

On Our Way: The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Initiative

“On Our Way: Living into God’s Future”

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The theme of our conference is “On Our Way: Living into God’s Future.” Much of what we will do over the next couple of days will be focused on that future and on what living into it may mean, and may call us all to do and to become in the months and years ahead. But my charge this afternoon is to help us reflect a bit on the journey we have already taken and to think about how far we have already come.

In late 2001 (almost a decade ago now), Lilly Endowment sent out a Request for Proposals announcing its new SPE grants initiative. Our invitation went out broadly. We welcomed applications from any “public charity in the United States that believes it is prepared to establish or enhance projects aimed at providing Christian pastors with opportunities to sustain excellence in pastoral ministry.” We noted that “qualified organizations [might] range from colleges to theological schools, from denominational judicatories to church conference centers and ministry development centers, and from congregations to nonprofit organizations with an interest in ministry.” It was the widest ranging invitation we had ever extended. As a result, we received the largest number of proposals we have ever received in any one grants initiative -- a total of 731.

Ultimately, the Endowment made SPE grants to 63 of the organizations that applied -- and over the course of the past eight or nine years, through your good work, more than 48,000 pastoral leaders have taken part in an SPE-sponsored program, and more than 16,000 pastoral leaders have participated in pastoral peer groups that you have hosted and sponsored. These pastoral leaders serve more than 36,000 congregations, at least 10 percent of all the congregations nationwide.

You have served these pastoral leaders and their congregations exceedingly well. You have read about that in Holly G. Miller’s splendid [Progress Report](#) on this initiative. You can see evidence of it in the stories included in the “Project Updates” that are in our event spiral. You will see it portrayed visually in a lovely video about this initiative that we will watch at our first plenary session tomorrow morning. And you will hear about it -- and learn a great more about it -- as we all listen to and converse with one another throughout the next two days. But above all, I know that each of you can see it most vividly in the lives of the particular pastoral leaders and congregations each of you has so ably served in and through your own programs.

I personally am profoundly impressed and deeply moved by what you have done. None of us at Lilly Endowment could possibly have imagined the incredibly wide and deep impact you have had on the lives, the well-being, the encouragement, and the strengthening of the ministries of so many thousands of pastoral leaders across this land.

Why Did Lilly Endowment Launch This Initiative?

Why did Lilly Endowment launch this initiative in the first place? And what were our hopes for it?

Let me tell you a story. One morning in the summer of 1994 -- after I had been at Lilly Endowment for about five years -- the president and the chairman of our board at that time called me into their offices and presented me with a challenge. They informed me that they anticipated the Endowment's assets to increase significantly over the next several years, and that they hoped that, with our additional grant-making capacities, we could find ways to bring the Endowment's resources closer to the actual life and work of the local congregation and to the everyday lives of Christian people.

In response to the mandate given to us, we in the Religion Division reconceived our fundamental mission and significantly reshaped our grant-making program. In the process of articulating our mission, we asked ourselves first of all what we most profoundly hope for in the everyday lives of ordinary people of faith. We answer that question in our public documents by saying that "our fundamental mission is to deepen and enrich the religious lives of American Christians, primarily by helping to strengthen Christian churches in the United States." That is a true statement. But our fulsome answer is more richly theological in character. What we really hope for people of faith (and, indeed, for all people) is the gift of life abundant, a *kind* of life and a *way* of life given by God, received in gratitude, and lived out in vocation as a response to God's calling.

What we most profoundly hope for for human beings is what the gospel claims, and promises, and calls forth from us. The great good news is that God is love and the giver of life. The gift of life -- and, indeed, of life abundant -- is given by God in creation itself, and it is restored and renewed for all humanity in Jesus Christ. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," says Jesus (John 10:10). The call to each of us -- as persons and communities of faith -- is to recognize and receive that gift; to respond to it by learning to live ever more deeply into the *way* of life that God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit provides; and to share it with everyone, so that, as the Apostle Paul says, they (and we) may "take hold of the life that really is life" (1 Tim. 6:19). That is our most fundamental vocation or calling as human beings -- to receive and respond to God's great gift of abundant life for all.

What do we hope for in the everyday lives of ordinary Christians? We hope for "abundant life" for them. We hope that they may come to discover that there is indeed a way of life that truly is life-giving. We hope that they themselves may come to live into it -- joyously, hopefully, actively, generously. And we hope that, by the way they live in the context of their own specific life commitments and through the particular work they do and the service they render, they will

extend that gift and call deeply into the world, so that ultimately all may receive the gift of life that God provides.

In addition to stating our hopes, our Religion Division mission statement also indicates that we will engage in our work primarily by helping to strengthen Christian churches in the U.S. For us, this has meant a primary focus on *local congregations* and on *enhancing the quality of pastoral ministry*. Our decision to focus here is based on two fundamental convictions.

First, we believe deeply in the importance and significance of the local congregation. Congregations are the places where most Christians encounter, in deep and sustained ways, the good news of the gospel and, in communion with one another, respond in faith and in the practice of the Christian life. It is the place where children, youth, and adults across generations participate with one another in worship and study, and find ways to care for one another and for the needs of the world. It is a crucial context in which, both individually and corporately, large numbers of people come to have a sense of vocation, and find guidance along the way in their discernment and support for its embodiment in their lives.

Second, we believe that excellent pastoral leadership is key to fostering and sustaining thriving congregations. If Christian people are truly to hear the Good News and to live faithfully in response, they need pastors who know the Christian gospel in their own heart of hearts, who are well-equipped to teach it and preach it, and who are able effectively to help shape the corporate life and ministry of the congregation into a vital community of faith. Some congregations can survive weak pastoral leadership for a while -- but not for long. And we know that really fine pastors are indispensable to the long-term thriving not only of any particular congregation, but also of the large, broad, interconnected community of faith as a whole.

At the very heart of our own mission as a philanthropic institution, then, there lies a kind of “theo-logic” that runs like this:

- the life-giving grace of God is given for the sake of the world;
- by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is born and brought into continuing life as the body of Christ, gathered in communities of faith organized, in significant part, in the form of local congregations;
- Christ’s church was from the beginning -- and will always continue to be -- guided by, cared for, ministered to, and led by pastoral leaders possessing a great variety of gifts;
- these are people whose own vitality, faithfulness, skill, and imagination have always needed to be nurtured and sustained in communion and community with one another and with the whole church.

That, from our point of view, was and is the point and purpose of “sustaining pastoral excellence” -- and the reason for launching the SPE Initiative.

A Collaborative Inquiry

From the beginning, we understood SPE to be a kind of “collaborative inquiry.” We had a set of core convictions, but this basic set of convictions and the logic that links them begs a lot of questions, such as:

- What does, in fact, constitute “excellence” in pastoral ministry, Christianly understood?
- What opportunities and experiences are most helpful to pastoral leaders in sustaining excellence in their ministries throughout a lifetime of faithful service?
- What organizations and institutions are best positioned to support pastoral leaders well and to implement programs that will provide them with opportunities essential for maintaining healthy and vital ministries?

These, we said in our initial Request for Proposals, are the questions that lie at the heart of this grants program. And we have never considered them to be merely rhetorical.

We understood these to be real questions -- questions to which we at Lilly Endowment, at least, did not have preconceived answers. Indeed, we expected from the outset that there would likely be a lot of good and diverse answers to all of these questions -- both in thought and in practice. And we hoped that our grants would provide a significant variety of institutions -- from many denominations and contexts -- with a long, deep, intensive opportunity to ask and address these questions in fresh and powerful new ways -- again, not only intellectually but, more importantly, through the creation of and experimentation with dynamic and sustainable new efforts.

To that end, we hoped not only to enable our grantees to create new programs. We also hoped to foster among you a climate of mutual collaborative inquiry, debate, reflective practice, and shared learning. So, we asked Duke Divinity School to launch an SPE Coordination Program; to convene us periodically for conferences, peer working groups and consultations; to establish a website to which a steady stream of relevant writings and reflections could be posted and widely shared; and to make small grants so that various ones of you could gather in smaller denominational or regional groups to collaborate in ways that you yourselves might design and find most fruitful. We commissioned several studies, including those published by Duke’s Pulpit & Pew Project. (Jack Carroll’s book, “God’s Potters” and Greg Jones and Kevin Armstrong’s “Resurrecting Excellence” are two especially important resources emerging from that project.) Now we have the results of the study of SPE peer groups around which Penny Long Marler, Janet Maykus, and others of you have been collaborating and that will soon be expanded into a book. Most important, many of you have written and published marvelous new resources stemming from your own thought and practice. In addition, of course, we have encouraged you to engage in ongoing “learning from your own work” through careful and systematic evaluation, as well as in efforts to garner and compose for public telling the great stories that are emerging in the lives of those whom you are touching.

This hard work is proving to be of lasting significance. It has everything to do with how you are shaping and re-shaping your programs. And it has provided the enduring substantive ballast that has given the language of ‘sustaining pastoral excellence’ real meaning in your faith communities and has infused the conversation about pastoral ministry in our time.

With substantive intellectual grounding in hand, you have continued to make enormous progress in working out living answers to all the core questions -- answers that have drawn deeply on the resources of your own theological and ecclesial traditions; answers that make sense in your particular contemporary contexts; answers that advance your specific institutional identity and mission.

Over the course of the next two days, I encourage all of you to remember these questions and to listen for the various embodied as well as explicated answers given to them. Listen for more than only the stories people tell about what they have done. Listen as well for *why* they have done what they have done -- and for why they have done it in the particular way that they have. Listen between the lines for what they believe or assume the good news of the gospel is. Listen for the assumptions they have about why congregations matter, about what kinds of communities they are called to be, and about what they therefore need to be able to do -- and to do well. Listen for what they have to say about the work of pastoral ministry. What is that core work? When it’s done well, what does it look like and why does it matter? Listen for what they presuppose or have to say about pastors’ lives, loves, fears and joys. Find out what they believe most profoundly feeds, heals, nurtures, empowers, energizes, sustains and consoles them.

Listen carefully. And then compare. The answers will have a lot in common, but they will also be different from one another -- in ways both large and small. There will be wonderful, distinctive nuances that never occurred to you before. Attend to them all carefully. Enjoy their beauty. Give thanks to God for them. Be fed by them. Let these gifts do their own quiet work in you. Grow through them. Allow yourself to be changed by them.

Places of Blessing/Habitations of the Spirit

The theme of our conference, again, is “On Our Way: Living into God’s Future.” And that indeed is what we have been doing. Over the course of the last 10 years, we have come a long way. Things are different with us now than they were before. We can all feel it. We can all see it. But this journey has a different feel to it than do both the literal and figurative road trips we typically take in our half-crazed, frenetically driven society. The journey we have been on is not the kind for which there is a specific, known destination. It is not the kind for which there is a clear itinerary that can be mapped out in advance and guided by our GPS navigation systems. It is not the kind of journey we can take and be done with quickly, so we can go on to something else. No, as it has turned out, this journey has more of a pre-modern feel to it. We are embarked on a journey that is better described in biblical terms.

The orienting text for our conference this week is Psalm 23. Listen to it.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff --
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

It seems quite clear to me that because of your provision, a great many pastors have themselves actually experienced in quite powerful ways what this beautiful psalm describes. They have "laid down in green pastures." They have walked "beside still waters." They have been directed in "right paths." And they have been comforted. Tables rich in good food have been prepared for them -- and many have come to these tables feeling besieged by enemies that seemed to surround them from without or that battled fiercely within them. You have in many cases literally anointed their heads with oil, making the sign of the cross upon their foreheads and praying for them quietly as you did. They have drunk deeply of the cups you have set before them -- sometimes a little bourbon, occasionally a beer or two -- but with considerable frequency and deep meaning, it has been the Eucharistic cup of blessing that you have given them to drink most deeply of.

As a result, these pastoral leaders now know something -- something that, in the intensity of obligation, demand, sorrow, or frustration that inevitably comes with the actual practice of pastoral ministry -- they may have forgotten or come no longer to believe. But they now know the most important thing there is to know -- namely, that God's own deep faithfulness, goodness, and mercy shall follow them all the days of their lives, and that, even though they may walk in very dark valleys, they nonetheless dwell in the house of the Lord, and will continue to do so their whole lives long.

Look carefully again at John August Swanson's powerful, beautiful serigraph. Look first into the forest, which with its "deep shadows and darkness, is a place filled with hidden sights and creatures." Look up into the night sky and take in the luminescent glow of a billion stars helping to guide the travelers who are taking a journey along the path through the valley. Look

at the two travelers themselves, whom Swanson says are “moving forward barefoot and without fear” (quotations from Swanson’s website: www.johnaugustswanson.org).

As I reflect on this psalm and Swanson’s serigraph in relation to what has actually happened in and through your programs over the past decade, I have come to a fresh insight into what you have done and the ways in which you have done it. In the psalm -- and, indeed, throughout the whole of the Bible -- the themes of journey and of place intermingle and interweave. But ultimately, place has priority. Before the journey, God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. Before the journey, God created human beings and placed them in a Garden -- a place both beautiful and good, and abundant in all that the human beings and every other creature and thing would ever need. In the beginning was the place.

Before the journey, there is and was and always will be the place -- the place where God dwells, the place where the light shines, the place where life lives -- richly, fully, abundantly. And that place is right here -- in our place, in our time, and in every time. The place where we actually live is a place ever and always shot through with the presence of God, the love of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

What I now believe has been happening over the course of the last 10 years is that you have remembered that place. And you have recognized that this place, where we live right now, is and will always be a place where the Holy Spirit dwells. In that remembrance and recognition, you have created rare and quite special places of blessing, in which that remembrance and recognition can be felt and tasted afresh by the pastoral leaders you are welcoming and so beautifully serving.

You have created habitations of the Spirit, which, in their structuring, substance and dynamics, have drawn on the deepest and best resources of the Christian tradition: its Scriptures, its sacraments, its fundamental practices, its wisdom -- and, above all, its source and ground, the living Triune God. Every one of you has created such places -- each time drawing on and bringing to bear the fruits of the Spirit that mark the way of life abundant. In and because of these rare and special places, thousands of pastoral leaders are finding their way into a new, more abundant, more life-giving way of life -- and thereby into fresher, stronger, more life-giving ways of being ministers and leaders in their congregations.

On Our Way

A meeting was held here in Indianapolis almost exactly a year ago today, at which project leaders gathered to identify the collective wisdom that has been emerging from the SPE initiative as a whole. In the course of our conversations, someone said that one major consequence of this work has been that a new narrative about ministry is coming into being.

Almost immediately, there was a broad consensus that this is true. Most everyone, it seemed, agreed that old narratives about the irrelevance of ministry in our society, about mediocrity in ministry, about ineffectiveness in ministry, and about the loneliness and isolation of ministry are increasingly being replaced by a new narrative -- one that:

- celebrates the deep substance and intricate inter-weaving of the core work of pastoral ministry and leadership;
- one that relishes the ways in which the demanding intellectual and spiritual challenges involved in the work of pastoral ministry call forth and strengthen pastoral leaders' own best gifts;
- one that expresses gratitude for the ways in which the vocation of Christian ministry draws pastoral leaders themselves ever more deeply into the core practices of Christian faith and life;
- one that recognizes the real impacts that good ministry actually makes in the lives of individuals, families, congregations and, indeed, whole communities;
- one that gives thanks for the true companionship and community of shared practice one can now find among pastoral peers in the context of ministry;
- one that celebrates the deep and lasting joys of ministry, even in the midst of its inevitable trials and disappointments.

When a new narrative becomes prevalent in the language of a community, we can be sure that something very significant is going on. A new narrative is both a *sign* of important changes already taking place and a *harbinger* of still deeper and broader changes yet to come. A fundamental narrative shift is a sign and harbinger of *cultural* change of real significance.

We all know that what really forms, shapes, and educates us as persons and as communities is the character, quality, substance, and spirit of the effective environment in which we dwell. What shapes our lives most powerfully is the culture in which we live. Thus, what we need if pastoral excellence really is to be sustained, is not only good programs -- but larger *environments*, broad *landscapes*, effective *cultures* of pastoral excellence. And, indeed, it may well be that that is where we are headed. It may well be that what started out as a collection of new *programs* for sustaining pastoral excellence has already begun infusing larger *environments for* -- and fostering a new *culture of* -- sustaining pastoral excellence.

If, indeed, this is the direction in which we are headed -- and the future into which God is calling us -- then we need to figure out how we might best respond. So let me close by suggesting several opportunities and responsibilities that I believe we should take quite seriously over the next several years.

First, we should do everything we can to secure and sustain the wonderful places of blessing and habitations of the Spirit that you have already created. This will require: that you get clearer and clearer in your own minds what it is that gives the place you have created its character and power ; that you keep learning systematically from your own work, so you can continually improve what you are doing and adapt it to new circumstances; and that you secure

the ongoing organizational leadership and financial resources that will be needed in the coming years.

Second, the new narrative needs to spread widely and be communicated compellingly. Each of you can play an important role in this by telling vividly the story of the particular place of blessing you have created and of its consequences in the lives of pastoral leaders, in their congregations, in your own institution, and in the larger context which you affect and influence. Use every means you can to get the story out, so more and more people can hear it, catch it, seek it, and begin to tell it themselves.

Third, a great deal of work needs to be done to help others create their own new contexts for cultivating and sustaining pastoral excellence. We already see this happening as many of the core ideas, convictions, and programmatic strategies developed by your SPE projects are increasingly being built into parts of larger institutional structures. Many of you are playing key advocacy, coaching and leadership roles in regional and national denominational organizations, in theological schools and in many other institutions that seek the well-being of pastoral leaders and congregations. As more and more of you write essays, create new educational resources, and produce guides that others can use to create habitations of the Spirit of this kind in their institutions and organizations, the more likely it will be that this movement will grow.

Finally, as I believe most of you know, the SPE program is one of several initiatives Lilly Endowment has launched to encourage and support excellence in ministry in and among Christian congregations. In addition to initiatives designed to help sustain pastoral excellence among pastoral leaders already serving congregations, the Endowment also launched several programs and initiatives that seek to identify, encourage, support, and call forth into pastoral ministry a new generation of faithful, gifted, and energetic young people.

This new generation of current and future pastors is a source of great hope and joy. They are people of faith and conviction, people who bear great and wonderful gifts for the life of Christ's church. But these are not easy times to be entering pastoral ministry. Significant changes in the costs and funding of theological education in recent decades have radically increased the debt loads carried by most seminary graduates. We all know that the economics of local congregations and of pastoral ministry are daunting. We also know that, as they prepare for and seek positions in pastoral ministry, too many new pastors are getting caught in conflicted and poorly functioning patterns of deliberation and action that have to do with candidacy and placement.

So, here we are. A younger generation of pastoral leaders is coming in our direction and is increasingly present amongst us. For them, the conditions are not as good as they need to be for nurturing and sustaining pastoral excellence. And yet, we have this gift! We ourselves have become a community of increasingly competent shared practice in the art of sustaining pastoral excellence. Can we find ways to become companions in pastoral ministry with the young adults who will be Christ's ministers for the next several decades? Can we extend to them both the wisdom and the hospitality that we have learned through our own practice over the course of the last decade? Can we, over time, become conversation partners and collaborators with the people and institutions that are now working hard to notice, name and nurture the new generation? And

can we establish within our own institutions the kinds of structures that help to nurture and sustain pastoral excellence across generations? Can we all together grow into a larger ecology of institutions that knows how to nurture and sustain pastoral and congregational excellence for the sake of Christ's ministry in the life of the world?

We will not be able to take up all these matters during our time together here. But these are opportunities, responsibilities, and questions that I believe are on the near horizon as we move forward "on our way" -- and I know many of you are thinking about and addressing them already.

A Final Blessing

In Holly G. Miller's *Progress Report*, I made a comment that we at Lilly Endowment "never stipulated a definition of pastoral excellence. We understand that 'excellence' is better described or portrayed than defined or measured. As with 'beauty,' we know it when we see it -- at least if we have 'eyes to see.' And it truly is a beautiful thing to see really good pastoral leaders at work. We know too that 'there are a variety of gifts' and that pastoral excellence comes in many forms." The gifts of excellence that God provides call forth from us a response, and we are all eager to respond faithfully and well. That is why we invited all of you to follow the Apostle Paul's advice to "think on these things" -- on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable -- on "any excellence," on "anything worthy of praise."

We have long hoped that attention to a rich, compelling, faithful vision of excellence in pastoral ministry -- shaped by the deepest and best resources of the Christian faith itself -- might be an important resource for all of you, for the pastoral leaders whom you serve, and for their congregations. We can see that it has been. And for this we are deeply grateful.

I pray for God's blessing on our conversation these next few days. Far more, I pray that God's own deep and abiding love, grace, and mercy will sustain all of you in your profoundly significant ministries for the church and for the world.