

## Background

*The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) is composed of leaders of active orders of Catholic sisters throughout the United States. They represent more than 78,000, or 91 percent of the country's sisters.*

*In August 1994, members of LCWR called on the Conference to develop "benchmarks" "to measure Church efforts to make leadership roles more available to women." In November of 1994, the U.S. bishops published "Strengthening the Bonds of Peace" which invited dialogue about women's roles in the church. The bishops hoped to "look at alternative ways in which women can exercise leadership in the church" if ordination is not open to them.*

*In the "Benchmarks" study, LCWR responds to the bishops' invitation. Study papers review the roles of women in the church from the perspectives of history, theology and current church law; and survey contemporary pastoral practice.*

*The LCWR task force found that "while documents of the Apostolic See clarify the position that the church does not have the authority to ordain women to the priesthood, they also affirm the dignity of women, condemn every form of discrimination against women, and call for women's full inclusion in the life of the church is closed to them.... Against the backdrop of such teaching stands the experience of women that the practice of the church falls short of her pronouncements."*

*The following recommendations were published by LCWR in 1996 in "Creating a Home, Benchmarks for Church Leadership Roles for Women." (Recommendations in boldface)*

### PROMOTION OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP ROLES FOR WOMEN

**1. The call for greater involvement of women in the church and in society is based solidly in the history of the U.S. church and in conciliar and post conciliar church teaching. Study of the history of the roles of women in the U. S. church and of the theological foundations for the equality of women should be included at every level of Catholic education: in elementary and high school; in seminaries, colleges, and universities; in religious and ministry formation programs; and in religious education.**

**2. We urge the U.S. bishops, church institutions and agencies, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and other national organizations to continue to recruit and appoint women to significant leadership positions at national, diocesan, and parish levels. Women should be considered for the positions of general secretary, associate general secretaries and secretaries of departments within the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference; the chief executive officers of national Catholic health care, social service, and educational organizations; the presidents of Catholic colleges and universities; the chief executive officers of sponsored health care systems, health care facilities, and social service agencies; the chancellors of dioceses and heads of diocesan offices. Church employers must aggressively seek qualified women candidates for positions that have traditionally been reserved for clergy or laymen, but that women are competent to hold.**

**3. Women are limited by common perceptions of what they may do, what they can do, or what is appropriate for them to do. Those stereotypes can be corrected by providing information about the accomplishments of women in traditional and non-traditional roles and by enabling the church community to experience accomplished women. We urge the staffs of national and diocesan newspapers, church-related television programs, and parish bulletins to assess their coverage about the work of women, particularly those in leadership roles, and to report on women in the church. We ask Catholic organizations that sponsor national conventions or regional or diocesan assemblies to see that their programs feature women in prominent roles.**

**4. Ordination to the permanent diaconate would open the way for women to exercise ministries and to hold ecclesiastical offices from which they are now excluded. Moreover, it would provide women with the added grace of the sacrament and the standing in the church to perform those functions. We encourage the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to invite the U.S. church to engage in serious dialogue about the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate and urge the laity, the national conferences of religious, and scholarly organizations to participate in that dialogue. If a national reflection on the issue indicates that ordaining women would have positive pastoral results, we encourage the U.S. bishops to petition the Apostolic See for the canonical derogations that would make it possible to ordain women to the permanent diaconate in the United States.**

## PROTECTION OF RIGHTS

**5. One of the complaints voiced frequently by women engaged in church ministry is that they have been terminated unfairly, or that other work-related rights have been violated. Often these women feel they have no recourse in the church and this perception contributes to the belief that the church does not value their dignity.**

**It is imperative that dioceses publicize their offices of conciliation and arbitration, grievance procedures or processes for negotiating solutions to conflict and that women understand how to gain access to those resources. Moreover, justice demands that all church employers, including all dioceses, have accessible, well publicized procedures for settling grievances.**

**6. Persons who seek the resolution of grievances through due process procedures to not always need a canon lawyer, but they often need the assistance of an advocate. Religious institutes would serve the cause of justice by training personnel to serve as advocates.**

**7. Going through formal due process procedures can be time consuming and is often adversarial. We encourage religious institutes to train members in negotiating skills and conflict resolution and in the use of those skills as a primary means to protect rights and resolve conflicts.**

**8. When employers have parallel sets of personnel policies for employees, according to their state in life, they risk discriminating against some persons. This is true in the case of dioceses that have separate policies for clergy, for religious, and for laity; it is equally true in the case of institutions sponsored by religious which have separate policies for religious and for lay employees. We challenge all church employers to develop comprehensive personnel systems that are based on competency, not ordination or state of life, and that apply equally to clergy and laity, men and women.**

**9. If women are to participate fully in church leadership roles, they must have the requisite education. However, the lack of financial resources and/or the policies of admission to formation programs often make that education inaccessible to women. In allocating the resources of the local church, dioceses are urged to invest in lay ministers, particularly lay women ministers, by establishing formation programs for lay ministers, by setting aside funds for tuition subsidies, and by making other resources such as the diocesan seminary and its library available to lay ministers.**

10. Many leadership roles require advanced degrees in fields such as theology, scripture, canon law, ethics and language. If women hope to fill those roles in the future, they must acquire the appropriate education now. **We urge religious institutes to encourage members, especially those who are changing ministry, to consider undertaking serious study in preparation for church leadership. Further, we encourage institutes to commit the resources to such study for the future of the church.** In many cases this financial commitment may not be possible for a single religious institute. **However, we encourage religious institutes and dioceses to establish joint funds to support the advanced education of women for church leadership.**

11. In parish communities women ordinarily outnumber men in paid professional roles, in lay leadership roles, as volunteers, and as regular church goers. If clergy complete their seminary education without having experienced competent women teachers, formators, or spiritual directors, they enter the world of the parish ill-equipped to work collaboratively with the women leaders who play significant roles in that community. **We challenge dioceses to engage women in seminary education because of the contribution they can make to the formation of clergy as well as for the ultimate positive effects on parish life.**

12. Many women are trained and experienced spiritual directors. When only men are engaged in spiritual direction, the church is deprived of women's gifts and thus, impoverished. **We urge dioceses, religious institutes, and parishes to make use of the gifts of women in spiritual direction.**

### JUST COMPENSATION

13. A basic expression of the relationship between the church and those who are engaged in Church ministry is compensation. The majority of lay church workers are women and the level of their compensation testifies to the value the church places on both their work and their dignity.

**Justice demands and the law of the church requires that all church employers-dioceses, parishes, institutions, religious institutes and agencies-provide for their employees compensation and benefits deemed just by external measures (cost of living, wage and salary survey, etc.).**

### EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION

14. The church provides a variety of opportunities for the participation of lay persons in consultative bodies. These bodies include the U.S. Bishops' National Advisory Council; diocesan synods; diocesan pastoral councils, the boards of universities, hospitals, and Catholic Charities agencies; parish councils and parish finance committees; and school boards, to name a few. Some of these groups, like parish finance committees, are called for by the law of the church; others have been created by bishops, pastors, religious leaders, and church administrators who recognize the importance of considering the experience of the laity in church decision making. **Justice requires that bishops, pastors, religious leaders and administrators take appropriate steps to see that both women and men are equitably represented in all church consultative bodies.**

15. In the past several years, Pope John Paul II has repeatedly affirmed the dignity of women and called for their greater participation in society and in the life of the church. **In response to this call from the Pope, we ask U.S. bishops to include in their quinquennial report, prepared for their ad limina visit, in the section on the laity, a description of the progress each diocese has made in the previous five years to promote the participation of women in the public ministry of the local church.**

### References:

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Appeal to the Church on Women's Behalf, John Paul II, 1995  
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## RECOMMENDATIONS

*From the*

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*Women Religious*

*About*

*Church Leadership Roles*

*for Women*

