. Catholic parishes, a jump of nearly 5,000 from six years ago, according to the National Pastoral Life Center in New York. That number doesn't include numerous volunteers involved in lay ministries.



PHOTOS BY JIM PATHE

Taking a pastoral ministry class at Caldwell College are, from left, Donna Cole and Carol Orlando, both of Cedar Grove, Gary Ruth of West Caldwell and Mary Carroll of Edison.

The use of lay ministers was initiated in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council, which passed the Decree on the Laity encouraging the non-ordained people to be active in the church.

The lay ministers have increased as the numbers of ordained priests and nuns during the past three decades steadily declined. As of this year, there are 48,000 Catholic priests in the United States, compared with 59,000 in 1970, according to statistics from the United States Catholic Conference. Since 1965, the number of nuns has plummeted from nearly 180,000 to this year's total of 87,644, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

While the clergy has dwindled, the number of Catholics in the United States has swelled, from 46 million in 1965 to 61 million this year, according to the research center.

Caldwell's pastoral ministry program wasn't devised to usurp the role of ordained clergy, said the Rev. William C. Graham, associate professor of religious studies at Caldwell College and the institute's director.

"We're not trying to take the priest's job away or diminish the call to a holy order. We want to complement that," said Graham. "A properly functioning Catholic parish cannot depend on just the priest and ordained staff. There's just too much to do and the best of priests cannot do all the ministries."

The Caldwell master's program focuses on men and women who have worked in various types of ministries for at least two years — as religious

education instructors, music and liturgical ministers, eucharistic ministers, youth ministers and those involved in parish administration and chaplaincy work.

The 30-credit program combines formal theological training with practical courses designed to hone pastoral skills. Students, for example, study the structure and theology of the Gospels, the purpose and organization of sacraments and worship, and the developing role of catechesis, life-long instruction in the tenets of the church. They also study community organizing as a ministry, grief and youth ministry, the psychological aspects of ministry and lay preaching.

Students are allowed up to five years to complete the master's on a part-time basis.

Some of the students, like Carroll, are full-time church employees. Two are nuns. Others, like Cole, have full-time careers outside the church and conduct their lay ministries as part-time employees or volunteers.

Vincent Pisano is a retired Rockaway Township police officer now working for a two-way radio marketing firm. He also does pre-marital counseling at Our Lady Star of the Sea Church in Lake Hopatcong. He enrolled in the Caldwell Institute this fall.

"It's opened my mind to a lot of tensions in the church, such as women's role in the church and how important it is," he said.

Four other religious academic programs at New Jersey Catholic colleges target lay ministers, along with clergy and members of religious orders.

At the College of St. Elizabeth in Morristown, the Center for Theological and Spiritual Development has placed a special focus on the ministerial development of church laity since it opened in 1982.

Since the early 1970s, Seton Hall University has offered a master's degree in pastoral ministry through a 48-credit course of study specifically developed for the laity.

This fall, Georgian Court College in Lakewood introduced a master of arts degree in theology, and most of the 33 students enrolled are laity.

In addition, Felician College in Lodi has developed a master's degree in catechesis that is designed to attract lay people involved in educational ministries. College officials hope to open the program to students by April 1998.

Nationally, the number of Catholic lay ministry formation programs totals 281, an increase of 75 since 1986, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. That includes diocesan as well as academic-based programs.

As lay ministries continue to grow, the church must remain aware of an emerging challenge, said Sister Mary Garvin, president of the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry.

"We need to work toward collaborative ministry and not have a two-track system where priests have their own route for education and practice, and lay people have a different one," she said. "It's very important that we're all working for one church."