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For Immediate Release
November 18, 2010

National Clergy Renewal Program to return for 12th year

Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment is pleased to announce that the National Clergy Renewal Program, which already has awarded more than 1,400 grants in its 11-year history, will continue for another year. Most pastors who participate in the program 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 in their lives. They travel throughout the world, study subjects they care about, and reconnect with family and friends from years past.

“The renewal of a pastor’s heart and spirit 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 their 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 helped them focus on issues such as effective leadership, the future directions of the congregation, and the like.

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“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, “pastors 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

Eligible congregations 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.

An application brochure that describes the program and eligibility requirements in detail and provides application forms and instructions is available on the Endowment’s Web site, lillyendowment.org/religion. 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 12, 2011.