

Telling Compelling Religion Stories

Museum and Historic Site Leaders Gather to Learn Together

DURING THREE DAYS IN WASHINGTON, D.C., leaders from museums and cultural institutions around the United States gathered to exchange insights about innovative and varied approaches to exploring religion and spirituality in their collections and exhibitions, education offerings and other public programs.

The Smithsonian Institution hosted the meeting, bringing together representatives from nearly 40 organizations that are participating in Lilly Endowment's Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative (RCII). The initiative's aim: help museums, historic sites, libraries and other organizations across the nation strengthen their abilities to fairly and accurately portray the role that religion plays in the U.S. and around the world.



CONVENING IN 2023

Religion And Cultural Institutions Initiative

In 2023, Lilly Endowment made a grant to the Smithsonian Institution to support a convening of leaders from nearly 40 museums, historic sites and other cultural institutions. The organizations are participating in the Endowment's Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative, a national effort to support the development of exhibitions, educational programs and collections that fairly and accurately portray the role of religion in the U.S. and around the world.



The Endowment made grants in 2020 and again in 2022 through two invitational rounds of RCII. In 2023, the Endowment launched a competitive third round of the initiative and anticipates making additional grants in 2024.

Curators, archaeologists, education specialists and museum and historic site administrators came from 17 states and the District of Columbia to participate in the three-day gathering. They represented fine arts museums, children's museums, history museums devoted to distinct regions of the United States, and historic sites dedicated to the lives of indigenous people, early European settlers in North America and key figures in American history. They represented organizations documenting the narratives and experiences of enslaved people and their descendants, organizations that tell the stories of varied ethnic communities across the nation, and organizations rooted in the civil rights movement. There also were participants from organizations focused on World War I, the Holocaust and other historic events that have shaped the nation and the world.

Leaders from cultural institutions gathered in Washington, D.C., at three Smithsonian Institution sites: the National Museum of African American History and Culture (above), the Arts and Industries Building (near right) and the National Museum of American History. Peter Manseau and Erika Gault (far right) curate Smithsonian collections.





■ ■ ■ Convening sessions included a screening of the documentary “God Talk,” receptions, a concert, gallery tours (below) and panel discussions.

“The field of religion, its interpreters and interpretations are quite vast,” said Erika Gault, director and supervisory curator of the Center for the Study of African American Religious Life at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. “There’s value, then, in bringing together a wide variety of voices to ensure that as many perspectives as possible are represented and engaged in our

future narrative-making on religion and national dialogue on the same.”

Participants for the gathering toured galleries at the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of American History. And they gathered for two days of panel discussions in the Arts and Industries Building.

The Smithsonian sites on the National Mall in Washington were a fitting locale in which to gather, share stories of innovation, brainstorm about challenges and new ideas, and build community. That’s because the Smithsonian has been at the forefront of the



Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative, having received multiple grants since 2019 to support efforts at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the National Museum of African Art, the National Museum of American History, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the National Museum of Asian Art. Additional Endowment grants helped the Smithsonian incorporate religion into the development of both the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Latino.

Through panel discussions and Q and A sessions, participants explored the collecting and sharing of sacred items and stories; reaching audiences and learning from them; building community beyond the walls and grounds of cultural institutions; and the future of religion in museums.

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“Organizers set such an inclusive tone at the outset of the meetings—that no idea was off base, that this would be a respectful sharing of ideas and experiences. And that it was!” said Caroline Goesser, the W.T. and Louise J. Moran Chair of Learning and Interpretation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Anthea Hartig, the Elizabeth MacMillan Director of the National Museum of American History, addressed participants on the second evening of the gathering, which happened to be the 60th anniversary of the day the museum opened.

“We are truly proud that our work is enhanced by the Lilly Endowment Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative. Through this initiative, Lilly Endowment has recognized the powerful role that museums and cultural institutions play in our society and in the life of our nation. It provides substantial resources to invest in efforts that inspire a deeper understanding of the role of religion in our world,” Hartig said.



“Remarkably, they’ve gone even farther—and we are thrilled they did—because they have convened us together to collaborate and share our knowledge for the betterment of our collective work. It is truly inspiring, and time together last night and today only served to reinforce our sense of community and underscore both the challenges and joys of this work.”

■ ■ ■ Anthea Hartig (top) directs the National Museum of American History. Amy Landau (above) is director of education and interpretation at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. (Below, left to right) Cesareo Moreno is chief curator at the National Museum of Mexican Art. David Roche is CEO of the Heard Museum. The Rev. James Imgram is an interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg.





Finding Strength Together

Convening to Help Pastors Reinvigorate Their Ministries

For Catholic priests and deacons serving rural parishes, there is a rhythm of life connected to the land that is beautiful. But it also can be isolating, according to James Ennis, executive director of Catholic Rural Life, a national nonprofit organization based in St. Paul, Minn., supporting Catholic life in rural America.

A pastor might serve three, four or even five rural parishes, in communities spread out across many miles. Just reaching these far-flung flocks often involves lots of driving—usually alone. The challenges of being spread so thin are real. “You can get lonely, which can lead to burnout,” Ennis says.

Ministry in an urban setting can be lonely, too, even if a pastor is surrounded by people. Leading a church is rewarding, but as pastors spend their days serving others—often in challenging circumstances—they can struggle to find safe spaces to share their own cares and concerns, according to Miriam Acevedo, vice president of City Seminary of New York, and an associate pastor at Iglesia Pentecostal Camino a Damasco Church in Manhattan.

City Seminary and Catholic Rural Life have more in common than their names suggest, including a commitment to supporting the well-being of pastors. They are two of 129 organizations supported through Lilly Endowment's Thriving in Ministry Initiative, which seeks to help pastors thrive in congregational leadership so they, in turn, are better equipped to enhance the vitality of the congregations they serve.

In August 2023, Ennis and Acevedo joined colleagues working in Thriving in Ministry programs across the country for a three-day gathering in Indianapolis. They came to celebrate the variety of organizations and their theological traditions; to understand common challenges; and to encourage one another.

"It means so much for me to come together with others to learn how everyone is working in their own ways to love pastors," Acevedo says of her first Thriving in Ministry event. "In our own programs we help pastors know that they are not alone, that they can learn from each other. And with this gathering in Indianapolis, I know that I am not alone. Like our pastors, we are learning from each other, too."

For Ennis, the gathering—his third—reminded him of the wisdom in Proverbs 27: "Iron sharpens iron."

"At each Thriving in Ministry gathering, it has been especially meaningful to learn from men and women whose faith has been transformative in their communities," he says.

Stirring the imagination

The Endowment launched Thriving in Ministry in 2017, making grants to seminaries, colleges and universities, denominational agencies and other nonprofits that are committed to supporting the well-being of pastors and others in congregational ministry. The initiative also includes funding to support Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School, which provides a coordination program for organizations participating in Thriving in Ministry. A major part of that coordination program is offering learning opportunities, including annual gatherings, which have taken place in-person and virtually since 2019.



The overall goal of the events is always the same: foster a community that strengthens its individual members, worships together, and explores common purpose and solutions to challenges, according to Alaina Kleinbeck, associate executive director for coordination programs at Duke's Leadership Education and director of the Thriving in Ministry Coordination Program.

"These gatherings are huge 'aha' moments when the whole church shows up," Kleinbeck says. "To be in a space where everyone—Orthodox, Reformed, Catholic, Pentecostal—are in conversation is remarkable. It stirs the ecumenical imagination."

■ ■ ■ Panel discussions (opposite), worship services and networking (below) were hallmarks of the Thriving in Ministry Initiative convening in August 2023. City Seminary of New York uses convenings in its grant-funded work, too (above).





Hospitality as a spiritual practice

Across the Endowment’s many initiatives, convening grantees is a longstanding practice. Duke’s strategy for the Thriving in Ministry gatherings has always been to make a hotel ballroom feel like a more intimate space. That was true at the most recent gathering in August 2023, when 227 participants representing the 129 organizations and 34 states across the country convened for three days at a downtown Indianapolis conference hotel.

Days together began with morning worship. Plenary panel discussions explored the internal lives of pastoral leaders and the external realities affecting their ministries. Breakout sessions encouraged participants to have deeper conversations about the shared challenges they face and possibilities for collaborative solutions. Shared meals and generous break times are designed to encourage participants to process together what they heard in sessions and to foster networking.

“It’s the tradition of Christian hospitality, extended to all. We want each person from every grantee organization to walk in and know that they are a beloved child of God,” Kleinbeck says. “Anything we can do to help throw off the anxiety of travel, their exhaustion, the strangeness of the place, is crucial to practicing that hospitality.”

Rural renovation

At the 2023 Thriving in Ministry gathering, Ennis represented Catholic Rural Life on a stage with three other panelists for a discussion about the contextual challenges facing pastors. The panelists enumerated the issues facing their communities, as well as ways that they could see God at work.

Ennis talked about priests feeling discouraged by seeing only “grayheads” at mass and parents who worried about how to pass their faith on to their children. He also talked about what was working: priests using creative methods to meet young people on their terms, hosting “s’more theology” bonfires, cheering on their high school football and basketball teams, and even driving the team bus to away games.

But even as he talked about his own experiences, Ennis says he was inspired by the pastoral leaders sitting next to him—representing rural and urban ministries, Catholic and Protestant, male and female—and the humility and faith at the root of their shared work.



James Ennis (left) leads Catholic Rural Life. Participants in the Thriving in Ministry Initiative convening took part in small-group collaborative workshops (above).

“There is real wisdom in bringing people together and sharing models of ministry, but it’s all about glory to God, not ‘here’s what I am doing.’ It always reinvigorates me and how I approach my own work.”

Ennis was at a turning point with Catholic Rural Life when opportunities presented by the Thriving in Ministry Initiative came along. The organization was founded in 1923 at a gathering in St. Louis, Mo., of bishops, priests and laity who shared common concerns about rural Catholic parishes. Almost a century later, the organization needed some “renovation,” Ennis says. Parishes and their priests needed better help, but Catholic Rural Life lacked the budget to expand its outreach.

In 2019, the Endowment made a \$1 million Thriving in Ministry grant to help Catholic Rural Life support the ongoing spiritual formation of clergy and to help pastors renew their vision for ministry. There are retreats and follow-up sessions focused on leadership development and best practices for ministry in rural settings.

Together, clergy are growing in their understanding of what it means to serve rural communities as they strengthen bonds with one another.

“It has been transformational,” Ennis says. “It’s just been a huge blessing to our rural pastors.”

Beyond funding for the much-needed programming, Thriving in Ministry’s annual gatherings have introduced Ennis to a nationwide community of people devoted to helping pastors and their congregations. At the annual gatherings, Ennis has met leaders of other Thriving in Ministry grant programs in other regions and contexts. Conversations have created companions on a journey, one that has Ennis looking forward with hope for a better future for pastors and their parishes.

“Having these deep friendships with people I trust and can give me wise counsel is just so powerful,” he says.

Finding Affinity

The 2023 gathering in Indianapolis of the Thriving in Ministry Initiative

marked the start of a pilot project to build new clergy networks beyond the annual gatherings hosted by the initiative’s coordination program.

The initiative is supporting opportunities for grantees to work together in areas of shared affinity, according to Alaina Kleinbeck (right), director of the Thriving in Ministry coordination program. The program is based at Duke Divinity School.

Prior to the 2023 annual Thriving in Ministry gathering in Indianapolis, coordination program leaders asked grantees what topics they may want to explore in conversation with peers, regardless of denomination affiliation or other institutional boundaries.

Organizers made time during the gathering to encourage participants to find each other through an unscripted self-matching process.

By the end of the meeting, Thriving in Ministry grantees found conversation partners that coalesced around multiple topics, including:

- holistic well-being of faith leaders
- multi-cultural contexts
- Black women thriving in ministry
- retirement
- spiritual practices for people of color



Dubbed the Cohort Formation Project, the pilot is “a grand experiment,” that supports the initiative’s goal of helping pastors continue to support one another in ministry, Kleinbeck says.

During 2024, cohort groups are meeting in both virtual spaces and in-person meetings. A cohort group organized around

supporting pastoral leaders in the Catholic tradition, for example, will travel to the U.S. southern border to better understand how pastors and parishioners can lead together on issues surrounding immigration.

“(A) grand experiment.”

In 2025, grantees supported through Thriving in Ministry will gather again to share their experiences.

“We don’t know whether these cohorts are going to work exactly as envisioned or planned. We just don’t know yet,” Kleinbeck says.

“We trust the Spirit, and we trust these adult learners, who have stepped forward in faith. But because of our experience with the Thriving in Ministry gatherings, we do know that it is crucial to develop and support these networks to lead the Church to thriving.”

City sanctuary

In the heart of Harlem, City Seminary of New York is demonstrating the spiritual practice of hospitality to the ministers it serves. In 2017, the seminary received a \$1 million Thriving in Ministry grant. Pastors from a wide range of Christian traditions gather in small “praxis” cohort groups at the seminary, engaging in deep conversation during retreats designed for inquiry and reflection. They create and enjoy art together. Ignacio, a friendly dog, is in residence.

“When a meal is shared, we are reminded that we are called to nourish one another.”

At City Seminary, pastors can lean into a welcoming, creative space that nurtures friendship and self-care. As a result, city pastors—who might not otherwise have even met—are able to make connections, providing one another with a much-needed extended community of support and encouragement, according to Acevedo.

Cohort groups might use their meetings together to talk through a challenging question—not necessarily to find an answer, Acevedo says, but to find fresh perspectives. Recently, a group of women pastors met in a cohort group focused on self-care, making a retreat for respite and reflection, sharing their experiences of church leadership, and taking in an exhibit on Puerto Rican history at a local museum.

“There is diversity in faith and culture, yet these pastors can be in relationship with each other at City Seminary in ways they cannot find anywhere else,” she says.

For Thriving in Ministry program leaders, there is a similar need to be in relationship. The gatherings hosted by the initiative’s coordination program are filling that need. Whether it is in morning worship and prayer or during break time discussions in between plenary sessions and workshops, Acevedo says the time together is building much-needed community. The informal breakfasts and lunches with new Thriving in Ministry colleagues in Indianapolis are particularly meaningful. Psalm 34 came to her mind: “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.”

“When a meal is shared, we are reminded that we are called to nourish one another,” Acevedo says. “The convening was a time to see and hear the good things that God is doing to strengthen the church. To get a taste of thriving ministries.”



AT A GLANCE

Thriving in Ministry Initiative

The Thriving in Ministry Initiative is a Lilly Endowment initiative designed to help organizations create or enhance programs that help Christian clergy thrive in their roles as pastoral leaders and, as a result, enhance the vitality of the congregations they serve.

Through three rounds of grantmaking in 2017, 2018 and 2020, the Endowment has awarded implementation grants to 129 charitable organizations that are committed to supporting the well-being of pastors. The organizations, which include seminaries, denominational agencies, congregations, faith-based colleges and universities, and other religious organizations, received grants ranging from \$31,500 to \$1 million to implement their programs. The grants totaled \$119,063,355.



Located in 35 states and the District of Columbia, the organizations represent 29 theological traditions, including mainline and evangelical Protestant, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian communities. The pastors they work with serve congregations of various settings in urban, suburban and rural communities. More than three dozen of the organizations have developed programs that are supporting pastors serving Black, Latino, Asian American, new immigrant and multi-ethnic congregations.

In addition, grants to Duke University support a coordination program that provides learning opportunities and other resources to organizations funded through Thriving in Ministry.

■ ■ ■ Miriam Acevedo (left) is vice president of City Seminary of New York.



A Prayer Entitled 'A Love Supreme'

When a quartet of the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra performed the music of John Coltrane at the National Museum of American History, it shared one of the most famous works in American jazz, "A Love Supreme."

Less well known is the inspiration for the 1964 composition: Coltrane's religious awakening. He wrote the piece as a prayer. The concert was one of several events held during a convening of Lilly Endowment's Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative in Washington, D.C. As Peter Manseau, the director of the museum's Center for the Understanding of Religion in American History, introduced the quartet, he encouraged colleagues from cultural institutions around the country to continue to be attentive to the unexpected and intriguing ways that religion shows up in their collections. (See story about the Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative on page 20.)

Smithsonian musicians Allyn Johnson, piano, Amy Shook, bass, Luis Hernandez, tenor saxophone, and Ken Kimery, drums, performed what scholars consider to be among the most important pieces of 20th century American music. Smithsonian archives contain many of Coltrane's manuscripts, including the original score for "A Love Supreme." For the concert, an image from that score was projected above the stage. Manseau directed the audience to Coltrane's handwritten instruction, including a description of how the bassist's final notes are intended to be the prayer's symbolic 'Amen.'

"The great opportunity and responsibility we have as cultural institutions engaged with religion is to explain it when it is obvious and reveal it when it is hidden," Manseau said. "To help our audiences see and hear and understand it in new ways, even when it is as subtle as a bass line under music."