

## **Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Event Evaluation Report**

for

### **“On Our Way: Living into God’s Future” May 11–13, 2011**

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#### **I. Introduction**

“On Our Way: Living into God’s Future” was a capstone event for Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, a ten-year program of Lilly Endowment Inc. The event provided the opportunity for SPE project leadership, a team each of their chosen stakeholders, as well as Endowment invited guests, to ask again the orienting questions, such as: What sustains pastoral excellence? Participants shared with regard to how we have come to think about these questions and what difference our efforts have made, as we celebrated the work that has been done and prepared to live into God’s future. The event included plenary sessions, worship, breakout sessions, an evening of celebration and music, and time for informal conversation and fellowship.

The event was held May 11–13, 2011 at the Marriott Indianapolis Downtown. Almost 250 people attended the event, including 43 project directors, 132 project guests, 46 Endowment guests, 5 speakers, and 17 Endowment and Leadership Education at Duke Divinity staff.

The intended outcomes were for participants to be able to:

- Experience the breadth, depth, and impact of work in SPE.
- Reconnect to the vision and narrative of pastoral excellence.
- Share their wisdom and learn by listening to others.
- Broaden their energy, vision, and imagination through the presence and participation of stakeholders and other invited guests.
- Celebrate the work and commit to ongoing conversation, peer support, and excellence in ministry.

Participants were given the opportunity to complete an event evaluation survey. Of the 226 non-staff participants, 104 completed the survey. Responses were grouped by role into three categories: project directors, project guests, and Endowment guests (“other guests”).

## II.

### What did we learn?

1. The value of creating settings for informal conversation. Seventy-four percent of the project directors and 86 percent of the Endowment guests said that their informal conversations at the event were very valuable. They appreciated both the time and space set aside for such conversation and connection. They seldom have this kind of time in their day-to-day encounters. One project guest wrote that the event gave her/him time to remember “the importance of being intentional about being relational.”
2. The importance of border crossings: We know that one of the practices that sustain pastoral excellence is when pastors “cultivate imagination through border crossing.” In the May event, we discovered through the evaluations (as well as through first-hand comments), that border crossings embodied in the event itself were an important part of the participants’ experiences. Project directors were stimulated by the “rich mix of voices” that helped them imagine other approaches to pastoral excellence, understand the scale of SPE, “hear the stories of God’s work,” access partners for future sustainability, and that “created synergistic energies and ideas.”

Many expressed a deep sense of gratefulness for this mix. “I was delighted and invigorated by the program participants and other stakeholders I met and heard from,” wrote one project director, “And my project colleagues and I gained substantial insight for our work going forward from our own invited guests! There was a freshness and vitality from them that was like yeast in the mix with all of us who’ve been at this for a while.” “To be among such a diverse group of people from all over the U. S., working for the same cause,” wrote another guest, “recharged my batteries.” And an Endowment guest wrote, “The presence of this diverse group enabled me to grasp the depth and breadth of the possibilities for sustaining pastoral excellence in my own context. I left with the awareness that I am surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and a part of a movement that intends to create a new culture/ narrative for pastoral ministry.”

3. Sustaining pastoral excellence must take place on two levels: Participants agreed in their evaluation comments that pastors must continue to be supported through activities such as peer groups, border crossing times, Sabbath time, and practicing the spiritual disciplines. Renewing our

commitments to entire communities of competence, however, is equally important for sustaining pastoral excellence. This may include learning to tell our story as a community, sustaining family and church systems alongside pastors, and duplicating the peer group foundation of pastoral excellence with jurisdictional and institutional settings. Participants believe that pastoral excellence mindset is both an institutional and personal mindset.

4. The power of a positive, celebratory event rather than one focused on problem solving: “It was a privilege to participate in a positive event,” wrote one participant. “Too often the world/our work focuses on the negative and trying to solve problems.” It was important to participants that through our “tone of celebration” we convened “a conversation of hope and possibilities that are different from conversations that many church leaders return home to.” One project guest said that the event, “renewed my sense of the way church really can change, and thus, can change the world.” Other participants felt that a large gathering that included artists and speakers such as Tom Long, Krista Tippett, and Carrie Newcomer stimulated celebration, energy and creativity among the group. The worship, theological reflection, Swanson art, and hospitality were seen as positive, “teachable moments” for what constitutes pastoral excellence.
5. The event conveyed successfully peer groups and peer learning as “game changers.” While project directors and some project guests have known the value of peer groups for many years now, Endowment guests became equally convinced of the power of peer learning. One guest wrote, “Peer groups are nourishing, replenishing, inspiring, and help hold us accountable to being our best selves.” It was instructive that 82 percent of the Endowment guests said that it was very likely they would incorporate practices learned through SPE into their current work. Endowment guests’ ideas for use of peer learning included:
  - “Infusing it into our program with young preachers”
  - Incorporating “relational connectedness” as an important and strategic part of existing programming
  - Recommitting to “resources/practices we have been developing over the past eight years”
  - “Re-framing and strengthening the seminary curriculum...to provide better integration of peer support structures.”
  - “Writing about what has been learned from the peer learning process”
  - Developing spiritual exercises and prayer for peer groups
  - Utilizing SPE learning in a new nationwide network of pastors
  - “Setting aside periods for personal spiritual review”

- Teaching seminary students about the need for mentors and peer learning groups for effective, successful ministry
- “Encouraging peer groups among alumni/ae groups”
- Sharing the SPE story with the wider alumni/ae base
- Exploring the possibility of “group coaching of clergy sharing the same interests around ministry with the poor”

### III. **What are the challenges?**

1. Identifying more practical strategies for financial sustainability – While project directors understood that sustainability is not first about money, but rather about a “clear and compelling vision and finding the right partners,” many project directors are still seeking “significant strategies” for sustaining projects financially and hope that this can be incorporated into future SPE resources, social media, or events. One participant wrote, “The currents of the event – vision, energy, scope, impact – are crucial to sustaining our work, of course. However, the hard work of translating those dynamic qualities into donors and dollars remains for each project to do.” Several project guests who are fund raisers expressed appreciation for their new understanding of the scope of SPE. They said that this gives them new resources with which to tell the story to donors.
2. A lingering need to change the “old narrative” for pastors – “If you don’t feed the shepherds, they will begin to eat the sheep!” wrote one Endowment guest. While participants see evidence of new, healthier narratives around pastoral excellence, thanks to the work of SPE, the old narratives still abound: pastors are “hero leaders who are lonely and self-contained,” they “lead alone by giving vision, commands, and control,” they are “Lone Rangers” and “king pins” who are under stress. One project guest wrote, “I am afraid that the basic story has been one of how hard it is to be a pastor, how lonely, how overwhelming, how impossible. It almost takes a ‘superperson’ to survive.” Denominations too often still see pastors as “inter-changeable commodities.” For many, pastoral effectiveness is still measured by “numbers, growth, and dollars.”

Signs of hope for a changing story often accompany younger ministers who know, in the words of one participant, “how to take care of themselves better than my generation did.” They are products of a recent culture more interested in self care. In addition, denominational leaders now have a greater awareness of the need for peer support and sabbatical leaves, thanks to far-reaching programs initiated by SPE projects. “Institutions are slowly awakening to doing church in a new way.” Participants agree that the narrative changes when institutions place greater emphasis on the spiritual

formation of their pastors, through retreats, conferences, peer groups, and other resources.

3. Articulating ways to transform the corporate narrative – While individual pastors have embraced peer groups, self-care, and spiritual disciplines, several participants still see the need to shift these efforts to the corporate narrative. Congregations, denominations, and theological schools need to change and expand their understanding of pastoral excellence and sustainability. One Endowment guest wrote, “My local church? They are educated, engaged, personable. They take breaks. My denomination? It is a less healthy story.” And another, “If average church members had some learning about sustaining their pastors, they’d be enthused as well. I’m just not sure how to get that enthusiasm and knowledge outside of the Marriott Hotel...”

#### IV.

#### What are the signs of hope?

1. Over 95 percent of project directors said that their projects will continue beyond 2011. For most, the programming will be similar to what it has been in the past, but the funding models will change to include participant fees, denominational funds, and fund raising. Many mentioned keeping the “best parts” of current SPE programming, including pastor and lay peer groups, self-care, and spiritual practice for clergy. Several project directors anticipate that the friendships and clergy partnerships formed will be life-long ones, but that they will also work to create new and broader partnerships. The May event was helpful in supporting both of these goals.
2. The theme of partnership is one that generates energy and hope for participants. Particularly as they think about ways to sustain their projects in the future, project directors and their guests are creating new partnerships with individuals, organizations, and institutions that can help them sustain their work in creative ways. (For instance, the Institute for Clergy Excellence has piloted an arrangement whereby individual donors can sponsor a peer group for three years. An important key to this partnership is that the donor and the peer group develop a unique and personal relationship.) “Partnership means listening deeply to the ‘language between the words’ that points in the same direction regarding spiritual formation,” wrote one guest. Listening carefully and discovering common passions and goals will help generate future partnerships for sustainability. In the words of another project guest: “Peers. Partnership. Persistence.” Likewise one Endowment guest wrote, “Listening to their successes and describing my program (as a non-SPE person) generated unlimited opportunities for collaboration.”

3. The “spirit of ecumenism” undergirds the work of pastoral excellence. Many participants noted that the “spirit of ecumenism” was an important force at work not only at the event, but in the breadth of the SPE program itself. “I found it inspiring,” wrote one project guest, “that we are involved in something ‘bigger than ourselves.’ This stimulates energy/vision.” “I walked away from this conference with connections,” wrote another guest, “ecumenical connections, that I believe will help me to help shape our clergy-program staff.” Another participant noted that the collaborative efforts of the projects will help build a strong future for the mission of Christian churches in the U.S.