

'The Times They Are A-Changin'

Shifting demographics, social disruptions move congregations to explore how to remain relevant and serve their communities



Many pastors may hear today the echo of Bob Dylan’s iconic lyrics as they reflect on the rapid social and cultural changes that are affecting Christian congregations. Digital technologies are not only changing ways that people worship. They also are affecting daily ministry and efforts to keep members connected with one another. Moreover, significant demographic shifts throughout the United States are changing the neighborhoods in which many congregations are located and conduct their ministries. These and other changes are affecting churches and influencing how individuals and families—especially young adults—participate in congregational life.

In this fluid context, Lilly Endowment launched the Thriving Congregations Initiative to strengthen Christian congregations and help them thrive on into the future. According to the Rev. Tim Shapiro, president of the Indianapolis-based Center for Congregations, strong and thriving congregations have vitality and engage in ministries that are relevant to members and their communities. With this in mind, this initiative is designed to help churches explore and understand social and cultural changes and gain clarity about their missions and values. Through the initiative, the Endowment seeks to encourage congregations to draw on practices from their theological traditions to adapt and meet the new and emerging needs of their members and others in the communities they serve.

Fostering Vitality in Various Contexts

Through two rounds of grantmaking—in 2019 and in 2020—the Endowment made grants totaling a little more than \$117 million to 115 organizations that are leading Thriving Congregations programs across the United States.

These organizations include seminaries, denominational agencies, other church-related organizations, and congregations with the capacity to support other churches, and they have launched programs that are working with congregations from diverse theological traditions that are engaged in ministries in a wide variety of contexts.

Grant-funded efforts include the University of Notre Dame’s Church Communications Ecology Program. It is helping Catholic parishes nationwide—including St. John Catholic Church in Goshen, Ind.—understand how digital technologies are affecting parishioners and ministers as individuals and the impact of technology on worship, faith formation, pastoral care and the nature of Christian identity.

The General Synod of the Reformed Church of America’s Renovations Project is helping churches around the country re-imagine their missional future as they explore what it means to share faith and serve one another; Payne Theological Seminary’s Mapping the Future of Black Methodism program is strengthening congregational ministries in the Midwest; Latin American Bible Institute’s Learning Communities and Hispanic Church Program is engaging Hispanic congregations in the western U.S.; Mere Christianity Forum’s Tap Roots and Seed Crystals program, designed

to help congregations in college towns to reach young people; and Yale Divinity School’s program is working with churches in the New Haven, Connecticut, region.

In early 2020 the first wave of programs was beginning to take shape. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, becoming a profound and unexpected social force affecting faith communities—and the Thriving Congregations programs designed to engage them.

A Year Like No Other

The year 2020 was nothing like Pastor Davie Tucker Jr. ever imagined, although it dawned with promise for the 24 Tennessee churches that American Baptist College had gathered under the wings of a Thriving Congregations program.

● The Rev. Jose Arroyo of St. John Catholic Church in Goshen, Ind., (opposite) is participating in the University of Notre Dame’s national program exploring technology and congregations. ● Pastor Davie Tucker Jr. directs the American Baptist College’s Thriving Congregations program in Tennessee (below). ● The Rev. Tim Shapiro is president of the Center for Congregations (left).





Tucker is pastor of Beech Creek Missionary Baptist Church in Nashville and program director for the Thriving Congregations grant at American Baptist College, a historically Black college with deep regional connections. The Endowment grant is supporting the college’s Empowering Congregations to Heal Communities program. Through the program, Black congregations of varying denominations and sizes from four urban areas—Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis and Nashville—are exploring how to engage theological convictions and practices of inclusive justice as they minister to people in their neighborhoods.

During the night of March 2, 2020, Tucker and his wife awoke to the terrifying sounds of a powerful tornado ripping through north Nashville. The storm barreled across a 100-mile swath of Tennessee, killing 128 people and damaging or destroying thousands of homes, businesses and churches.

As cleanup began, the COVID-19 pandemic forced churches, traditional places of refuge in times of grief and need, to close their doors and quickly adapt to social distancing and remote worship, even while members were sick and dying.

Spring and summer brought more suffering with the police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, a fresh wound from the familiar and painful scourge of racially-motivated violence.

“In my entire life, I never imagined that I would live through such a struggle, in which instability and uncertainty were the rule of the day,” Tucker says. “We had to adapt to changing conditions on the ground.”

The Thriving Congregations grant enabled American Baptist College to be flexible with how it supports churches and pastors as they learn new ways of ministering in communities facing rapid change and, yes, crisis. The year of hardship reinforced the importance of recapturing the powerful and prophetic Black church tradition, according to Tucker.

“In some ways, we have lost the theological imagination that once allowed us to lean into the life-threatening realities our people have had to face and ask, ‘What is God saying to me?’ It requires

imagination to take risks and challenge assumptions to address suffering and encourage flourishing,” he says. “It is hard to give words to that connection, but we know when we have been in the presence of the Divine.”

Congregations as Communities of Faith and Practice

Congregations have long served as the local communities where Christians gather for worship, pass down faith to their children, extend care to one another and seek to strengthen their relationships with God.

“In many neighborhoods, towns and cities, congregations are touchstones for the entire human lifecycle—birth, marriage, sickness, old age and death,” says Shapiro of the Center for Congregations. “They are the places where people turn as they approach these life-changing crossroads in their lives.”

Congregations also are communities where people learn how to love others beyond their local churches and where they draw on their faith to strengthen the social fabric locally and around the world, according to Shapiro, who has researched and written about practices that foster the vitality of Christian congregations.

To remain relevant, congregations need to adapt to the rapid changes having an impact on society—from the demographic shifts affecting congregations in rural, urban and suburban settings to the ever-evolving impact of digital technology on everyone, notes Shapiro.

● Members of multiple congregations are involved in Cornerstone University’s Thriving Congregations program focused on neighborhood outreach in Grand Rapids, Mich.



“Big Ideas”

The Rev. Eliza Cortés Bast, pastor and program director of the Renovations Project, the Thriving Congregations program for the General Synod of the Reformed Church of America (RCA), says the initiative is encouraging her to “go after big ideas” with RCA congregations from around the country.

“Our old model of saying ‘You, come to us,’ was very frustrating to those who were limited by geography, for pastors who were bi-vocational, or those who had other circumstances that made travel difficult,” Cortés Bast says. Yet she, like other leaders, needed to make unanticipated program adjustments in the face of the pandemic. “This year, we had the additional challenge of leaders who were exceptionally anxious and tired. We knew we had to adjust and change.”

Developing an online digital platform, Learn.Faithward.org, was always part of the plan for the RCA program, but the pandemic accelerated the rollout of new digital resources, including a podcast network. “If there had been no pressure on us, we wouldn’t have moved so quickly,” Cortés Bast says.

“My hope is that the church will look for a new normal. The heart of this grant is looking at what are ‘good bones’ and what needs to be refreshed,” she adds. “Thriving Congregations gives us the freedom to dream something different.”

● The Rev. Eliza Cortés Bast leads the Thriving Congregations program of the Reformed Church of America (above). ● The Rev. Khary Bridgewater directs the Thriving Congregations program of Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Mich. (right).

An Emphasis on Relevance

Before COVID-19, “church” was what happened on Sunday morning, according to the Rev. Khary Bridgewater, director of the Thriving Congregations program at Cornerstone University’s Urban Church Leadership Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In 2020, Grand Rapids experienced “church” in action: finding food for hungry people and helping clergy understand the COVID-19 risks so they could work to keep their congregations safe. “Church” became working with local and state health authorities to dispel myths about vaccines and helping people get vaccinated. It became about ministering to people experiencing deep pain and high anxiety during a time of intense stress over racial and political divisions. “This grant enabled us to walk with churches at this unprecedented moment,” Bridgewater says. “Without this grant, we would not be engaged in this way. We had a team and resources in place, and there is no doubt that without this grant, people would have died.”

While the community continues to recover from grief, lingering illness and financial fallout, the Urban Church Leadership Center has begun to refocus on the grant’s initial work: helping Black, Latino, Asian and new immigrant congregations connect their ministries to people in their communities. A cohort of clergy and lay leaders is engaged in a process to connect parishioners with the residents of surrounding communities. Congregations are using research tools to better understand changing culture in their communities. Cornerstone’s Thriving Congregations program is making small capacity-building grants to help congregations design, test and implement new ministries.

“Our objective is for churches to think deeply about the ways they help their members form faith and communicate it with others,” Bridgewater says. “We are thinking about what it means to gather and be engaged. Those are questions we need to ask more than ever if we are to be relevant in this new environment.”

