



NACFLM Legacy and Foundations:

An historical account of the National
Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers (NACFLM)

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PREAMBLE

Only God creates out of nothing, implying therefore that anything that is humanly constructed comes from what went before, namely its history. Historical consciousness is now considered essential to almost everything, especially in response to the need for sustaining organizational integrity and vitality. In that spirit, what follows is a brief history of a major organization that exists within the confines of the Catholic Church. It arose as a means to provide organizational support for marriage and family ministry, a significant ministry within church life in the United States. Its original name was the National Association of Diocesan Family Life Ministers, abbreviated NACDFLM. Later, the “D” was dropped to include members from Catholic parishes. What follows is an account of its origins and its early life.

What Is NACFLM & Why Was It Founded

NACFLM is a Catholic voluntary association of individuals and groups engaged in ministry to and with families that traces its official founding to a national meeting in Memphis, Tennessee on October 2, 1980. At that time marriage and family life ministry had just been identified as a major priority and ministry of the Catholic Church. A few years before the Catholic bishops of the United States unanimously approved a seminal document called the “Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry: A Vision and a Strategy.” That document provided the strongest warrant for creating a national organization for family ministry. Ministry in the church of any kind is both a personal and a communal effort. Individual ministers are more effective when they are backed by a community of like-mind and like-spirited individuals. This principle of accompaniment and support dates back the origins of Christianity itself.

PRE-HISTORY

The 1950s and 1960's

The main features of that foundational church document can be traced to a series of commission meetings sponsored by the bishops' conference that involved not only a group of bishops, but also family ministers representing the twelve episcopal regions of the United States. They were assisted by experts from the various academic fields that studied family life. Married couples were also invited to serve on the commission. The commission was chaired by Archbishop John R. Quinn who was president of the National Council of Catholic Bishops. More about that later.

What follows here is a brief history of the association's life that traces its deeper roots back to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) where family life was specifically named as a part of church life. It was in the documents of Vatican II that we come across the naming of the family as "the domestic church." Such nomenclature was drawn from a theological process that was widely employed at the council, often referred to as *ressourcement*, or a return to the sources (*ad fontes*) of church life as it was lived and described in the early church. This ecclesial identity of the family can even be seen in the later parts of the New Testament where families are referred to as households of faith or as house churches. The council fathers captured some of this sense of the ecclesial nature of the family in their documents. But to tell the full story of family ministry in the United States, we do well to point to an even earlier awareness of the importance of marriage and family life for the church that was beginning to surface in diocesan and parish circles even before the council

The Cana Movement

Among these early signs of marriage and family ministry was the creation of the Cana movement in Chicago, where, in the 1950's, two priests, Fathers Jack Egan and Walter Imborski, began pioneering efforts to address both marriage preparation and enrichment. Their efforts became models of ministry for the rest of the country. Lay people were invited to assist priests in this ministry. An even earlier form of Cana involved retreats for married couples in St. Louis under the leadership of Father Ed Dowling, S.J.

The Christian Family Movement

Concurrently, also in the Windy City, the Christian Family Movement (CFM) was created by a married couple, Pat and Paddy Crowley, that was based on successful models of what was then called "the lay apostolate" in Belgium and in other European countries. After World War II, various "Catholic Action" movements were founded, largely based on the inspiration of a Belgian cardinal, Joseph Cardijn, who had been imprisoned by the Nazi during the war. These groups used a method of spiritual and pastoral discernment known as "observe, judge, act," which was adopted by CFM small groups. Both priests and lay people, mostly married couples, were drawn to this movement. It spread quickly throughout the United States. A need was evident.

Marriage Encounter



At a well-attended national meeting of CFM at Notre Dame in the late 60's, a priest from Spain, Father Gabriel Calvo, at the invitation of CFM leadership, introduced a weekend retreat for married couples called Marriage Encounter. This "retreat" was based on the belief that married couples needed special church support for their marriages to remain vital. Based on a theology of marriage that was thoroughly relational and using processes then popular in various encounter movements, this movement spread quickly throughout the country. Again, it was a joint ministry of both priests and married couples.

THE 1970's

Starting with Priests, Moving to the Laity

Pre-Cana and Engaged Encounter

The early 1970's witnessed the appointment of mostly priests to head diocesan offices that oversaw programs for marriage preparation. A few dioceses and parishes sponsored small gatherings for married couple and parents, especially those with Catholic school children. Regional gatherings, primarily dealing with marriage preparation, attracted significant numbers. Two national meetings were convened for those involved in marriage preparation or Pre-Cana. These meetings, along with the communal support experienced by those attending them, generated the creation of a loose federation of family life ministers around issues relating to marriage preparation. Under the inspired leadership of Father Carl Arico, the group gained national attention. It issued a set of guidelines rooted in proven positive approaches to this ministry of the church. Slowly marriage and family ministry were making inroads in diocesan planning and activity.

About this same time, the Papal Committee for the Family was recommending that episcopal conferences around the world create plans for pastoral care of marriages and families, especially those of the poor. This message made its way into the advisory council of the administrative board of the American bishops who recommended increased pastoral concern for marriages and families.

The tenor of the Vatican request implied that something more was called for in support of marriages and families, something more than the existing programs of marriage preparation. In 1975 Father Donald Conroy was appointed as the United States Bishops representative for marriage and family life. In the Department of Education for the United States Catholic Conference. He was charged with creating an ad hoc national commission of bishops and other experts, including seasoned family ministry personnel to consider the request. This commission's goal was to formulate a set of recommendations to the whole body of bishops that would include a pastoral plan describing specific strategies for supporting marriage and family life.

Its first meeting (of three) was held in Washington, DC in November of 1976. An important part of that meeting was discussion of a lengthy report on marriage and family ministry drawn from twelve earlier regional meetings conducted by the family life directors of each region. A clear discernable structure for advocating and supporting marriage and family ministry was slowly, but resolutely, being imagined.

Call to Action – a national listening project highlighted the need for marriage & family ministry



Also in 1976, as part of the Bicentennial celebration of the founding of the United States, the bishops of the Catholic Church initiated a national listening process named “the Call to Action.” Its aim was to surface the ideas and needs of a broad sweep of church members. More than 800,000 participated in parish and diocesan gatherings, culminating in a national meeting in Detroit. While the collection of survey data from these hearings might have been uneven at times, it resulted in a comprehensive set of recommendations for church leadership as it charted a direction for the church in future years.

The issues that received the most attention related to marriage and family life. This was particularly evident in two gatherings that were part of the Catholic participation in the overall bicentennial celebration. First, there was a three-day meeting in Atlanta that was organized around listening to the voices and articulating the needs of contemporary Catholic families, Second, as part of a Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia, the role of family in the sacramental life of the Church was highlighted with a special day-long series of events.

Toward the end of 1976, under the leadership of Father Donald Conroy and the support of *Marriage and Family Living* magazine, the twelve locally elected regional representative of family ministry gathered at the University of Chicago to discuss future directions for marriage and family ministry in the United States and to begin consultation on the direction that should be taken by the bishops’ commission soon to be convened. The quality and intensity of the discussion was apparent. Worth mentioning was that the composition of regional representations was totally clerical except for one married couple, Terri and Mimi Reilly, who had recently been appointed to head the family life office for the diocese of Phoenix.

Formation of USCC Ad hoc Commission on Marriage & Family Life

Soon after that meeting, these same people joined the newly created “Ad hoc Commission on Marriage and Family Life” along with seven bishops, three chairmen of working committees of the family life directors on marriage preparation, marriage and family enrichment and family spirituality (an expansion of family ministry is seen here) and sixteen others, mostly experts in various fields of inquiry concerning marital and family matters. That’s close to forty members, a formidable assembly, indeed. Over two years and three formal meetings (with lots of on-going research and discussion sandwiched in between by various sub-committees) the commission formulated a set of forty-five recommendations that was passed on to the Administrative Committee of the NCCB. The centerpiece of those recommendations was a pastoral plan for family ministry plus a schedule for implementing that plan in all the dioceses of the United States

Passage of *A Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry: A Vision and Strategy*

On May 4, 1978 key members of the ad hoc commission gathered in Chicago to prepare presentations for groups of bishops that had gathered for their annual meeting. The bishops all had in hand the proposed plan, but it was thought that an *informed understanding* of the plan would serve to deepen the support of the bishops for what they were about to vote on. This was a brilliant move on the part of the leadership of those who had assiduously worked on the plan for two years. It was especially gratifying to learn that when the plan came to the floor of the bishops meeting, it was enthusiastically approved *without dissent*.

Here, some of the key elements of the “Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry: A Vision and Strategy” are worth emphasis, particularly because they played an essential role



in the creation of NACFLM. These key factors are partly drawn from a summary of the plan presented by Bishop J. Francis Stafford, the chairperson of the newly formed USCC Commission on Marriage and Family Life. He succeeded Archbishop Quinn after he was elected president of the bishops' conference.

- The bishop first noted that the plan called for the enactment of “**total family ministry**” which meant that it sought to respond to the many needs of all marriages and families throughout the lifecycle in all the dimensions of their domestic lives. The comprehensiveness of this pastoral approach was clearly stated as the various expressions of ministry were broken into six areas of concern:
 1. Ministry for pre-marrieds and singles.
 2. Ministry for married couples
 3. Ministry for parents
 4. Ministry for developing families
 5. Ministry for hurting families
 6. Ministry for leadership couples and families.

- The kind of ministry called for in the plan encompassed **both positive enrichment elements and the offering of support and assistance** to marriages and families in need. While the plan was first implemented in dioceses, its eventual home was to be found in parishes where most church members connect with the church.

- Another noteworthy aspect of the plan was that it involved a bold pastoral process that divided into four stages.
 1. The process was to begin by **listening** and recording the positive and negative features of married and family life as expressed by ordinary Catholics in dioceses and parishes. Building pastoral response on the *real* needs of the people was considered foundational for a successful ministerial response.
 2. Once the situations of marriages and families were described, the church was to express a **caring attitude** that truly empowered people to work through whatever it was they faced. The church was to present a posture of acknowledgment and support.
 3. Only after realistic understanding and genuine care was achieved would actual ministry unfold especially in what the plan called **like-to-like ministry**, where married couples would minister to married couples, parents to parents, families to other families. Many noted this was truly (although not exclusively) a lay ministry.
 4. Finally, the plan called for the creation of **effective church structures** in dioceses and parishes and in ecclesial movements that would serve marriages and families. “Total family ministry” provided a daunting challenge to the church as a whole.

Its implementation was to begin in 1979 with dioceses initiating the various stages of the plan.



1980

NACDFLM Begins and Evolves as a National Association

1980 was designated a focused Year of the Family, a year which would begin a Decade of the Family (the plan was clearly no small undertaking) for full implementation. It was hoped that successful models of ministry might emerge that would be shared throughout the country. Special professional academic training would be called for as needed. Research into the spiritual and theological dimensions of marriage and family life were to be encouraged. Lastly, the involvements of families in the social ministry of the wider church was to be highlighted. The family as an ecclesial unit was to be incorporated into the many expressions of community and ministry in the church.

While this passage of the plan signified a kind of ending, it really established the groundwork for a significant surge of interest and effort in support of family ministry. Subsequent national meetings in Washington, DC and Kansas City, Missouri provided added enthusiasm for enacting the full content of the plan as it acquainted more and more church leaders with both its letter and spirit. All the dioceses of the United States were expected to send representatives to these gatherings and most did. Over 90% of the dioceses in the United States sent representatives to these two gatherings.

Carefully written resources were sent to all the parishes throughout the country. Hundreds of local and regional conferences occurred within months after the passage of the plan. Most dioceses created family life offices as the number of individuals, including a significant increase of lay people, gained full employment as directors or coordinators for marriage and family ministry. At the Kansas City conference, the twelve regional family ministry representatives were invited to establish a framework for the creation of a self-standing organization for their burgeoning ministry. The foundation for the creation of a new national organization was being laid. It was called the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Family Life Directors (NACDFLM) – an acronym that those outside the association found hard to say, much less understand, at least at its beginning.

Building on the Readiness of the US Church to Grow and Organize

A word about national church organizations in the United States may help to bring greater appreciation of their development and importance. In the early part of the Twentieth Century, the Catholic Church in the United States experienced unprecedented growth, particularly through immigration from Europe. For instance, church historians note that during the 1920s in the Archdiocese of New York alone, one new Catholic building (usually a church or a school) was dedicated each week during that whole decade. And once dedicated, they were filled.

Along with sacramental life, the Catholic Church was involved in a myriad of other activities or ministries, like education at all levels, social work and care for the needy, refugee assistance, youth ministry, lay ministry, hospitals, orphanages, publications and the development of associations of men and women, lay people and religious and clergy. Many, if not most of these like-minded groups, began in parishes and spread to the diocesan level. But as communication and travel became easier, diocesan groups often evolved into national bodies.

Thus, was born such well-known organizations as the National Catholic Education Association, Catholic Charities USA, the National Conference of Catechetical Leaders, the



Catholic Health Association and so forth. With family ministry in the church spreading as just described, it was time that a similar move be taken in support of family ministers. It was time to create NACDFLM. And like other Catholic national associations it would develop its own character, its own spirit, its own way of doing things.

FOUNDATION OF NACDFLM

The 1980s

The first president of NACDFLM, Father Tom Boland from the Archdiocese of Louisville, noted in a handbook for new diocesan family life ministers (one of the first projects undertaken by the new organizations) that because this associations was focused in the interpersonal lives of people, a primary aspect of NACDFLM would also be interpersonal. Its meetings, its communication, its programs and its activities would all express not an impersonal institutional face but rather it would signify a personal touch, a sense of mutual respect for all and welcoming spirit. In his words, “Thus I envision members of the association coming together in various gatherings to support and enrich one another by working on common tasks, sharing prayer and simply having fun together. I believe this kind of mutual support is at the heart of our like-to-like ministry to one another.”

The first meeting of the association was held in Memphis, Tennessee. Prior to that meeting an ad hoc committee composed of the family life representatives of the twelve episcopal regions met to draft a constitution and by-laws for the new association. On October 2, 1980, at the National Conference in Memphis, the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Family Life Ministers documents were passed by the eighty dioceses in attendance. Father Tom Boland of Louisville was elected its first president. It was noteworthy that as they were meeting, the first papal Synod of Bishops on the family was being convened at the Vatican entitled, “The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World.”

Early Structure of NACDFLM

A basic feature of its initial orientation stated that NACDFLM would offer membership only to dioceses and dues were proportioned to the size of the diocese. All the members of a diocesan staff would be members although each diocese was entitled to only one vote in any association election or deliberation. Elected offices would be held for two years. A nomination process for president and president-elect was established and candidates would be voted on in the annual meeting of the association. Provision was made for absentee voting.

Each region of the association (based on the then twelve episcopal regions) were to elect a regional representative, with the full group of representatives constituting the board of directors of the association along with its officers.

The board was scheduled to meet during the annual convention and hold one intermediary meeting between conventions. Each region was also encouraged to hold a meeting during the annual convention and at least once in between within their region. Thus, the association began with an overall organizational agenda that would focus on meetings, on regular communication and conversations among its members that focused on the work of the association and on the overall effort to serve marriages and families.



This is especially seen in reviewing the **original purposes of the Association**. In no particular order, they are listed in the original constitution of NACDFLM.

- A. To promote the development of family life ministry on all levels of the church.
- B. To offer support and enrichment to the membership through regional and national structures
- C. To respond to the practical needs of family life ministers
- D. To collaborate with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in family life ministry
- E. To serve as advocate for family life ministry
- F. To consult with and maintain liaison with individuals, organizations, and those institutions involved in the promotion of mutual interests.

These multiple purposes of the association are broad-based and somewhat open-ended. Institutional family ministry was mostly a new orientation for the Catholic Church of the United States. The purposes of an association were to organize those serving on the front lines of that ministry, especially in diocesan offices. NACDFLM's goals had to be expressed to incorporate a wide variety of church sponsored (sometimes formally, sometimes less so) ministries to marriage and family life. The specific ministries of its membership would vary from diocese to diocese.

If one purpose had to be singled out as most important, it would be purpose B, which spoke of support and enrichment of the membership. Being a relatively new ministry in church structures, support was needed, not only from within the dioceses, but outside its boundaries where diocesan staffs in marriage and family life offices could experience understanding and support from those involved in similar settings.

Growth of NACDFLM

Annual NACDFLM conventions grew in attendance over the early years of the association. The same can be said about membership. By 1984, 137 dioceses held full membership. The association also opened its doors to individual members engaged in marriage and family ministry, but who operated outside diocesan structures. Attendance at national meetings grew over the years, reaching almost 500 attendees by the end of the Decade of the Family.

Its initial conventions focused on themes drawn from the Bishops' *Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry: A Vision and Strategy*.

- In 1981 in Madison, Wisconsin the focus was "Awareness that Understands." At that time dioceses around the country were engaged in diverse kinds of listening processes which would often culminate in diocesan plans for family ministry.
- In 1982 the Association gathered in San Diego where it discussed the meaning of "Caring that Enables."
- At the 1983 NACDFLM convention the focus was "Ministry that Serves."
- And in 1984, the annual convention was held in Louisville with the theme being "Structures that Serve and Free."



NACFLM at the Vanguard of “Family Realism”

It is noteworthy that the Association thought it important to specifically list “freedom” as part of its call for adequately serving marriages and families. This openness toward ministry allowed marriage and family ministers to move into areas that traditional church ministries often overlooked, e. g. ministry to single parents and single persons, ministry to divorced, separated and remarried Catholics and to all church members who experienced a need for support and assistance related to marriage and family life. New needs were being identified through pastoral listening processes in both dioceses and parishes and new ministries were being created to respond to those needs. The innovation and creation of new ministries in the Catholic Church created both concern and enthusiasm. The Catholic Church was finding it necessary to address matters that were previously hidden, at least from institutional view. Family life diocesan offices were being described as on “the cutting edge” of new ministerial awareness.

During its first twenty years a survey of convention topics shows that the initial idea of “total family ministry” was gaining traction in the life of the association. While the connections between diocesan and parish implementation of the bishops’ pastoral plan began slowly, eventually it was in full swing by the mid-1980s. Growing pastoral concern was evidenced by convention themes dealing with changing family structures, recognizing the needs of voiceless families and addressing and serving families beset with the challenges of addiction, poverty, homelessness and abuse. Total family ministry served as an overarching goal of both the Catholic Church and NACDFLM during this time. As a goal, it was comprehensive and could not be reduced to simply a small set of ministries or programs.

In 1985 the association paused to consider its growth during its first five years. Signs of maturation were identified by board members that included a deepening of conversations over difficult ministerial issues like cohabitation before marriage, the challenges of second marriages, the situation of families with gay and lesbian children, families of mixed religion and faith and how societal changes in family life might relate to diminishing participation in Catholic sacramental life. A stronger sense of what might be termed **marriage and family realism** permeated the association’s awareness and thinking.

Evolving Insights about Family Ministry:

- **Domestic Church** – There was continued discussion of the meaning and the value of Vatican II’s identifying the family as the Domestic Church. How were families not only members of the church but also churches in their own right?
- **Family Systems** – Also noted was the incorporation of new approaches to family ministry using “systems thinking,” an approach advocated by leaders in the field of marriage and family therapy. At the 1985 convention Dr. Edwin Friedman, widely recognized as a primary voice for this approach and its application in churches and synagogues, addressed the association members in attendance and remains to this day as one of the most influential and memorable voices heard at any NACDFLM convention.
- **Role of the Laity** – Also, at the 1985 convention the association elected its first lay person as president, Valerie Dillion from the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. In



general, the ratio between clergy and lay members of the association was tipping in the direction of the laity. Another trend worth mentioning is that NACDFLM as an organization was partnering with other church organizations in promoting common goals and approaches to serving marriages and families.

- **The Sacred in the Ordinary** – In its 1986 convention NACDFLM began promoting and using the phrase, “The Sacred in the Ordinary” as a way of addressing educational and ministerial needs that arose from the daily lives of families. The association eventually published a book specifically addressing this perspective.
- **Publishing Resources** – While publishing was not listed as a specific function of the association, the enrichment and educational purpose of the association created opportunities over the years to publish materials under its own name and to co-sponsor publications with various publishers.
 - An example of this co-sponsorship was the creation of *Foundations*, a bimonthly newsletter sent to newly married couples through dioceses that was designed and authored by Kathy and Steve Beirne.
 - As a service to its members, the association also published a quarterly journal called *Family Perspectives* that featured addresses by its current president, general news of activities undertaken by its membership and brief articles, written both by NACDFLM members and by noted experts who were invited by the association to contribute their ideas on an assigned topic. These quarterly publications addressed timely themes that were determined by the Journal Committee of the Association.
- **A Family Perspective** – A growing matter of interest was the importance of evaluating from “a family perspective” various aspects of church life, especially at the parish level. This concern eventually was taken up by the bishops’ Committee on Marriage and Family Life and incorporated into a manual published in 1988 which described ways to employ a family perspective in church planning and enactment. This approach to family ministry was founded in part on a directive found in Pope John Paul II’s *Familiaris Consortio*, where he wrote, “No plan for organized pastoral work at any level [of church life] must ever fail to take into consideration the pastoral area of family (no. 70).” This bishops’ document was revised ten years later with members of NACDFLM taking a lead role in its reissuance. But also in its incorporation into church life all through the 80’s and 90’s. NACDFLM as an organization became the leading voice for implementing a family perspective in every aspect of church life. This approach also implied that everyone involved with ministry of any kind in the church was in some way a family minister.

Organizational Structure Develops

- **Standing Committees** - Standing committees of the association dealt with such matters as communication, clergy education, annual conference planning, education and formation, association operations and resource development. Members of these committees or commissions were drawn from the membership of NACDFLM. These sub-groups of the association usually met before or during annual conventions although they kept in touch throughout the year as each addressed their particular concern.
- **Broadening Leadership from Diocesan only to include Parish and related ministries**



As the association evolved into the later part of the Decade of the Family, an organizational “family problem” became more and more apparent. It had to do with the matter of belonging. While organizational membership originally included diocesan heads with their staff, there was no place in the association for parish family ministers. As the Decade on the Family unfolded, their number was growing in accord with the original vision of the bishops’ pastoral plan, namely that full implementation of the plan was to become primarily a parish reality. The diocesan operation was seen as serving its parishes, where most families connect with the life of the church.

So, as part of its growing pains, in 1990 the membership voted to delete “Diocesan” from its name, thus becoming NACFLM. National representatives for diocesan and parish members were created. The membership increasingly became more diverse and its interests more varied. Still, a strong and vigorous foundation for the association had been set into the landscape of the Catholic Church in the United States.

THE 1990s

Refinement of Ministries

The momentum gained during the Decade of the Family continued into the following years. Using the six areas of ministry identified in *the Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry: A Vision and a Strategy*, it is enlightening to highlight some of these developments. Considerable development was seen in all areas of ministry signifying a growing awareness of the challenge of total family ministry. Contributing to these efforts were many members of NACFLM. All these areas received affirmation and support at annual conventions of the association and through the regular publications and communications of the organization.

Ministry for pre-married and singles

Expanded and new ministries, or processes, developed during these years.

- The practice of sponsor-couples accompanying engaged couples not only to the wedding, but also beyond into the early years of marriage was developed.
- Programs modeled on the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) became popular. This program provided a wider catechesis for the engaged based on the realization that many were entering the sacrament of Christian Marriage without much understanding of the Christian and Catholic dimension of marriage.
- Retreats for engaged couples were offered by many dioceses especially under the leadership of Engaged Encounter, a movement that was modeled on Marriage Encounter weekends.
- More and more, marriage preparation was seen as “a teachable moment” where couples could connect with the life of the church as their sacrament of Christian marriage became more appreciated.

Ministry for married couples

The second area of ministry noted in the pastoral plan, also experienced significant attention and pastoral support, especially in the final two decades of the Twentieth Century.



- Thousands of married couples testified to the value of the various expressions of Marriage Encounter. Couples experiencing this ministry took their enthusiasm back to their parishes and significantly contributed to the growth of lay ministry in the church.
- Parishes sponsored various enrichment events for married couples, especially around Valentine’s Day.
- Dioceses instituted special liturgies celebrating wedding anniversaries.
- Various retreats for married couples became common.
- More attention was given to the sacramental meaning of marriage both in the liturgical celebration of the sacrament and in the support available afterwards.
- A continued challenge to remain pastorally connected with newly married couples received attention, but due to the mobility of young couples, this connection was often quite difficult to maintain.

Ministry to parents

The third area of ministry of the plan, underscored the role of parents in the religious and spiritual development of their children, as well as the importance of the specific vocation of parents in the life of the domestic church, their families.

- Catechetical publications incorporated materials for parental use as the importance of family-based evangelization and catechesis gained greater attention. In some parishes, whole family units were given special liturgical roles in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.
- Parenting programs for young parents and parents of teens were created. Like so many areas of family ministry, the recognized need of parents for church support often outdistanced the church’s response. Nevertheless, recognizing the need itself could be considered a sign of expanding pastoral awareness.
- Adding to this area of ministry was an increased awareness of the role of grandparents in the spiritual development of children.
- Finally, the appreciation of the ecclesial position and role of the family under its naming as the domestic church continued to grow.

In 1992, under the auspices of the bishops’ committee on marriage and family life, with support of many NACFLM members, a symposium of scholars and family ministers met at the University of Notre Dame to discuss the importance and appropriateness of the naming of the family as the domestic church. While some participants at that conference spoke of the difficulty for families to grasp the full significance of that naming, the symposium concluded that this ecclesial idea remained important and encouraged its use whenever appropriate. In 1994, as an expression of its celebration of the International Year of the Family of the United Nations, the bishops of the United States issued as pastoral letter to families entitled “*Follow the Way of Love.*” Positive and challenging in nature, the letter was influenced by many members of NACFLM who were invited to assist the bishops in its formulation.



Developing Families

The fourth area of family ministry in the plan focused on ministry to developing families.

- This approach involved an invitation to give pastoral attention to all families, not just to those families facing serious difficulties. Part of this wisdom arises from the research that while most families experience times of difficulty, they also have moments of strength and stability. Again, this is a dimension of total family ministry, which aims to be comprehensive and constant and not restricted to the more typical role of the church as reaching out to those in need. Families are living cells of the church requiring constant care and nourishment.
- The emphasis on family spirituality, the recognition of the sacred presence of God in ordinary family life, was part the vision of the plan and of NACFLM with its continued support of family in all aspects of its life. More attention was being given in NACFLM to discussions about the social and cultural influences on marriage and family life. Also there was more awareness of the diversity of families from a historical and cultural perspective.

Hurting Families

That many families are hurting, the language used by the plan in its fifth expression of ministry, is of no surprise in Catholic Church circles. Often the ministry of the church to hurting families distinguished the church in both its personal and organization response to family need.

- This has always been the case although pressing issues relating to economics and employment, moving and immigration, addiction and abuse and the search for adequate food, clothing and shelter for families became more apparent as the association entered the New Millennium.
- Growing secularization was especially noted at NACFLM conferences with the need for continued conversion within the church so that its ministry to marriages and families remained vital and strong.

Leadership

The final form of family ministry expressed in the bishops' plan was that of ministry for leadership couples and families. The adage, "You cannot give what you do not have" was sown into the fabric of NACFLM from its beginning.

- NACFLM was continually supportive of educational and formation programs for family ministers. Its annual meetings were seasoned with multiple opportunities for personal enrichment, for the development of leadership skills and for deepening the spiritual lives of family ministers.
- Its members often played key roles in the formation of seminarians, married deacons and their wives.

Responding to Societal and Ecclesial Challenges

Still, ministerial stress was becoming more felt as dioceses in particular experienced budgetary restraints, often due to legal issues associated with sexual abuse cases involving clergy. With some dioceses having to limit their staffing, it became common that offices of family ministry were reduced in size or even closed. More and more "family ministry" was



added to job descriptions of other ministries. Dioceses and parishes became more dependent on volunteers to engage in family ministry.

- To meet the educational need of these new leaders, NACFLM developed education and formation programs called *Family Ministry 101, 201, and 301*. It was facilitated by its experienced members and was offered throughout the country. Leadership support and formation has remained a strong part of the work of the association.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

2018+

Soon approaching its fortieth birthday, NACFLM remains a vital part of the ministerial life of the Catholic Church.

- It maintains a fulltime office in Ohio where information and resources produced by the association can be acquired.
- It also supports a website (<http://nacflm.org/>) that can be visited by anyone interested in marriage and family ministry.
- A monthly enrichment opportunity known as PDCC (Profession Development Conference Call) on timely topics is available to members via phone conferencing.
- A monthly newsletter is sent to all members via email.
- Regional meetings of members are still happening, although at a somewhat reduced rate especially due to the constraints experienced by diocesan offices.
- The annual NACFLM convention remains a powerful instrument of association vitality as it allows for like-to-like ministry between leaders in the always challenging arena of marriage and family ministry.

The vision that inaugurated this ministry in the Catholic Church is set in foundations laid at Vatican II, and even further back to the early days of the church. This same vision rests in the heart of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers. *Ad multos annos!*

Purpose: To capture in print the initial vision, movements, personalities, meetings and other factors that led to the creation of NACFLM. It also described the vitality that the association enjoyed particularly in its first two decades. This account is designed as a “resource” to assist in the “formation” of existing members of NACFLM and to provide background for new members of the association.

Presented by the NACFLM Formation and Resources Commission

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