



# Thriving Congregations Initiative

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

2020

**L**illy Endowment is pleased to announce its **Thriving Congregations Initiative**. Through this endeavor, the Endowment seeks to support charitable organizations located in the United States in developing new or strengthening existing programs that will work directly with congregations to help them: 1) explore and understand their rapidly changing social and cultural contexts; 2) gain greater clarity about their values and mission; and 3) draw on Christian practices from their theological and ecclesial traditions to adapt their ministries to the demands of their changing contexts. The ultimate aim is to help congregations strengthen their ministries and thrive so they can better help people deepen their relationships with God, enhance their connections with each other and contribute to the flourishing of their communities and the world.

Eligible charitable organizations may submit proposals for **up to \$1 million** that may be used for up to a five-year period to design and implement programs that support Christian congregations and help them thrive. In this open and competitive grants initiative, the Endowment anticipates awarding approximately **50 grants** to charitable organizations that submit exceptionally promising and compelling proposals that advance the aim of the initiative and demonstrate the capacity of the organization to design, implement and sustain a high-quality program.

Charitable organizations interested in participating should submit an interest form by April 17, 2020. **Proposals are due by June 1, 2020.** The Endowment anticipates announcing grant awards in the fall of 2020.

## Rationale

One of Lilly Endowment's key aims in religion is to support efforts to enhance the vitality of Christian congregations. This aim is grounded in the conviction that local congregations have been and will continue to be the primary form of Christian community. They are places where Christians gather regularly to worship, teach their religious traditions to their children and youth, extend care to one another, and proclaim love for their neighbors through acts of service and hospitality. Congregations, which take many forms ranging from small country churches to majestic cathedrals, serve as a foundational building block of Christian community and a central carrier of faith.

In recent years, many pastors, church leaders and scholars of religion in America have noted significant social and cultural trends that are affecting congregational life. Widely cited studies by the Pew Research Center, for example, have charted the significant increase in the percentage of individuals who claim no religious affiliation (the "nones") and the growing number of young people who are choosing not to join churches. Religious leaders are noting that patterns of participation in worship and congregational activities are changing. Regular participation was once viewed as weekly attendance, but now attending church once or twice per month is considered as such. Pastors also report that many older forms of ministry, such as Sunday schools, youth groups and Bible studies, are not attracting the level of participation as in the past, and many churches are finding it difficult to recruit and retain volunteers for their programs. These religious leaders recognize that these challenges are symptoms of larger social and cultural trends; they also acknowledge the need, as well as the opportunity, for congregations to reassess how they approach and organize their ministries and adapt them to their new and emerging contexts.

In the face of disruptive transitions, many religious leaders are asking fundamental questions about what makes Christian congregations vibrant and effective communities of faith today. One recent study of congregations by Tim Shapiro and Kara Faris, for example, draws on the experience of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and its work with thousands of churches to address these questions. Shapiro and Faris observe that thriving congregations are very clear about their values and mission. This clarity enables them to identify specific areas of interest or concern for the congregation, concentrate their attention on these areas, and align their ministry priorities accordingly. As they focus on these priorities, thriving congregations draw on time-honored Christian practices to build intentional connections among multiple areas of congregational life. These practices help them re-energize and restructure their existing ministries and create new efforts that attend to their needs and the needs of their communities. The result is the emergence of innovative and integrated forms of congregational life and ministry that are rooted in the congregations' theological and ecclesial traditions. These forms of ministry attend in fresh ways to concrete ministry opportunities and needs both within their faith community and in the neighborhoods, towns, cities and wider regions where they live and serve.

The Thriving Congregations Initiative is based on the recognition that congregations throughout the centuries have needed to structure and restructure the ways that they organize and conduct their ministries to maintain their vitality, relevance and effectiveness. Thus, the initiative seeks to

support charitable organizations that will help congregations thrive by assessing and adapting how they organize and carry out their ministries in ways that attend to their changing contexts.

## Characteristics of Thriving Congregations

Although pastors, religious leaders and consultants name several factors that contribute to the health and vitality of local churches, many agree that thriving congregations share three characteristics. They:

### 1. Recognize their Changing Social and Cultural Contexts

Thriving congregations exhibit a nuanced understanding of the characteristics, interests, history and challenges of their communities and neighborhoods. These congregations attend closely to demographic and social changes in their communities, and they understand the particular qualities that make their communities both what they are and what they are becoming. As active participants in the community, the members of the congregation build face-to-face relationships with people in their neighborhoods and understand well the ways they live, play, work and gather. Through these close connections with their communities, thriving congregations are able to listen to the needs and interests of people in their local and regional contexts and develop ministries that are highly relational and relevant for those they seek to reach. These ministries are created by individuals and groups in the congregation and help the members of the congregation respond to specific changes in their congregation's community as well as to changes in the neighborhoods and regions the congregation seeks to serve.

### 2. Exhibit Clarity of Values and Mission

Thriving congregations have a striking clarity about their values and mission. Drawing on their theological and ecclesial traditions, they have developed a strong sense of identity and are able to articulate "why" they are called to love God and serve those in their congregations, neighborhoods, regions and across the globe. This clarity enables a thriving congregation to identify specific areas of interest and then align its ministries and activities around those priorities. Some of the ministries created by thriving congregations may concentrate on strengthening the inner life of a congregation while others may focus on reaching out and serving others. Moreover, members of thriving congregations are not merely concerned with the roles and functions of sustaining a church and its programs but are focused instead on a vision of abundant life that connects them to God, one another and the world. While members are recipients of the congregation's ministry, they are more importantly agents of ministry who serve one another and their communities as they share life together.

### 3. Cultivate Christian Practices

Many thriving congregations concentrate their attention on living out their common life and mission through time-honored Christian practices. These practices can take many forms and are rooted in and draw from a wide range of theological and ecclesial traditions. Some common examples of Christian practices include hospitality, testimony, Sabbath rest and singing, among others. Furthermore, thriving congregations attend

to these practices in ways that are contextual for their ministry settings and rooted in the particularities of their traditions. Through these intentional Christian practices, congregations cultivate a rich sense of community as they help individuals identify with their congregations and experience belonging through a shared vocabulary and engagement in common rituals and activities.

Together, these characteristics help congregations thrive. When congregations have clarity about their values and mission, they are able to identify and focus on their core mission and adapt current and/or develop new, innovative ministries that build on their unique strengths and gifts. Through their attention to Christian practices, they are able to draw on their theological and ecclesial traditions to strengthen connections among and integrate more fully all elements of congregational life and direct them in furtherance of their mission. Through growing a strong sense of who they are, congregations are better equipped to discern how to engage and build relationships in their communities and cultivate partnerships with other organizations including non-profits, civic groups, businesses and others. Such relationships further a congregation's self-understanding and sense of identity and mission. They also enable the congregation to be more creative, take risks and explore new possibilities for its ministries.

## **Congregational Learning Process**

Today, many congregations and their leaders spend much of their time operating multiple programs, and the daily demands of these ministries often make it difficult to find time to pause long enough to evaluate their activities or to explore their rapidly changing social and cultural contexts. If congregations are going to adapt successfully and meaningfully to their shifting contexts, they need opportunities to step back and engage in a learning process to gain clarity about their values and mission, assess strengths and weaknesses of their current ministries, identify their gifts and passions, and imagine new possibilities for organizing and advancing their ministries.

Religious leaders and knowledgeable church consultants who work closely with local churches, such as the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, have noted that congregations learn best when they are part of a larger community of learning. These learning communities include congregational leadership teams from other churches engaged in similar endeavors as well as knowledgeable consultants and experts who can help them explore questions or provide knowledge about particular topics or challenges.

Drawing on insights from religious leaders and knowledgeable church consultants, organizations participating in the Thriving Congregations Initiative should establish learning communities comprising congregational leadership teams including both pastoral and lay leaders. Participating organizations will work directly with groups of congregations and guide them through a carefully designed learning process. This learning process will enable a congregation to:

- Explore and deepen its understanding of social and cultural trends that affect the congregation.
- Learn about its immediate neighborhood, town, city, region and/or broader areas of concern through face-to-face encounters as well as research and study.

- Gain greater clarity about its values, theological convictions and mission in light of its changing contexts.
- Deepen understandings of its ecclesial traditions and denominational relationships and how they shape and expand its ministry opportunities.
- Identify areas for ministry where the congregation has the greatest passion, gifts and sense of calling.
- Explore how time-honored Christian practices may provide both the theological framework and patterns of activity needed to revitalize and bring coherence to congregational life.
- Build and strengthen a sense of community among members of the congregation.
- Strengthen the congregation's governance and leadership practices.
- Establish and nurture deeper relationships with organizations and individuals in its local neighborhood, town, city, region or across the globe as appropriate in furtherance of its refocused and clarified mission and focal areas of concern.

Through the process, the participating congregations will learn more about the contexts in which they carry out their ministries. A congregation, for example, may begin to recognize that its neighborhood has changed in significant ways. It may need to learn more about new immigrant populations and the ways they are shaping and changing the congregation's community, city or region. Perhaps the congregation will learn about young people in its community who are passionate about social causes, or it may discover how retirees are beginning new chapters in their lives and looking for opportunities to serve. The congregation may also learn about cultural currents and dynamics in its community, like changing family norms or emerging technologies, that affect the ways people live, work, attend school and use their free time.

As congregations learn about their communities, they may also need to learn more about themselves. What do members of the congregation most care about? Which of its traditions, rituals and activities are most life-giving and important? Which Christian practices most effectively deepen its collective faith, build a shared sense of belonging among its members and lead it to develop new forms of ministry?

Christian practices may provide congregations with a repertoire of possibilities as well as an integrative framework for sharpening, energizing and organizing their ministries. As a congregation learns about changes in its community, for example, it might draw on practices of Christian hospitality as it creates ways of connecting with new families. As it strives to deepen these new relationships through practices of hospitality, it may realize that its neighborhood needs a place for these families to gather and therefore it builds a neighborhood pavilion and playground. It also may recognize the financial stress of many young families and decide to use the church's building to provide a new preschool ministry for families in need of affordable childcare. At the same time, the congregation may assess its worship services and incorporate elements into worship that are more engaging for children and young families.

These examples are intended to be illustrative only, and applicants are encouraged to design programs that are appropriate for their own constituencies and contexts. These are examples of how a congregation might draw from its practices and sense of mission to engage its social context. As a congregation learns about itself and its social context, it may also discover that

some of its longstanding programs or educational activities, like Sunday school or Bible studies, need to be redeveloped or deployed in new ways. It may also discover exciting possibilities to make its worship services more inviting and engaging.

Congregations selected to participate in the applicant's proposed program should be ready to engage in a learning community with other churches. They should also be ready to commit to a learning process that will help them refine their values and mission, examine their changing contexts, assess their current ministries in light of their sharpened sense of mission, and adapt current and/or design new ministries in furtherance of their priorities. As it works to support congregations, the applicant, through its proposed program, should also offer congregations access to key resources, consultants, experiences, or other elements that will deepen learning and help congregations develop vital ministries.

## Eligibility and Selection Criteria

Charitable organizations with Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3) and public charity status that are committed to supporting Christian congregations are eligible to participate in the Thriving Congregations Initiative. Eligible organizations may submit proposals of **up to \$1 million** each that may be used for up to a five-year period. See proposal guidelines below for a fuller description of the application requirements.

Successful applicants will submit proposals to develop new and/or enhance existing programs to help congregations: 1) explore and understand their rapidly changing social and cultural contexts; 2) gain greater clarity about their values and mission; and 3) draw on Christian practices from their theological and ecclesial traditions to adapt their ministries to the demands of their changing contexts. The proposal should include a plan to create a learning community of select congregations and a description of how the proposed program will support these congregations in ways that are appropriate to the applicant's own organizational mission, theological tradition, ecclesial community and geographic and cultural context. The proposal should also include a thoughtful evaluation plan that includes activities for ongoing assessment and curation of insights as well as a dissemination plan that includes activities for sharing learning with other organizations, congregations and ministries. Finally, the proposal should include a sustainability plan to continue the program beyond the end of the grant period.

The Endowment encourages each applicant to apply for an amount appropriate to its organizational capacity, proposed program need and ability to sustain its program after the grant period ends. These are intended to be one-time grant awards. If successful, applicants are expected to continue the program beyond the grant period from other funding sources.

The Endowment will review the proposals and award grants on a competitive basis to organizations that submit complete proposals demonstrating that they have the capacity to design, implement and sustain a high-quality program. Funding decisions will be based on the following criteria: 1) the quality of design of the proposed program and its potential to advance the initiative's aim; 2) the capacity, readiness and appropriateness of the organization to develop a new and/or enhance an existing program; 3) the capacity of the organization to work effectively with a substantial cohort of congregations; and 4) the capacity of the

organization to garner the financial resources needed to sustain its program beyond the grant period.

## Application Guidelines

Interested organizations are asked to use the following application procedures and timeline:

1. **Submit an [interest form on the Endowment's website](#) by April 17, 2020.**

Each applicant is asked to complete and submit an Interest Form indicating its intent to submit a proposal. The submission of an Interest Form is not required, but it will help Lilly Endowment know of the applicant's interest and aid in the implementation of the initiative.

2. **Submit a complete proposal through the [online application form on the Endowment's website](#) by June 1, 2020.**

Each applicant must complete and submit a proposal. Instructions for the preparation and submission of a proposal are below.

Lilly Endowment anticipates notifying organizations of funding decisions in fall of 2020.

## Proposal Guidelines

A complete grant proposal will include the following:

- Official Request Letter
- Proposal Narrative (up to 12 pages)
- Budget and Budget Narrative (see instructions)
- Proposal Summary Information Form
- Accompanying Materials
  - › Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form
  - › Copy of Internal Revenue Service tax status determination letter
  - › Current year operating budget
  - › Annual financial statement
  - › Letter(s) of support (where applicable)

**Official Request Letter:** The grant proposal must be accompanied by an official request letter signed by the president or chief executive officer and, where applicable, the chairperson of the applicant's governing board.

**Proposal Narrative:** An applicant must submit a proposal narrative, which should not exceed 12 pages in length (excluding budget and other accompanying materials), and address the topics and questions as follows:

1. **Executive Summary** - Begin with a one-paragraph executive summary that describes the applicant, the appropriateness of the proposed program's fit with the applicant's



mission, the applicant's constituency, the types of congregations the applicant's program will support and the highlights of the proposed program. (Not included in the 12-page limit.)

- 2. Changing Context of Congregational Life and Ministry** - Provide a discussion of the nature of challenges and opportunities facing congregations today.
  - › Based on research and conversations with religious leaders, what are the most pressing cultural and social shifts affecting congregations?
  - › What social and cultural changes do congregations need to address?
  - › What other commonalities do congregations share?
- 3. Characteristics of Thriving Congregations** - Provide a discussion of the applicant's view of the characteristics of thriving congregations.
  - › What are the characteristics of thriving congregations?
  - › What helps thriving congregations develop a clear sense of their values and mission?
  - › What kinds of experiences, opportunities and activities help them thrive?
  - › How can Christian practices help them establish and maintain their vitality?
- 4. Program Purposes and Goals** - State the proposed program's purposes and goals.
  - › What are the program's purposes and goals?
  - › How does the proposed program fit within the applicant's own mission?
  - › How will the program enable congregations to thrive?
  - › Why has the applicant decided to apply for a Thriving Congregations grant?
- 5. Program Design** - Provide a thorough and detailed program design that relates clearly to the program's goals. (Note: The costs for the program's proposed activities should be shown in the budget that is described below.)
  - › What is the program's overall design?
  - › What are the program's key activities?
  - › What congregations will the program support (e.g., congregations affiliated with a specific denomination or theological tradition, congregations in a geographic area, congregations serving in particular ministry contexts, etc.)?
  - › How will the applicant select congregations?
  - › What existing and new resources are needed to implement the program?
- 6. Congregational Learning Process** - Provide more detail about the congregational learning process and activities. How will congregations:
  - › Explore and deepen their understanding of social and cultural trends that affect them?
  - › Learn about their immediate neighborhoods, towns, cities, regions and/or broader areas of concern through face-to-face encounters as well as research and study?
  - › Gain greater clarity about their values and mission in light of their changing contexts?



- › Deepen understandings of their ecclesial traditions and denominational relationships and how they shape and expand their ministry opportunities?
  - › Identify an area of ministry in which the congregation has the greatest passion, gifts and sense of calling?
  - › Use Christian practices as described above (pages 3-4) to provide both the theological framework and integrative patterns of activity needed to energize and bring coherence to congregational life?
  - › Build a sense of community among members of the congregations?
  - › Learn about how they can strengthen their governance and leadership practices to support the restructuring of current or launching of new ministries?
  - › Establish and nurture deeper relationships with organizations and individuals in their local neighborhoods, towns, cities, regions or across the globe as appropriate in furtherance of their refocused and clarified mission, purpose and focal areas of concern?
- 7. Outcomes and Evaluation** - Provide a description of the program's anticipated outcomes and an evaluation plan that explains the process by which the applicant will assess the extent to which the outcomes of the program are being achieved.
- › How will the applicant capture what is learned from the program's activities?
- 8. Leadership** - Identify key leaders for the program.
- › Who are the program's key leaders and what roles and responsibilities will they have in implementing this effort?
- 9. Communication** - Include a communication plan that describes how the applicant intends to communicate what is learned through the program.
- › With whom will the applicant seek to communicate what is learned?
  - › What communication tools will the applicant employ and why?
- 10. Organizational Support and Partnerships** - Describe any current or anticipated partners who will participate in the program's implementation. If the proposed program involves cooperation with other organizations, evidence must be submitted in the form of letters of support from the leaders of the partner organizations. Letters of support, which should be no more than two pages in length, should describe the organization's mission, state its role in the proposed program, and affirm the organization's support for the proposed endeavor.
- 11. Anticipated Obstacles** - Describe any anticipated obstacles in implementing the program.
- › What challenges does the applicant anticipate facing as the program is launched?
  - › What are key strategies for addressing these challenges?
  - › What initial or ongoing technical assistance will be needed to address anticipated challenges?

**12. Sustainability and Continuation** - Prepare a future funding plan to sustain the program beyond the initial grant period.

- › How will new sources of funding be cultivated to replace grant dollars?
- › How will other institutional and intellectual resources be secured to sustain the program?
- › Who will be in charge of long-term development and fundraising?
- › How will development and fundraising activities be staffed and funded?

**Budget and Budget Narrative:** Please prepare a budget and budget narrative for the activities described in the proposal narrative. (Budget documents are not included in the 12-page limit for the proposal narrative above.)

The grant may be used to fund the programmatic costs of the applicant's proposed program, including personnel, program activities, travel and other necessary expenses. Up to ten percent of the grant may be used to support fundraising expenses to garner the resources needed to secure long-term support to sustain the program beyond the grant period. The grant may not be used for scholarships for educational degree programs or for endowments.

The Endowment encourages applicants to apply for an amount appropriate to the organization's capacity, proposed program need and ability to sustain the proposed program after the grant period ends. In other words, an applicant may wish to consider applying for less than \$1 million if such an amount would better fit the organization's capacity. An applicant may apply for a grant that may be used for up to a five-year period, but it may decide to submit a request for funding for a shorter time period.

- **Budget:** A detailed line-item budget should specify how grant funds will be used and should be submitted as a separate document. Please follow the ["Guide to Budget Preparation"](#) in preparing the budget. Please note that the budget categories are for illustrative purposes. The Endowment recommends that the applicant work closely with those responsible for accounting procedures and financial policies in the organization to create a budget that fits within the organization's chart of accounts.
- **Budget Summary:** If the budget is more than one page, please prepare a one-page budget summary, condensing the line items into larger categories, according to the guidelines.
- **Budget Narrative:** A budget narrative describes the calculations for each line item in the grant budget.

**Proposal Summary Information Form:** This form conveys information about the proposal, organization and contact persons for the purposes indicated on the form.

**Accompanying Materials:** In addition to the proposal narrative and budget, a complete proposal should include the following materials. (Not included in page limit.)

- **Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form:** A completed form should be enclosed with the proposal. This form is used to verify the charitable organizations' tax status.

- **Copy of Internal Revenue Service tax status determination letter:** Please also include a copy of the organization's Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tax-exempt status determination letter. This letter provides verification of the applicant's status as a 501(c)(3) organization and its public charity classification under Internal Revenue Code section 509(a) (1), (2), or (3). Please note: many congregations or judicatory-related organizations may not have asked for or received such a letter from the IRS. If that is the case, determine whether the organization is listed in a group exemption ruling for the denomination. If so, please attach evidence that the congregation is covered by the ruling (for example, by sending copies of the directory cover and the page on which the congregation is listed in the official directory of your denomination). No grants will be awarded until the proper tax status is confirmed.
- **Current year operating budget:** Provide a copy of the applicant's operating budget for the current year.
- **Annual financial statement:** Provide a copy of the applicant's annual financial statement. The format of the financial statement should be consistent with that of the operating budget and should show a comparison of actual to budgeted expenditures. The annual financial statement may be from an internal review of accounts or from an outside agency or formal audit.
- **Letter(s) of support (where applicable):** If the proposed program involves other organizations, letters of support from the leaders of the other organizations or agencies must be submitted with the application (See discussion of letters of support in point 10, Organizational support and partnerships, on page 9).

## Proposal Deadline and Checklist

Proposals must be submitted by **June 1, 2020**, through the [online application form on the Endowment's website](#) as a single PDF.

A complete grant proposal PDF should be arranged in the following order:

- Official Request Letter
- Proposal Narrative (up to 12 pages)
- Budget and Budget Narrative (see instructions)
- Proposal Summary Information Form
- Accompanying Materials
  - › Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form
  - › Copy of Internal Revenue Service tax status determination letter
  - › Current year operating budget
  - › Annual financial statement
  - › Letter(s) of support (where applicable)

Please email any questions to [thrivingcongregations@lei.org](mailto:thrivingcongregations@lei.org).