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27 Indiana congregations receive grants in Lilly Endowment clergy renewal program

The Rev. Steve Thomas, pastor of the Walnut Hills Mennonite Church in Goshen, is working to establish a local retreat center. He plans to spend time visiting other retreat centers in the United States, the British Isles and Ireland to see what makes them work.

The Rev. Ruth Phillips of Plymouth Congregational Church in Fort Wayne wants to take dancing from the fringes of her life to “center stage” and watch the “dance of the cosmos.”

The Rev. Scot W. Longyear is senior pastor of Exchange, a large ministry of the Maryland Community Church in Terre Haute, and feels he needs to renew his personal energies in order to lead this ministry as effectively as he can.

The ministers serve three of the 27 congregations that have received grants in the 2006 Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Program for Indiana Congregations. They join more than 230 congregations that have received grants since the program began in 1999.

During 2007 Thomas and his family will search for the “best places” for retreats that promote spiritual renewal. He is a member of a church mission group that plans to open Pathways, a natural haven in Goshen that offers rest, reflection and renewal with God. Figuring out how best to make that happen is one of the goals of the sabbatical.

After a week at home to “decompress” from church duties, he will attend an individual retreat at the Hermitage in Three Rivers, Mich. Then he and his wife, Linda,

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will head for the British Isles to visit centers of Celtic spirituality in Scotland, Ireland and England. The Thomases also will explore some of “God’s natural cathedrals,” the national parks and vistas of the Pacific Northwest, British Columbia and Alaska. They also will spend time in monasteries and retreat centers in New Mexico.

This year, for the first time, the Endowment has made it possible for congregations whose pastors took a previous leave at least seven years earlier to apply for a second clergy renewal leave. Thomas, who has served Walnut Hills for 16 years, is one of two pastors receiving such support. His previous sabbatical grant came in 2000.

Ruth Phillips has served her Fort Wayne congregation for five years. This creative minister, who dabbled in dance growing up as a “sedate preacher’s kid,” has discovered ballroom dancing and defines the dance studio as a “dynamic universe of music, rhythm and movement, a sanctuary from the world’s seriousness.”

She will use what she calls “this lavish gift of time” to travel to Hawaii and Santa Fe and then journey with her two children to visit her brother and his family in Munich, Germany. Her travels will conclude with a two-week stay at the Silver Bay Association on Lake George, N.Y., for resting, reading, reflecting and swimming. She and her children spent 15 years there when they were young, and this will be her first trip back to the lake and the mountains in 10 years.

Plymouth Church’s creative atmosphere and openness to dance as sacred expression have long supported Phillips’ artistic interests. The congregation thus expects to emerge from the renewal period with a strengthened identity as a faith community that is better able to proclaim its unique ministry through music and movement. They plan to welcome Phillips back with a “Plymouth Prom,” an evening of dinner and ballroom dancing.

For Longyear, the renewal time will give him permission to “slow down, listen more and talk less.” His Exchange ministry at the Maryland Community Church has him working in “uncharted territory” in which “we sometimes forget about the individual.”

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His congregation supports his need for time to disconnect from his leadership role and its demands on his energy, spirituality, creativity and passion.

Longyear plans to start his three-month sabbatical with time alone at the World Prayer Center and Jericho Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., for prayer and reflection. Then he will meet up with his father and brother for a week of fishing in Sioux Falls, Ontario – an activity they used to do as kids.

A trip to Australia with his wife and his two daughters will launch the family on an extended adventure in an English-speaking country far from home with a vibrant spiritual climate. For a while, Longyear wants to be part of a congregation, instead of leading one. Stops include Sydney, Brisbane, and the Great Barrier Reef. When they are not exploring the countryside and the cities, Longyear plans to spend time in uninterrupted reading, meditation, keeping his journal and writing songs – all the while gaining a global picture of God’s kingdom.

Any congregation in Indiana with an ordained minister is eligible to apply for a clergy renewal grant. The maximum award is \$45,000, and up to \$15,000 of that may be used for congregational activities while the pastor is away.

“We’ve been conducting this program now for a number of years, and it is a delight for us to see these congregations and ministers formulate intentional sabbatical renewal programs,” said Craig Dykstra, the Endowment’s senior vice president for religion. “The most successful ones blend time for prayer, reflection and rest with new adventures that expand their horizons. Many pastors spend some of their time in retreat by themselves; this complements other time spent with friends and family.

“It is apparent from the proposals that these congregations are fond of their ministers and want to keep them. They realize that their ministers work hard and are ‘there’ for them at both the best and worst times of their lives – and at most points in between,” he said. “In order for good ministry to be sustained over the long haul, it is

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important for pastors periodically to get away for an extended time to reconnect with spiritual and personal energies that give them life. The ministers and the congregation members almost always come away from this experience with a renewed appreciation and understanding of one another.”

This year’s recipients come from 21 counties in the state, from Lake County in the north to Floyd County in the south. Twelve denominations are represented; two congregations are nondenominational.

The congregations and pastors selected for the 2006 program are the following:

Broadway United Methodist Church, Indianapolis, \$45,000
Michael D. Mather

Calvary United Methodist Church, Brownsburg, \$44,769
Michelle L. Kallock Knight

Cedar Lake Church of the Brethren, Auburn, \$43,910
Donald O. Shankster

Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), New Albany, \$43,422
Randy M. Miles

Chapel Hill United Methodist Church, Indianapolis, \$45,000
Jeffrie Van Zirkle

Cicero Seventh-Day Adventist Church, \$45,000
Ronald P. Kelly Jr.

Clay United Methodist Church, South Bend, \$44,034
Herbert J. Buwalda Jr.

Eagle Alliance Church (Christian and Missionary Alliance), Whitestown, \$45,000
Eric S. Simpson

First Christian Church of Rochester (Disciples of Christ), \$34,700
Herbert W. Slade

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Angola, \$44,429
Deborah S. Davis

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Fountain of Truth Christian Church (nondenominational), Indianapolis, \$45,000
Marlon A. Moss Jr.

Grace United Methodist Church, Kokomo, \$43,918
Stephen A. Beutler

Hanover United Methodist Church, \$44,149
Vickie L. Perkins

Howard-Miami Mennonite Church, Kokomo, \$44,990
Randall O. Detweiler

Little Blue River Baptist Church (American Baptist), Shelbyville, \$37,352
Robert W. Langdon

Maryland Community Church (nondenominational), Terre Haute, \$45,000
Scot W. Longyear

Mount Olive Lutheran Church (Lutheran Church/Missouri Synod), Greenwood,
\$44,196
David McClean

Plymouth Congregational Church (United Church of Christ), Fort Wayne
\$44,730
Ruth E. Phillips

Richmond Church of the Brethren, \$45,000
Kelly J. Burk

St. Boniface Roman Catholic Church, Lafayette, \$40,000
Timothy M. Alkire

St. Mark Evangelical and Reformed Church (United Church of Christ),
Evansville, \$37,760
Kimron B. Reising

St. Mary of the Lake Parish (Catholic), Gary, \$41,247
Thomas E. Mischler

Tarrytown Missionary Baptist Church, Gary, \$44,335
Willie L. Joyner

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Trinity Evangelical Free Church, South Bend, \$43,360
Craig A. Clapper

Walnut Hill Mennonite Church, Goshen, \$45,000
Steve Thomas

Waterford Mennonite Church, Goshen, \$39,101
Loanne E. Harms

Zion Lippe United Church of Christ, Mount Vernon, \$45,000
Kenneth L. Scherry

Endowment officials anticipate that the Indiana program will continue, and an announcement is expected soon.

Besides this program, the Endowment offers the National Clergy Renewal Program for congregations and their ministers in the other 49 states. For more information about either program, see the Endowment's Web site, lillyendowment.org.