

**Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate
Georgetown University
Washington, DC**

**Catholic Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation
in the United States:
Statistical Overview**



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CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States.

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Overall Trends

Terminology

In 2005, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. In that document, the bishops note that they have been using the terminology of *lay ecclesial minister* and *lay ecclesial ministry* since 1980 in *Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity*.

In *Co-Workers*, the USCCB describes lay ecclesial ministry as characterized by:

- *Authorization* of the hierarchy to serve publicly in the local church
- *Leadership* in a particular area of ministry
- *Close mutual collaboration* with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons
- *Preparation and formation* appropriate to the level of responsibilities assigned to them.

Lay ecclesial minister is intended to be a generic term, not a specific role description or title. *Co-Workers* states that the ministry is *lay* “because it is service done by lay persons [including vowed religious]. The Sacramental basis [for lay ecclesial ministry] is the Sacraments of Initiation, not the Sacrament of Ordination.” It is *ecclesial* “because it has a place within the community of the Church, whose communion and mission it serves, and because it is submitted to the discernment, authorization, and supervision of the hierarchy.” It is *ministry* “because it is a participation in the threefold ministry of Christ who is priest, prophet and king.”

The longest section of *Co-Workers* is on formation for lay ecclesial ministry. It begins by noting that the Church has always required proper preparation of those who exercise a ministry: it cites Canon 231, which states that “lay persons who devote themselves permanently or temporarily to some special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation which is required to fulfill their function properly.” The following pages describe the development of such formation programs for lay persons in the United States.

In 1986, the USCCB Committee on the Laity completed the first nationwide study of formation programs designed to prepare lay Catholics for parish-level church ministry. CARA has been conducting studies of lay ministry formation programs nearly every year since 1994. As it has in each of its previous studies, CARA limits the scope of its survey to programs of at least two years’ duration that provide training for professional lay ecclesial ministry.

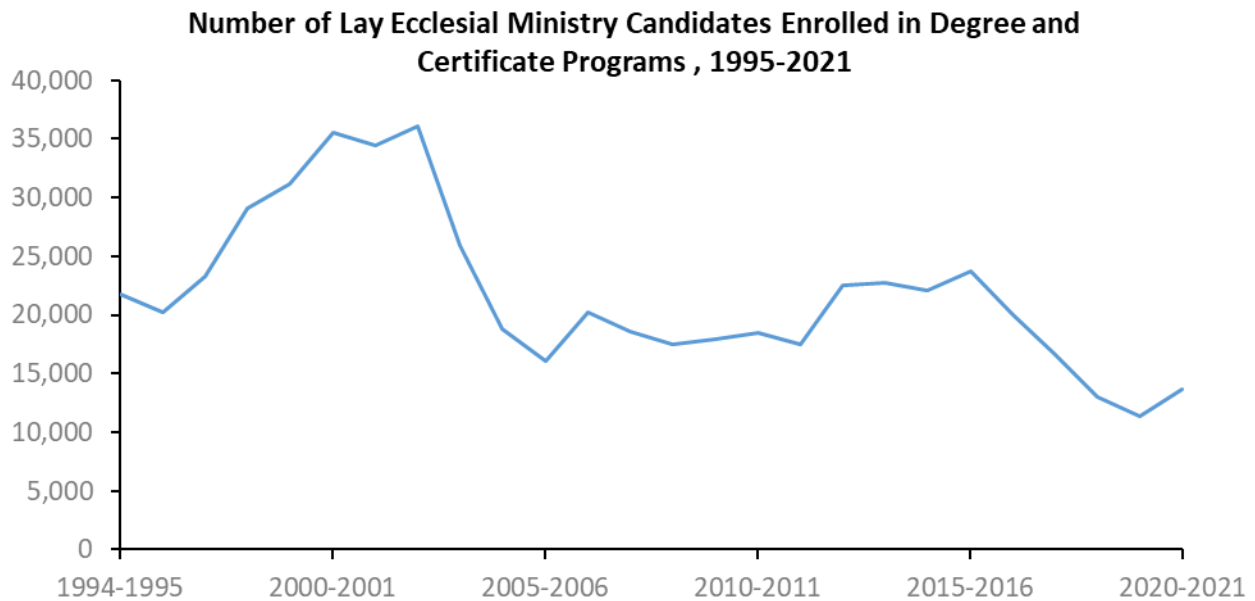
Number of Enrollees in Lay Ecclesial Ministry Programs

In 2020-2021 academic year, there were 13,631 lay ecclesial ministry candidates enrolled in degree and certificate programs. This was an increase of 2,264 candidates (20%) from the previous year. The number of candidates increased by 30% between 1985-1986 and 2020-2021 and decreased by 24% between 2009-2010 and 2020-2021. The largest number reported in formation was in 2002-2003, when a record 36,048 total candidates were identified. If the trend since 1994-1995 continues, there will be projected 10,576 candidates \pm 14,856 (CI=95%) in 2025-2026.

Of 13,631 lay ecclesial ministry candidates, 10,124 (74%) were working toward a certificate in ministry and 3,507 (26%) were working toward a graduate degree in ministry. The total number of enrollees represents an increase of 20% from the 11,367 candidates reported in 2019-2020.

Reported enrollment in lay ecclesial ministry formation programs has fluctuated over the 35 years that the data have been collected. This fluctuation is partly a function of CARA's work with the USCCB to distinguish more carefully lay ecclesial ministry formation from adult faith formation.

A second reason for the fluctuation is that the number of active programs offering formation in lay ecclesial ministry has also varied widely. CARA works throughout the year to identify new programs and to clarify the status of other programs that have been discontinued or that did not respond to the survey.

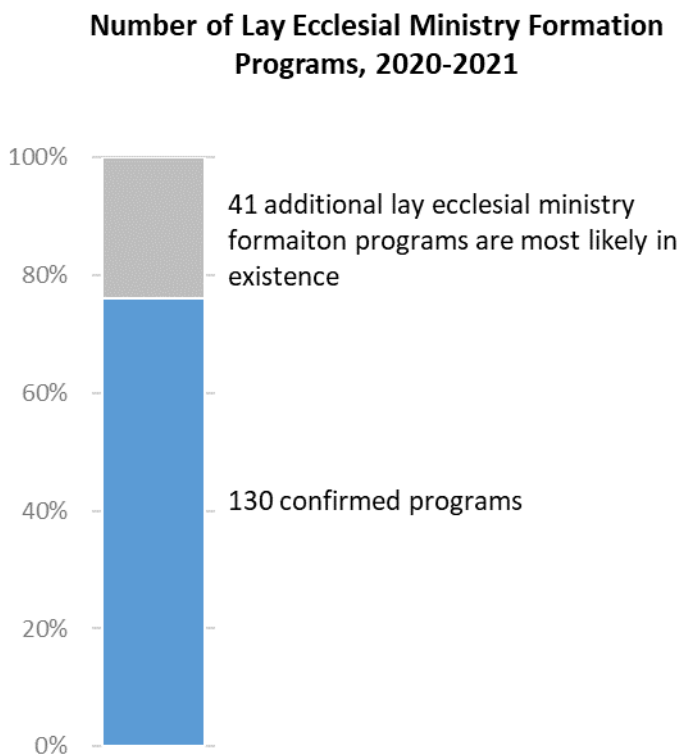


Characteristics of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation Programs

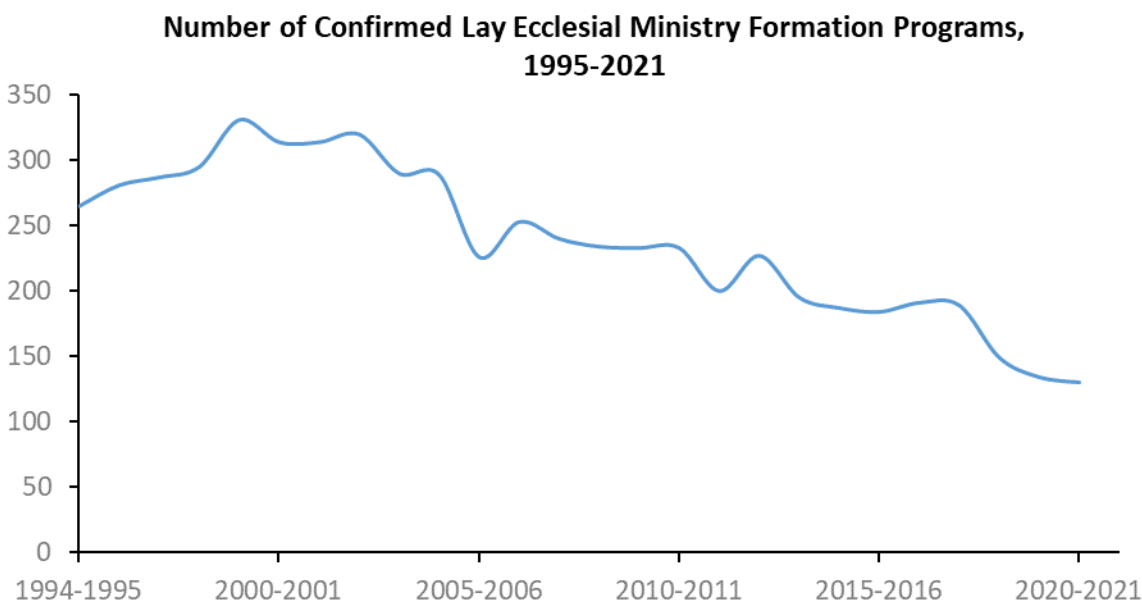
Number of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation Programs

The role of the laity and their participation in the ministry of the Church has evolved considerably in the decades since the Second Vatican Council. At the same time, the number of formation programs to train lay people for professional church ministry has decreased. The number of programs decreased by 37% since the first study of lay ministry formation in 1985-1986 and decreased by 44% since 2009-2010.

In 2020-2021 academic year, CARA identified a total of 171 active lay ecclesial ministry formation programs and received program information from 130 active programs, for a response of 76%.¹ The 130 responding programs in 2020-2021 is a decrease of 3% from the 134 in 2019-2020.



Among the directors of the 130 active programs that responded to repeated requests for information, 12 supplied program information but did not provide any information on their enrollment. The information provided on the following pages does not include the participants enrolled in those 12 programs.

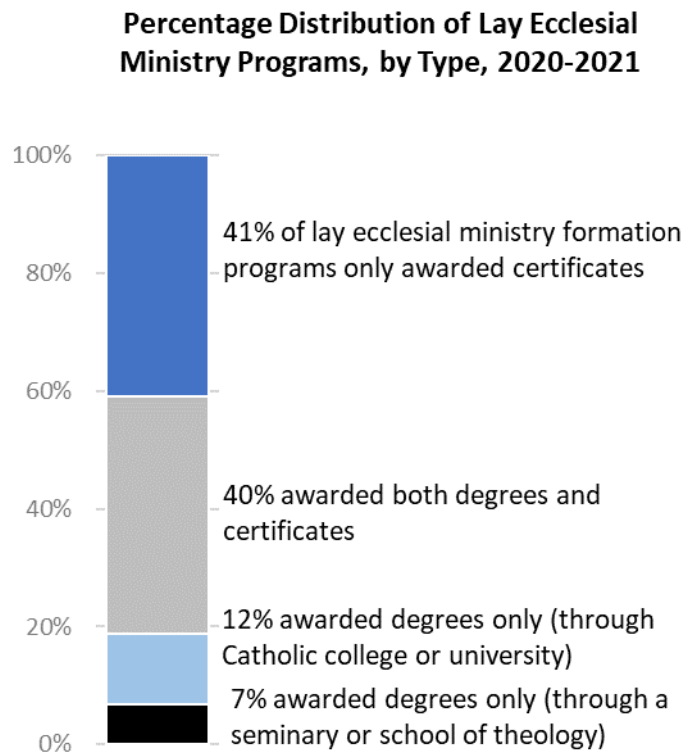


Distribution of Certificate vs Degree-Granting Programs

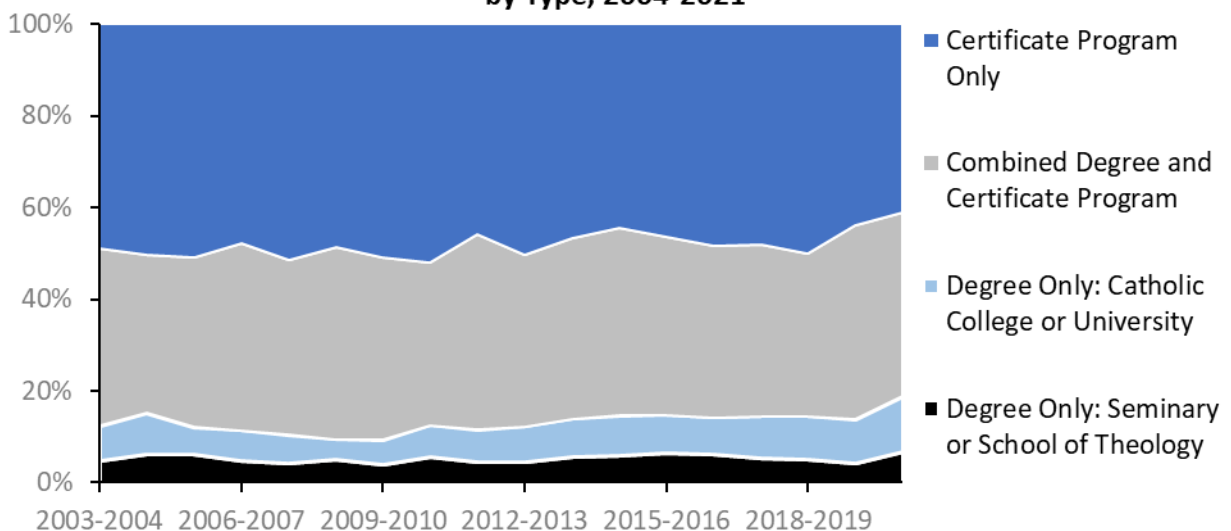
A number of different types of lay ecclesial ministry formation programs offer either a degree or a certificate in a ministry-related field. CARA asked program directors to classify their program into one of four categories, according to the program’s relationship with a degree-granting institution.

Overall, two in five (41%) of all responding programs offer a certificate but no degree. This percentage represents steady decline from 50% in the 2019-2020 academic year. Based on the trend since 2003-2004, the share of programs in this category is projected to be 43% ±6% (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

On the other hand, the share of programs awarding degrees only has been increasing. In the 2020-2021 academic year, one in five programs were awarding degrees only (12% did so through Catholic college or university and 7% through seminary or school of theology). This represents an increase from 14% in 2019-2020. Based on the trend since 2003-2004, the share of programs in this category is projected to be 20% ±7% (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.



Percentage Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Programs, by Type, 2004-2021



Degrees Offered

Academic-based programs offer academic degrees but many also offer certificates. Similarly, diocesan-based programs affiliated with a seminary, college, or university typically offer opportunities for both academic degrees and certificates. Programs that are exclusively diocesan-sponsored typically offer only non-degree certificates.

Most of the degree-granting programs offer graduate degrees, although a few also grant associate or baccalaureate degrees. The most commonly offered graduate degrees in degree-granting lay ministry programs are the M.A. Theology (42 programs), M.A. Pastoral Studies or Pastoral Ministry (41 programs), Master's degree in other areas (24 programs), M.Div. (18 programs), M.A. Religious Studies or Religious Education (16 programs), and D. Min. or Ph.D. in Theology (14 programs).

Overall, 24 programs offer Master's degrees in other areas which include, for example: Church Management, Catholic School Leadership, Catechetics & Evangelization, Biblical Ministry, Hispanic Theology and Ministry, Intercultural Ministry, Justice Ministry, Health Care Mission, Catholic Philosophy, Biblical Studies, Couples & Family Therapy, Transforming Spirituality, Transformational Leadership, and Leadership for the New Evangelization. Overall, six programs offer other graduate degrees such as: Ph.D. in Religious Education, Doctorate in Canon Law, and Th.D.

Degrees Available in Lay Ecclesial Ministry, 2020-2021

	Programs
	[#]
M.A. Theology	42
M.A. Pastoral Studies or Pastoral Ministry	41
Master's degree in other areas	24
M.Div.	18
M.A. Religious Studies or Religious Education	16
D. Min. or Ph.D. in Theology	14
Other degrees	6

Certificates Offered

Most lay ecclesial ministry programs grant certificates of completion. The most common certificate programs are in Pastoral Ministry (46 programs), Religious Education (34 programs), Catechetics (32 programs), Youth Ministry (26 programs), Theology (22 programs), Liturgy (20 programs), Clinical Pastoral Education (9 programs), Pastoral Administration (7 programs), and Music (4 programs). Certificates in other areas include, for example: Lay Leadership, Retreat Planning, Spiritual Direction, Adult Faith Formation, Hispanic Leadership, Charity and Justice, Health Care Mission Leadership, Monastic Studies, Catholic School Administration, Catholic Evangelization, and Ignatian Spirituality.

Certificates Available in Lay Ecclesial Ministry, 2020-2021

	Programs [#]
Certificate in other areas	81
Certificate in Pastoral Ministry	46
Certificate in Religious Education	34
Certificate in Catechetics	32
Certificate in Youth Ministry	26
Certificate in Theology	22
Certificate in Liturgy	20
Certificate in Clinical Pastoral Education	9
Certificate in Pastoral Administration	7
Certificate in Music	4

Distribution of Academic vs. Diocesan-Based Programs

Many lay ecclesial ministry formation programs can be classified as either exclusively diocesan-based or academic-based, but several are the result of collaboration between a diocese and an academic institution. In these cases, often the diocese assumes responsibility for the human, spiritual, and pastoral formation, while the academic institution is responsible for the intellectual formation. Currently, 66 active programs are sponsored or co-sponsored by a diocese, 46 are sponsored or co-sponsored by a college or university, and 13 are sponsored or co-sponsored by a seminary or school of theology. Loyola University in New Orleans operates nine active programs that are both diocesan-sponsored and university-affiliated through the Loyola Institute for Ministry. CARA received program information from six of these programs in 2020-2021.

In addition to academic and diocesan-based programs, a few independent Catholic organizations sponsor several other programs. Another nine independent programs in clinical pastoral education (CPE) are offered by Catholic hospitals to train ministers who serve as chaplains in medical settings.

Some programs are designed to meet particular needs in lay ecclesial ministry formation, including programs designed specifically for ministry with and to the Hispanic community (such as El Instituto Pastoral San Juan Diego de la Arquidiócesis de Denver), the African American community (the Institute for Black Catholic Studies in New Orleans, LA), and the National Association of Pastoral Musicians, which prepares pastoral musicians for certification as a Director of Music Ministries. Another program, the Master of Science in Church Management at Villanova University is designed to prepare those who are in church leadership and administrative roles who are seeking to become better stewards of church resources by improving their business and management skills.

Lay Ecclesial Ministry Programs, 2020-2021				
	Average Number of Full-time	Part-time	Average Number of Degree	Certificate
	 [#]	 [#]	 [#]	 [#]
Degree Program associated with a Catholic Seminary or School of Theology – no certificates	11	8	57	-
Degree Program associated with a Catholic College or University – no certificates	13	10	63	-
Combined Degree and Certificate Program	7	17	39	68
	2	13	-	92
Certificate Program only – no degrees	11	8	57	-

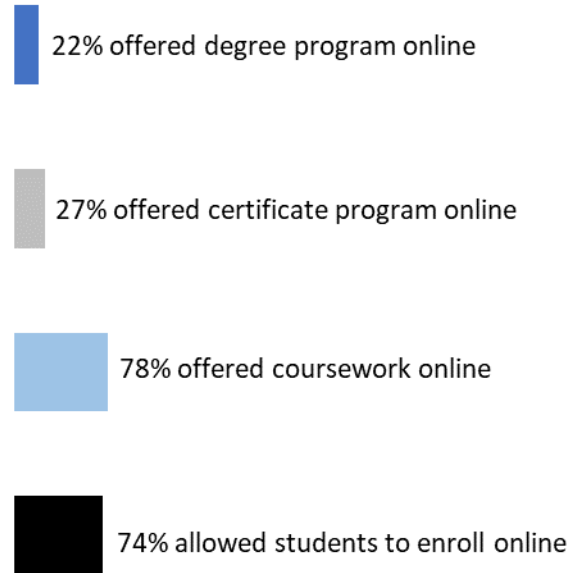
Distance Learning and Online Coursework

In addition to the extension programs described earlier, a number of programs were developed to take advantage of the internet as a tool for expanding their reach to a wider audience. Several programs offer some coursework online and a few offer their entire program online.

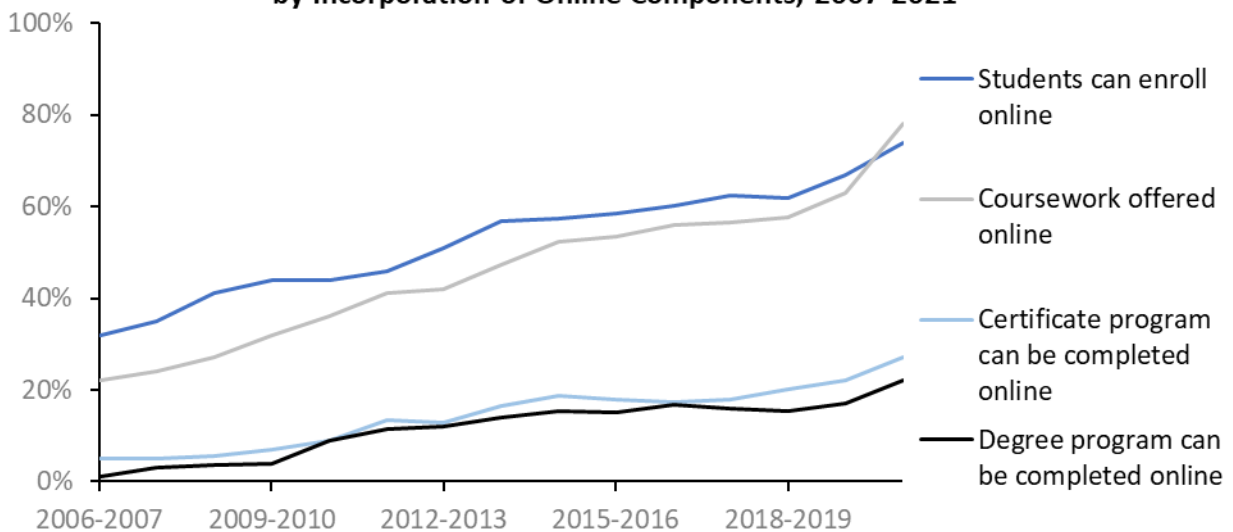
Overall, a quarter (27%) of programs reported that their certificate program can be completed online and one in five (22%) programs reported that they have a degree program that can be completed online.

Three quarters of programs offered coursework online (78%) or allowed students to enroll online (74%). Based on the trend since the 2006-2007, these numbers are projected to increase to 88% \pm 6% and 84% \pm 5% (CI=95%) respectively, in the 2025-2026 academic year.

Percentage Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Programs, by Incorporation of Online Components, 2020-2021



Percentage Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Programs, by Incorporation of Online Components, 2007-2021



Language of Instruction

Lay ecclesial ministry formation programs are conducted in a variety of languages. The majority (69%) uses only English as the primary language of instruction, 3% are taught only in Spanish, and 28% use both English and Spanish.

Spiritual Formation and Field Education

Although academic formation is indispensable to lay ecclesial ministry formation, human, spiritual, and pastoral formation are also essential components of formation for ministry. Overall, among the 130 responding active programs, one in eight (12%) say that only formal spiritual formation is required of program participants, the same share (12%) report that the program includes only a field education/internship requirement, and two in five (37%) require both. The table below separates the programs by type and displays the proportion within each type of program that require a spiritual formation component as well as the proportion that require a component of field education/internship.

	Spiritual Formation Component [%]	Field Education/Internshi [%]
Degree Program associated with a Catholic Seminary or School of Theology – no	63	75
Degree Program associated with a Catholic College or University – no certificates	21	50
Combined Degree and Certificate Program	60	55
Certificate Program only – no degrees	52	48

List of Formation Programs with Highest Enrollment

Nine programs report more than 100 degree candidates enrolled in 2020-2021. The 1,711 degree candidates enrolled in these programs represent 49% of all degree candidates enrolled in reporting programs. These nine programs also report 79 students working toward a certificate (1% of all certificate candidates reported).

Lay Ecclesial Ministry Programs with Highest Enrollment

	Candidates for	
	Degree	Certificate
	[#]	[#]
M.A. in Theology, Augustine Institute, CO	344	8
M.A. in in Theological Studies, Franciscan U. Steubenville, OH	335	0
School of Theology and Ministry, Boston College, MA	226	14
Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education, Fordham U.,	174	10
M.A. in Catechetics & Evangelization, Franciscan U. Steubenville, OH	159	0
Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry, WA	147	15
Catholic Distance University, WV	112	16
Certificate in Pastoral Studies, Catholic Theological Union, IL	107	8
Catholic Theological Union, IL	107	8

Profile of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Program Candidates

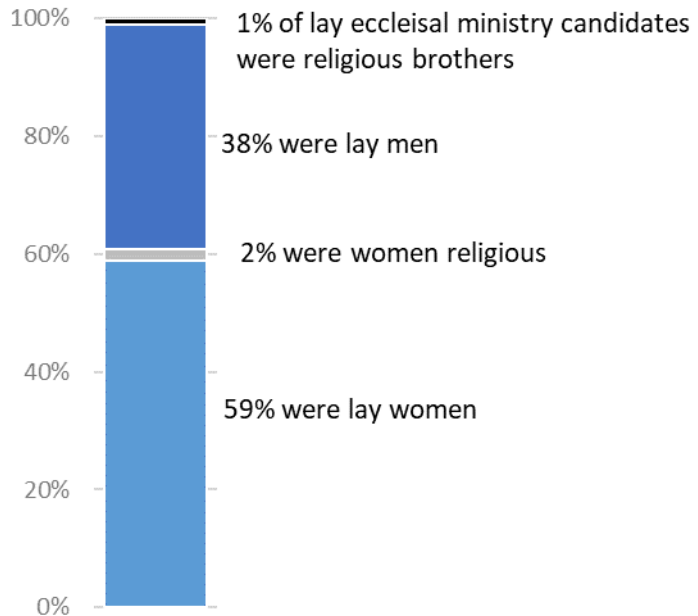
Distribution of Candidates by Gender and Ecclesial Status

In the 2020-2021 academic year, three in five lay ecclesial ministry candidates (61%) were women. This included women religious (2%) and lay women (59%). Based on the trend since 2003-2004, women are projected to comprise 59% ±5% (CI=95%) of candidates to lay ecclesial ministry, in the 2025-2026 academic year.

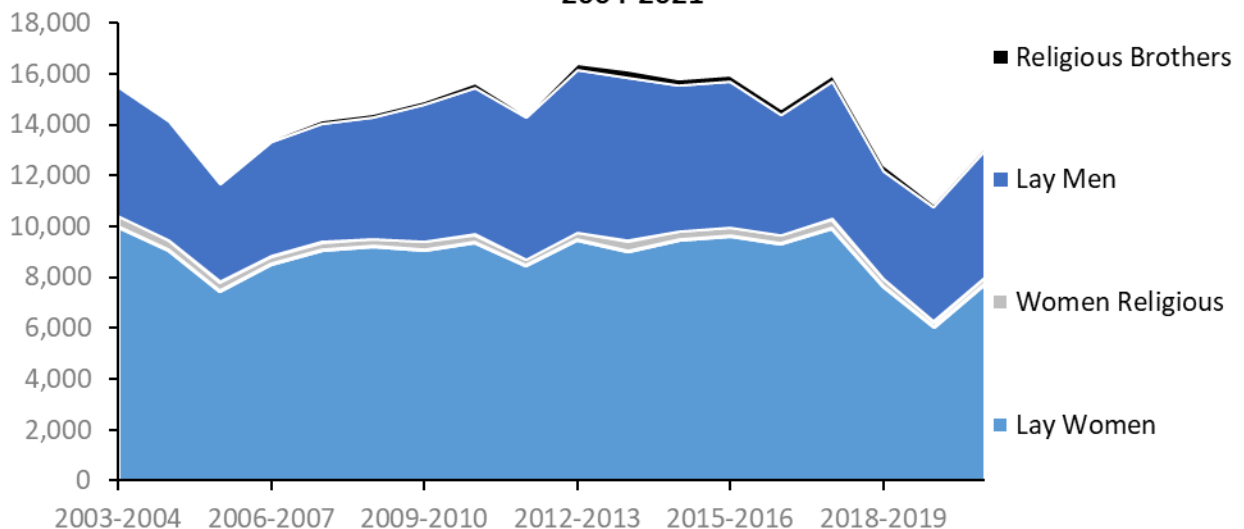
Two in five lay ecclesial ministry candidates (39%) were men. This included religious brothers (1%) and lay men (38%). Based on the trend since 2003-2004, men are projected to comprise 41% ±5% (CI=95%) of candidates to lay ecclesial ministry, in the 2025-2026 academic year.

Both men and women religious are more likely to be enrolled in degree programs than to be enrolled in certificate programs. Lay men and women who are not members of a religious institute are three times as likely to be enrolled in a certificate program as in a degree program. Lay women enrolled in a certificate program make up 48% of all Catholic lay ecclesial ministry program participants.

Percentage Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Candidates, 2020-2021



Percentage Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Candidates, 2004-2021



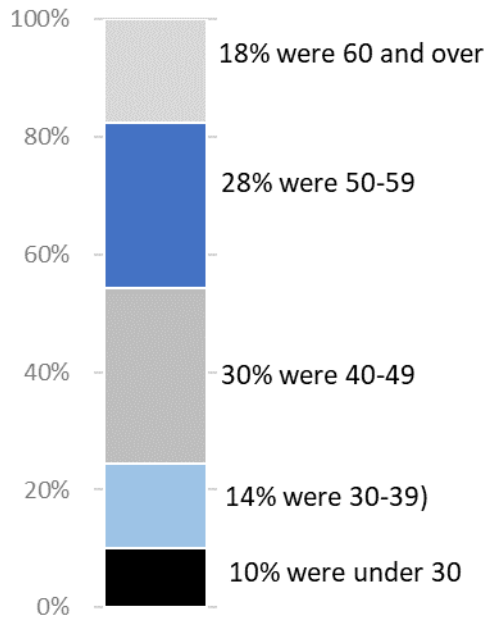
Age Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Program Participants

More than half of candidates in lay ecclesial ministry formation programs (58%) are in their forties and fifties. A quarter (24%) are under the age of 40 and one in five (18%) is age 60 and older.

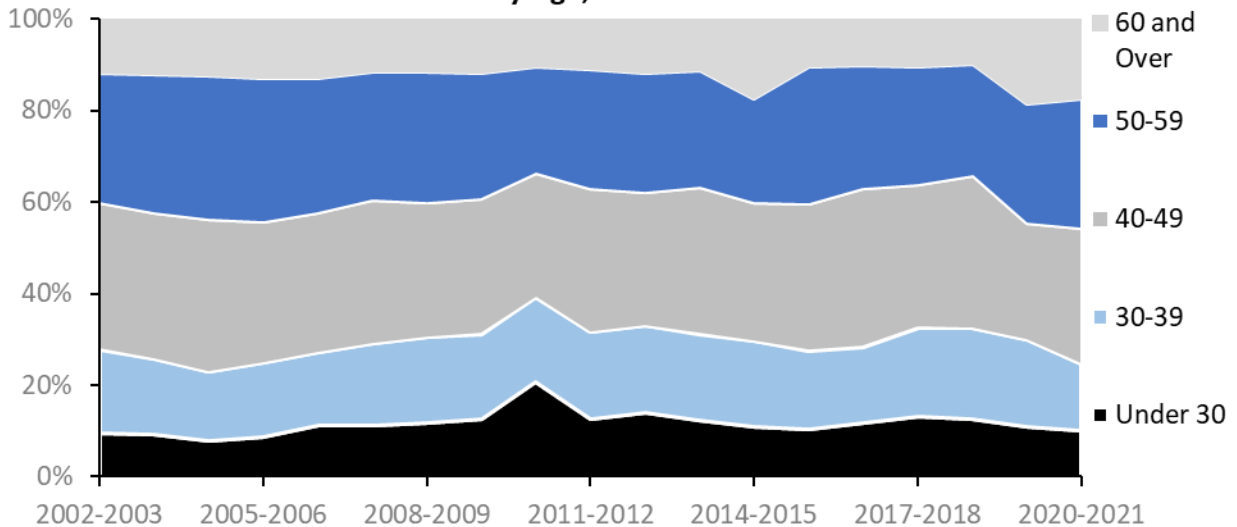
Based on the trend since the 2002-2003, the youngest candidates (i.e., those under 30 years old) is projected to increase to 13% \pm 5% (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

Students enrolled in degree programs are typically somewhat younger than those enrolled in certificate programs. Half of the degree program enrollees (45%) are under age 40, compared to one in six (16%) of certificate program enrollees. Overall, 13% of degree program enrollees are age 60 and older, compared to 20% of certificate students who are 60 or older.

Percentage Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Candidates, by Age, 2020-2021



Percentage Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Candidates, by Age, 2003-2021



Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Program Participants

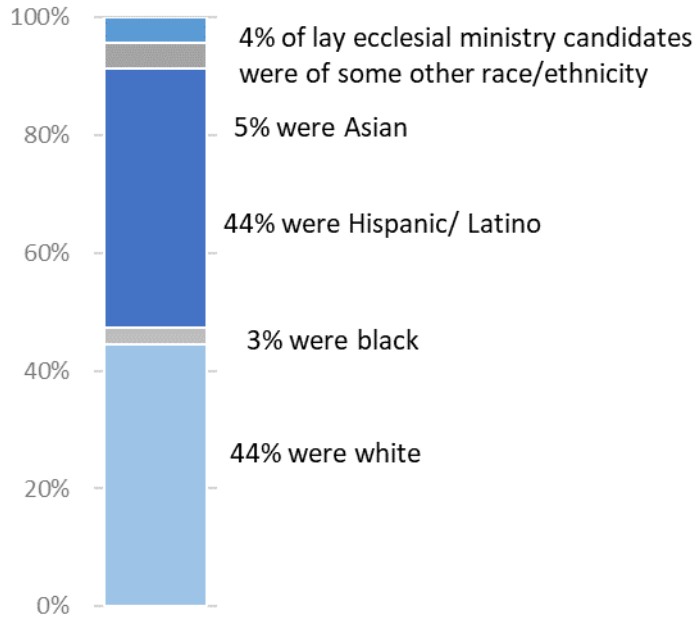
Hispanics/Latinos and White/Anglo/Caucasians make up two in five candidates in lay ecclesial ministry formation programs (44%). Blacks/African Americans make up another 3%, while Asian/Pacific Islanders make up 5%. Others (including Native Americans) make up 4% of enrollees in these programs.

Hispanics/Latinos comprise two in five (44%) lay ecclesial ministry program participants but are disproportionately enrolled in certificate programs.

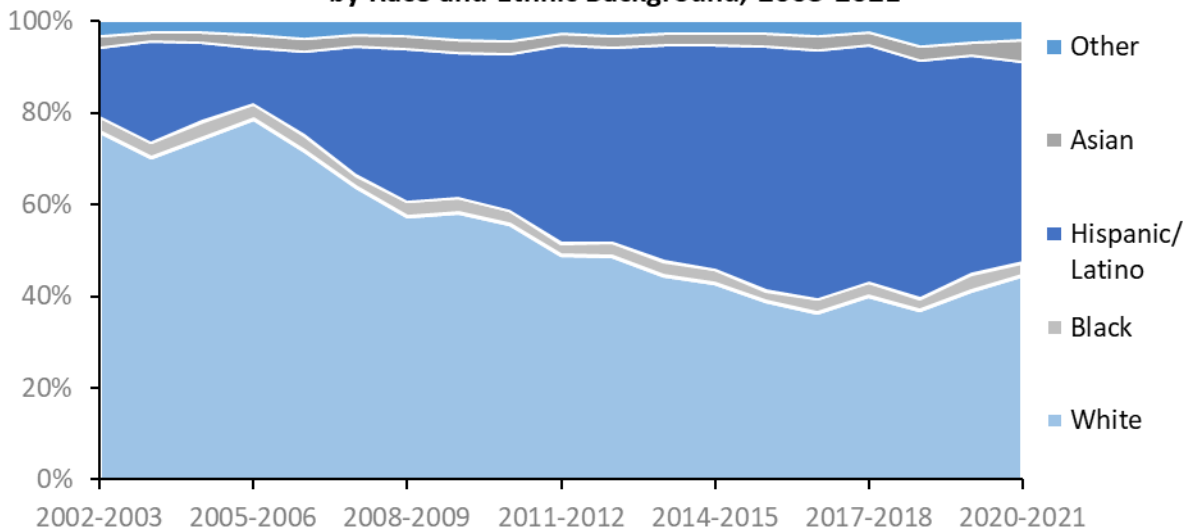
Hispanics/Latinos make up 16% of students enrolled in degree programs and 57% of students enrolled in certificate programs. In contrast, whites/Anglos/Caucasians also make up 44% of the lay ecclesial ministry program participants but comprise 61% of degree candidates and 37% of certificate candidates.

Blacks/African Americans, Asians/Pacific Islanders and other racial/ethnic groups comprise 12% of students in degree and certificate programs.

Percentage Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Candidates, by Race and Ethnic Background, 2020-2021



Percentage Distribution of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Candidates Candidates, by Race and Ethnic Background, 2003-2021



Methodology and End Notes

Note about Methodology

In 1986, the USCCB Committee on the Laity completed the first nationwide study of formation programs designed to prepare lay Catholics for parish-level church ministry. CARA has been conducting studies of lay ministry formation programs nearly every year since 1994–1995. Beginning in 2003-2004, CARA collaborated with the USCCB to improve the data collection so that participants in ministry formation programs who are preparing themselves for lay ecclesial ministry can be differentiated more accurately from those who are participating in these programs primarily for adult faith formation.

CARA limits the scope of its survey to programs of at least two years' duration that provide training for professional lay ecclesial ministry. CARA asks programs to identify degree candidates and certificate candidates separately, rather than asking only for the total number enrolled in the program. In addition, CARA asks each program to identify more clearly its affiliation with a degree-granting institution, where appropriate. While adult faith formation is vitally important for the Church, the purpose of this part of the Directory is to provide a complete list and to monitor trends among the programs that prepare adults for lay ecclesial ministry in the Church.

Endnotes

¹ Overall, 117 programs completed the survey (i.e., reached the end of the survey) for a response rate of 68%. The response rate included in the text is calculated in the same way as in previous years.