



Lilly Endowment Thriving In Ministry Grant Proposal: *From the Center Outward* Proposal Narrative

A. Executive Summary

Our grant application proposes an expansion of the mentoring capacity of our synod with three specific groups of leaders on our roster with a particular eye to connecting, resourcing and encouraging bolder leadership where weariness, isolation and self-limitation may take be especially likely to take root. We plan to draw on the existing resources of our area, using the grant funds to increase our ability to do so in manifold ways. Expanded support of the particular leaders addressed in our proposal would lead to greater vitality and sustainability for these individuals as well as a renewed sense of possibility which we hope would reverberate beyond the participants in the cohorts to their peers, congregations and the synod more broadly.

B. Marks of Thriving in Ministry

Nearly sixty years ago, delivering the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, theologian Joseph Sittler diagnosed the ailment that undermines the essential ministry of the pastor. His “Maceration of the Minister” outlines the ways that demands of congregational life, denominational expectations and personal distraction dissipate the vocational focus of pastors.¹ He critiques the ways churchly systems undermine the theological, prayerful, disciplined center of the call to pastoral ministry.

Sittler’s words are worth hearing afresh.² Writing of what afflicts pastors such that they experience the violence of maceration, he writes: “His time, his focused sense of vocation, his vision of his central task, his mental life, and his contemplative acreage – they are under the chopper.”³ Sittler describes further the conspiracy between daily demands to run a parish as a CEO, the niggling distractions of the wider church, and the consequential fragmentation of the pastor’s life:

There have been a number of studies, some widely publicized in which attention has been called to the large number of crack-ups of various degrees of severity among the clergy. The reasons most often suggested are too much work, too long a day, too various a complex of problems and duties, too unremitting a drain on emotional and mental stores, insufficient opportunity to lift the clerical nose from the parish grindstone.⁴

¹ Sittler, Joseph. “Maceration of the Minister.” *The Ecology of Faith*. Fortress, 1961, pp. 76-88.

² Sittler lived long enough to see the ordination of women pastors in his Lutheran denomination. While his writing in 1959 references only male pastors and uses male pronouns throughout, his innovative theological convictions favored to the ordination of women to this office.

³ Sittler, 77.

⁴ *Ibid*, 83.



However, he does not accept these as the actual cause of lethargy or a withering of a sense of call. Rather, he places culpability at the center of the vocation to parish ministry. When pastors act like professional administrators, public officials or leaders of corporations, they lose sight of the fundamental call to attend the depths of scripture and the importance of being a witness to the gospel and a pastor—or shepherd—to people: “A minister has been ordained to an Office; he too often ends up running an office.”⁵ What, then, is the cure? Here is Sittler’s prescription for vitality, thriving, flourishing in the pastoral office: “By a sheer effort of violent will (the pastor) must seek to become his calling, submit himself to be shaped in his life *from the center outward*.”⁶ Though delivered as a reforming call in 1959, we find this assessment to be as valid today as it was then.

Sittler dedicated the publication of these lectures to his father, a small town pastor in Ohio, naming him as his first and best teacher. In many ways, his father was his mentor in a time when the formation of pastoral vocation began, as often as not, in the parsonage. Far fewer Lutheran seminarians today are “PK’s” than was true even a generation ago. For many the call to ministry has come in the adult years, necessitating the role for trained, trust-worthy, insightful mentors. A recent study of ministers in their first five years describes the role of mentors in this way:

New ministers cultivate pastoral imaginations when they apprentice themselves to the particular world where their ministry is situated, and find mentors who help them process their thinking, feeling and action in that world.⁷

It is the contention of this proposal that such relationships are as vital in subsequent years as in the beginning of ministry. Mentors help with embodied practices; demonstrating the coherence between the “talk and walk” of faith and leadership. By disposition, they are gracious when speaking and attentive when listening, willing to learn *with* a less experienced colleague, and naturally curious about what God is doing in the world. Life’s lessons and the practice of ministry give such mentors gravitas, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.

But this pastor-mentor relationship needs to be grounded in a community with others. As a synod we have invested time and money in learning cohorts so that no pastor learns or serves in isolation from peers; and not simply peers of one’s choosing. In ministry, as in any vocation, there is a temptation to invest time primarily with a self-selected group or clique. We have leveraged the geographical proximity of this synod’s territory to bring pastors together in groups that are diverse in age, parish context and cultural background.

⁵ Ibid, 84.

⁶ Ibid, 86.

⁷ Scharen, Christian A.B. and Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, “Learning Pastoral Imagination: A Five-Year Report on How New Ministers Learn in Practice.” *Auburn Studies*, no. 21, Winter, 2016, pp.1-60. This citation is from page 33.



Though Joseph Sittler framed his valuation nearly sixty years ago, in preparing this proposal, we concur with his fundamental assessment of what fragments and discourages those called into ministry in this day. It is evidence of a spiritual malaise as much as it is an organizational or institutional crisis. While some tasks in ministry are seemingly easier in 2018, and the gifts and assumed leadership role of elected lay leaders within congregations more dynamic than six decades ago, in other ways the maceration of the pastor is even more severe.

In the digital age the structure of theological formation has also changed. Fewer clergy today have prepared for ordination by three or four years in a residential community of study and prayer but rather through online and intensive coursework undertaken while working full time. The demands of family life are also perceived differently. More households with children include working parents rather than one stay-at-home parent. The financial demands that accompany middle class expectations, widely shared by clergy, include a mortgage, student loans, and consumer debt create challenges not known a half-century ago. None of these make a deeply centered vocation an obvious strategy for clergy.⁸

These are powerful cultural and pedagogical shifts. The focus of theological curricula has also changed. The newer pastors of this synod are surprisingly adept at reading the social dynamics of the settings in which they serve. They have learned skills in community organizing and family systems that were rarely, if ever, addressed in seminaries a generation ago. In many ways they are more proficient in reading *contexts* than *sacred texts*. This is why, in addition to building the supportive structure of a mentoring culture, the activities outlined in our grant help clergy reconnect with their human capacity for joy, curiosity and an enduring relationship within the long tradition of spiritually, communally rooted leadership of the church.

The vocation of pastoral ministry is a complex calling that shapes and forms the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, inter-personal, public and lifelong identity of a pastor. In our Lutheran tradition, the ordinand is publically asked both doctrinal questions and this: *Will you be diligent in your study of the holy scriptures and faithful in your use of the means of grace? Will you pray for God's people, nourish them with word and sacraments, and lead them by your own example in faithful service and holy living?*⁹ With Joseph Sittler, we are convinced that only a life shaped from the center outward allows a pastor to thrive in ministry. Such a life is also one lived in community with clergy peers, lay leaders of congregations, and one's family and friends.¹⁰ Through our structured synodical work

⁸ The commonality of seminary debt as well as debt loads have been steadily climbing along with shifting expectations and support for seminary students. See Anthony Ruger, Sharon L. Miller and Kim Maphis Early, "The Gathering Storm," *Auburn Studies*, No. 12, September 2005.

⁹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly*. Augsburg Fortress: 2009, p. 189.

¹⁰ Other aspects of this community of learning include our First Call Theological Education (FCTE) program and our Learning Cohorts. FCTE is required for the first three years of professional ministry, and encourages the formation of healthy habits from the start: engagement in the wider life of the synod,



with pastors and existing mentors in the past years, and by focused conversations in preparing this proposal, we have been led to these convictions about what allows a pastor to thrive in ministry:

- capacity for deep reflection on one's life and world
- practice of lifelong, careful study of scripture
- ability to work gracefully with lay leaders
- disciplined curiosity to learn about context, people and self
- relationship with mentors to encourage and reinforce those habits

The activities outlined in this proposal are designed to address one or more of those strengths over a long enough period of time to make a durable difference in the life and ministry of the participants.

C. Current State of Pastoral Ministry

This synod is perceived as a highly desirable place to serve in ministry. With 10% of the general population in the east metro area of the Twin Cities belonging to ELCA congregations there are congregational calls in variety of settings: open country settings to the far north and south, full-time solo pastorates in city and suburban settings, congregations with two or more pastors (including five of the largest congregations in the denomination), and a steady number of part-time calls in a metropolitan area with high employment options for spouses.

While a small number of first call opportunities exist in the synod, most pastors move into the synod at the time of their second or third call. Those who begin serving in this synod overwhelmingly remain in this synod (or adjacent Minneapolis Area Synod) for the rest of their years in ministry. We are aware that paying attention to pastors at crucial times of transition in their ministry will bear fruit over the ten to thirty years they serve in this synod. With a structured learning cohort already in place for first call pastors, we have chosen to address three other matters relating to times of transition or needed guidance in the arc of the pastoral vocation.

The Age of our Rostered Leadership. Currently, sixty seven of the two hundred and fifty pastors in active ministry are sixty or older. For the foreseeable future, we anticipate

participation in a mentor group, the development of practical skills needed for their ministry context, and participation in another synodical learning cohort. Rather than a one or two day intense dive into a topic led by a "sage on the stage", our learning cohorts encourage small group, long-term consideration of a particular issue, replacing the "busyness traps" clergy face with sustained learning in a community of peers. From 2015-2018, learning cohorts have included: conflict and resilience, maintaining spiritual vitality, retiring gracefully, women in ministry, facilitating conversations to build consensus, vulnerability in leadership, pastoral care and addiction, and exploring the voices of women theologians. In the coming calendar year, we are launching cohorts on the craft of preaching and managing a staff effectively. Over the past 4 years, nearly 70 of our leaders have been a part of one of these cohorts, 15 have been in more than one. This adds up to nearly 1000 hours where our leaders are drawing from the well of experience of this unique metropolitan area.



six to eight retirements a year from congregational calls. Ensuring ongoing pastoral formation in the earlier years of ministry fits well with a strategy of fostering vitality for leadership in increasingly complex settings for the coming generation. We are staking out a fresh appreciation for the complexity of pastoral service in the fourth to tenth years of ministry, the target for the largest portion of this proposal.

The Senior Leadership Capacity of our Roster. The number of larger congregations in this synod requires that attention be given to preparing more pastors to serve in such contexts. These leaders need to be both pastorally gifted and sufficiently confident in administration to guide congregations that are akin to non-profit organizations or community institutions. In this area of our proposal, we seek to expand senior leadership skills by forming an interdisciplinary cohort of rising leaders and nonprofit mentors so that a certain number of our clergy, especially women, are better equipped to take on the senior leadership of our largest congregations.

The Diversity of our Roster. A third challenge we face is the current lack of racial diversity among the pastors in this synod. While the polity of the denomination allows congregations to make the final decision on who to call as pastor, the synod has influence in framing expectations for those call processes and creating the pool of candidates considered for call. At present only eight persons of color serve as ordained pastors in this synod. Two are in chaplaincy settings, three serve as mission developers in ethnic-specific contexts, two serve in congregational settings and one is on leave from call. We are heartened that nine seminarians of color from this synod are preparing for ordination; three in the ELCA's TEEM program and six in M.Div. degree programs. While all may not serve their first call, here, we are cheered that we have been more successful in recruiting needed leaders of color to enter seminary.

The four countries within this synod show a racial mix of 77% white and 23% persons of color.¹¹ The population of Minnesota is diversifying like the rest of the country. The synod has adopted and funded a strategic commitment to address racial justice and white privilege at the congregational level, to work with congregations to extend calls to pastors of color, and to actively recruit pastors of color for service in this synod. This work is long overdue and how we can best support them is addressed in one portion of this proposal.

D. Program Purpose and Goals

Using a combination of learning cohorts and mentor relationships, we wish to test out three interrelated hypotheses during the five years of this grant. Each cohort addresses convictions that frame pastoral vocation *from the center outward*. The three hypotheses are:

¹¹ ExecutiveInsite Report for Saint Paul Area Synod, ELCA. Accessed from <http://missioninsite.com/> on 22 May 2018.



- Can a structured learning cohort with intentional mentoring relationships increase pastoral effectiveness, resilience and joy during the fourth to tenth years in ministry? This will be explored in the **Second Act Cohort**.
- Can the guidance of mentors from the nonprofit sector effectively increase the overall leadership skills of experienced pastors poised to move into multi-staff congregational settings? This will be tested in the **Kubernesis Seminar**
- Can a cohort model with mentors of color (both ordained and lay) increase the synod's effectiveness in recruiting and supporting **pastors of color** as they serve in congregational settings? From this we hope to learn much about supporting and retaining clergy of color within this synod.

E. Program Activities

Second Act Cohort. This cohort is for those beyond First Call Theological Education, yet still early in their ministry, specifically, four to ten years in. We consider this time to be crucial for the years that follow. While we have not studied in depth why second calls are differently challenging, it is our hunch that pastors move into more demanding congregations, roles or contexts. This sense of challenge is often voiced as sense of weakness in needed practical skills, but we suspect that it is also a loss of spiritual and vocational vitality. In the first year, our proposal would fund a planning day for all eligible leaders in congregations to help shape the cohort and build excitement about applying to join (\$1500 budgeted). Two cycles of a two-year cohort would follow with ten leaders each. In the first year of each cycle, the twin foci of *deep reflection on life and world* and *lifelong practice of careful study of scripture* would take center stage. The activities would include an annual retreat to re-center in vocation (\$4,000), a year of spiritual direction (\$8,000), a contract with a local pastor and writer to develop and facilitate meaningful and creative text study unrelated to the lectionary (\$2,500). Participants would be given a stipend to design a thematic project deepening engagement with scripture in their congregation (\$3,000). In the second year of each cycle, the foci would shift to *ability to work gracefully with lay leaders* and *disciplined curiosity about self, others and the world*. To strengthen the pastor's relationship with the church council president, we would host a kickoff dinner (\$1,100), and provide for a year's membership to the Nonprofit Leadership Lab (\$4,500), an online resource and community. They would have the chance to apply for \$300 toward a project of shared governance within the congregation, such as a council retreat or revision of the congregation's constitution. As we planned how to address our conviction about curiosity, we were reminded of a challenge Peter Marty laid before our pastors at a recent conference: "If you want to be a better pastor, become a deeper person." Therefore, part of the grant will allow participants to choose a project or practice that stretches their way of inhabiting their own lives or community. A stipend of up to \$500 per participant will be available should the project involve expense. The cohort would vet one another's projects and serve as accountability partners. In years 4-5 a second cycle of this cohort would kick off with a crossover retreat (\$4,000), then the activities from years 2-3 would repeat. Because this



cohort is where the largest share of the grant funds will go, no capstone experience has been planned at this point. We will determine a fitting experience with the group if the budget allows.

Mentors would be trained by a consultant (\$1,500) and would be present at the annual retreat as well as meeting monthly with their mentees. We envision 5 mentors taking on 2 mentees each and receiving an annual stipend of \$1,000 for each mentee they assume (\$20,000 for each cycle). An additional allowance of \$300/year will cover mileage and allow them to pay for meals or coffee during their monthly meetings.

Kubernesis Seminar. Drawn from the Koine Greek for “administration” which 1 Corinthians 12.28 identifies as a spiritual gift, this cohort focuses on building the capacity of ten pastors to take on leadership in larger congregations. This cohort would convene over twenty four months in the middle of our five year cycle. In the early months of 2020, we would recruit three to five leaders in the nonprofit community of the metro Twin Cities area to serve as mentors. The seminar would consist of up to ten pastors (ideally more women than men), and would kick off with a retreat in the fall of 2020. The operating metaphor for the seminar is “steering the ship”, so our inaugural retreat would take place over three days near the water (\$1,500) with a focus on community building, scriptural resources for leadership (led by a facilitator for \$1,000). In the intervening months, the seminar would meet four times as a large group. During months when the large group does not meet, participants would meet with their mentors. Mentors will receive a \$500 stipend per year for each mentee and an allowance of \$300 for mileage and meals. At second year of similar periodical meetings and one-on-ones with mentors will follow. The seminar will have as its capstone experience a sailing trip in August of 2022 (\$5,000). Each participant will be given an additional \$1,000 over the course of the seminar to invest in continuing education (\$10,000). They will also have the opportunity to apply for up to \$1,000 to spend on a project that will expand their capacity for senior leadership (\$10,000). They would present on this at the capstone retreat.

Leaders of Color Cohort. Acknowledging the lack of formal mentors and pastoral role models for clergy of color within the synod, we do not know the best way to address this. During year one of the grant, pastors of color will be invited together for a discernment day to seek their collective wisdom on the best way to support their ministry in a predominantly white church culture. Using values of accompaniment rather than imposing a preordained model, a time of gathering and listening will lead to a planning process, guided by the synod’s pastors of color. Just over \$32,000 has been designated for this cohort over the grant cycle. We anticipate that might include up to \$8,000 for meal-based gatherings and retreats; \$16,000 for mentor expenses, tapping leaders of color in other synods or denominations, teaching theologians or leaders in the non-profit sector; and up to \$8,000 for a capstone experience for the cohort.

F. Leadership



The core leaders for this proposal are Anna Marsh and Bishop Patricia Lull. Anna is Executive Assistant to the Bishop and a Ph.D. candidate in Hebrew Scriptures at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. She will serve as Project Director. She brings experience in developing and administering programs for our leaders through oversight of the First Call Theological Education initiative, Learning Cohorts and Business 101. She will be responsible for day-to-day coordination of the grant activities. Bishop Lull will serve as Grant Administrator, a role she has played at a seminary and for several years as the Executive Director of a non-profit organization in Saint Paul. In addition, Greg Triplett, synod finance administrator, will receive grant payments and disperse funds, as well as generating annual financial reports. Members of the synod staff will provide added clerical support.

The first year of the grant cycle is structured as a planning year. During 2019 contracts will be confirmed with a number of gifted leaders from the synod and community. Included in this group will be the pastors selected to participate and those tapped to serve as mentors, teachers for the scriptural components, trainers and consultants. While the synod describes itself as a learning organization, it is not an academic institution. Consequently, a variety of outside consultants and trainers will bring their expertise to the work of this grant. We are fortunate to be located in the shadow of four seminaries, multiple colleges and universities and one of the most cohesive and creative networks of non-profits in the country.

G. Expected Outcomes

The outcomes and accountabilities for participants in each of the distinctive cohorts are noted in the outline of activities above. We expect the clergy participants to become exemplars of the convictions for thriving in ministry and models for healthy relationships with mentors.

As a synod, we anticipate being able to demonstrate that our current pastors continue to move into fresh calls within the synod rather than seeking calls elsewhere, that more senior pastorates are filled by women (particularly) from within this synod and that pastors of color remain within the synod, serve in successive call settings, and help welcome other pastors of color to serve here. As stated above, the Saint Paul Area Synod is perceived as a desirable place to be in ministry. We know why that is currently, but hope that the culture of learning, mutual development and a bold and hopeful vision cast by our bishop are also contributing factors. We want the desirability of serving here to become truer for folks over time because of how we are invest in the leadership of the church. Strengthening our mentoring capacity and addressing these areas of concern within our roster will make us stronger as a synod and contribute to a sense of vitality in the church more broadly.

H. Evaluation



The Saint Paul Area Synod is in conversation with a professor at a nearby university who has agreed to design and oversee a five year evaluation of the program's effectiveness and impact. She has experience with assessment of projects on this scale, and will serve as our consultant for the evaluation of this grant's activities. This will be a mixed methodology assessment, using both qualitative and quantitative measurements. The clergy participants, the mentors and the congregations served will be included in the assessment.

At a recent luncheon, honoring clergy who have served for 25, 40, 50 or 60 years since ordination, the honorees were asked what gives them joy in their current vocation. While a few remain in active calls most are retired. They spoke of the joy of being grandparents, mentoring a confirmand, travel, belonging to a theology book group or being invited to preach occasionally. All in all, they spoke with gratitude for the call to serve as pastors. It is our aspiration that our current pastors would sound as enthusiastic as similar anniversary milestones come round for them in the future.

Success for participants in all three cohorts might be summarized by imaginative, positive, demonstrable and joyful answers to these questions: *How has participation in **From the Center Outward** initiative allowed me to inhabit my vocation differently now? How has it prepared me to be sustained in this vocation in future calls?*

I. Sustainability and Continuation

The grant funding request of \$375,000 over five years represents 3.5% of the projected annual revenue for the synod for that period of time. Three steps will be taken to insure that such a financial base is secure in year six and beyond.

- 1) The incorporation of at least one-third of the annual amount (\$25,000) within the yearly budget of the synod in 2024 and beyond. Reequipping leaders is already a programmatic priority in the synod budget, currently funded at \$15,000 a year. The second step toward continuity is the decision to tap a member of synod staff to serve as program director. This grant aligns well with her current responsibilities and expertise. The \$14,000 for staffing within the grant proposal is well within the capacity of the synod to absorb at the close of the grant cycle. As a third step, initial planning and feasibility work are underway for a comprehensive campaign within the synod. Leadership development will surely be one facet of that campaign, which would conclude long before the end of this grant cycle.
- 2) Because this grant is based on the conviction that thriving in ministry begins *from the center outward* with mentorship that encourages deep reflection on one's life and world, careful study of scripture, graceful work with lay leaders, and disciplined curiosity about the pastor's context, congregation and self we are willing to make the holy wager that congregations will be eager to contribute toward the continuation of this project.



- 3) Long-term fundraising for the synod falls within the responsibilities of the Bishop and the Synod Council. Both the synod's Bishop and the synod's elected leaders are deeply committed to investments that insure the continuing vitality of pastors.

J. Organizational capacity

One of the sixty-five synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, this synod is the second largest with 120,000 baptized members within its 112 congregations and mission starts. The Bishop is elected at the annual Synod Assembly and serves a six year term, eligible for election to a second term. Members of the Synod Council are similarly elected at Conference or Synod Assemblies and serve three year terms (four years for officers). The annual operating budget for the synod is about \$2.1 million and for the last two years has included an additional \$100,000, raised annually, to further support new and renewing congregations.

The decision to complete this grant application arose out of on-going conversations about what work really matters within the synod and the alignment of that discussion with the request for proposals from the Lilly Endowment. Prior to preparing the Letter of Intent, submitted in April 2018, six individuals were interviewed about the current work of mentors with first-call pastors, the value of mentoring more broadly, the wellbeing of clergy in this synod, and the gaps that exist between the expectations of congregations and pastors serving them.

During the summer of 2015 listening sessions were held across the synod. Out of that process of listening to nearly 150 lay members and clergy, a statement of purpose was crafted. It acknowledges that we in the church "are grasped by grace". The statement continues:

*Christ has begun this good work among us and is renewing us today for
deeper faith in the living God
wider engagement in God's world
bolder trust in God's work through us;*

*In our common work we will
build partnerships that are local, global and mutually transformative
embolden our public witness to justice and service, and
welcome possibilities for being church in a new day;*

We are not there yet. We are on the way together.

Within the freedom of God's grace, crafting a proposal to address pastoral vocations that are shaped **from the center outward**, with more experienced pastors and lay leaders mentoring and accompanying newer pastors, is a joyous endeavor. We have much to learn. We look forward to doing so together.