



Contact: Gretchen Wolfram
317/916/7304
wolframg@lei.org

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Lilly Endowment announces 2012 National Clergy Renewal Program

The Lilly Endowment-funded National Clergy Renewal Program, which awards Christian congregations grants that allow their pastors an extended time of renewal and reflection, will continue next year. So far, the Indianapolis-based Endowment has awarded more than 1,400 awards in this program's 12-year history.

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. It is essential to the quality of a congregation's life together and to its ministries and mission," 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 proposals, 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 the congregations that did not receive grants – the application process itself helped them focus on issues such as effective leadership and the future directions of the congregation.

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National Clergy Renewal Program
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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 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 rewarding,” 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 website, lillyendowment.org/religion. Interested persons may call 317/916-7350, email clergyrenewal@yahoo.com or write Lilly Endowment, 2801 N. Meridian St., Indianapolis, IN 46208.

The deadline for proposals is May 11, 2012.