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# What makes a high-quality proposal?

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The Lilly Endowment clergy renewal programs (the National Clergy Renewal Program and the Clergy Renewal Program for Indiana Congregations) are structured to provide congregations and their leaders maximum freedom in proposing a renewal leave suited to their own context. The programs actively seek to learn from the varied ways in which American congregations imagine the possibilities of clergy renewal.

In the spirit of that learning, we have observed that high-quality proposals have certain common characteristics. Below, we list four such characteristics for the consideration of potential applicants. These four characteristics do not add up to a formula for crafting your proposal. Instead, they are offered as observations from experience, illustrated by examples, to encourage you to design the most fruitful renewal program possible for your leader and congregation.

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## A sense of purpose

Strong proposals convey a sense of purpose or direction. They usually are grounded in a central vision or idea which integrates the proposed leave activities and which clearly matters to those who pursue it. That vision or idea may reflect a deeply held personal interest or commitment on the part of the pastor. It may be rooted in the history and character of the congregation's or pastor's religious heritage. It may come out of the current congregational context. Whatever the impetus, it can best be described as "home-grown"—as growing out of the particular soil, or situation, of the church and its leader.

## Examples

*An Episcopal priest had led his congregation in the discipline of centering prayer through a series of workshops, lectures and prayer support groups. The proposal, which probed the theological roots of centering prayer, requested funds to support a leave during which the priest could have two long, uninterrupted periods of prayer and meditation. Building on the theological foundation laid by the proposal, a strong case was made for the ways in which this leave would aid the spiritual growth of the congregation and also would allow the pastor to explore his interest in writing a personal essay. All involved, as the proposal explained, would*

*have a chance to live Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God. "*

*A Midwestern congregation entitled its proposal, "We Make the Road By Walking." This title, taken from a Spanish proverb, "aptly describes our minister's ... way of being a minister and ... [our] way of being a church." Beginning from this common ground, the proposal detailed the "walk" that the pastor and congregation had gone on together to prepare the proposal. The renewal leave, it was clear, would further the pastor and his congregation on their walk.*

## **A sense of balance**

High-quality proposals demonstrate a sense of balance in their plans for renewal. This sense of balance may be reflected in the attention paid to both the pastor's personal and professional life during the renewal period. A sense of balance also can come across in the range of activities in the renewal plan. The strongest proposals contain more than one proposed activity and frequently involve a retreat or reflection component.

### **Examples**

*A minister in the rural Northeast proposed a renewal leave in which he enumerated four goals for his time away: spiritual renewal, intellectual stimulation, physical and emotional refreshment, and strengthening of family relationships. To these ends, he detailed a plan that included travel, retreat and a two-week period of "wind down" time at the end of the leave. The proposal was explicit about the ways in which his family would be included in the plans.*

*A couple serving as co-pastors of a racially and socioeconomically diverse congregation drafted a shared proposal. Each pastor's renewal time away included continuing education and reflection on the church's goal of creating Christian community. The two pastors' renewal periods were designed to occur at separate times of the year, providing each of them with three months of individual renewal time and six weeks of shared renewal time, thereby allowing church life to continue with minimal interruption. Because the couple shared one full-time position, the budget for the grant request adhered to the \$30,000 limit.*

## **Evidence that the congregation understands and affirms the value of a renewal program for its leader**

High-quality proposals offer evidence that a congregation worked with the pastor on developing the proposal and will be involved in the maintenance of congregational life during the pastor's leave. It is important to note that strong proposals do not always detail a smooth proposal preparation process. Indeed, the best proposals may record how the congregation gradually came to support the pastor in his or her request for renewal, identifying initial concerns of church leadership or parishioners and the ways in which these concerns were addressed.

## Examples

*A pastor in the Midwest served two congregations. One congregation immediately approved the pastor's request for renewal leave; the second congregation was initially cautious, believing the pastor to be asking for an extended vacation. The proposal explained how this second congregation developed a better understanding of the importance of renewal through the circulation of newsletters, formal and informal discussion, and requests for congregational input. "A flood of responses came in from the membership at large," the pastor noted in his proposal. "The overwhelmingly positive response was a very affirmative experience for the congregation and for me."*

*The leadership of a small rural congregation that had broken from its former church requested a renewal grant for their pastor who had shepherded them through the break and had helped them grow as a new church. The congregation's enthusiasm for their pastor and the leave she had designed were made evident in the fact that the congregation was committed to supporting her plans for renewal leave regardless of the success of her application.*

## Benefits both the pastor and the congregation

In the strongest proposals, renewal activities arise from the congregational context and clearly contribute to congregational goals, thereby maximizing the effect of the leave period. For instance, the planned renewal time may allow the pastor to research, reflect on, or explore an issue of concern to the congregation, resulting in a

dual benefit. Given a respite from having to respond daily to the problem, the pastor can step back and look at the larger themes surrounding the issue. In this way, the pastor is being refreshed and consoled that he or she is not alone in facing the challenge. At the same time, the congregation is able to anticipate a benefit upon the pastor's return.

Here it should be noted that proposals that do not allow the pastor enough distance or freedom from challenging issues are also less likely to benefit the leader or congregation. The primary goal of the program is to ensure a period of rejuvenation for a pastor and congregation. The best proposals demonstrate that this sort of renewal remains the top priority of the proposed leave.

## Examples

*A minister in a predominantly African American urban church was facing an increasingly aging population. He had performed more than 145 funerals in his five-year tenure and was constantly working with parishioners to find solutions to adult day-care needs. His proposal included a request to gain perspective on this challenge by researching issues related to gerontology—specifically the representation of African Americans in retirement homes—with an eye toward the creation of an adult day-care center at the church. As the proposal suggested, this time away would not only energize the pastor but also would "benefit the church, in that a portion of our pastor's vision ... developing an adult day-care [center] ... can be accomplished through the gerontology studies."*

*A pastor serving a church striving to be open and accepting to a variety of marginalized populations requested funds for a trip to New Zealand. The purpose of this trip, aside from the inherent renewal value of travel, was to explore the ways in which the English-speaking people of New Zealand have learned to celebrate and*

*embrace the traditions of the native Maori people. The pastor wrote, "Working as I do in a multicultural setting ... I would be most interested in exploring this aspect of New Zealand society in search of lessons for my own community."*

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These four characteristics have appeared in different measure and combination in a variety of successful proposals. Above all else, the Endowment seeks proposals that exhibit coherence. In a coherent proposal, the character of the congregation, the personal and professional needs of the pastor, the proposed activities and accompanying budget, and the shape of the planning process come together in a way that makes sense and indicates a meaningful and efficacious renewal experience.

We hope these observations from experience will help you imagine a significant and valuable renewal program for your pastor and your whole congregation.