Sustaining Pastoral Excellence
A Progress Report on a Lilly Endowment Initiative
**Vibrant congregations, excellent pastoral leadership**

We at Lilly Endowment believe deeply in the significance of local congregations. We also believe that excellent pastoral leadership is crucial in helping them to thrive. If Christian people are truly to hear the good news and to live faithfully in response, they need pastors who know the gospel in their own hearts, are well-equipped to teach and preach it, and are able to help shape the corporate life and ministry of the congregation into a vital community of faith. Vibrant congregations go hand in hand with healthy, thoughtful, effective ministers.

But the pastoral vocation is demanding. Doing it well requires deep faith, discerning intelligence, and large measures of love, wisdom, humility, patience, and endurance. Thus pastors both need and yearn for opportunities to nourish and sustain their own spiritual lives, renew their energy, and nurture their pastoral imaginations. The Endowment launched the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence initiative in order to support pastors of nearly every Christian tradition with opportunities for ongoing biblical study, theological reflection, disciplined prayer, and spiritual renewal, as well as sustained friendship and support among colleagues—the kinds of experiences that keep ministry alive.

In 2003, Lilly Endowment asked Duke Divinity School to host a coordination program to assist us in enabling our grantees to connect with one another and learn from each other’s best work. We are deeply grateful for all that Duke has done over the years to convene, mentor, and support our grantees and, at this important moment in the life of the initiative, to produce this fine report.

Author Holly G. Miller has written a compelling report. She has taken a panoramic look at this large, complex enterprise and made its character and purposes accessible and clear. She gives voice to the first-hand experiences of a great many pastors, describes in depth both the shape and the substance of a diverse but representative sampling of the programs, and presents the results and impact of our grantees’ work in ways that are at once vivid and encouraging. We hope that everyone who reads this report will derive from it as much a sense of hope and promise for the church and its ministry as we do.

**Craig Dykstra**  
Senior Vice President, Religion  
Lilly Endowment Inc.

**John Wimmer**  
Program Director, Religion  
Lilly Endowment Inc.
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By Holly G. Miller

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Indianapolis, Indiana
As a former basketball player, John Terpstra sometimes describes his approaching retirement—still six years off—in sports terms. “I’m in the fourth quarter,” he says, “and frankly, you can have three great quarters, but you win or lose the game in the fourth.” After 34 successful years as a pastor, Terpstra has no intention of running out the clock by merely going through the motions of ministry. “You grow to hate yourself when you start to coast or when you walk away on a Sunday morning saying, ‘I got by—again.’”

But in 2005, a sequence of events pushed him to the brink of burnout. “Part of it was the normal wear and tear of the ministry,” he recalls. “Added to that was a growing sense of isolation.” For years he had preached about the value of community and had established a strong ministry for the men of Immanuel Christian Reformed Church in Fort Collins, Colorado. Twice a week they gathered to talk openly and honestly about the brokenness in their lives and their need for Jesus Christ. Although Terpstra has an excellent rapport with his congregation, he felt that his leadership role prevented him from sharing his growing feeling of emptiness and his need for renewal. “I realized that I had created space for everybody but myself,” he explains. “What was missing in my life was a place where I could be just John.”

He knew he had to take action: “I felt mentally done in, and I didn’t know if I would make it.” He consulted with other pastors, read the books they recommended, attended a few conferences, and asked for—and received—a lengthy sabbatical. Then he revved up his Harley and took his wife, Bev, on a 7,000-mile trek to the Florida Keys, stopping en route to visit sites related to the ministry of Martin Luther King Jr. It was exhilarating, but it wasn’t enough. He still needed a place where he could be “just John” on a regular basis. Within a few months, he found it.

“The thing that I would identify as the most important factor in my personal turnaround has been my participation in two clergy groups supported by the SPE program,” he says. One of his groups is local; the other, international—but at the heart of both is no-holds-barred conversation. “Our agenda is just telling stories and experiencing life together. Once we get past the ‘what did you preach about last Sunday?’ we get deeper and deeper into our personal lives, our sense of call, and our views on theology. We’re peers; nothing that we say gets back to anyone who is in a position to supervise us. We can be exactly who we are, without question and without fear.”

Discovering the need for peers

If Terpstra was preparing for his fourth quarter in ministry in 2005, Dana Allen Walsh was overpreparing for her first. An outstanding graduate student who had earned a full scholarship to Princeton Theological Seminary, she overloaded her academic schedule because, she admits, “I was...
craving to learn, and couldn’t pass up any class. Besides, there was so much I needed to know!” A successful two-year internship at a church near campus rounded out her ambitious degree program, making her well-qualified to accept her first call to ministry. Yet after nine months as associate minister at Hancock United Church of Christ in Lexington, Massachusetts, “I was filled with self-doubt and wondered if the church—any church—was the right place for me.”

Conflict within Hancock’s professional staff prompted two pastors to resign shortly after Walsh’s arrival. This bumped Walsh up to the uncomfortable position of second-in-charge and made her the most permanent person on staff. Her responsibilities changed overnight, and her hours increased dramatically. “I was exhausted,” she recalls. “At times I doubted the church’s future, as well as my own.” She wanted to slow down and process all that was unfolding around her, but there was no time or place for reflection. “Where can clergy go?” she asks. “I couldn’t talk to anyone at the church, and none of my friends outside of ministry understood.”

When she learned that her denomination was participating in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence initiative and that a group of young associate ministers was meeting regularly in Lexington, she eagerly accepted the invitation to join. “I was feeling pretty needy,” she says, recalling the first session she attended. “They were great—so supportive and willing to help me deal with everything that was going on in my life. I remember we actually diagrammed my church’s staff and looked at the power structures and the struggles. It really helped me navigate that first year.”

She survived the ordeal, and so did her church. After a period of healing, the congregation rebuilt its staff and now is enjoying a growth spurt. Walsh, comfortably settled in her associate’s role, now questions neither her call to ministry nor her ongoing need for her peer group. “I look forward to every meeting,” she says. Members rotate in and out as assignments change, but a handful of “originals” remains. The same peers who helped Walsh through her early challenges have experienced their own difficulties, and she’s been there to return the favor. “It’s great to see how our relationships have grown and changed,” she says. “There’s no competition, and no one feels the need to prove himself. We’re just there to support each other.”

A changing ministry environment

No one knows exactly when or why the shift occurred. At what point did pastoral ministry become so draining, so challenging, that a gifted veteran such as Terpstra would question his ability to go the distance? Or what change would cause a bright and talented newcomer such as Walsh to consider dropping out of professional ministry less than a year into her first call? Like most difficult questions, these elicit no simple answers.

Janice Huie, bishop of the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, cites declining membership within most mainstream denominations as a contributing factor to an increasingly stressful environment. “The United Methodist Church experienced its first year of decline in
Traveling to her peer group meetings was no easy task for Jan Hotze, vicar of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Haines, Alaska. Arrangements went something like this: weather permitting, she would catch a late ferry for the four-and-a-half-hour commute to Juneau, where she would nap briefly before boarding a red-eye flight to Seattle; once there, she would switch planes and fly to Chicago, where a colleague, driving down from Wisconsin, would pick her up at nearby La Grange Park, Illinois, and together they would travel the 200 miles to Beech Grove, Indiana.

Yes, it was that important for her to spend 10 days, twice a year, with her Protestant and Catholic sisters at Our Lady of Grace Monastery. “I could cry whenever I think about how significant this has been in my life,” says Hotze.

The idea of a community of nuns treating Protestant female pastors to some much-needed “time out” was born out of empathy and hospitality. Although their church prohibits the ordination of women, the Benedictine sisters were sympathetic to the challenges that female clergy face. They knew that only 15 percent of mainline Protestant pastors are female and that women in ministry often accept calls to congregations in remote areas where they have difficulty finding colleagues of their own gender.

The program the sisters designed, Women Touched by Grace, carefully balances prayer, rest, exercise, learning, and friendship. “Our goal is to relieve these women of any obligation to do anything while they’re with us,” explains program director Sister Mary Luke Jones. “They’re here for a serious reason, but we like to pamper them too. If they want half-and-half in their morning coffee, we get it for them. When they go to their rooms at night, they’re likely to find a little treat waiting on their pillows.”

Denominational differences disappear as the hosts and guests explore the faith they share. Unity emerges from diversity, and “suddenly our expression of God grows bigger as our hearts expand to include both differences and common experiences,” says Sister Jennifer Mechtild Horner, vocation director at the monastery.

When the pastors return to their pulpits, many take Benedictine practices home with them. “If I meditate on a passage and the lectio helps unlock it for me, my sermon is more creative,” says Patti Waser, a United Methodist minister in Fort Worth, Texas. Erin Matteson, co-pastor of a Church of the Brethren congregation in Modesto, California, has begun a creative prayer group that helps participants become comfortable with silence.

Even after the Women Touched by Grace groups officially disband, members communicate by e-mail—sometimes daily—and occasionally gather for reunions. “The women are in my heart,” says Waser, “and the experience is in my bones.”
1973,” she says. “I was ordained in 1974, so I’ve spent my entire ministry in a declining denomination. That’s not a happy prospect.” Nor is it likely to change. A national survey, conducted by AARP, indicates that 40 years ago, 30 percent of baby boomers expressed “a great deal of confidence” in organized religion. More recently, that number has slipped to 13 percent.

As she interacts with the more than 700 congregations in her conference, Huie has sensed frustration among clergy trying to incorporate new forms of communication into their work. “How do you utilize Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to connect with people?” she asks. “Pastors weren’t trained for that. Pastors were trained for a world that is rapidly disappearing.”

Added to this is the growing number of options that vie for church members’ attention. Piling into the family van and heading for morning worship is no longer a weekend staple for many families. “Once upon a time, Sunday was church day. Now we’re in competition,” says Huie. “People have so many choices. We’ve gone from a simple strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate world to 35 flavors and beyond. That’s a huge amount of change for pastors to deal with, particularly when they’re not prepared for it. It exacerbates feelings of disconnection and isolation.”

One pastor describes the feeling of loneliness as “public isolation,” because clergy are expected to exude friendliness but eschew friendships. Deep relationships are off-limits for a variety of reasons. Shrinking congregations often put ministers, who should be colleagues, in competition for members. Parishioners sometimes express jealousy if pastors “play favorites.” Then there’s the danger of ministers revealing their vulnerability to friends and being perceived as weak or unworthy of congregational leadership. “It becomes particularly difficult for pastors to develop close personal friendships when they are put on a pedestal or held to higher moral standards than the rest of the congregation,” write Bryan Stone and Claire Wolfteich in Sabbath in the City, a book that emerged from Boston University’s SPE project with 96 urban pastors.

Terpstra, a second-generation pastor, compares his career in ministry with that of his father. Because his father was the solo pastor serving a congregation of 500, he spent more time in the pulpit than John does, but he didn’t manage a staff, have responsibility for several church-sponsored programs, or feel compelled to accept positions on the boards of community organizations. His father’s church was homogenous, with 95 percent of the members sharing the same faith background. Families didn’t come and go; they came and stayed.

“Today, there’s a three- to five-year itch,” says Terpstra. “People may love your church and love you as a pastor, but after a few years, they say, ‘You know, the church down the street is doing some cool things, so I think I’ll go down there for a while.’” He tells the story of a family whose children continue to attend his church’s Sunday school and youth group meetings although their parents recently decided to switch denominations. The result: a house divided. “That’s the culture we live in; everything has to be tweaked just right for the individual,” says Terpstra. “As pastors, we feel a lot of stress from this. We’re always looking over our shoulders wondering who might be the next family to leave. At the same time, new people are coming in the front door because they weren’t happy at the last church they attended.”

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—Janice Huie
Attracting the brightest and best

In their book *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry*, authors L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong include a bogus classified advertisement that would be humorous if it didn’t ring so true. “It’s an absolutely depressing description of pastoral ministry,” says Jones, former dean of Duke Divinity School and now vice president and vice provost for global strategy and programs at Duke University.

**WANTED:** Person to fill position that involves important but undervalued work; exact job description unclear. Long hours; must work weekends and holidays. Low pay. Master’s degree required; doctorate preferred. Must be accomplished at multitasking, including running an organization without clear authority to do so. The successful candidate will be skilled as a public speaker, manager, politician, and therapist, and will devote significant time each week to pastoral visits. The position reports to multiple bosses.

This description differs dramatically from the description of pastoral ministry a generation ago, when the profession was so revered that communities encouraged only their brightest and best to pursue it. To illustrate how radically the perception of ministry has changed, Jones tells of an outstanding student who wanted to enroll at Duke Divinity School when Jones was the school’s dean. The student had graduated from an elite university with a perfect 4.0 grade-point average and aspired to a career in ministry. There was just one problem: tuition money. “His parents, active church members, said that they would pay his way through law school or medical school but he was on his own if he chose to go to seminary. They told him, ‘You need to make something of your life.’”

Contrast that story with the call to ministry experienced 40 years ago by one of Jones’ longtime colleagues, a pastor who also serves on the divinity school faculty. “He came to Duke as an engineering student, but his church kept insisting that he needed to consider ministry,” says Jones. “His congregation believed his gifts were so exceptional that he surely was destined to become a preacher.” A tug of war ensued between the would-be engineer and the determined congregation. Ministry won. “The question I would ask congregations today is, ‘How long has it been since you’ve engaged in a war over a young person’s vocation?’” says Jones.

A deeply rewarding vocation

Too often negativity breeds negativity and, in the case of pastoral ministry, can result in what Jones calls an “ain’t it awful” mindset. Such was the situation a decade ago, prior to the launch of Sustaining Pastoral Excellence. Gatherings of clergy all too frequently were devolving into “ain’t it awful” conversations that centered on shrinking memberships, underfunded budgets, shifting demographics, conflicting worship styles, mystifying technology, and a general nostalgia for days gone by. “We lost sight of what makes a pastoral life fulfilling and excellent,” says Jones.

As an alternative to their help-wanted ad for an underpaid and undervalued pastor, Jones and Armstrong include in their book a very different job description. This one depicts a deeply rewarding vocation founded on meaningful relationships. Specific responsibilities range from preaching and
teaching to “nurturing rigorous study and shaping practices of faithful living in church and world.” The advertisement promises fair compensation as well as support and encouragement for the successful applicant, who will walk alongside others, sharing lofty but attainable goals. As for the chain of command: “The vocation reports to God.”

How is a perception altered? How are conditions changed? What needs to happen to replace the negative description of pastoral ministry with the positive version? By the year 2000, the Christian community expressed an eagerness to find answers to these questions and a willingness to take action based on the answers. “What we were hearing was that the task of being a pastor was becoming more and more challenging, more and more complex, more and more difficult,” says Terry Hamrick, coordinator for leadership development for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. “Ministers were feeling overwhelmed.”

Even the calendar seemed to nudge the change process forward. As Jerry Dykstra, former executive director of the Christian Reformed Church, recalls: “With the approach of a new century, a combination of events came together that made us realize that we needed to address what it means to be an excellent pastor and identify what kinds of support pastors require to sustain that excellence.”

A program whose time has come

The “ain’t it awful” mindset and the conditions that caused it were decades in the making. Likewise, the initiative designed to address the mindset and upgrade the conditions took several years to formulate. Typical of all Lilly Endowment initiatives, Sustaining Pastoral Excellence was grounded in research.

As far back as 1998, the Endowment had funded a pilot project modeled on the Dixon Foundation’s successful Methodist Education Leave Society (MELS) program in Alabama. The pilot project, labeled the Clergy Peer Group Study Program (PGSP), invited Indiana clergy to form peer learning groups and meet periodically for three years. Like MELS, the program offered pastors some “time out” to interact with colleagues, work with a facilitator, and explore a central issue. Unlike MELS, the Indiana groups weren’t limited to a single denomination, and the focus was open-ended. MELS concentrated on preaching; PGSP gave group members the freedom to choose any topic related to pastoral leadership.

The Indiana program was slow to catch on—perhaps pastors hesitated to commit to yet another obligation—but it gradually gained momentum. Early recruits seemed to like the ecumenical mix within the groups (one team called itself the “Lutherpalians”) and appreciated the nontraditional approach to continuing education. Members developed a study plan, set learning goals, identified resources, and agreed on meeting times. The facilitator served in a support role, ready to step in whenever and wherever needed. Thanks to word of mouth, perception of the program changed. Participation came to be viewed, no longer as an obligation, but as an opportunity. Project director Bruce Roberts estimated it took more than three years to assemble seven study circles but only four months to double that number.

Whereas the peer learning experience gave Hoosier pastors a respite even as they continued to perform their regular duties, a second Endowment-supported program expanded “time out” to “time off.” The Clergy Renewal Program, introduced in Indiana in 1999 and rolled out nationally a year later, included a sabbatical component that encouraged midcareer pastors to get away from it all—literally—for three or four months. The purpose wasn’t to resuscitate failing ministries but to reinvigorate successful ones.

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—James P. Wind

explains James P. Wind, president of the Alban Institute. “It also reminds people that the clergy represent a finite resource, and if we’re not careful, we can exhaust it.”

With their congregations’ support and guidance, Clergy Renewal participants designed programs that played to their strengths, sharpened their skills, and explored their interests. They traveled, studied, wrote, and reflected. They gave themselves permission to indulge in self-care. They took up hobbies, shed a few pounds, and reconnected with friends. When they returned to their ministries, they felt rejuvenated and were eager to pick up where they had left off. In writing about the program, one journalist rightly dubbed the sabbatical “the pause that refreshes.”

Building on common ground

As different as MELS, the Clergy Peer Group Study Program, and Clergy Renewal were, they shared three important characteristics:

- They encouraged “agency.” Translated, this means that pastors had the opportunity and freedom to take personal responsibility for their own growth and development. The programs challenged pastors to decide what they wanted to do apart from their regular church duties and then gave them the time and the funds to do it.

- They celebrated excellence. So many programs aimed at pastors focus on fixing what is wrong rather than sustaining what is right. These programs took a different tack. They encouraged participants to engage in transformational practices that would build on existing strengths.

- They brought results. Participants came back to their pulpits with a new energy that was contagious. Congregations felt the jolt and responded with gusto.

The positive outcomes were so obvious that churches with vacant pulpits in the North Alabama Conference began requesting that their bishop appoint pastors who had taken part in MELS training. Evaluations of PGSP and Clergy Renewal in Indiana yielded feedback from participants and parishioners so enthusiastic that the link, long suspected, between a pastor’s health and a congregation’s vitality seemed confirmed.

A comprehensive research project, Pulpit & Pew, revealed that many American pastors struggle with feelings of loneliness, have difficulty establishing deep relationships, and often neglect their physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. Findings from programs such as MELS, PGSP, and Clergy Renewal indicated success in addressing some of these negatives. Peer groups, in particular, seemed an effective antidote to loneliness. Working in a community of peers seemed to generate trusted friendships. Time away from ministry seemed to nudge program participants toward reinstating balance within their personal and professional lives.

Endowment staff members took note of each program’s findings and assessed the composite picture that emerged. Still, there were gaps. The time seemed right to take the next step and create a comprehensive initiative that would test assumptions, confirm hunches, and take learning to a higher level. Specifically, they wanted answers to three key questions:

- What constitutes excellence in pastoral ministry?

- 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 and implement programs that will provide opportunities essential for maintaining healthy and vital ministries?
They call themselves the “Facelifters,” partly because their average age makes them prime candidates for nips and tucks, and partly because they share a profession that benefits when they lift their faces collectively to God. The five-member group gathers twice a year for a 48-hour retreat at a secluded cabin in the mountains of Colorado. Conversation is superficial at first—“We all tell lies about how fast our churches are growing,” jokes Tom Draayer, pastor of Hillcrest CRC in Denver, Colorado, one of the founders—but by Monday night, honesty prevails.

“We go around the circle and ask, ‘How are you doing?’ Each person can answer at whatever level he wants,” explains Draayer. They respect each other’s privacy, but anything mentioned in open conversation becomes fair game for follow-up questions or reflections. This isn’t a time to vent, whine, or play games. Instead, it’s a time for the pastors to nudge one another gently and ask, “How are things going in your life … really?” The session lasts about three hours and always ends with prayer. The goal is not to solve problems on the spot but rather to offer support for whatever situations members are facing.

For Draayer, diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease a decade ago, Facelifters has served as a trusted sounding board as he’s learned to balance his passion for ministry with his need to accommodate his condition. When his peers ask him how he’s doing … really, “I tell the truth.” If someone else—even a parishioner—were to ask the same question, “I’d probably just smile and say, ‘I’m fine.’”

Recently Draayer debated whether to leave the CRC church he has happily served for 22 years to accept a call to a sister congregation. At age 56, should he take on a new assignment with challenging responsibilities? As part of his deliberations, he sought the insights of his peers, knowing they would be truthful. “I asked them if I was getting stale where I was,” he recalls. “Did they think I was using my God-given gifts to the fullest extent?” Once he had made his decision, “I felt I was opening a new chapter in my life, and part of the encouragement to do it came through the feedback of Facelifters.”

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—Tom Draayer
They placed advertisements in major Christian publications inviting nonprofit organizations to join in a great experiment called Sustaining Pastoral Excellence. They hoped to interest a range of “laboratories”—different settings and a variety of approaches. A brochure outlined the SPE initiative in broad terms. Respondents had six months to dream, discuss, and then design programs that would build on past initiatives and result in fresh insights, new strategies, and proven practices.

**Wrestling with ‘excellence’**

“I liked the ‘excellence’ notion,” recalls Victor Klimoski, part of the team that accepted the Endowment’s challenge and drafted a grant proposal on behalf of St. John’s School of Theology-Seminary. As director of lifelong learning at the seminary, Klimoski admits he had been trying to figure out what a theological school could do for a church’s ministers that would be more than triage. “I was looking for something that would help make ministers full participants in the changes going on in their profession and in parish life.” The SPE proposal, if successful, would result in what Klimoski calls “enabling money” that would move the St. John’s program from paper to practice.

Not everyone shared Klimoski’s fondness for the word “excellence.” Some potential grantees pointed out that “excellence” seemed more appropriate for the business world, where success is defined by sales, profits, and volume. They noted that preaching, pastoral care, and counseling aren’t easily quantified. Some expressed doubts that excellence is compatible with the gospel. After all, Christians worship a crucified Lord, and in a worldly sense the cross is a symbol of failure. Some worried that “excellence” carried connotations of arrogance or would lead to a standardization of ministry. They bristled at the thought of Sunday morning attendance or stewardship numbers becoming the yardsticks to measure success.

The lively debate over the initiative’s name was exactly the reaction Lilly Endowment anticipated—and hoped for. In fact, “the word ‘excellence’ was chosen with careful deliberation,” explains John Wimmer, program director for SPE at the Endowment. “Philippians 4:8 asks us to focus on what is noble, right, admirable, and excellent. Christians speak about the excellence of God’s grace, the excellence of the gift of the church, and how we should give our best for God.”

**Excellent ministry ... is God’s gift rather than a human achievement.**

—Kenneth Carder

**Excellence as a resource**

Kenneth Carder, a former bishop of the Mississippi Area of the United Methodist Church who helped lead Duke’s coordination program, addressed the issue of “excellence” in ministry in several essays he wrote for the SPE website. “The wellspring of excellence in ministry,” he said, “is this: God, who creates this magnificent world and in Jesus Christ reconciles and renews all things, graciously invites us to share in Christ’s ministry by being reconciled and becoming agents of reconciliation. Excellent ministry, then, is God’s gift rather than a human achievement. ... [It] certainly involves personal initiative and accountability, skill development, and continuous formation and learning. But those qualities spring from a source deeper than mere self-discipline and external expectations and rewards.”

“We have never stipulated a definition of pastoral excellence,” says Craig Dykstra, the Endowment’s senior vice president for religion. “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 a really good pastor at work. We know, too, that ‘there are a variety of gifts,’ and that pastoral excellence comes in many forms. The gift of excellence that God provides calls forth from us a grateful response. We are all eager to respond faithfully and well. That is why we asked our applicants and grantees to follow Paul’s advice and ‘think on these things’ as deeply and fully as they could—both as they wrote their proposals and, especially, in the midst of their ongoing programs. We hoped that a vision of excellence could become an important resource for them and the pastors and congregations they serve. I believe that it has."

As a part of the grant application process, respondents were asked to put forward their own views of excellence in ministry. Specifically: What are the marks of good and faithful pastoral ministry? What are the rhythms and qualities of a well-lived pastoral life? What habits and practices sustain good ministry over time? What are the major challenges facing pastoral ministry today? What encourages or inhibits the practice of good ministry? What types of activities that support pastoral ministry need to be expanded? What is missing and needs to be created?

The pastors also noted the importance of taking personal responsibility for their own growth and development—agency—and their desire to participate actively in designing and implementing their own study and renewal experiences. They expressed little desire merely to attend events that others planned and hosted.

The forefront of national discussion

In September 2002, Lilly Endowment announced the awarding of 47 grants totaling $57.9 million to support SPE programs at institutions from coast to coast. The proposals were so strong and the competition so close that the following year 16 additional organizations joined in the initiative, sharing more than $26 million in grant awards. (See “Overview: The big picture” for a list of the 63 grantees.)

Even before the implementation phase began, the Endowment and the participating ministries agreed that they already had benefited from the exercise. Because the grants competition was open to any nonprofit organization that was committed to supporting pastoral work, the Endowment found itself in partnership with several outstanding but previously unfamiliar organizations. More important, the grants competition had pushed the topic of pastoral excellence to the forefront of national discussion. These exchanges led to a general understanding, as Terry Hamrick, of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, articulates, that ministers are “a renewable resource rather than an expendable commodity.” Every organization that submitted a proposal had engaged in conversation about the state of pastoral ministry and what encourages or inhibits excellence in its practice. "Good enough” was a euphemism for "mediocre” and simply wasn’t good enough as a characterization of pastoral ministry.

"Over the course of the past decade, the debate about the word ‘excellence’ has disappeared as people have become comfortable with it and have come to understand the impact that it can have,” notes Duke’s Greg Jones. “Participants in SPE have seen that excellence is a mindset that can be generative of new life and new images of pastoral ministry that enable and require changes in practices and assumptions."

True to the Endowment’s pledge to give a maximum amount of agency to grantees, the programs that received

- Regular engagement in spiritual disciplines
- Ongoing biblical and theological study with colleagues
- Friendships formed and nurtured with peers and mentors
- Extended time away for spiritual and personal renewal
- Involvement in programs to improve one’s pastoral skills
Senior pastor at the historic Vermont Avenue Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., Cornelius Wheeler says he has been “mission-minded since birth.” His father, who preceded him in the pulpit, used to make frequent trips to Central Africa. His church has supported the work of the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention for decades, and guest speakers from Martin Luther King Jr. to Barack Obama have praised the congregation for its tradition of working on behalf of the poor.

Still, “nothing prepares you for the culture shock that you experience in rural Guyana, Jamaica, and the townships of South Africa,” says Wheeler, who participated in Lott Carey’s Pastoral Excellence Program (PEP). “Poverty, much worse than I had imagined, is a way of life there.” Exposure to it “snatched me off my little golden perch and brought me down to reality very quickly.” Because PEP requires ministers to immerse themselves totally in foreign settings and work alongside host pastors, Wheeler visited homes of parishioners, made hospital calls, preached Sunday worship services, and led revivals. In the end, “the people ministered to me as much as I ministered to them,” he says.

He recalls the frustration of encountering problems that he was powerless to solve with a donation or a phone call. He and a colleague, for example, were able to pool their resources and buy the required school uniforms for four children who couldn’t attend classes because their family had no money. “But we could do nothing about their water that was unsafe to drink, or about the fact that the closest clinic was 50 miles away. We could only listen and try to instill hope.”

The experience has had “an earth-shattering impact” on his ministry. He returned home exhausted but exhilarated and “on fire to share my new perspective.” His message now to his congregation is that the Christian faith involves more than merely attending church. “I’ve seen people who have no material wealth, but they have a zeal for the Lord,” he says. “Being a Christian is knowing that tomorrow will be better than today because we believe in Jesus.”
funding followed no cookie-cutter model. Each was shaped by a team of persons within an organization who understood the unique needs of the group and recognized the opportunities and risks that the SPE initiative afforded. In their own ways they called forth the pastoral imagination of participants who were hungry for change and ripe for a challenge. “Just the process of asking the hard questions and putting together the grant proposal was critical,” says Dykstra, formerly of the Christian Reformed Church. “It began to get our leadership thinking differently about the church.”

The successful projects were “a diverse lot,” SPE program director John Wimmer later noted. “Perhaps this breadth is itself a significant lesson about the many ways pastoral leaders can learn from and with one another.” The next decade would prove his observations to be accurate—and grossly understated.

**A diverse group**

As different as the 63 funded proposals were, they shared similar goals and objectives from the outset. Ultimately, they were designed to strengthen pastors and thereby strengthen congregations. Their authors hoped to reduce the number of dropouts within the clergy ranks, address the “lone ranger” feeling of isolation that permeated the profession, provide continuing education opportunities that would upgrade skills and instill confidence, offer renewal experiences that would replenish energy and rekindle the desire to serve, and create resources that would benefit pastors long after the grant periods ended.

The ways the individual programs would accomplish these many goals were—and continue to be—the distinguishing factors. Some chose project names easily distilled to acronyms that give clues to their focus. Among them: Pastoral Excellence Program (PEP), indicating a heightened level of energy; Center for Pastoral Refreshment (CPR), suggesting a positive response to burnout; Pastoral Seasons as Life and Ministry (PSALM), underscoring an emphasis on Scripture; Sustaining Health and Pastoral Excellence (SHAPE), promising a multifaceted wellness program that includes self-care.

At the center of all ongoing programs are small groups that carry a variety of labels. Called learning communities, circles of trust, covenant fellowships, companions in ministry, and gateway groups, they differ in size, composition, frequency of meetings, and agenda. Some have facilitators; others do not. Some utilize the services of coaches or mentors; others have advisors or counselors on call. Some are denominationally based; others are ecumenical. Some assemble members from a small geographic area; others cross state lines or even national boundaries. Some have a designated curriculum; others take a more freewheeling approach. Lis Van Harten, project director for the Christian Reformed Church in North America, recalls a Texas group reporting to her about a particularly successful retreat. “We did absolutely nothing,” exuded the participants, “and we’re totally exhausted because we got so much accomplished.”

Many programs reach out to specific groups of pastors. Among those targeted over the years are Korean-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans, females, pastors under the age of 40, pastors in their first calls, pastors of churches in transition, youth pastors, second-career pastors, spouses of pastors, leaders of urban ministries, church planters, leaders of rural parishes, seminarians, … and the list goes on and on. Some groups are self-selecting—members invite colleagues to join—and others are organized by project directors who purposely mix up the membership to build bridges between generations and styles of ministry. Participation is encouraged but remains voluntary, which helps “maintain the edge,” says Chris Braudaway-Bauman of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ. “A group has to be very good if it is to keep its members involved.”

“Just the process of asking the hard questions and putting together the grant proposal was critical. It began to get our leadership thinking differently about the church.”

—Jerry Dykstra
At the center of the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program are the catalysts, the original grantees—63 faith-based organizations in 28 states and the District of Columbia that received funds to implement projects over a three- to five-year period.
• Memphis Theological Seminary of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Tennessee
• Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi
• Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, Minneapolis
• National Association for Lay Ministry, Chicago, Illinois (now in Washington, D.C.)
• Nebraska Conference of the United Church of Christ, Lincoln
• North Alabama Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, Birmingham
• Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas
• Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky
• Presbytery of San Francisco, Berkeley, California
• Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey
• Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia, Alexandria
• Reformed Church in America, New York, New York
• Roman Catholic Diocese of Tulsa, Oklahoma
• St. Francis Retreat Center, DeWitt, Michigan
• St. John’s School of Theology-Seminary, Collegeville, Minnesota
• St. Mary’s Seminary and University, Baltimore, Maryland
• St. Paul’s Monastery, St. Paul, Minnesota
• Samaritan Counseling Center of Albuquerque, New Mexico
• Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama
• Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry, Washington
• Texas Methodist Foundation, Austin
• Triangle Pastoral Counseling, Raleigh, North Carolina
• Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education (now Union Presbyterian Seminary), Richmond, Virginia
• United Methodist Center (State Headquarters), Little Rock, Arkansas
• University of Notre Dame, Indiana
• Upper Room Ministries, Nashville, Tennessee
• Upstate New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Syracuse
• Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.
• Western Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America, Holland, Michigan
• Westminster Theological Seminary in California, Escondido
• Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
The response to the small group opportunity was overwhelming from the start. Recruitment efforts typically required little more than getting the word out. “Initially, we were flooded with people who wanted to participate,” recalls Hamrick, of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. “Almost overnight, we had organized more than 50 peer groups.” Years later, that number continues to swell. “We now have 120 groups with between 800 and 900 ministers involved,” says Hamrick.

Fine-tuning the programs

A common characteristic of all SPE projects has been a willingness to fine-tune program components that fall short of expectations and to expand components that far exceed their goals. For example, when pastors who enrolled in the Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership commented that their days at the program’s Green Lake Conference Center were overscheduled, the planning team scaled back the time allotted for lectures and created larger blocks for peer group interaction. When workshops at St. John’s School of Theology-Seminary were undersubscribed, the school’s SPE planners revamped the program and replaced the workshops with renewal retreats and independent study projects designed by the ministers who would participate in them. When the Institute for Clergy and Congregational Excellence in Texas clustered pastors according to their years in ministry, the anticipated bonds among group members failed to materialize. Project executive director Jim Turley sensed the lack of chemistry, shifted direction, and began grouping pastors who serve in similar ministry settings. Mission accomplished.

“Halfway through our programming we heard people ask repeatedly, ‘What are you doing for the spouses of pastors?’” says CRC project director Van Harten. “In truth, we weren’t doing anything. So, because we’re a binational church, we decided to host a two-day wives’ conference in Toronto to test the interest. It was so well-received that we then expanded and did nine regional events across Canada and the States. Based on the evaluations, our next grant proposal contained three new pieces: an annual conference for spouses, peer groups just for pastors’ wives, and a learning event for pastor couples.” (See “Close-up: Life in a fishbowl.”)

This constant tweaking to improve every aspect of every program has led to interesting discoveries. Positive results seem best achieved when no detail is left to chance. For example, the location where a peer group convenes may seem like an arbitrary decision, but its importance cannot be overemphasized, according to program overseers. Case in point: the Facelifters peer group (see “Close-up: ‘How are you doing?’”) meets at a rustic cabin that has neither housekeeping staff nor carryout food options. Shortly after the members assemble, they cook their own dinner and then do the dishes. The simple activity of five male pastors collaborating in the kitchen breaks down barriers and creates an informal atmosphere that carries over when they gather around the fireplace for their initial conversation. By contrast, female spouses of pastors typically schedule their small group meetings at full-service hotels where they enjoy a welcome reprieve from their normal cooking and cleanup responsibilities. As opposite as these two settings are, they accomplish the same goal: they take participants out of their established routines and prepare them for the unexpected.

“Productive learning can happen almost anywhere, but the setting is not a matter of indifference,” explains Klimoski, veteran group facilitator for the St. John’s program. “Choosing

“Productive learning can happen almost anywhere, but the setting is not a matter of indifference.”

— Victor Klimoski
As senior pastor at Belgrade Avenue United Methodist Church in Minnesota and father of 12 adopted kids, Bart Fletcher has limited time to dabble in creative writing. “We didn’t adopt infants,” he explains. “We chose to adopt kids who were waiting in foster care.” He and his wife, Claudia, collaborate on a blog that explores the joys and challenges of parenting a blended family of ten sons and two daughters. His entries are insightful, but their frequency is sporadic. “I’ve always had a desire to write,” he says, “but because of other responsibilities …”

Halfway across the country, Roberta Egli can complete the sentence. A second-career pastor who came into ministry after decades as a nurse, she’s a gifted writer who says she gets “epiphanies through journaling.” Five months into her call as minister at Trinity United Methodist Church in Eugene, Oregon, she struggles to keep current with her entries. “Journaling is a formative way of birthing who I am becoming as a pastor,” she says. “Some of the ideas that germinate in my journal end up in sermons and newsletters. I know I need to carve out time to write, but …”

When Upper Room Ministries created a Writers’ Covenant Group as part of its SPE project, the goal was to give participating pastors—Fletcher and Egli among them—the gift of time. The group meets for four-day retreats that feature generous chunks of protected writing time. The project’s planning team, including editors from Upper Room publications, has resisted the temptation to fill the hours with instruction. “We want to offer sacred space so the voices of these authors can emerge,” says Pam Hawkins, managing editor of Weavings journal. “What often happens to creative people when they enter seminary is that their writing becomes tailored to meet academic demands. We’ve heard countless stories from pastors who once loved to write but who haven’t been able to recover that part of their identity.”

Members of the group have come to accept the notion that writing is more than a communication tool; it is “a spiritual gift that enables them to express their love for God,” says Hawkins. During one discussion session the group members talked about the importance of nurturing the dual gifts of writing and ministry. This prompted what the group calls a “Bart-ism” from Fletcher. He posed the question, “Am I a writer who pastors or a pastor who writes?”

“I don’t know if there is an answer,” he says honestly. “When I’m heavily engaged in my pastoral work, I feel like a pastor who sometimes writes. But when I’m in retreat and have whole blocks of time to focus on my writing, I think I’m a writer who pastors. For me, it’s that continuum, back and forth, that provides energy and momentum to keep doing it.”
Practices that sustain pastoral excellence

As important as such settings are, they serve only as backdrops for the ongoing practices that are critical to the development of the character and work of excellent pastors. In the past decade, the 63 SPE projects have explored a range of practices in an effort to identify those that are crucial to sustaining pastoral excellence. Three practices, tested in numerous settings by clergy from diverse faith traditions, have emerged as unequivocally effective. Excellent ministry is most likely to develop and flourish when pastors:

1. Participate in a structured learning community of peers
2. Embody a life of faith in sustained ways
3. Cultivate imagination through border crossing

These practices have manifested themselves in different ways within individual SPE projects. Learning communities—as illustrated throughout this publication—can take on different shapes, sizes, and purposes with equal success. Depending on the traditions of the sponsoring organizations, expressions of faith can range from days of silent prayer to hours of jubilant song. Depending on the missions of the programs, groups can cultivate imagination by making pilgrimages to Italy or learning the ancient art of bookbinding in Minnesota. What has remained constant in all programs is the presence of the three practices—in all their creative diversity.

“Pastors need to experience community if they are to create community,” says Jim Turley, president of the Texas Methodist Foundation’s Institute for Clergy and Congregational Excellence. Six years into the SPE initiative, a pair of surveys measured the impact that peer group participation had on hundreds of pastors. Among the interesting findings: As busy as clergy are, 97 percent of respondents say they have attended a majority or all of their peer group meetings; 91 percent say they view their groups as an important component of their continuing education; and of the 70 percent who have participated in groups apart from the SPE initiative, the majority characterize their SPE group as “better or much better” than the others.

To ensure that Texas pastors receive maximum benefit from their CDGs (Clergy Development Groups), Turley, a former attorney, follows a three-part model that he adapted from the corporate world. The process creates a community that not only cares for its members but also equips its members to lead. The first part of the model involves self-directed learning based on the group's interests. “We bring in speakers the pastors otherwise wouldn’t have access to,” says Turley. “These are significant resource people who engage in dialogue that participants can’t get when they sit in a lecture hall with 200 other learners and take notes that will end up in binders on a shelf somewhere.”

“These are significant resource people who engage in dialogue that participants can’t get when they sit in a lecture hall with 200 other learners and take notes that will end up in binders on a shelf somewhere.”
—Jim Turley
The second part of the model is “issue processing.” Each pastor brings to the peer group meeting a personal or professional issue that needs attention. Group members exchange ideas until the person who presented the issue is ready to create a “personal exit summary of concrete action steps” based on the discussion. “This plan goes far beyond saying, ‘I’m going to pray about it,’” explains Turley. “It’s a commitment to action.” The third part of the model occurs later, when the group’s facilitator makes an accountability visit to the pastor’s church to check on the plan’s implementation. The facilitator asks such questions as, What progress have you made? What is the status of your issue? “This is the strength of our program,” says Turley. “The process encourages pastors not to fuss and moan about a situation but instead to take action in affirmative and positive ways.”

A similar blend of education, discussion, and skill building exists in most SPE programs, although the time allotted for each component may vary. Dana Allen Walsh’s group in Lexington, Massachusetts, is smaller—five members—and always begins with “check in.” Pastors take turns summarizing what’s going on in their personal and professional lives. “We’ve set some good ground rules,” explains Walsh. “This is a sacred time for the group; it’s not a time to boast or brag.” Topics may include a pragmatic issue such as improving a church website or a personal issue such as self-care. “I remember one meeting when the group convinced me that I shouldn’t feel compelled to check my e-mail right before I go to bed at night and first thing in the morning,” says Walsh. “They told me it’s all right to set boundaries and to know when to say yes and when to say no when it comes to going to the office on my day off.”

Many programs, including Turley’s in Texas and Walsh’s in Massachusetts, utilize trained facilitators who convene conversations at just the right level and prevent them from turning into “ain’t it awful” sessions. Klimoski often begins his group meetings at St. John’s with a question that he describes as “broad enough to invite everybody into the conversation but specific enough so people don’t think we’re just shooting the breeze.” He emphasizes that the purpose of a peer group meeting isn’t to rehash old problems that have no solutions but to elevate the discussion to issues related to equipping people to become disciples of Christ. “I try to have a very clear starting point that reflects the needs and interests of the group,” says Klimoski. “But going forward, the conversation is theirs; they shape it. I never have a predetermined end.”

**Practice 2:**

**Embody a life of faith in sustained ways**

Worship is a vital part of all peer group gatherings and often involves studying Scripture, praying, singing, and meditating. “Most groups prefer that the facilitators lead the worship so the pastors can catch their breath and relax,” says Braudaway-Bauman, of the Massachusetts Conference, UCC. “For a lot of our clergy, this feels like the only place where they can participate in worship without having the responsibility to lead it.”

Jerry Haas, project director of the SPE-supported Companions in Ministry program at Upper Room Ministries, likes to pose the question suggested by T.S. Eliot, “Is there enough silence for the Word to be heard?” Because Haas believes the answer is no, the Companions in Ministry program gives participants ample time to reflect and discern what God is saying to them. Each day that the pastors spend together as a group has an intentional rhythm to it. Educational activities and peer group sessions are punctuated by daily communion and morning, midday, and evening prayer. This rhythm goes home with the pastors when they disperse. Many of them find ways to integrate it into their parish ministries and their personal lives.

Silence likewise is built into the Sustaining Urban Pastoral Excellence project, based at Boston University School of Theology, and into the Lott Carey Pastoral Excellence Program. Ministers in city settings try to “turn down the volume” of their surroundings, and at least one New York City pastor is attempting to teach his congregation how to be silent in the midst of the clamor of Manhattan. The practice
His reputation as the father—better yet, the grandfather—of pastoral peer groups is well-deserved. After all, Larry Dill was the one who convinced the Dixon Foundation back in the 1980s to support a cluster of clergy who wanted to design a curriculum and study together for three years. The pastors had had their fill of “syllabus mentality” that requires learners, even adult learners, to study what someone else wants them to study. The concept of self-directed learning—“agency”—was new, and Dill was its most enthusiastic proponent.

He still is. Now retired from parish ministry, he serves as executive director of the Institute for Clergy Excellence, a program that urges peer groups to embrace “radical agency,” Dill’s term for crafting adventure-filled learning modules. Ecumenical groups, supported in part by SPE funds, have traveled to Korea, Brazil, and South Africa. “The world is our classroom,” says Dill. “Important and unexpected things happen when ministers move far out of their comfort zones.” For example, a group composed of a rabbi, a Catholic priest, and several Protestant pastors wanted to study the ways spiritual leaders of various faiths experience the divine. Their quest took them to Bangladesh and India, where they worked with Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity organization. “It was mind-blowing,” says Dill. “We were amazed by their stories.”

He is equally enthusiastic about life-changing adventures that are available closer to home and on a more modest budget. A group of clergy over the age of 50 recently approached him with a proposal called “Jubilee Journey.” The ministers were beginning to think about retirement, and as one member explained, “We want to end well. We don’t want to become burned out, holding on with cold, bony fingers until we hang it up.” The jubilee theme seemed fitting because of the Old Testament tradition of designating the 50th year as a time of celebration and renewal. The pastors wanted to begin their final chapter of ministry on a celebratory note and with a revived sense of mission.

“This is what SPE is all about,” says Dill. “The program addresses sustaining pastoral excellence in the whole life span of ministry.” He believes that the key is agency—better yet, radical agency. “You can see a difference in people who are pursuing what they are passionate about,” he says. “That kind of learning experience builds energy and is truly transformational.”
of silence can be equally challenging in rural environments. The Lott Carey program schedules a three-day retreat when pastors visit Guyana as part of their immersion experience. One of those days is spent in silence.

“Some Baptist pastors who live in small communities have never heard of doing this, but they are open to it,” explains project director Brenda Harewood. “The Lord meets them at new and different places, and many of them take these practices back to their churches to introduce the idea of sabbath to their lay leaders.”

Using art as a catalyst for understanding Scripture is a practice that several SPE programs have adopted successfully. “Art helps people open up,” says Barbara Sutton, associate dean of ministerial formation and outreach at St. John’s School of Theology-Seminary. In facilitating small groups of ecclesial ministers, she often asks participants to read a portion of Scripture and then study the accompanying illumination from The Saint John’s Bible. This leads to an exchange of personal stories and insights as group members respond to the words that are wedded to the art.

“I remember talking about the parable of the sower and the seed,” says Sutton. “One woman in the group was fixated on the left corner of the illumination that shows a tiny bird with its head down, picking at seeds and paying no attention to the man who is scattering the seed. The woman said, ‘That bird is so like me! I get busy doing little tasks and don’t take time to look up at the whole picture around me.’” The comment led to a meaningful discussion as the ministers saw the link between the parable and themselves. “Art slows us down in a good way,” explains Sutton. “Sometimes people are surprised by what they say after they say it. Value comes from talking things out.”

Other important Christian activities that help sustain a life of faith include exhibiting hospitality, cultivating holy friendships, and honoring the body through feasting, fasting, and exercising. The Facelifters peer group incorporates all of these practices during their retreats in the mountains of Colorado. (See “Close-up: ‘How are you doing?’”) Hospitality begins with their pitch-in dinner; friendships deepen during discussion times; and exercise takes the form of hiking, boating, or snowshoeing, depending on the season of the year. “It’s important to include something fun,” explains Tom Draayer. “We all enjoy studying and learning, but what we need in our lives isn’t to attend more conferences or gain more knowledge. We need to get away, decompress, and have fun.”

Getting away and decompressing is particularly challenging for pastoral couples who serve in the same church. The tendency is to let shoptalk encroach on personal time and blur the lines between home and office. When Bill Hoyle, senior pastor of Clemmons (N.C.) Presbyterian Church, who serves alongside his wife, applied to the Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence for a sabbatical leave, he identified two things that needed his attention. First was his personal spiritual life; second was his family. Addressing the first, he proposed getting away from the demands of daily ministry and spending time alone in a quiet, reflective setting. A week of silence and contemplation at a monastery in Alabama accomplished that goal. “I had never done anything like that before,” he says. “It was wonderful.” In fact, it was so beneficial that when he returned home he arranged to meet with a spiritual director each month. The practice continues. “Time at the monastery helped propel me into this relationship.”

Practice 3:
Cultivate imagination through border crossing

These experiences also help pastors gain perspective by being a type of border crossing, a time to cultivate their imaginations away from the everyday. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Lott Carey’s Pastoral Excellence Program (PEP), which requires peer group participants to stay in the homes of host
pastors when they travel to Guyana, Jamaica, Zimbabwe, or South Africa. (See “Close-up: Snatched from a golden perch”)

“Our first group of pastors fought the idea when we introduced it,” recalls Brenda Harewood, the project director. “Many of them said, ‘After all these years in ministry, I don’t live in people’s houses; I stay in hotels!’” They even offered to pay for their own rooms.” But Harewood was adamant. The decision to stay in private homes was not negotiable; in fact, it was essential to achieving the program’s goal of nudging the pastors out of their comfort zones. The group complied, grudgingly, and later understood the importance of total immersion in an unfamiliar culture. Members were overwhelmed by the hospitality of their host families, regardless of the sometimes sparse surroundings.

The PEP process is guided by the theological principles of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation adapted from Walter Brueggemann’s theological analysis of the Psalms. Program participants begin with a basic understanding of pastoral ministry, but when they are immersed in a new environment they feel confused. “These experiences of disorientation help pastors broaden their vision and build healthy networks of support,” explains David Goatley, executive secretary-treasurer of Lott Carey. “They learn from the ministry strategies and practices of their international colleagues and come to appreciate the support they develop with their cohorts.” After disorientation, the pastors move to reorientation, “which provides them with the space to integrate appropriate aspects of their immersion experiences into their personal and ministerial lives,” says Goatley.

Bill Hoyle discovered that immersing himself in different environments was so refreshing that he now tries to convince colleagues to get away and cross borders with some regularity. This can be accomplished simply by reading widely, talking with new and interesting people, or experiencing different styles of worship.

The impact of SPE

Someone once remarked that a mind, stretched, can never go back to its original shape. Likewise, clergy, congregations, and institutions that have participated in Sustaining Pastoral Excellence projects are forever changed—in large and small ways—for having been part of the great experiment. How are they different? “It’s hard to measure,” says Jerry Dykstra. “After all, how do you measure attitudes? How do you measure cultural change? Yet if I get up on the balcony and look down at the dance floor, I can see a significant difference. It isn’t the whole answer to sustaining excellent ministry, but it’s a critical piece of the whole.”

Only a portion of SPE’s impact is quantifiable, but much is tangible, and even more is supported by very real stories. Results are still unfolding as seminaries implement curriculum changes, judicatories revise professional development programs, retreat centers consider new ways to serve pastors, and individual congregations beef up their continuing education budgets and make systemic changes based on what they’ve learned. For example, 65 Baptist congregations drafted sabbatical leave policies after the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship used SPE funds to award sabbatical grants to their...
clergy. “Our goal was not just to give pastors a break but to create an appreciation within congregations for sabbatical leaves and continuing education,” says leadership development coordinator Hamrick. The strategy worked.

Among other measurable results: Researchers who have studied the effects of pastor peer group participation report that congregations led by clergy who attend small group sessions typically create a “culture of involvement.” They actively assimilate newcomers, involve members of all ages in leadership, devote time to community service, and encourage their clergy to pursue continuing education opportunities. And their churches are growing. “Does participation in pastoral peer groups make a difference to pastors? Does participation in peer groups make a difference to congregations?” asks SPE researcher Penny Long Marler. The answer to both questions, she says, is a resounding yes—and she has the numbers to back it up.

Field reports of SPE’s impact further support Marler’s findings. New Clergy Groups have been so successful in the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ that virtually 100 percent of recently ordained clergy choose to join. “When pastors come to Massachusetts, they call us and ask, ‘Where is my New Clergy Group? How can I get connected right away?’” says SPE program director Sue Dickerman. “They know they won’t be dropped into a swimming pool and told to swim. They’ll have a support system that will help them make a successful entry into the local church.” After three years in a New Clergy Group, a pastor has the option of moving into a Clergy Community of Practice. The majority of them do. “About 64 percent of our pastors have been in our program since we began it eight years ago,” says Dickerman.

More good news: in that same time period, the dropout rate among clergy has plummeted.

Because of the success in Massachusetts, UCC conferences in other parts of New England are expressing interest in adopting the model, and a few pastors from neighboring New Hampshire and Connecticut are crossing state lines to sit in on small group meetings and attend colloquies. This literal “border crossing” is a new phenomenon for the region and for the denomination. “New England congregations value their independence a lot,” emphasizes Dickerman. “The idea of networking and being part of a larger system that learns from one another is a huge cultural change. There seems to be a new understanding about how we can work together.”

**Congregations signing on the dotted line**

Convincing congregations to buy into change is a challenge not limited to New England. Many SPE projects require congregations to sign covenants of mutual understanding and contribute matching funds before their pastors can participate in programs. “The purpose is to initiate conversation between the pastor and congregation,” explains Upper Room Ministries’ project director Haas. “The congregation has to know that the pastor will need time away, will be involved in certain activities, and will be learning some new things. The covenant prompts the congregation to support and value the experience.” The Upper Room’s agreement requests that a congregation go beyond giving tacit permission. It encourages church members to get actively involved alongside their clergy. The last line of the covenant reads: “We [the congregation] will seek to learn as [the pastor] is learning what it means to be the church today and what it means to be in ministry as the people of God.”

Some ambitious SPE projects have expanded lay involvement and created new roles for congregations. The Christian Reformed Church launched a Sustaining Congregational Excellence program in 2007 that is modeled after but not funded by SPE. CRC congregations of fewer than 150 members are invited to apply for grants to support ministry projects that they feel passionately about. “It’s very much patterned after SPE in that we ask congregations, ‘You tell us—we won’t tell you—what gets you excited? What project is your congregation
anxious to take on?” explains program director Lis Van Harten. “For example, we just made a grant to a Grand Rapids church that wanted to create an activity room for teens in the community. Because the space has hip-hop music and because it’s decorated for kids, the young people are starting to come—even kids who say they want nothing to do with church. The freedom and creativity of the project are typical of SPE and wouldn’t have happened had we not been involved in SPE.”

Like the CRC, the Massachusetts UCC leadership is in the process of creating a spinoff program that is motivated but not funded by SPE. The First Call Congregations Project will expand on the New Clergy Groups initiative and engage multiple partners. In working with pastors in their first calls, “we recognized that there is another important part of the equation—the congregations that call them,” says Braudaway-Bauman. “What does it mean to call a pastor just out of seminary? After all, pastors are formed not just in seminary but in the first congregations that they serve. So how can we help congregations be more intentional as they fulfill their role in pastoral formation?” A partnership has resulted for the purpose of designing strategies and implementing a program to address these questions. Participants include the SPE team, area congregations, the national UCC organization, and Andover Newton Theological School.

**Excellence: A shared responsibility**

Other collaborations are forming as diverse entities within the Christian community acknowledge the shared responsibility of instilling and sustaining pastoral excellence. “It is the task of the seminary—in partnership with congregations—to educate and form leaders for the church,” conclude Boston University’s Stone and Wolfteich in *Sabbath in the City*. As a result of the school’s SPE project with urban pastors from across the country, the faculty has made curriculum revisions and changes in field education, and is creating ongoing peer learning communities. The school rolled out its new curriculum in the fall of 2010, and “we’re excited to see the long-term impact,” says Wolfteich.

A different kind of partnership is emerging at St. John’s School of Theology-Seminary, where faculty and administrators are working with U.S. bishops to develop a theology of vocation for lay ministers. This is a natural outgrowth of the SPE project that has worked to expand and upgrade continuing education opportunities for ecclesial pastors. With the shortage of priests, these ministers shoulder much responsibility and often do it with minimal preparation and recognition. “What does it mean to be called to this kind of ministry?” asks Bill Cahoy, dean of the school of theology. “How is it different from being called to the priesthood? What is an ecclesial minister authorized to do? And who does the authorizing? Figuring this out is part of creating a culture within the Catholic world in which this form of ministry can be recognized and vocationally enriched. I think SPE has greatly contributed to that.”

The impact of the decade-long SPE initiative will continue to be measured, felt, and described in personal narratives for years to come. At its most powerful, it has been the catalyst for sweeping change. In less dramatic terms, it’s been a catalyst for a conversation that has given voice to almost every faith tradition on the American landscape. Themes have emerged. Agreements have been noted and misconceptions dispelled. Collaborations have replaced competitions as barriers have tumbled down.

“It’s brought together Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelical Protestants,” says Duke University’s Jones. “It’s been interesting to see the different mindsets converge in the need to become more intentional about thinking about the vocation of ministry and what excellence will involve in the 21st century. There’s been enough in common to make it a really rich conversation, and there’s been enough diversity to make it a really important conversation.”
Flattened by Hurricane Camille in 1969 and devastated by Katrina in 2005, historic Trinity Episcopal Church was rebuilding again when lay leaders urged their rector to get out of town. They were worried about him.

“I’ve never been so tired in my life,” recalls Chris Colby, who had served in various ministry assignments for more than 30 years when Katrina roared through Pass Christian, Mississippi, demolishing about 80 percent of the coastal village. Flood water reached 22 feet in Trinity’s sanctuary, pushed out the stained-glass windows, and washed away the Christian education building, parish hall, and church offices. “It’s staggering to walk through your hometown, a place that you love, and realize that it’s practically been erased,” says Colby. “You feel as if you’ve lost part of your identity.”

He had never taken an extended leave but was attracted to the opportunity that Samford University’s Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence offered as part of its SPE project. Sabbaticals of up to three months were available to pastors involved in active ministry. He needed only to design a plan that would address his needs. “Many pastors have no concept of sabbaticals,” says Michael Wilson, program director. “We tell them that a sabbatical is time away for a reason. We suggest that they answer this question: If you were given time and space without any distractions, what would you do that would be renewing and refreshing?” Answers have varied from fly fishing to writing a book to taking trombone lessons. For Colby, it was easy.

“I slept most of the first week,” he admits. After that, “I spent the whole time just slowing down.” Because he has always loved an academic setting, he took up residence on the Samford campus, where he sat in on classes, exercised under the direction of a physical trainer, explored the library, and talked regularly with a counselor. Five weeks later, he returned home to continue to pick up the pieces—literally.

“The sabbatical was one of the best things I’ve ever done for myself,” he says. “If you serve in an area like this, you really need a lot of care. I take rest more seriously now. I feel human again.”
When the Christian Reformed Church in North America expanded its SPE program to include peer groups and special events for pastors’ wives, the women responded with gratitude and humor. One peer group called itself “SOS” (Saving Our Sanity); another chose “Pastor Spouses Sharing Together” (Psst!). A couples’ getaway explored “The Art of Living Large in a Fishbowl,” and a girls-only conference used the theme “For the Many Hats You Wear” to celebrate the wives’ ability to fulfill multiple roles at home and in church. Before they left the “hats” conference, fully recharged, the 90-plus female participants gathered for a group photo wearing hats that ranged from beret to sombrero to ten-gallon.

“Ministry is wonderful, but it can be draining,” says Mary Lee Workman, a pastor’s wife for more than 40 years. “If a pastor doesn’t have the full support of his wife, he’s going to have a long, tough road ahead. These events make the wives feel valued and needed. By investing in our lives, SPE is recognizing us as an important part of the ministry team.”

Members of Workman’s peer group vary in age, are culturally diverse, and come from churches scattered from Durham, North Carolina, to Miami, Florida. The single characteristic they share—all are married to CRC pastors—has caused them to form strong bonds. “We let down our hair and have fun together,” Workman says. When they go their separate ways, they are different—better—in some small way. “For me, since I’ve been in ministry for so long, it’s a fulfilling feeling to know that I’m walking alongside someone younger, someone I’m mentoring. At the same time, it’s energizing to see these young women who are excited about ministry and to hear what they’re doing. The peer group has created a setting where we all learn from each other.”
SPE: *A movement to be continued …*

Is there life after Lilly? As grants run out, organizations face the hard work of sustaining programs that have succeeded in sustaining excellence. Many institutions have assembled a portfolio of strategies to help meet expenses. They’ve added new lines to their operating budgets, shuffled funds from one project to another, shifted program participation from “free to fee,” trimmed frills, and launched development campaigns. The administration at one university-based project has agreed to provide office space and cover salaries if staff members can raise programming money. Another organization has sold a parcel of land to serve as the bedrock for an endowment fund. The director of an effective but expensive program is hoping technology might curb the travel expenses of consultants who make one-on-one calls on pastors. Skype, anyone?

Much of the impetus for continuing SPE projects has come from clergy who have experienced the benefits of participation. The Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ has trained 50 “ambassadors”—enthusiastic pastors who have served as group facilitators—to visit churches and seek support for a $3.5 million sustainability campaign. “It won’t cover all our costs,” says program director Sue Dickerman, “but it will be an endowment to underwrite programming.” Sister Mary Luke Jones at the Benedict Inn has set aside a portion of the inn’s grant money to hire a consultant to create a comprehensive fundraising initiative. This will build on the unsolicited gifts sent by participants in the Women Touched by Grace program. Graduates of the pastoral retreat program at Ashland Theological Seminary are so enthusiastic about their experience that many return to mentor and teach new participants. They provide their services for a stipend that covers only 5 percent of their time, an arrangement that accomplishes three goals: it saves money, reinforces learning for the graduates, and gives retreat participants access to mentor-teachers who know the program inside and out.

“By now our peer groups have self-ownership, which is why they have longevity,” says the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s Terry Harrick. “I joke that we couldn’t eliminate the groups if we wanted to. They’re finding ways to fund their activities. The programs belong to them, not to us.” In denominations that relocate their pastors with some regularity, the peer group concept is self-propelling. As one program director noted, “When pastors move on, they take the idea with them and start new groups wherever they land.”

Larry Dill, the man who helped birth SPE, is also having success in keeping it alive. The Institute for Clergy Excellence, the project he directs in Alabama, has established sponsorships, “and people are making significant contributions,” he says. “Congregations are seeing that this program is making a difference.”

And it appears to be a difference that they’re willing to support. “Yes, SPE has staying power,” assures Duke University’s L. Gregory Jones. “People will continue it because they’ve discovered that it matters.”

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Credits:

Thank you to all the SPE projects who contributed photographs for the report and to the many project directors, pastors, and project participants who agreed to be interviewed.
Resources

From articles and websites to books and blogs, SPE has produced an assortment of significant materials since the initiative’s launch a decade ago. Many more products are in the works, including a comprehensive volume, available next year, that will serve as a how-to guide for organizations interested in creating programs that support pastoral excellence. The list that follows represents a sampling of the best books produced by SPE projects, along with helpful resources for those looking to launch projects, and selected titles related to ways of thinking about pastoral excellence. A fuller list is available on the Pastoral Excellence website.


Explores the Christian faith as an embodied way of life shaped by practices. The contributors address twelve practices for the Christian life in response to God’s love for the church and all of creation. A vital resource for sustaining the spiritual, theological, and physical lives of pastors and their ministries.


Discusses what it means for pastoral leadership to be “life-giving,” as well as the kinds of learning and teaching that best prepare ministers to foster such a way of life in their congregations. Contributors probe and clarify the significance of practical theology in the classroom, the wider academy, and actual ministry settings.


Draws on the extensive data collected from the Pulpit & Pew project to examine the state of both Protestant and Catholic clergy at the beginning of the 21st century. The book addresses the many factors shaping pastoral ministry today—changing roles of clergy and laypeople, the future of women in ministry, the shifting state of clergy supply, and more. Using Paul’s image of Christians as “clay jars,” God’s Potters offers strategies for strengthening pastoral leadership and cultivating excellence in ministry.


Offers an honest, reflective account of the challenges and joys of pastoral ministry. The chapters move from comedy to pathos, story to theology, Scripture to contemporary culture. An ideal read for those who are considering the ministry or who want to understand better the ministry vocation.


Discusses the idea of adaptive leadership and provides a practical set of stories, diagrams, techniques, and activities to help assess and address difficult challenges in leadership. An essential handbook for leading in and through complex and rapidly changing contexts.


Shows clergy leaders how to explore their story of reality, tell it to other clergy peer group members, and consider how it can be used as a resource for leadership. A product of the authors’ six years of work with SPE-supported long-term clergy peer groups, this volume provides a narrative perspective about leading through difficult challenges and contexts, where there is always more than one story.

Provides the theological basis for exploring pastoral excellence. The authors articulate a theology of excellence in ministry that shuns both competition and mediocrity and rightly focuses on the beauty, power, and practices of living as faithful disciples of the crucified and risen Christ. *Resurrecting Excellence* portrays the ministries of pastors, lay leaders, and congregations that embody “a more excellent way.”


An account of the practice of “Circles of Trust” for forming peer group commitments. Provides an evocative framework for peer group rules that invites a participatory dynamic and discourages hierarchical or problem-solving approaches. A helpful resource for designing peer group experiences.


Offers new approaches to continuing theological education that address the need for programs involving both clergy and laity at the congregational level. The book explores historical perspectives and educational contexts; theory and research in professional continuing education; innovations in continuing theological education; development, management, and promotion of programs; and directions and resources for the future.


Draws together a wide range of texts—including fiction, autobiography, and philosophy—to raise the question of what we should do and who we should be. Instead of giving prescriptive advice, the editors approach the subject of vocation as an ongoing conversation. This volume will help readers clarify and deepen how they think about their own lives and vocations.


Addresses the specific challenges facing urban pastors and explores practices that help sustain ministers working in urban contexts. Drawing on their SPE-supported research involving urban pastors from across the United States, the authors identify and examine spiritual practices that foster excellence in urban ministry: cultivating holy friendships, practicing sabbath, maintaining lives of prayer and study, and setting appropriate boundaries.


Offers a framework for understanding the spiritual disciplines and instruction for developing and nurturing them. The author captures the beauty of Christian spirituality and the practices of prayer, worship, fasting, self-examination, and hospitality. A powerful account of the spiritual life, well-suited for both individual reading and group discussion.
The cover and interior design elements for this report were drawn from Psalm 23, a new serigraph by John August Swanson, with his permission. We are grateful for his generosity and for the ways in which his art has inspired so many.