News

Priests from the Boston Archdiocese, along with Auxiliary Bishop Robert Reed (third from left), visit the Diocese of Las Cruces, New Mexico, in January as part of Catholic Extension's Mission Immersion Program for Pastors. (Catholic Extension/Rich Kalonick)



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A new grant initiative begun by the Lilly Endowment aims to reinvigorate lay and religious pastors to sustain and thrive at important transitional moments in their ministerial careers.

The Thriving in Ministry Initiative was launched in December by Lilly, a private, Indianapolis-based foundation that seeks to enrich and deepen the lives of American Christians. Thriving in Ministry looks to do that by providing financial support to new or existing programs that help clergy develop mentor relationships and traverse

challenging transitional periods throughout their ministry.

"We have received many reports from pastors about the changing demands of serving as a pastoral leader today," Christopher Coble, Lilly's vice president for religion, said in a Dec. 20 press release. "Many pastors are seeking to find role models and wise colleagues who can guide them through professional transitions and challenges encountered in particular ministry contexts."

The initial grants awarded more than $20 million to 24 organizations, with plans by Lilly to award up to 30 more grants, as much as $1 million apiece, in the fall. Among the initial recipients were four Catholic institutions: the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame; the Sisters of St. Benedict of Beech Grove, Indiana; and the Chicago-based Catholic Theological Union and Catholic Extension.

For Catholic Extension, which provides resources to the church in the poorest corners of the country, the Lilly grant will allow it to "scale up significantly" a program that allows priests to experience firsthand the organization's work in the nation's mission dioceses, said Timothy Muldoon, its director of mission education.

"Our thinking, which was very much parallel with the thinking of the Lilly grant, was that it was important not only for pastors' ongoing formation to have direct encounter with people on the margins of U.S. society, but it was also an opportunity for them to take a step away from the very often busy work of a parish and reconnect with their peers," he said.

The Mission Immersion Program for Pastors began in 2014 with a pilot phase taking groups of Chicago archdiocesan priests on short, three-day visits to Native American reservations in the Diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota, and to meet with migrant communities in the dioceses of Yakima, Washington, and Las Cruces, New Mexico. A January trip by a group of Boston archdiocesan priests to the border dioceses of Las Cruces and El Paso, Texas, was the first funded by the Lilly grant.

Three additional trips are planned for 2018, with the goal of holding 45 trips for as many as 250 priests over the course of the grant's five-year term.



In April, the Benedictine Sisters of Beech Grove, Indiana, hosted a reunion for participants in its Women Touched by Grace program. (Benedictine Sisters of Beech Grove)

The Mission Immersion Program targets diocesan priests in the Northeast and Midwest at midcareer, a point when "the work becomes work," Muldoon said, but they have a thirst to revisit fundamental questions about their vocation. The trips

also serve as a time for fraternal connections, and a way to introduce Catholic Extension to the priests and, through them, to parishes that play an important role in financially supporting its work.

The immersion trips showcase the church's critical work at the margins, but also allows the priests to experience a different view of the church in America — in places where instead of aging, shuttering parishes, ministries are youth-filled, growing and vibrant. Combined, they offer a valuable gift to the priests, Muldoon said.

"To help them to remember what it means to serve in the person of Christ, and to awaken in them a deeper sense of calling in their ministry," he said.

Rejuvenation and community are aspects also emphasized by the Benedictine Sisters through their Women Touched by Grace program for women clergy, which the Lilly grant will help extend.

Since November 2003, it has brought together three separate sessions of female Protestant ministers from the U.S. and Canada. Each class comes to the Benedict Inn Retreat and Conference Center, outside Indianapolis, for 10-day stays twice a year over a three-year period.

A major emphasis is prayer.

Through readings and conversations with Protestant clergywomen and other readings, Benedictine Sr. Mary Luke Jones, director of Women Touched by Grace, and other sisters sensed their Christian peers had difficulty finding time for prayer amid the responsibilities that come with leading a congregation.

"One thing that they really didn't seem to have time for or were able to take time for was their own spiritual growth and deepening their journey to God," she said.

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As part of Women Touched by Grace, the clergy join the sisters' monastic community in prayer three times a day and are paired with a sister prayer partner. Jones said the importance of pastors making space for prayer is that "you can't give away what you don't have. And they're called upon at the highest and lowest points

of the lives of their congregants."

In addition to the retreat, Women Touched by Grace places the participants, so far 68 women, into small groups where they can support one another and help each other in their ministries — a particular benefit for women clergy in smaller communities where they may be the only female pastor in town.

The Lilly grant will allow for fourth and fifth sessions of Women Touched by Grace. The sisters have also planned two new programs along Thriving in Ministry themes of mentor training and handling transitions at the beginning and end of a woman's ministry.

Likewise, the McGrath Institute at Notre Dame plans to use its Lilly grant to grow its Bishop D'Arcy Program in Priestly Renewal, a weeklong summer retreat aimed at cultivating priest leaders who can in turn mentor younger priests at a time when they'll be fewer but the demands on their time larger.

The grant will also kick-start the institute's Strong Foundations for Pastoral Leaders Program that looks to lend the next generation of lay pastoral ministers a helping hand in handling their own transitions into their new careers.

"We want to offer support to these people in these first few years of ministry, which is probably when we lose most of the people who have been interested in serving the church, especially in a professional capacity," said Leonard DeLorenzo, a faculty member in the McGrath Institute who assisted in preparing its grant proposal.



Benedictine Sr. Mary Luke Jones, right, meets with alumni of the Women Touched by Grace program during an April reunion at the retreat center run by the Benedictine Sisters of Beech Grove, Indiana. (Benedictine Sisters of Beech Grove)

The two-year program, open to pastoral ministers nationwide, will include two groups of 12 to 18 young leaders each. A big component is a summer program, where they come to Notre Dame and are paired with an experienced mentor, with whom they'll work for several years. Eight days of conferences and seminars will review topics such as finances, career planning, and balancing and cultivating personal relationships.

Together, the two programs hope to present vocations in both ordained ministry and lay ministry "as appealing and possible life choices for people," DeLorenzo said. He added that efforts like Lilly's Thriving in Ministry Initiative go a long way in helping people not just explore a life in ministry but to make it a successful and fruitful decision for those who choose it.

"When we look back on all this stuff 50 years from now, I think there'll be quite a lot to see and what [is] the impact that Lilly's made through some of these initiatives," DeLorenzo said.

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