

MINISTRY FORMATION HAS COME A LONG WAY, BUT IS IT ENOUGH?

“There is indeed a ‘tipping point’ in the kind of leaders who serve to continue a ministry, or send it off in another direction never intended by its founders. As the work of leadership formation continues to develop within the health care ministry, the 16th century wisdom of St. Ignatius Loyola may speak to us in fresh ways today. Let our future work be less about checklists and more about the compass.”¹

— BRIAN YANOFCHICK

So much has happened in the world of formation over the last two decades. Multiple systems have formation as a priority in their strategic plans, and many have senior leader formation programs. But is it enough? When exploring this question, one area that does not require any analysis or investigation to determine its importance is the undeniable need for formation leaders. Aside from determining who are the formators of the Catholic health care ministry now, what about those in the years ahead? And more importantly, how are they being trained not only for today, but into the future?

A CALL FOR CONTINUING FORMATION

More than 20 years ago, I was invited to coordinate prayers and reflections for a two-day gathering of sponsors and senior executives of California Catholic health care systems and hospitals, in addition to the state’s Catholic bishops meeting. The agenda was clear: How would the healing ministry of Jesus, as expressed in Catholic health



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care, continue now and into the future? Bill Cox, president and CEO of the Alliance of Catholic Health Care and organizer of the event for Catholic health care leaders, noted: “Thoughtful critics have questioned whether the institutional Catholic health ministry can remain alive, vibrant and formative, given the context in which health care is delivered today. ... The critics’ most worrisome concern, however, is that Catholic health care may be ill-equipped to effectively address largely external challenges because the culture of Catholic health care itself is becoming dysfunctional. That culture, which is anchored in the healing mission

of Jesus, is Catholic health care’s *raison d’être* — its meaning and purpose. Without it, Catholic hospitals cannot continue to be efficacious church ministries, much less sustain their identities in a rapidly changing external environment.”² Cox’s answer to these critics was and remains the necessity for ministry formation at all levels of the organization, from frontline workers to the sponsor.

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A core competency of the sponsor body is ministry formation, namely to “ensure, oversee and assess formation activities throughout the ministry, starting with the sponsor body itself” and for leaders’ and associates’ participation in “appropriate formation programs that strengthen them spiritually for the ministry of health care.”³ The Code of Canon Law — which references formation in multiple instances — states: “lay persons who devote themselves permanently or temporarily to some special service of the Church are

obliged to acquire the appropriate formation required to fulfill their function properly and to carry it out conscientiously, zealously, and diligently.”⁴ Formation has to be “continuing,” which implies that growth in the Christian life, or for any state in life, is a matter of ongoing development.

Formation has even been called out in CHA’s recent national 2022 Mission Leader Survey as the foremost core competency that mission leaders most seek to improve. Ministry formation is also on the majority of system-level strategic priorities, yet operationalizing this is stymied by the scarcity of qualified mission and formation leaders to do the work.

FORMATION FOR FORMATION LEADERS

CHA has recognized the growing need for innovative approaches in ministry formation for some time. To creatively lead formation into the future and establish a community of practice, this fall, CHA will launch its 24-month Formation for Formation Leaders program. This comprehensive training, which will run through the fall of 2025, will provide participants with an opportunity to learn and engage in rigorous academic and experiential practices in an immersive, supportive and community-learning environment. The program will use a hybrid methodology and includes four in-person and nine virtual sessions.⁵

Formation for Formation Leaders provides professional development through:

Theological Grounding

- Understanding Christian anthropology as foundational to Catholic health care.
- Illuminating theological connections to vocation, tradition, Catholic social teaching, ethics, spirituality and discernment.
- Accessing theology as a resource for the formation process.

Psycho-Spiritual Development

- Cultivating spiritual practices for strengthening contemplative presence.
- Using the Enneagram [a classification system that helps differentiate personality/ego from one’s essence/self] for deepening self-awareness.
- Developing strategies for ongoing personal formation.

Design, Facilitation and Presentation

- Enhancing design and facilitation skills.
- Utilizing media and virtual modalities of formation.
- Managing self, group, time and content.

FORMATION’S EVOLVING FUTURE

Formation as a modern discipline in Catholic health care is in its relative infancy, which brings up two issues: fragility and potentiality. At CHA, we tend to lean into potentiality and see the possibility of formation becoming a discipline in its own right. But that takes more than a vision — it takes time and multiple talents. For this to happen, we also need to move out of silos and into a united community of practice, where difference and diversity are respected and encouraged, and sharing of resources and generation of ideas and strategies are a given.

There have been discussions about a new charism emerging in Catholic health care, which can directly serve the ministry of the Church. Formation is at the heart of this possibility and has to be invested in and given the attention it requires. Bringing together a cohort of present and future formation leaders is where the gifts and talents and potentiality get infused with grace, and all manner and means of things become possible.

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But most importantly, as we all know, this is an extraordinary ministry — and it is spilling over with gifts and sacred meaning that is begging for greater distribution, in addition to meeting a desperate need in the human condition and in our communities. This is what it means to continue the healing ministry of Jesus, and to honor those that went before us, who so selflessly initiated us into this vocational work.

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NOTES

1. Brian Yanofchick, "Leadership Formation: Choosing Between the Compass and the Checklist," *Health Progress* 89, no. 1 (January/February 2008): 8-9, <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/archives/issues/january-february-2008/mission-and-leadership---leadership-formation-choosing-between-the-compass-and-the-checklist>.

2. William J. Fox, "Nurturing the Ministry's Soul," *Health Progress* 85, no. 5 (September/October 2004): 38-43, <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/archives/issues/september-october-2004/nurturing-the-ministry's-soul>.

This presentation was first delivered in October 2002 at a talk to the sponsors and senior executives of California Catholic health care systems and hospitals and the state's Catholic bishops meeting in Palo Alto, California. It is worth noting that the

Ministry Leadership Center (known today as MLC) was created out of this meeting, which would go on to produce a three-year formation program that more than 1,000 executives completed over a 10-year period.

3. "Guide for Sponsors in Catholic Health Care," Catholic Health Association, 2021, https://www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/sponsorship/cha-sponsorship-guide.pdf?sfvrsn=fac9cff2_5.

4. Code of Canon Law, c. 231, 1, in *The Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983).

5. "Formation for Formation Leaders," Catholic Health Association, 2022, https://www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/formation-resources/final-formation-for-formation-leaders-brochure-2022-24.pdf?sfvrsn=34adc6f2_6.



For further details on CHA's Formation for Formation Leaders program, including how to apply and participation requirements, email Formation@chausa.org.

Upcoming Events

from The Catholic Health Association

Global Health Networking Zoom Call

May 3 | 1 – 2:30 p.m. ET

Mission in Long-Term Care Networking Zoom Call

(Members Only)

June 7 | 1 – 2 p.m. ET

Assembly 2023 (Virtual)

June 12 – 13

Diversity & Disparities Networking Zoom Call

June 29 | 1 – 2 p.m. ET

Faith Community Nurse Networking Zoom Call

July 25 | 1 – 2 p.m. ET

Mission in Long-Term Care Networking Zoom Call

(Members Only)

Sept. 6 | 1 – 2 p.m. ET



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