

Through a Wide-Angle Lens

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When the Rev. Greg Lee, senior pastor of Suncrest Christian Church, applied for a slot in the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program, his goal was to expand his circle of colleagues beyond his hometown of St. John in northwest Indiana. "I run in a tribe of evangelical churches that do great work, but it's an insulated tribe," he explains. "The opportunity to talk about meaningful issues with pastors from around the state really appealed to me."



Selected to participate in the program's pilot run in 2009-10, Lee got all that he hoped for ... and then some. His expanded "tribe" included 18 men and women who represented 10 Christian traditions, came from a range of ethnic backgrounds and pastored congregations in locations as tiny as Milroy, population 604, and as large as the state capital, Indianapolis. "We respected each other immediately, even though we had different views on theology and how a church should work," Lee recalls. Respect deepened to friendship during group study trips to Mexico and India, where the clergy delved into complex issues of immigration, criminal justice reform and poverty. "There's a sort of disorientation that happens when you're in a cross-cultural setting, and it was in that context that we really came together."

These pastors in the first decade of their careers began to see themselves as different kinds of leaders. As they gathered to learn from judges, educators and leaders in business and nonprofit sectors about issues facing Hoosiers, the pastors started to discover their gifts and talents beyond the pulpit. And they came together to listen to one another's stories about ministry and leadership.

The Wabash program emerged nearly a decade ago as part of Lilly Endowment's support for efforts that help Indiana pastors strengthen their leadership throughout their careers. But it was a particular response to Endowment-funded research that indicated young pastors are at risk for dropping out of ministry in the early stages of their careers. The research, from Duke University's Pulpit and Pew Project, revealed that in these early

years of ministry a significant number of pastors reported experiencing a profound sense of professional and personal isolation and growing demands on their leadership that left them less time to connect with fellow pastors and mentors to seek support and advice.

By engaging pastors at a critical time in their ministerial careers, the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program is helping them imagine how they and their congregations contribute to the well-being of their communities while facilitating the development of relationships with a supportive group of peers.

Six years after completing the program, Lee says he still feels its impact and is convinced that Suncrest Christian Church, and its role in St. John, Indiana, will never be the same. Under his leadership, the congregation has developed a heightened awareness of human needs within Lake County. This has led to collaborations with nonprofit organizations that minister to women in crisis, provide housing for low-income families and offer tutoring services to middle-grade students in nearby Merrillville, Indiana. More recently, members voted to contribute 10 percent of all church offerings to local charities that they call their "compassion partners." Lee estimates



The Rev. Greg Lee (opposite top) and the Rev. Mark Thompson (opposite below) are two of the nearly 70 Indiana pastors who have taken part in the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program at Wabash College.

The program inspired Thompson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Brazil, Indiana, to strengthen his congregation's response to hunger and lack of child care options in Clay County, Indiana (below).



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donations already exceed a half million dollars, “and I trace it all back to the experience I had with the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program.”

View from the balcony

Launched with an Endowment grant in 2007 and supported by additional grants ever since, the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program at Wabash College was created to spark the imaginations and advance the skills of high-capacity pastors at a critical early point in their careers. The program was designed to help pastors meet leaders in education, business and government sectors to explore important issues that Indiana communities face. Pastors who have five to 10 years of experience in professional ministry are eligible to apply. Since its first cohort in 2009, 68 Indiana clergy have taken part in the program. Its success has inspired the creation of 16 similar early career programs in communities around the United States. Each has been funded by Endowment grants.

“Flourishing communities need flourishing ministers,” says Raymond Williams, professor emeritus of religion at Wabash College, who helped design the Wabash program and lead its first two cohorts of participants. “This is not about remediation. We don’t teach them what they already learn in seminary or in practice.”

Instead, Wabash program directors select up to 18 gifted pastors whose demographic diversity will generate lively conversation when they gather at the college, located in Crawfordsville, Indiana, to explore issues that concern the people in their pews. Two study tours, usually one to a city within the United States and another to an

international destination, help pastors place local and regional challenges into wider contexts. Sessions are designed to help pastors stretch and begin to reimagine their ministries, their communities and their own leadership.

“To see what is happening in your community, you have to get out of it a bit,” says the Rev. Libby Manning, a pastor at Christ the Savior Lutheran Church in Fishers, Indiana, who completed the program and now is its associate director. “You have to get up on the balcony where you can see with a wide-angle lens all of the moving parts. This program gives participants the opportunity to do that and to be with one another as they continue to learn and to grow both personally and professionally.”

The intention is to give a “turbo boost” – Manning’s term – to careers that are still in formation. “We want these pastors to have many years ahead so they can engage civic leaders on issues that matter deeply to Indiana communities,” says Manning. An unanticipated consequence of the program has been the positive response of the civic leaders – mayors, city council members, judges – many of whom are accustomed to angry rhetoric. “They seem to welcome the calm, moral voice that pastors bring to the conversations at Wabash.”

A work in progress

Although four cohorts have completed the two-year Wabash program since its launch, the program’s 10 on-campus sessions and two study tours are subject to ongoing tweaks and adjustments. “We should be wearing lab coats because this still is an experiment. We keep learning and evaluating,” says Derek Nelson, Wabash religion professor who assumed the directorship after Williams retired. As an example, “we used to ask participants to write essays, but that felt too much like another seminary class.” Now the emphasis is on participants’ interacting with civic leaders and other residents in their hometowns to learn about topics that are on the agenda for discussion by members of their cohort.



Indiana pastors (opposite) gather bimonthly for two years as part of the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program. They learn together about what it means to lead in their local communities, and they have the opportunity to build a lasting peer network.

One such exchange with a group of public school teachers led a program participant to launch a ministry that reaches out to children who don't get enough sleep because their impoverished homes have no mattresses. "The pastor mobilized the community to meet the need," says Manning. A national mattress manufacturer agreed to donate its products to the cause, an act of generosity that Manning believes can have sweeping effects over time. "When children get enough sleep, they learn better," she says. "When children get the education they need, their families can see a brighter future. Those families help give an entire community hope."

Speakers who address the bimonthly gatherings at Wabash are experts in their fields. A panel about education could include the president of the Indiana Youth Institute or a vice president at Ivy Tech Community College. A session on conflict resolution may feature a former member of the U.S. Congress.

Addressing issues of civil and criminal justice, Sarah Evans Barker, Judge, U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Indiana, has taken part in sessions with three Pastoral Leadership Program cohorts. The experiences have heightened her appreciation for the place of religious leaders in public life.

"Each year, I have found these pastors to be wonderfully thoughtful, intelligent, insightful and highly principled people," Barker says. "Their desire to be helpful, effective advocates on behalf of parishioners or to be more knowledgeable religious leaders in their



denominations and the community or simply to better serve as trustworthy companions is palpable.”

Sometimes a comment by a guest speaker provides a nudge that moves a participant to action after he or she returns home. It happened to the Rev. Mark Thompson, pastor of First Baptist Church, Brazil, Indiana.

“I remember when David Shane (retired chief executive officer at LDI, Ltd.) spoke to us and asked, ‘Is anyone in the group running for local office? School board? Anyone working with the local chamber of commerce?’ When no one replied, he said, ‘Why not?’” Thompson recalls. “Shortly after that, someone in our community asked me to serve on the Clay County Chamber of Commerce board. I agreed, and at the first meeting they elected me vice president.” In that capacity, Thompson became acquainted with local business leaders and earned their support for faith-based programs that supply child care so teenage mothers can stay in school, provide lunches to children during summer break, and offer back-to-school haircuts and dental screenings to needy students in the fall.

“I normally would have said ‘no’ to the invitation to serve on the chamber board,” says Thompson. “Because of the challenge we received through the Wabash program I said ‘yes,’ and it’s been amazing to see what has happened as a result.”

“We’ve got your back”

Communities aren’t the only beneficiaries of the program. The pastors have benefited from the ongoing support of a statewide network, through which members keep in touch via social media, informal lunches and annual reunions hosted by the Wabash program directors. “Pastors tend to be lonely,” says Raymond Williams. “One of our goals is to create an ecumenical peer group and provide an environment that is supportive and safe for conversation and personal development. These pastors have each other’s back.”

Friendship supersedes denominational differences, as demonstrated by a request for help in 2015 when the Rev. Tracy Paschke-Johannes prepared to leave her pastorate at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Muncie to accept a position in Ohio. Her congregation was struggling to come to grips with her departure, so she scheduled a retreat for the lay leaders charged with overseeing the period of transition. She invited two colleagues from the Wabash program to facilitate the retreat. One was the Rev. Jerry Ingalls, senior pastor at First Baptist Church in New Castle; the other was the Rev. Whitney Rice, associate rector at St. Francis-in-the-Field Episcopal Church in Zionsville.

“It was an amazing experience,” says Rice. “Jerry and I come from very different backgrounds and have obviously different styles, but because of the Wabash program we were able to combine our strengths, come together, and help Tracy and the congregation prepare for the changes ahead. Our ability to do that came directly from having met each other and worked together at Wabash.”

International travel is part of the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program. In 2014, the third group of pastors in the program traveled to South Africa (below) where they met with Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu.



A Community of Learning

In anticipation of their first session together, 15 California pastors are preparing videos of themselves, their families, their churches and their communities. “They’ll post them on the Internet so everyone can get acquainted before they gather as a cohort in 2017,” explains Stephanie Cupp, co-director of *Communitas Pastoral Leadership Program* at Pepperdine University. This will be the second cohort to experience the *Communitas* program, and Cupp knows the importance of establishing unity at the outset. The purpose of the videos is “to break the ice a bit.”

Communitas borrowed the video idea from a sister program in the Early Career Pastoral Leadership Development Initiative. Launched in 2012, the initiative is a network of 18 programs that received grants from Lilly Endowment. All share common goals: help talented young pastors become better leaders, strengthen their commitment to ministry, support one another and raise the professional and social status of ministry by helping pastors enlarge their circles of influence.

Inspired by the success of the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program, the early career programs are based at colleges, universities and seminaries in 13 states and the District of Columbia. In 2016, their program directors convened in Indianapolis to trade insights. Designed to identify and share best practices, the meeting was coordinated by leaders of the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program, which coordinates the national initiative.

“It’s an opportunity to compare notes,” says Donald Ottenhoff, who took part in the gathering. He is executive director of the *Collegetville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research* in Collegetville, Minnesota, where the *Collegetville Institute Fellows Program* is based. “We can ask each other, ‘What are you doing? How are you structuring your program?’”

All of the pastoral leadership programs are loosely based on, but aren’t franchises of, the Wabash model. Like Wabash, their goal is to provide leadership development experiences to gifted pastors who are five to 10 years into their ministries while helping them develop relationships with a supportive group of peers. And all programs help pastors explore the significant challenges that their communities are facing. Beyond basic parameters, grantees have the flexibility to shape their programs to reflect the assets of their locations and the unique challenges pastors face in particular regions of the country in which they live. *Communitas* uses Pepperdine faculty members as presenters and builds in a trip to Washington, D.C., where participants stay at a Pepperdine facility and learn

about Christian initiatives in the nation’s capital. The *Collegetville* program invites its fellows to explore the bucolic grounds of St. John’s Abbey and join in prayer with the Benedictine monks between sessions that probe such complex issues as Minnesota’s changing demographics, public education and the achievement gap, and the challenges of healthcare in the state.

“We’re not interested in program participants becoming advocates for a certain point of view,” says Ottenhoff. “We want them to think theologically about real issues in the real world. We hope they will hear from all sides of a crucial topic, then step back and make wise discernments about how we should go forth and in what ways our congregations can contribute.”



Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary	Austin, Tex.
Chautauqua Institution	Chautauqua, N.Y.
Collegetville Institute	Collegetville, Minn.
Emory University	Atlanta, Ga.
Fuller Theological Seminary	Pasadena, Calif.
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary	South Hamilton, Mass.
Hendrix College	Conway, Ark.
Marquette University	Milwaukee, Wis.
Messiah College	Mechanicsburg, Pa.
Morehouse College	Atlanta, Ga.
Pepperdine University	Malibu, Calif.
Protestant Episcopal Cathedral Foundation of the D of C	Washington, D.C.
Seattle University	Seattle, Wash.
Union Theological Seminary	New York, N.Y.
University of Chicago	Chicago, Ill.
Wabash College	Crawfordsville, Ind.
Wake Forest University	Winston-Salem, N.C.
Wesley Theological Seminary	Washington, D.C.