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Lilly Endowment announces 10th year for National Clergy Renewal Program

Last month, 133 congregations in 36 states were notified that they had received a National Clergy Renewal Program grant for their pastors from the Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment. This month, the Endowment announces that the program, which already has awarded more than 1,400 grants in its nine-year history, will continue for another year.

“The renewal of a pastor’s heart and spirituality is part of his or her ‘job description’ and is essential to the spiritual quality of a congregation’s life,” said Craig Dykstra, senior vice president for religion at the Endowment. “Pastors and congregations both benefit from this period of renewal. Pastors are given a rare chance to get away from the demands of daily parish ministry. We ask them to consider ‘what will make your heart sing?’

“That is why we suggest that, before they move too quickly to figure out the details of their renewal proposal, pastors reflect carefully about what kinds of experiences will touch them most deeply and connect them most closely with the hopes, influences and sense of vocation that led them to the ministry in the first place,” he said.

Completing the application requires a joint effort of the pastor and the congregation; applicants are encouraged not to put off applying until the last minute. “The process takes some time,” cautioned Dykstra. “It involves intentional and purposeful discussion between the congregation and the pastor. It is not just a form that can be filled out overnight.

“We have found, however, that – even among congregations that did not receive grants – the application process itself has helped them focus on issues such as effective leadership, the future directions of the congregation, and the like.”

Most pastors spend three to four months away from their churches, and their experiences both open their minds to new possibilities and connect them more deeply with what truly matters

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National Clergy Renewal Program
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to them. They travel to various places throughout the world, study subjects they really care about, and reconnect with family and friends from years past.

“As they explore the roots of their religious traditions, write poetry, practice contemplative prayer, or spend weeks or months in significantly different cultural contexts,” Dykstra said, “they come to see their ministry with fresh eyes. At the same time, the congregations also come to see their pastor and themselves in new ways. The planning process itself gives them a better understanding of what their pastors do, and their appreciation for them grows.

“Sometimes congregations decide to undertake a spiritual journey of their own alongside the pastor; they may read some of the same books the pastor is reading or form discussion groups around the sabbatical theme. Comments from former recipients prove to us that both the pastors and the congregations find the whole experience empowering and exciting,” he said.

Each congregation may apply for an award of up to \$50,000, and up to \$15,000 of that amount may be spent for congregational support during the absence of the pastor.

To be eligible, ministers must be ordained and have earned a master of divinity degree from a theological seminary or divinity school accredited by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. The program is open to all Christian congregations in 49 states and the District of Columbia. (The Endowment administers a separate, similar program for Indiana congregations.)

The brochure/application is available on the Endowment’s Web site, www.lillyendowment.org. Interested persons may call 317/916-7350, e-mail clergyrenewal@yahoo.com or write Lilly Endowment, 2801 N. Meridian St., Indianapolis, Ind. 46208.

The deadline for proposals is May 14, 2009.