



National Storytelling Initiative on Christian Faith and Life

REQUEST FOR CONCEPT PAPERS

2025

Lilly Endowment is pleased to announce its National Storytelling Initiative on Christian Faith and Life (Storytelling Initiative). The aim of the initiative is to unlock and tell compelling stories that portray the vibrancy and hope of Christian faith and life to inspire and help people from a wide variety of backgrounds to come to know and love God.

In this open and competitive initiative, the Endowment invites charitable organizations to submit concept papers that provide initial descriptions of potential projects that advance the following three objectives:

1. Identifying stories about Christian individuals, groups, churches and communities that are compelling examples of authentic and vibrant Christian faith and life.
2. Producing compelling stories about these examples of Christian faith and life in various media formats.
3. Sharing these stories through different media with a wide variety of people in a broad spectrum of contexts and from many different backgrounds.

The Endowment anticipates awarding grants that range **up to \$5 million each to up to 30 charitable organizations** to develop and implement high-quality storytelling projects that advance the initiative's aim.

The Storytelling Initiative will be conducted through a two-stage process:

Concept Papers: In the first stage, interested charitable organizations may submit concept papers that explain their interest in the initiative and provide initial descriptions of their potential projects. Concept papers must be submitted through the National Storytelling Initiative on Christian Faith and Life Online Application Form, which may be found on the Endowment's website. **Concept papers are due by February 24, 2025.**

The Endowment will review the concept papers and award **planning grants of up to \$50,000 each to up to 30 organizations** that submit the most promising descriptions of potential projects that will advance the Storytelling Initiative's aim and objectives. The planning grants are intended to assist organizations in developing their concepts and preparing proposals for implementation grants. The Endowment anticipates notifying organizations of planning grant awards in Spring 2025.

Implementation Grant Proposals: In the second stage, selected charitable organizations that received planning grants may submit proposals for implementation grants that range **up to \$5 million each that may be used for up to a five-year period** to execute their plans. **Implementation grant proposals are due by August 15, 2025.** The Endowment anticipates announcing implementation grant awards in December 2025.

Through the Storytelling Initiative, the Endowment anticipates awarding **grants totaling up to \$101 million** to charitable organizations to develop and launch projects that will identify, produce and share compelling stories about the vibrancy and hope of Christian faith and life.

A fuller discussion of the initiative, eligibility, application procedures, selection criteria, and guidelines for concept papers follows.

The Need for Compelling Stories About Christian Faith and Life

Illuminating the Vibrancy and Hope of Christian Faith and Life

Numerous Christian leaders have shared with Lilly Endowment inspiring stories about the vibrancy and hope they witness in the Christian communities and networks they serve. These leaders, including pastors, denominational executives, theological school faculty and administrators, researchers and other leaders of Christian organizations, give multiple accounts of churches that are nurturing the spiritual lives of children and youth, caring for the aging, reaching out and attending to the human needs of their neighbors, building bridges across political and social divides and promoting justice and reconciliation by working to address racial and social disparities in their communities. They talk about their encounters with dynamic and talented young adults who are drawing on the wisdom of their theological traditions to create and lead innovative efforts that help Christian communities understand and adapt their ministry practices to their changing contexts. And they describe the rapid growth of energetic and vibrant churches in their cities or regions that are serving immigrant communities, which are largely responsible for the increase in the number of congregations in those areas. These stories of vitality, the leaders say, fill them with hope for their communities and for the world around them.

At the same time, many of these Christian leaders acknowledge their mounting concerns about troubling trends in religious life in the United States. They worry about the increasing numbers of individuals who are disaffiliating from churches and the decreasing influence of religion in the lives of many people. They are particularly concerned by reports about individuals, especially young adults, who no longer feel that religious communities are relevant for nurturing their spiritual lives or for addressing their deep concerns about the well-being of their communities and the world. These leaders also worry that an increasing number of national media reports seem to disproportionately highlight these negative trends, fueling cynicism about the future of Christianity.

While these Christian leaders do not wish to deny the troubling trends facing Christianity or discount negative stories about religious life, they find that these accounts often overshadow fuller and more hopeful stories about what they see is actually happening in many Christian communities. These leaders believe that there is an urgent need to share stories that illuminate and make known the vitality of Christian faith and life that they witness in churches and communities every day.

The Practice of Christian Storytelling

For centuries, the practice of storytelling has been at the heart of Christianity. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus tells stories to teach his followers about God and God's love for them and to encourage them to love one another and their neighbors. Jesus also tells his followers to "let their light shine before others," so others may see their good works and come to know God (Matt 5:16). Many followers of Jesus Christ then and now share their faith with others through stories. By telling stories about Christian individuals, families and communities

that are examples of authentic and vibrant faith and life, they illuminate for others their love for God and hope for the world. Through storytelling, Christians also convey how their faith in Jesus Christ shapes their daily lives. Christians share their spiritual struggles with one another through stories about how they experience God's hope and grace in those times. They tell stories to inspire one another, as well as others, to engage in acts of love to serve their neighbors, work courageously for justice, and pursue healing and reconciliation in the world. Through storytelling, Christians, in the words of Jesus, let their light shine, illuminating their deepest beliefs about God and showing how their individual lives are part of God's larger story of grace and love embodied by Jesus Christ.

The practice of Christian storytelling has never been static. Throughout the centuries, Christians have adapted new media practices and storytelling formats to reach new generations. Medieval cathedrals in Europe, for example, used images in stained glass, etched walls and sculpted columns to tell biblical stories to a largely illiterate population. The invention of the printing press in the 15th century and its widespread usage expanded significantly opportunities for Christians to collect and share stories about their faith. In the early 20th century, religious leaders discovered how to use new technologies, such as the radio, to reach and share stories of faith with new audiences. Today, the rapid emergence and spread of social media and other digital platforms through which many individuals communicate and glean information about the world provide ever-expanding opportunities for Christian communities to engage and share stories about faith with young and old alike.

Many Christian leaders have noted that Christianity in the United States may be at another key inflection point. These leaders describe the need for a fresh wave of storytelling to share with multiple audiences compelling accounts about Christian faith and life to illuminate more brightly how Christian faith nurtures abundant life and to give testimony to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

What Makes Stories Compelling?

Media professionals and Christian leaders have discussed with the Endowment the characteristics of stories about Christian faith and life that would be compelling for multiple audiences today. These leaders agree that the stories should do the following: 1) portray the goodness and hope of Christian faith and life, 2) "tell by showing" examples of Christian individuals, families and communities that are living inspiring lives of faith, 3) be honest and truthful, and 4) reflect the lives of real people and real communities in their local contexts rather than fictionalized or idealized portraits of Christian faith and life. Additionally, media professionals and Christian leaders affirm that regardless of the medium through which stories are shared - music, film, written word, visual arts, etc. - stories are most compelling when they convey the deep relational character of Christian faith and show the vitality in communities formed by those living Christian convictions every day.

Media professionals note that different audiences are drawn to diverse kinds of stories and rely on a variety of media sources to gather information and communicate with others. They stress the importance of conducting research about the interests of particular audiences, the listening, viewing, reading and downloading habits of these audiences and learning what they find compelling before producing stories that try to reach them. In other words, effective Christian storytelling should begin with a serious exploration of who will receive the stories and the kinds of media spaces they inhabit. In the current media environment, they say, organizations must be strategic and media savvy about their intended audiences to share their stories beyond their known constituencies.

The media professionals and Christian leaders also point toward the importance of telling stories through a variety of formats, including in-person experiences, print and digital publications, videos, social media and podcasts. At the same time, they maintain that the compelling nature of Christian stories and Christian people is best captured “on the ground,” especially when focused on the daily practices and routines of Christian life. As one leader said: “Compelling narratives are often grounded in the invisible and unnoticed daily acts of love, grace, beauty, justice and truth of many faithful disciples.”

Guiding Questions for a New Wave of Storytelling

Through the Storytelling Initiative, the Endowment seeks to support organizations to plan, develop and implement projects that will generate a new wave of Christian storytelling and balance negative public narratives about religious life by unlocking and telling compelling stories that portray the vibrancy and hope of Christian faith and life. The Endowment hopes to support efforts undertaken by a wide variety of organizations representing a broad spectrum of theological traditions to engage in this work.

The Endowment is especially interested in supporting organizations that propose concepts for projects that advance the aim and objectives of the initiative and respond to the following **guiding questions**:

- **Illuminating the vibrancy and hope in Christian faith and life:** Where are signs of Christian vitality and hope today? Where does the organization see Christians engaged in acts of care for one another, service to their neighbors and love of God? What stories about individuals, groups, churches and communities in the organization’s networks portray and illuminate authentic and vibrant Christian faith and life?
- **Identifying potential audiences:** Who does the organization hope will hear or see these compelling stories about Christian faith and life? What are the audiences in the organization’s current networks? What audiences beyond these networks does the organization hope to reach with these stories? Why is it important to share compelling stories with these specific audiences?
- **Knowing your audiences:** How do the organization’s intended audiences receive information about the world? Where do they encounter stories? What kinds of stories do these audiences find compelling and why? How will the organization get to know its intended audiences?
- **Producing and sharing stories:** How will the organization identify, produce and share compelling stories with its intended audiences? What types of genres, formats and media will reach them? How will the stories help people who encounter them come to know and love God? What are the organization’s current capacities for sharing stories with these audiences? Who are the storytellers in the organization’s networks? What capacities would the organization need to develop or enhance? What does the organization hope to accomplish by producing and sharing compelling stories with intended audiences?

Although each organization is encouraged to design a project that advances the initiative’s aim and objectives and makes sense for its mission and constituents, the Endowment anticipates that most organizations may propose concepts for projects that would include one or more of the types of activities listed below. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, nor should it limit the organization’s creativity.

- Video storytelling: Producing long and short video stories and video series to share through various formats (e.g., streaming platforms, social media, etc.).

- Storytelling campaigns: Organizing and promoting storytelling campaigns to collect and share stories through in-person events and various media.
- Stories published in national, regional and/or local publications: Working with writers, photographers, and other journalists to produce stories for online and/or print publications (e.g., magazines, newspapers, etc.).
- Local storytelling festivals: Organizing and hosting storytelling festivals and other in-person events with platforms to share stories beyond the events.
- Storytelling through visual arts: Engaging artists in various genres to produce visual works that tell compelling stories (e.g., illustration, murals, painting, glassworks, etc.).
- Documentary films: Producing feature-length films about examples of compelling Christian faith and life (e.g., featuring a particular locale, the life of an individual who has had an impact, an exemplary congregation, etc.).
- Podcasts and radio: Engaging podcasters and radio producers to share stories (e.g., storytelling podcasts, interview formats, etc.).
- Social media campaigns: Developing storytelling campaigns for various social media (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Meta Reels, etc.).
- Local storytellers: Identifying, training and supporting local storytellers to craft compelling stories that will be curated and shared, including young adult storytellers.

In sum, through the Storytelling Initiative, the Endowment seeks to support charitable organizations in developing projects that will identify, produce and share compelling stories that portray the vibrancy and hope of Christian faith and life. These efforts will inspire and help more people discover and embrace God's love and promise of new life through Jesus Christ, feel hope for themselves and for others, find ways to express their faith more fully by serving their neighbors near and far, and experience a sense of belonging through participation in a Christian church or community shaped by Christian love.

Eligibility, Application Procedures and Selection Criteria

Charitable organizations located in the United States that are tax-exempt public charities under Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3) and corresponding statutes and that have a demonstrated interest in Christian faith and life are eligible to apply for grants through the Storytelling Initiative.

The Endowment seeks to support organizations from a broad spectrum of theological traditions and in different ministry contexts that demonstrate the capacity, readiness and commitment to develop and implement Christian storytelling projects that advance the aim and objectives of the initiative. The Endowment is especially interested in supporting projects that share with a wide variety of audiences compelling Christian stories and that portray the characteristics described in the "What Makes Stories Compelling" section above.

Eligible charitable organizations may apply for grants in the Storytelling Initiative through a two-stage process.

Concept Papers: In the first stage, organizations may submit concept papers for projects featuring a variety of approaches to Christian storytelling that would require implementation grants from the Endowment that range **up to \$5 million** to develop and execute during a grant period of **up to five years**. Please note that organizations may submit concept papers for larger projects that, in addition to a potential implementation

grant from the Endowment, would require funding from other sources. In their concept papers, organizations should identify sources and estimate the amount of these other funds as much as possible. Those organizations selected to prepare an implementation grant proposal in the second stage of this initiative will be required to confirm the sources of these other funds and include them in their project budgets. Note also that there is no minimum amount for implementation grants. Organizations may submit concept papers for smaller projects that are appropriate for their organizational capacities and would require smaller implementation grants to execute.

Concept papers will be evaluated on the quality and promise of the proposed projects, not on the projected amount of the proposed implementation grant. Thus, the estimated size of an implementation grant needed to develop and execute the organization's proposed concept will not advantage or disadvantage its opportunity to receive a grant. Organizations should propose concepts for projects that they have the capacity to execute well and, if relevant, sustain beyond the implementation grant period.

Selection criteria for concept papers will include the following considerations:

- The extent to which the organization's rationale for developing a storytelling project is compelling, creative and shows promise to advance the initiative's primary aim and objectives.
- The extent to which the proposed concept considers and responds to the guiding questions stated above.
- The extent of the concept's potential to effectively reach its targeted audiences and, if applicable, wider audiences from a variety of contexts and backgrounds.
- The extent to which developing the concept into a high-quality storytelling project is feasible.
- The extent of the organization's commitment and capacity to execute and, if appropriate, sustain a high-quality storytelling project.

After reviewing the concept papers, the Endowment anticipates awarding **planning grants of up to \$50,000 each to up to 30 organizations** that submit the most promising concepts to assist them in developing their concepts and preparing implementation grant proposals.

Implementation Grant Proposals: In the second stage, selected organizations that received planning grants may submit proposals for **implementation grants that range up to \$5 million each that may be used for up to a five-year period** to execute their plans. Although the Endowment hopes that all selected organizations submit strong implementation grant proposals and receive funding, the awarding of implementation grants to selected organizations is not guaranteed and is at the complete discretion of the Endowment. The Endowment intends to award implementation grants only to organizations that submit compelling proposals that present high-quality projects that will advance the initiative's aim and demonstrate the organization's capacities to execute such projects.

Guidelines for Concept Papers

Complete concept papers must be submitted through the National Storytelling Initiative on Christian Faith and Life Online Application Form and must include the following components:

Official Request Letter: This **one-page** letter must be signed by the organization's chief executive officer.

Concept Paper Information Form: This form provides key information about the concept paper and identifies the individuals responsible for the planning activities. *This form is available in the resources section at the bottom of initiative's page of the Endowment's website.*

Summary Statement: This brief summary (**no more than one page**) should describe the organization's concept and what the organization hopes to accomplish if the concept is implemented.

Concept Paper Narrative: This narrative must be **no more than five pages** and should be written in 12-point font, single spaced with one-inch margins. In the narrative, organizations should do the following:

- **Organizational Profile:** Provide a brief description of the organization, including its mission, history, major programs and annual operating budget. What is the organization's experience with media, communications and storytelling? What are the organization's current capacities and resources for executing a high-quality storytelling project? What capacities would need to be developed, and if developed, how will these capacities be sustained, if needed?
- **Rationale:** Explain the organization's rationale for developing a Christian storytelling project and why it is important for the organization to undertake the project. Who are the audiences the organization intends to reach through the project? Why does the organization want to reach these audiences with compelling Christian stories? What does the organization know about how the intended audiences encounter stories and the kinds of stories the audiences find compelling?
- **Concept:** Describe the organization's concept for its Christian storytelling project, including potential stories, possible key activities and strategies, potential collaborators, and the methods, media and formats the organization will employ to produce and share compelling stories with its intended audiences. How does the concept advance the aim and objectives of the Storytelling Initiative? What are the anticipated outcomes for the project? How does the organization's concept for a storytelling project draw on the organization's theological tradition and align with its mission?
- **Funding Level:** Provide the estimated costs to implement the proposed concept and indicate the level of funding the organization would seek from the Endowment if invited to submit an implementation grant proposal. Why is this level of funding appropriate for the project and the organization? (The Endowment understands that these costs are preliminary estimates and may increase or decrease during a planning period.) What, if any, other funders does the organization expect to support the proposed concept's implementation and what are estimates of the amounts of any such support?
- **Planning Grant Activities:** In the event that the organization is selected for a planning grant to prepare an implementation grant proposal in the second stage of this initiative, describe the activities the organization would undertake to develop the concept (e.g., research, hiring consultants, engaging in other activities to help develop the concepts and prepare implementation grant proposals, etc.).

Planning Grant Budget: This is a budget of **up to \$50,000** for projected planning expenses during a potential planning period. Note that planning grant funds may be used for up to one year. See the Guide to Planning Grant Budget Preparation section below for the required format.

Letters of Support (optional): Organizations may include up to three brief letters of support from partners and/or potential collaborators. These letters should note the anticipated role of potential collaborators in the implementation of the proposed concepts and their intention and capacity to undertake this role. Note that if an organization is invited to submit an implementation grant proposal in the second stage of this initiative, updated letters of support/endorsement will be required.

Copy of Organization's Audited Annual Financial Statements: This is a copy of the organization's most recently completed audited annual financial statements (reviewed by a certified public accounting firm). The financial statements should include a balance sheet, income and expense statement, and any footnotes or supporting schedules that provide an accurate assessment of the financial condition of the organization.

Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form: This form is used to verify the organization's tax status as a qualified recipient of grants from private foundations such as Lilly Endowment. Please check a box in Section 3 of the form to reflect the organization's status. The organization's status may be located on an Internal Revenue Service exempt status determination letter, as indicated in Section 2 of the form and as described below. *This form is available in the resources section at the bottom of the National Storytelling Initiative on Christian Faith and Life page on the Endowment's website.*

Copy of Internal Revenue Service Exempt Status Determination Letter: Most public charities that are qualified recipients for grants from private foundations will have received a tax-exempt status determination letter from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). This letter provides verification of the organization's status as a tax-exempt entity described in Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3) and indicates the part of the tax code under which the organization's public charity status has been established. Many denominationally related organizations may not have asked for or received such a letter from the IRS. If that is the case, the organization should determine whether it is listed in a group exemption ruling for the denomination. If so, the organization should attach evidence that it is covered by the ruling (for example, by sending copies of the directory cover and the page on which the organization is listed in the official directory of the denomination). No grants will be awarded until the proper tax status is confirmed.

Concept Papers Submission Instructions and Checklist

Concept papers are due **February 24, 2025** and must be submitted through the National Storytelling Initiative on Christian Faith and Life Online Application Form on the [initiative's webpage](#). Concept papers and supporting documents must be uploaded as a single PDF file in the order listed below:

- Official Request Letter - (one page)
- Concept Paper Information Form - (on the Endowment's website)
- Summary Statement - (no more than one page)
- Concept Paper Narrative - (no more than five pages)
- Planning Grant Budget - (up to \$50,000)
- Letters of Support (optional) - (up to three)
- Copy of Organization's Audited Annual Financial Statements
- Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form - (on the Endowment's website)
- Copy of IRS Exempt Status Determination Letter - (sample on the Endowment's website)

Information Sessions: The Endowment will host two virtual information sessions to discuss the Storytelling Initiative's guidelines for submission of concept papers. Organizations wishing to participate in one of these sessions (dates and times listed below) must register via the [Endowment's website](#).

- Thursday, January 16, 2025, at 2 p.m. (ET)
- Thursday, January 23, 2025, at 2 p.m. (ET)

Please email any questions about this initiative to storytelling@lei.org.

Guide to Planning Budget Preparation

Concept paper submissions should include a brief **one-page** Line Item Budget and Budget Narrative for a planning grant. The Line Item Budget should specify how the planning grant funds would be used for the activities described in the concept paper during the planning period. The Budget Narrative should provide a short narrative for each line item included in the Budget that describes how specific budget lines will be used.

Line Item Budget: This budget should list all the appropriate accounts where money will be spent (e.g., personnel, consultants, etc.) and the anticipated costs of the project in each of these accounts.

A sample budget can be found below. The line items outlined in the sample budget indicate items commonly found in budgets for planning grants, but the organization's budget may be different. Likewise, the sample budget does not indicate recommended amounts for particular line items.

Indirect costs may be included in the budget and should be calculated at up to 10 percent of the subtotal of direct costs.

Use whole dollar amounts in creating the budget.

Lilly Endowment recommends working closely with those responsible for accounting procedures and financial policies in the organization to create a budget that aligns with those procedures and policies.

Budget Narrative: This narrative should accompany the proposal and include a brief written explanation of how the costs were calculated for each line item in the budget.

Please direct questions to storytelling@lei.org.

Budget Sample For Planning Grant

Legal name of organization

National Storytelling Initiative on Christian Faith and Life Planning Grant Budget 2025

EXAMPLE EXPENSES:

AMOUNT:

Personnel

Director (part time)	\$15,000
Administrative Asst. (part time)	6,000
	<hr/>
	\$21,000

Administrative Costs

Office supplies and postage	\$6,000
Printing	500
	<hr/>
	\$6,500

Consulting

Planning consultants	\$7,500
Stakeholder gatherings	1,650
	<hr/>
	\$9,150

Survey/Study

Mapping potential stories	\$5,000
Surveying network partners	3,000
	<hr/>
	\$8,000

Subtotal Direct Costs

\$44,650

Indirect Costs (up to 10 percent of Subtotal Direct Costs)

\$4,465

TOTAL EXPENSES (up to \$50,000)

\$49,115

NOTE: *These budget categories and line items are used for illustrative purposes only. They do not include all the types of items the Endowment may fund. If the project involves other expenses the organization wishes the Endowment to consider, please include those items in the budget. Please do not include line items from this budget sample if they do not apply.*