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<http://www.icatholic.org/article/despite-social-distancing-measures-dioceses-lay-ecclesial-52713817>

## Despite social distancing measures, diocese's lay ecclesial minister formation program continues

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Wayne Cavalier, OP

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SALT LAKE CITY — Last August, when the most recent lay ecclesial minister formation program in English got underway, the 11 participants planned to follow the structure that the three previous cohorts had undergone: taking classes online and meeting in person once a month for instruction so that at the end of the four-year program they would be certified and take an active role in the diocese's pastoral structure.

Lay ecclesial ministers serve in various roles in the diocese and in their parish: they teach RCIA and CCD, and are involved with jail ministry, youth ministry and liturgy, among other areas.

The LEM program offers instruction in topics such as Scripture, Catholic social teaching, morality, spirituality and leadership skills.

The Diocese of Salt Lake City's Office of Faith Formation manages the LEM program. The 11 adults in the current program are completing their first year of formation even though, because of the restrictions in place because of the coronavirus pandemic, their instruction has moved entirely online.

The program integrates online formation resources from the University of Notre Dame's Satellite Theological Education Program (STEP) with monthly live formation events with resource persons from the Congar Institute for Ministry Development.

The Congar Institute, which makes pastoral, theological and spiritual formation resources available to mission dioceses such as Salt Lake City, has accompanied the LEM program in the Salt Lake City diocese since it started 13 years ago.

The Covid-19 outbreak in March disrupted the LEM's usual programming. They had to cancel the annual spiritual formation retreat day planned during Lent. Then, when shelter-at-home mandates were put in place in April, they decided to take a new approach to the monthly meeting with a Congar resource person.

In early April, Susan Northway, director of the diocesan Office of Faith Formation, consulted with Kelly Culver, director of the STEP program.

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“Partnering with STEP allows us the great benefit to request special arrangements tailored to our intellectual formation needs,” Northway said.

Originally, the Congar Institute’s resource person for May was Fr. Ray John Marek, OMI, D. Min., who was to give a presentation on Mary. Northway asked Culver if Fr. Marek could instead track the 11 LEM candidates during their five-week course titled “Mary, Our Mother.”

As a result, “Fr. Marek was given free access to the course content designed by Notre Dame faculty member Brian E. Daley, SJ,” Northway said.

In addition, for the past three weeks, Fr. Marek has been monitoring the students’ reflection and assignment posts and chat sessions. He will continue to follow their progress for the next two weeks and, in keeping with the STEP course outline, offer a live online educational session with the LEMs.

“Fr. Marek’s presentation will expand their pastoral understanding and use of Marian doctrine and delve into interesting aspects of popular religiosity,” Northway said. “We plan to schedule a Zoom class for the convenience of candidates and to ensure continuity in our schedule of monthly LEM community meetings. We believe this is a helpful alternative to in-person gatherings which are not advisable at this time. I am grateful for the flexibility and dedication of the Congar Institute and their excellent resource persons who support our program.”

Fr. Wayne Cavalier, OP, Ph.D., is the founding director of the Congar Institute for Ministry Development.