



NACC and the need for Ecclesial Endorsement for Board Certified Members What does endorsement mean and what is expected of the local ordinary?

In the case of a priest in your (arch) diocese seeking your endorsement, you know whether this priest has faculties to serve therein and you choose to endorse that priest or not. In the case of a lay person, you are asked to consider endorsing that person as a “lay ecclesial health care minister.” The term lay ecclesial minister takes its meaning from *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. So what does endorsing a person as a lay ecclesial health care minister through NACC mean?

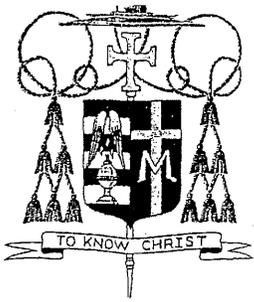
First of all, the NACC’s mission states “to continue the healing ministry of Jesus in the name of the Church.” What does *in the name of the Church* mean? In Bishop Dale Melczek’s letter to all bishops on May 4, 2004, (copy on opposite side of this document) which asked bishops to endorse lay people as lay ecclesial health care ministers who were being certified, he wrote, “The NACC offers an enormous advantage to the Church in assisting the bishops in the oversight of this vital ministry. It also assures the people whom we serve that those who minister to them on behalf of Jesus and his Church are grounded in Catholic theology, adhere to the ‘Ethical and Religious Directives,’ and extend the ministry of the Church with the formal approval of the bishop.” What Bishop Melczek refers to as “with the formal approval of the bishop” situates the meaning of endorsement.

As a ministry of the Church, our NACC members recognize their call to serve requires a discernment and affirmation process structured by the Church and approved by the bishop(s). The seminary process for priests is clear. In the case of lay people who are considered by the Church for lay ecclesial ministry, this discernment and affirmation process may vary from diocese to diocese.

Bishop Melczek’s comments cited above refer to NACC’s certification process as part of that discernment and affirmation process for our members. Our certification process is intended to provide an *assurance* that our board certified members are prepared for this specialized ministry and will represent the Church.

Your letter of endorsement conveys two messages. First of all, it implicitly is an affirmation of the NACC process that informs you that a person’s call and preparation align with the ministerial competencies and expectations found in NACC’s USCCB approved Standards for Certification. Secondly, while endorsement is neither an *authorization* nor an *appointment*, its most common understanding is that it affirms that the person is “in good standing” and has the disposition or character to serve. In most cases in considering whether to endorse a lay person, you rely on the recommendation of the person’s pastor. Hopefully, over time you will be able to personally meet with our member to get to know him/her whenever possible.

Some ordinaries delegate this endorsement process to another person in the (arch) diocese; some ordinaries require a meeting with the person requesting endorsement. We respect whatever process the ordinary puts in place. However, your endorsement does not authorize, appoint, or designate someone as an agent or an employee of the (arch) diocese. It does not make the (arch) diocese liable for the chaplain’s performance, unless that chaplain is an employee of the (arch) diocese or a diocesan institution like any other employee.



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May 7, 2004

Your Eminence/Excellency:

For many years, the USCCB and the National Association of Catholic Chaplains have attempted to resolve the dilemma regarding the title "chaplain." In the United States, hiring institutions (health care, prison, and other specialized institutions) will only employ "chaplains" who are board certified and hold this professional credential for spiritual care services. Canon Law (Canons 564-572) restricts the title "chaplain" to ordained priests. The 1997 interdicasterial Instruction, "On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests," approved in *forma specifica* by Pope John Paul II, further specified that it is unlawful for non-ordained faithful to assume the title of "chaplain." Our efforts to obtain a rescript for an exception in the United States have been unsuccessful.

The witness and ministry of Catholic women religious and lay faithful, who have met standards approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops through its Commission on Certification and Accreditation and who have been endorsed by their own local bishop, are essential to the Church's outreach to the sick and dying in our hospitals and long-term facilities. They are also essential representatives of the Church in most institutions today for maintaining a Catholic presence, for assuring adherence to the "Ethical and Religious Guidelines," and for providing direction and comfort to physicians, staff, and family members of the sick and dying.

To retain this very important ministry and to be faithful to the letter and spirit of Canon Law and the 1997 Instruction, the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC) will separate out "endorsement for ministry" from the "certification by the profession." Currently, the NACC, in the name of the USCCB, does both.

Under this new arrangement, the NACC will:

- submit the NACC standards for periodic review by the USCCB/Commission on Certification and Accreditation and prepare an annual report to the same as is currently done; and
- request the endorsement for "lay ecclesial health care ministry" rather than for "chaplain" by the local Ordinary or his delegate.

The National Association of Catholic Chaplains will issue a certificate for "the profession" as a legally separate 501(C)3 no longer with the reading "and by the authority of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops." As is theologically and canonically appropriate, the bishop of the local Church may choose to commission as "lay ecclesial health care ministers" those who have obtained the professional certification to do those things which the hiring institutions entrust to certified chaplains regardless of religion or ecclesiastical standing within a given faith.

This accommodation was discussed at the September 2003 USCCB Administrative Board meeting and at the March 13, 2004 meeting of the NACC Board of Directors and Committee on Certification. This solution enables the Church to continue to benefit from the oversight and ministry of the 3,300 members of the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (87 percent of whom are women religious or lay faithful) and it also allows those members to retain employment in and remuneration from the hiring institution. The Church is truly blessed with the compassionate and competent ministry which they extend to our faithful who are sick and dying in hospitals and long-term facilities, and also to those who are incarcerated.

Fraternally yours in the Lord Jesus,

Most Reverend Dale J. Melczek
Bishop of Gary
Episcopal Liaison to the NACC