

# IN PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE: *Nurturing Protestant Pastoral Leadership*

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Over the past several years, the theme of excellence has appeared in virtually every reform effort in American society—business, politics, education, the arts, science, etc. Whatever we have now, it seems, could and should be better, if not excellent.

In religious institutions, the same call has been heard. Lilly Endowment has been at the forefront of addressing excellence in pastoral ministry in a multi-faceted set of programs that span more than a decade. This article deals with only a sample of these grants and focuses on those addressed to excellence in Protestant ministry. A subsequent article will deal with grants for Roman Catholic ministry.

Lilly officers emphasize the wide-ranging scope of the grants, covering “the life course” of ministry:

- Calling forth the next generation of pastors
- Educating the next generation of pastors
- Enhancing and strengthening the transition to the first congregation
- Sustaining parish ministers

The term “ecology” figures prominently in Lilly’s discussion of the aims and purposes of its programs for strengthening pastoral ministers. The attempt is designed less to address particular problems and more to create an atmosphere or culture (“an ecology”) that creates and sustains excellence in ministry.

Of course, there are “problems” lurking in the background, ranging from the quantity to the quality of ordained pastoral ministers. They involve perceived declines in:

- The quantity of pastoral ministers (and not only in the Roman Catholic Church)
- The quality of students preparing for ministry
- The quality of ministers
- The morale among clergy, including loneliness and burnout
- The ethical behavior and standards of clergy

The criticism of pastoral leadership is not new or restricted to the last few decades in which the shortage of clergy, their skills in leadership, and/or their moral failures have been dissected and described. Indeed, the historian William Hutchison has observed, “Laments concerning ‘ministerial decline,’ laid end to end, would form a wide and solid line from 1630 to 1930 [the period about which Hutchison was writing] and, if valid, would document the ending of all ministerial influence in America sometime before the

Revolution” (Hutchison quoted in Jackson Carroll, God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006, pp. 191-92).

Whether new or not, the problems of pastoral ministers and pastoral ministry are fairly evident in various religious communities. Lilly’s response through its grantmaking is virtually unprecedented in the field of religious philanthropy—in substance, scope, and scale. Its attempt to create ecologies of nurture and excellence is providing new insights into how leadership for America’s congregations can be created, educated, trained, and sustained. In short, Lilly’s programs point the way forward for leadership in religious communities in the twenty-first century.

The fundamental assumption behind the Lilly programs is that there is a basic and symbiotic relationship between congregations and their leaders: vital congregations need and produce vital leaders; vital leaders inspire and nurture vital congregations. Together, they create an ecology of excellence in congregational life and a profoundly productive influence in American culture—“social capital,” to use the phrase of sociologist Robert Putnam.

The following article highlights four sets of grants to the Christian Reformed Church (Calvin College, Calvin Theological Seminary, and the denomination), the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Eastern Cluster of Lutheran Seminaries affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

## 1. Calvin College, Calvin Seminary, and the Christian Reformed Church

All three institutions are based in Grand Rapids, Michigan — a Mecca of sorts for Reformed Christianity that includes the prominent publisher, Eerdmans, and a number of Protestant organizations affiliated with the Reformed tradition, especially its Dutch version. All three are small. Calvin College is small compared to the larger world of higher education. Calvin Seminary is small compared to the larger denominational seminaries and especially the evangelical theological institutions. Both the College and the Seminary are affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, which has a small number of clergy and members.

Size helps make a difference, according to John Wimmer, program officer at Lilly. Speaking of many grants, Wimmer notes, “I’ve been amazed at how some small denominations take advantage of these programs and are able to move creatively and constructively.”

## Calvin College

Calvin College's focus was on the concept of vocation and the need to revitalize vocation as a central concept in church-related higher education. It was one of an astonishingly broad Lilly initiative to reinvigorate the notion of vocation, with grants made initially to 88 campuses.

In Calvin's case, the Lilly grant was preceded by the College's adoption in 2001 of a strategic plan that made "the relationship of Christian faith to vocation . . . a central theme of the core curriculum." The College did not interpret vocation narrowly as a call to ministry. Rather, it attempted to introduce "all Calvin College students . . . to the idea that any person who accepts Jesus' commission to 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness' is a person with a calling." The college's emphasis on vocation ranged from student orientation to January term courses for all first-year students, capstone courses for juniors and seniors, and specialized courses within any field of study. In an early report on its Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation grant, Calvin College reported that "given this continuous effort to relate faith to calling, it is impossible to segregate effects of [the] grant from the results of the new core curriculum."

Shirley Roels, the Project Director for the grant, said the "campus wide" Calvin program was both internally directed to the College and externally aimed toward the Seminary and the Christian Reformed Church. Internally, they had four objectives:

### *1. The Christian formation of students.*

Here the program involved work with students in residence halls, such as late night Bible studies and discussion groups devoted to common reading of books; worship involving student leaders; and connection to academic departments.

### *2. Faculty scholarship and development*

"We wanted to give faculty time to think, read, and write: What does vocation mean to my area of study?" Roels said. The initiatives were left to faculty members, and with relatively small amounts of money, faculty began to develop new courses or incorporate vocation into existing courses, write articles and books, and make presentations in church and academic settings.

### *3. Leadership for the church*

Fully half of the grant was used for this purpose, Roels reported. "This emphasis was generally expected at Calvin," she reported, "but it just wasn't happening." The College reinvigorated the pre-seminary advising program and is currently tracking 200 students. It also created an academic minor in youth ministry and created a summer seminar

program for juniors to participate in congregational ministry. By now, two thirds of the participants have completed seminary, are currently in seminary, or will enter seminary within one year. “Others have become strong lay leaders,” she noted.

#### *4. Ministry resources*

A relatively small amount of money was spent in cooperation with Calvin Seminary in developing a new Ministry Resource Center. The project is fascinating because it highlights a lacuna in institutional planning for pastoral ministry, namely, the collection of books and other resources on issues that congregations confront. “We have a great libraries at Calvin College and Calvin Seminary,” Roels declared. “But we didn’t have the kinds of material that relate theology to the life of congregations — worship, small groups, people who are struggling with divorce or grief or substance addiction. We needed a new, niche collection, especially for our students and area congregations.” Since the grant’s inception in 2002, more than 7,500 resources have been added to the Ministry Resource Center.

Externally, the grant moved Calvin College closer to Calvin Seminary and the work of the Christian Reformed Church, Roels reported, especially because both the Seminary and the Christian Reformed Church received similar grants emphasizing excellence in ministry. Joint meetings of the grant recipients were held on a regular basis, resulting in everything from curricular changes at Calvin Seminary to more effective outreach to CRC pastors across the country. “We developed a framework and platform for our mutual interests and leveraged each other’s work,” Roels declared.

College faculty have been enthusiastic about the Program for the Theological Exploration:

- Communications professor Quentin Schultze: “Nothing has done more to open up conversation with students, other faculty, staff, and the administration of the college. Nothing has done more to encourage and, to a large degree, legitimate vocational thinking on campus.”
- Biologist David Koetje: “The grant and scholarship produced for it have stimulated us to think in different ways . . . . Disciplinary questions are now secondary to ‘Who are you as a person?’ and ‘What do you see as your place in the world?’”
- Philosopher David Hoekema: “Focusing on questions of vocation in the context of the Philosophy Department senior seminar helped me understand better the need and the potential for the college to launch students into their post-college lives with a clear sense of calling.”

Student reactions have been both positive and penetrating:

- “I hate the word vocation. I’m a senior and that’s pretty much my life right now—thinking about what is going to be my vocation, what’s going to be my calling, what am I going to do after graduation. It seems like this big untouchable thing, like God callin for your life. You have to figure it out and you have to go do it . . . . Vocation and calling and career are big terms that are scary.”
- “My experiences have directly influenced my long-term goals. [They] helped me understand that I have gifts in scholarship and ministry.”
- “Before [this] program, I was not planning on going to seminary. Because of the experiences I had . . . I am excited to go to seminary and see what else God has to teach me there.”

The Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation had an especially powerful impact on Roels’ family and her future. Her son was in “the first wave” of the grant at Calvin. He went to seminary and is now the pastor of an historic Christian Reformed congregation in a Hispanic neighborhood. And she has become the senior advisor for the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education, an organization designed to further Lilly’s work in this arena.

### Calvin Theological Seminary

Grants to Calvin Theological Seminary included support of its Facing Your Future program, designed to enlist promising candidates for ministry. Its purpose was “to identify, recruit, engage, captivate, and retain through their college years young people of great spiritual, intellectual and personal promise for theological education and eventual ministry” in the Christian Reformed Church. Each year it offered 35 “bright, spiritually mature high school seniors with leadership potential the opportunity to explore vocational ministry,” said Greg Janke who coordinated the Seminary’s program. “The overarching objective of the program is to increase not only interest in vocational ministry, but also the actual number of young people training and ultimately entering ordained ministry” in the Christian Reformed Church.

Over ten years the program has had more than 350 participants — evenly divided between men and women. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, students participated in a variety of activities, including lectures, theological reflection, movie discussions, personal devotional time, worship, and recreation. The program also included trips to two other Michigan locations — Dearborn and Lansing — where they had the opportunity to learn about Islam and Hinduism first-hand from religious leaders. Janke said the “excursion” segment gave participants the opportunity to experience how ministry is conducted in particular context to see how theology and ministry interact.

Students traveled to either “Toronto, Ontario, where the focus was on ministry in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic community; Tualatin, Oregon, where the focus was on ministry to a post-Christian, predominantly secular community; or Paterson, New Jersey, where the focus was on inner-city ministry.”

Students had to be nominated to participate in the program, which emerged as a challenge for the Seminary since its proposed nominators frequently did not respond. This reflects the widespread realization in Protestant denominations that those in a position to influence and attract individuals to consider ministry often fail to take that initiative. Nominators were expected to be mentors to the participants after they completed the program, but this too proved to be problematic. The mentors frequently lacked focus in their guidance, and the Seminary realized the need to provide training for the mentors. Other non-nominator mentors were also recruited.

Enlisting high school students to enter ministry is a matter of deferred gratification. There are few quick results since youth still need to complete college, and they frequently delay vocational decisions. After 10 years, Calvin Seminary reported that half of its 347 “Facing Your Future” alumni were still in college or even high school; 37 have gone on to seminary (26 at Calvin Seminary) and 10 others have gone into parachurch or mission work after completing college. That’s still an impressive return—almost 15 percent of the post-college participants went to seminary or entered some form of ministry.

The lesson seems clear: If excellence in ministry involves attracting promising young people to consider it as a vocation, then seeking them out intentionally produces results.

Calvin Theological Seminary also received one of Lilly’s Making Connections grants. In Calvin’s case, the grant focused on pre-seminary initiatives designed to increase the number of candidates studying for ministry, a revision of its curriculum around the concept of “Theological Education as Formation for Ministry,” and establishing a closer relationship between the seminary and pastors and congregations.

This multi-faceted program produced many results, including a much more positive relationship between the Seminary and the Christian Reformed Church. But perhaps the most striking product of the grant was a complete overhaul of Calvin Seminary’s curriculum. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., President of Calvin Seminary, said the process was “potentially contentious, but by the grace of God we were able to move slowly enough to forge agreement.” He continued, “All this is based on the conviction that we all flourish by helping others to flourish. We wanted to create a culture of flourishing. Part of this is good Christianity; part of it is wisdom. You need to learn before you talk and teach.”

The curriculum revision, influenced heavily by the younger faculty members, had many components, but the most striking is how it focused on mentors, peer groups, and

relating the typical core of theological education (Bible, church history, theology, ethics, and pastoral theology) to the lived experience of ministry. For example, field education, was renamed “Mentored Ministry.” Every student is now a member of a peer group for the entire length of seminary education. Each group is led by a mentor, and the mentors themselves are mentored. The seminary changed its recruitment officer into a pastoral figure, and the admissions program is pastoral, using students as “ambassadors” to prospective and new students. The curriculum is still heavily weighted toward Bible and theology — but the context is the church’s ministry.

Kathy Smith, who directed the grant and who serves as Director of Continuing Education, said the mentoring groups were extremely powerful for the students and mentors. The students found them to be settings where they could reveal their anxieties and fears about seminary and ministry. The group members also held each other accountable. Smith said, “It’s assumed the group is safe. They can wonder and question without judgment. These groups changed me. They affected my faith. I realized they care for me, but they also challenge me.”

Plantinga said, “We spend a lot more time asking what moves the heart. Jonathan Edwards argued that the preacher is someone whose own heart can be moved, both toward God and away from evil.” He maintained that the new curriculum focused heavily on spiritual formation. “The train wrecks in ministry don’t happen because pastors lack information,” he said. “Good pastors have a proper sense of finiteness. They show hospitality to others. They demonstrate confidence, but they’re humble. They know they’re channels of grace. They’re good at receiving grace that will flow through them to others.”

Plantinga continued, “The heart of Christian identity is the dynamic of dying and rising with Christ. It’s the mortification and the vivification of the individual. I think this is the heart of the Reformed Doctrine of sanctification.”

### Christian Reformed Church

Calvin Seminary’s “Making Connections” grant aimed at making the seminary “a catalyst for pastoral excellence.” It had a profound effect on the Seminary and its curriculum, but it also led to a closer relationship with its denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, which received a Lilly grant to create “a culture of pastoral excellence.” The Lilly grants to the college, the seminary, and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship intentionally overlapped. (see the interview with [John Witvliet on the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship revitalizing the ecology of worship](#) )

Representatives of each institution met regularly to plan their work together.

The Christian Reformed Church’s grant was part of Lilly’s effort to sustain pastoral excellence.” The denomination’s five areas of programming were:

1. Promotion and teaching of the concept of pastoral excellence
2. A strengthened mentoring program for pastors
3. A peer-learning program that connects pastors within accountability groups
4. Regional continuing education opportunities that promote lifelong learning
5. Dissemination of learning which increases denominational impact

The denomination's program, entitled "Sustaining Pastoral Excellence," is striking in its strong relationship to the philosophical bases of the college's and seminary's programs: Peer learning works. Pastors really do learn from each other, and they can be trusted to form their own groups for support and accountability.

Michael Bruinooge, the grant director, said the denomination began the program of peer groups with virtually no guidelines. Each group of pastors was encouraged to design its own program. "We wanted pastors to know that we cared about them. We didn't know what to expect, and we got a huge response. We weren't too prescriptive about what we were looking for, and there were no financial boundaries. The most expensive was \$25,000, but the average came in about \$1,000 to \$1,500. No matching money was required."

"One of the important tweaks in the program," Bruinooge acknowledged, "was to push back on how they saw themselves as a peer group. What they often wanted was learning. What we wanted was community — what it means in practice to be a believer, what it means to be vulnerable and disciplined by one another. That was very important for us."

Apparently, it succeeded — overwhelmingly. Amidst their pressured lives and often amidst discouragement and loneliness, the pastors found that the peer groups had a powerful and profound effect on their lives. Frequently solo practitioners, they found support from other "lone rangers."

Here are some of their responses:

- "The peer learning group is the first I have been in and is by far the best thing that has happened in 27 years of ministry. . . . With empty nest — it is good to have people to share with and talk to. Overall, if I could encourage you to emphasize anything, it would be the absolute necessity of a peer learning group for all pastors."
- "The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program has done for me exactly what the name states, and I couldn't be more grateful. It has improved my ministry, sustained my soul, and connected me with others in healthy and helpful relationships."
- "The SPE program of the CRC is a career saver."

- “This has been the best growth experience that I have had in my 9 years in ministry.”
- “I do not think I would be part of an identified peer learning group if it were not for the SPE encouragement and grant program. These pastors would be my friends/acquaintances. But they would not have the permission I have given them to speak honestly into my life as they are doing. Nor would I have permission to do the same for them. I have some very meaningful moments personally and as a pastor that came about by being in this peer learning group.”
- “The peer learning group has been the most important part of my life in terms of accountability, growth, and joy as a pastor.”

One pastor flatly declared, “This has been a great program. I hate surveys and I only filled this one out because you folks have been so helpful to so many pastors in this denomination. Thanks for all you do.”

The Christian Reformed Church also included an opportunity for spouses to develop their own groups and fashion their own agendas. This is a sample of their responses:

- “I’ve never experienced this close Christian friendship with other pastors’ wives in our 28 years of ministry.”
- “In a real way, the members of this group have been able to reach out and touch a part of my heart that is being protected as a pastor’s wife.”
- “This has been an amazing year! I have never received so much support and encouragement in almost 30 years as a pastor’s spouse. I will recommend this to everyone I meet.”
- “We really enjoy being together and marveled at the safety we feel.”
- “We can’t say enough that the sense of community and decreased isolation that comes from meeting together has been amazing.”
- “[This] has made me feel like a woman of value.”

Bruinooge concluded, “This has been such a good story for the Christian Reformed Church — a feel good story.” There were other dimensions to the program — continuing education (which was dropped after the first round), dissemination of the program’s findings through various media, and mentoring, especially for pastors in the first five years of service. But nothing surpassed the peer groups in its pervasive impact

on pastors, their spouses, and their ministries. “It was a major home run,” said Bruinooge.

Interestingly, the denomination did not get any criticism about using the theme of excellence for the program. “I was surprised to hear that from other denominations,” Bruinooge noted. “I think people in the CRC understand that excellence means giving our best to God. That’s what it means to be part of the Reformed tradition.”

There were many factors that made the Christian Reformed grants notable. Part of it was geographical proximity, friendships between the key figures in the grant development and implementation, and small size. But putting vocation back on the educational agenda, changing the preparation for ministry from education to spiritual formation, and recognizing the power of peer learning and accountability are remarkable achievements — especially in only a decade of effort. The Lilly grants didn’t solve problems, but they helped people address them together. The results changed the climate and the culture; they helped spawn an ecology of excellence in ministry.

## 2. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was formed in 1991 as protest and alternative to the conservative forces that had assumed power in the Southern Baptist Convention. From very modest beginnings, this self-described “movement” has grown to more than 1,900 affiliated congregations, 19 state and regional organizations, a number of ministry partners, and 15 theological schools, 13 of which are in the United States. Its congregations are found in 34 states, and it supports 139 mission personnel around the world. It is headquartered in Atlanta with a staff of 72 who coordinate the Fellowship’s ministries, focusing primarily on leadership development, congregational life, and global mission.

At least two aspects of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s need for pastoral leadership are striking because they mirror similar developments in American Protestantism. First, the Fellowship emphasizes the need for “the movement” to address the shortage of ministers, particularly well-qualified and gifted individuals. Terry Hamrick, Coordinator for Missional Leadership with the Fellowship, noted “the alarming decline in the number and quality of young people who were affirming a call to ministerial leadership.”

Second, Hamrick focused on the breakdown of the “relay race” pattern of ministerial formation in which a series of institutions — e.g., church related colleges and seminaries, among others — “passed along” candidates for ministry until they entered pastoral leadership. “This relay race is over,” Hamrick declared.

Through a series of Lilly grants, the Fellowship has begun addressing its problems of leadership, ranging from the enlistment of more and better qualified candidates for ministry to assisting new pastors in their transition to ministry. The problems the Fellowship is addressing and the programs it is developing make the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship look remarkably like a denomination, rather than a movement.

Hamrick acknowledged the tension in the Fellowship's initiatives. He recalled a 2004 address by Daniel O. Aleshire, Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, to the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Virginia. In that address, Aleshire warned that an institution formed as a protest could not reach maturity but had to gain a clear, positive vision for forming ministerial leadership.

Hamrick admitted that Aleshire's analysis applied to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as a whole. He said the Fellowship would remain "a movement" but admitted that "it's a balance for us. We don't own anything. We talk about partners — institutions that work with us toward common goals. But we are moving beyond the Southern Baptist Convention division."

The Fellowship received a Sustaining Pastoral Excellence grant from Lilly and entitled its program, "An Ecosystem for Missional Leadership." The grant focuses on two "strategic initiatives":

- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will develop "a series of ministries that will enhance the capacity of missional congregations to discover women and men with the gifts and graces for ministry, while also empowering all of their people to discern a proper place in God's mission." In other words, the Fellowship seeks to revitalize the notion of vocation and specifically the call of God to pastoral ministry, and it is focusing on congregations to make that possible. Indeed, said Hamrick, "We believe there is a dynamic interplay between excellence in congregational life and excellence in the practice of ministers who serve such congregations."
- The Fellowship "will be a catalyst for a new community of theological schools and congregations so that the life of the church will be still more central for the development of congregational leaders." This initiative will address the oft-noted gap between theological schools and congregations and the equally well-noted phenomenon of seminary students who are inadequately prepared for the realities of congregational life.

In defining excellence, the Fellowship's proposal stated that the basic signs of ministerial acumen had not changed — "proclamation, worship leadership, and care for the congregation." However, it argued, "we persist in our belief that these historic tasks must be empowered by four contemporary virtues if a more excellent ministry is to flourish in our movement." It defined those virtues as "vision, imagination, discernment,

and relational capacity” — in other words, characteristics that are formed less by courses and more by “‘complex constellations’ of communities, with congregations at the vital center.” The proposal also identifies five “defining qualities” of excellent pastoral leadership — “resurrection confidence,” “a robust spirituality,” “a strong sense of curiosity about the world, the church, and God’s work in both,” “a global perspective that informs [pastors’] vision, nourishes their imagination, and pushes them into an ever-widening network of relationships,” and “a deep love for the church.” “We believe this kind of ‘resurrecting excellence’ is contagious,” said Hamrick, “in that it invites people not only into relationship with the minister, but more importantly into relationship with Christ and the church, and even into the possibility of the ministerial vocation. There is a dynamic magnetism about excellent ministry.”

At the heart of the Fellowship’s work is a vision of “an ecology for the formation of ministerial excellence [that] places congregations at the vital center of a complex constellation of communities.” The grant specifies 17 partner institutions, most of them theological schools, but it also includes work with congregations, colleges, and “denominational entities at the state, regional, and national level.” The goal, said Hamrick, is enhancing “the capacity of missional congregations to discover women and men with the gifts and graces for ministry, while also empowering all of their people to discern their places in God’s mission.” At the same time, the Fellowship seeks to “be a catalyst for a new community of theological schools and congregations so that the life of the church will be still more central for the development of congregational leaders.”

In terms of its first strategic initiative, Hamrick said that the Fellowship expects to see congregations develop a greater emphasis upon vocation, especially to pastoral ministry, and new and vibrant networks for youth ministers and “collegiate ministers” to consider pastoral ministry through internships and support from the Fellowship’s programs of nurture.

The heart of the second strategic initiative is the creation of a “Pastors and Scholars Studio,” composed of equal numbers of “pastors whose ministry is marked by excellence and scholars whose life and work reflect deep love for the church and commitment to ministerial formation.” The Studio will seek to address the gap between education in theological schools and the nature of pastoral ministry, and it will also focus on the need for a new generation of faculty members to serve in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and its partner institutions.

“I have a passion for local churches and educated clergy,” Hamrick said, “But congregations sometimes chew up educated clergy. We have to find ways of finding the best candidates for ministry and then nurture their gifts so that they will be prepared for the realities of congregational life. We don’t discount theological schools, but we are seeking ways to enhance that education and make it more holistic to create the right kind of leadership for our congregations.”

Hamrick declared, “This is the most exciting grant I’ve ever worked on. We have an opportunity to experiment with being a denomination. The energy that birthed us will not sustain us. We need to create an ecology of institutions, with congregations at the center, that will carry us into the future.”

### 3. The Eastern Cluster of Lutheran Seminaries

This consortium of seminaries in the Evangelical Lutheran Church consists of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, PA, the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, and the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, SC. All are related to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Over several years, Lilly awarded the Eastern Cluster a series of grants to create “Project Connect,” a far-reaching effort designed to “identify, nurture, and sustain young people gifted for and/or interested in ministry or identified by others as having promise for leadership.”

Project Connect has been directed by Don Johnson, the Executive Director, and Janet Johnson, the Administrator (who is also his wife). Based in New Hampshire, the Johnsons brought to their work decades of experience in camp ministry. In the first phases of the Lilly grants, Project Connect succeeded in developing a remarkable network of institutions and programs designed to address critical problems in the Evangelical Lutheran Church — a shortage of pastors, a decline in the quality of students preparing for ministry, an increase in the number of retirements, and a need for more pastors of color especially to serve congregations in urban areas.

Project Connect aimed at young adults —18 to 30 years of age. The results have been dramatic. As of 2010, the program made connections with 886 young adults who, at one time or another, indicated interest in exploring a seminary education. Of these 886 young people, 240 have enrolled in a theological school, and 210 entered a seminary of the Eastern Cluster. The average enrollment of young adults in the Eastern Cluster seminaries is up 20 percent in the last four years, and even though enrollment at all of the Evangelical Lutheran Church’s seminaries has increased, enrollment at the four Eastern Cluster seminaries is up 48% higher than in that of their sister institutions.

“Basically we’re trying to get young adults to consider public ministry,” said Don Johnson, “and then we hope they will follow through by going to seminary.” “The ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America] has seen for some time a large drop off of young adults moving away from the church,” he declared. “They simply were not staying with the church. We’re learning that we have not been intentional enough. We’ve been throwing in the towel. What we’re learning is that when we’re intentional and paying attention, it makes a difference.”

Project Connect’s most recent grant is unusual because it is designed to put Project Connect as an office out of existence. It aims less at creating a network and more at

developing energy *within* the network. The grant is an example of “initiative inversion,” according to John Wimmer, program officer in religion at Lilly. Said Johnson, “A major change in this next phase will be to switch from a central, administratively driven initiative to having the energy for the initiative generated by a widespread, grassroots involvement of the vast network of leaders” served by the Eastern Cluster. “We propose to do this through a number of components which provide our partners with support, but also challenge them to own the initiative for themselves.”

Project Connect’s strategy for decentralizing its program includes three elements:

1. The creation of 18 smaller networks, “connected into an ecosystem, that support the ministry of vocational discernment with young adults.” Specifically, each of these networks will each be eligible for grants of \$10,000, designed to build the goals of Project Connect into their work.
2. The establishment of an initiative evaluation team composed of nine partners from the Eastern Cluster’s geographical area. The team will be responsible for reviewing the 18 grant proposals and evaluating their implementation.
3. An annual gathering of the networks to share what they have learned, what works, and what needs to be done in the future.

Included in the effort to decentralize Project Connect is

- a multicultural initiative designed to recruit leaders and congregations from communities of color or where the primary language is other than English;
- the development of so-called “Connecting Ministries,” a collection of congregations and institutions that identify with and participate in the purposes and goals of Project Connect;
- maintenance of a data base of young people who are either considering ministry or who have already enrolled in seminary;
- discernment events for young people; and
- building connections with outdoor ministries, campus ministries, and the Lutheran Volunteer Corps.

Some of these connections are facilitated by mini-grants (\$500 each) designed to further Project Connect’s goals.

Project Connect has discovered that immersion experiences for young adults are often the essential element in helping a person decide to enter seminary and become a pastoral minister. “This is very critical,” Johnson declared, “In fact, 75 percent of those who have taken part in a Project Connect Immersion have either gone to seminary or are headed to seminary in the future.” The key is a first-hand experience of ministry,

“facilitated by healthy pastors,” said Johnson. Following his immersion, Nathaniel Anderson remarked, “Before I viewed parish ministry as a stepping stone to counseling or academics, something to do for a few years before I went on to something real. I have discovered in my immersion that parish ministry is not a stepping stone, but a ministry worth doing for the rest of my life.”

Another key is providing students with an opportunity for service and showing them that “missional congregations” can make a difference in the world. “Project Connect is very intentional about this,” Johnson said, “and we invite young people for mission and service. That’s the big thing. We can’t afford to let this happen on its own.”

Johnson used the imagery of a funnel to describe the work of Project Connect. “We can’t get the number of ministers we need at the bottom of the spout without having a large number of people at the top of the funnel,” he insisted. Currently, Project Connect points to the 800 individuals in its data base—young people who are considering ministry. As indicated above, about 200 are actually entering public ministry.

He acknowledged that such an endeavor confronted obstacles, such as institutional lethargy and pastors who are reluctant to call forth others into ministry. That is why the notion of a network seems to be effective; it focuses its work only on those who are committed to the strategy and goals of the effort and bypasses those that would be opposed or unenthusiastic.

Johnson expressed the wish that Project Connect would become a denominational priority throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church and expand beyond the area served by the Eastern Cluster of Theological Seminaries. At the same time, he said, “it’s totally amazing how this is spreading out.” It requires a lot of travel for him, but fortunately his wife is the administrator for the program. “Our home is the world headquarters of Project Connect,” he joked. His previous work in camp ministry involved extended travel as well, so as a couple they were used to working apart. “We’re very fortunate,” he concluded. “We know we’re making a difference in the world and for the church.”

#### **4. The Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church**

Even by Texas standards, the Texas Annual Conference is big. It covers 58 counties in East Texas with a combined population of almost 8 million people, 4.5 million of whom live in the Houston metroplex. Membership in this Methodist conference’s churches is 285,652 with worship attendance at 106,902. Rev. Janice Riggle Huie was assigned as Conference Bishop in 2004, and since her appointment, she has identified and addressed one of the crucial problems confronting the Conference — the shortage of young, talented ministers.

A first step was The New Generation Initiative, “an ecology of programs and processes for diverse, gifted young people that highlights God’s call to ministry and offer innovative opportunities for the practice of ministry,” Bishop Huie has written. “This initiative begins with persons at the high school level and continues through college, seminary, transition into ministry, ordination, and early appointments.”

The second step was Advancing Pastoral Leadership, a Lilly funded program designed to meet a critical problem in the Texas Annual Conference. The average age of clergy in the Conference is 58. The average age of retirement is 67. As a result, Huie noted, “we anticipate that half of our clergy will retire in the next 10-15 years,” and the situation is the same in other annual conferences in Texas.

The Conference cabinet identified approximately 100 “strategic” churches out of the 700 churches in the conference. A “strategic” church, Huie said, “means either they are strong, vital congregations serving the mission field (high performing) or they exist in mission fields which are underserved (high potential). Every one is challenging in its own unique way.” In the United Methodist Church where all ministers are appointed by the bishop, a church is called “an appointment.” “Strategic appointments,” she noted, include large urban and suburban congregations, the primary county seat congregation in nearly every county, underserved areas, and second pastors of new church starts. By membership size, the “strategic appointments” break down as follows:

58 congregations	1,000+ members
38 congregations	750-999 members
28 congregations	500-749 members

More than half of these congregation have pastors who will retire in the next ten years.

The problem, in short, was not only a shortage of leadership but a shortage of the right kind of leadership. The Texas Annual Conference’s program, Advancing Pastoral Leadership, was designed to address that problem. How? By finding young pastors and helping them develop the background and skills to accept a “strategic” appointment. Deceptively simple and so delicate and difficult to implement.

The “high potential” young pastors were identified by inviting all pastors with 30 potential years of service to apply. They were required to “have demonstrated excellence and fruitfulness in at least one previous appointment.” Most would have served as associates in a large congregation in which they showed potential for leadership. During the Advancing Pastoral Leadership program, they will either be serving as a pastor in charge of a strategic church or will be appointed there by the beginning of the second year of the program.

Advancing Pastoral Leadership is a five-year program with 12-18 participants, who participate in a series of intensive retreats. Faculty from Duke Divinity School, as well

as other skilled leaders, lead the retreats around common readings. In addition, each participant is given a coach and a mentor — but not at the same time. Coaches are lay people who work as consultants or as professional coaches do in the field of business. Mentors are other pastors in the conference.

“We’re well on target,” Huie declared in late 2010. “The response has been very positive so far. Churches are excited. We didn’t expect such a great response from the receiving congregations.”

Coaches have so far proved to be extremely valuable, in fact more helpful than mentors. They focus on such issues as the participants’ work ethic (“not a big issue,” said Huie), personal appearance (how they present themselves), and finances (especially the burden of educational debt).

Isn’t this program elitist? “Yes,” Huie acknowledged, “in a sense it is. But we have a huge problem with retirements. By 2017, 80 percent of our ministers will be eligible for retirement. This is really an accelerated pathway for pastorates.” She admitted, “This doesn’t make everybody happy.” Mid-career pastors wanted leadership development “to finish well,” she said. In effect, they said, “You’re doing this for young clergy. What are you doing for us?” Huie says the mid-career pastors are a gap in the Conference’s program, but the need for young pastors is paramount.

“This program is not remedial,” she emphasized. “We want to take our strongest young pastors and help them move forward. We’re looking for high potential people with large capacity, desire, and courage.”

Huie is disappointed that other conferences have not joined the program and expressed the hope that future classes will have more representatives from other conferences. “We would like to spread the Lilly money more broadly,” she declared.

“The church of the future is not going to look the same as it does now,” Huie said. “Methodists have been huge innovators, but we’ve sort of settled in. We need to have pastors who take chances. Evangelicals call them apostolic pastors. We have lots of pastors who care for their congregations. What we need is pastors who will find people outside the church in addition to those who take care of the saints. We need to reach the untouched, and sometimes that’s going to involve failure. We can learn from failure because that’s the way it is.”

She continued, “We have possibilities here and I’m excited. I’d like to be remembered as someone who loved Jesus and the church and left the church better than it was. We Methodists talk about going on to perfection — sanctification. I actually believe all this stuff.”

The Texas Annual Conference proposal promised to raise significant funds to underwrite Advancing Pastoral Education in the future. Huie maintained that the Lilly grant made a huge difference. “It encouraged innovation,” she said, “What we’ve been doing isn’t working. We needed capital to try something new.”

## 5. Conclusion: In Pursuit of Excellence in Ministry

The novelist P.D. James described one of her characters as upset about things “too commonly accepted by the malcontents of her generation . . . : noise, mobile phones, vandalism, drunken louts, political correctness, inefficiency, and the assault on excellence by renaming it elitism” (The Lighthouse [New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2005], p. 29). Indeed, even as excellence seems to be a worthy goal, Bishop Huie and others have discovered the pitfalls and dangers of the pursuit of excellence.

At one level, when it comes to pastoral ministry, it seems so simple and straightforward. But at another level, it is much more complex. In a provocative and thoughtful book based on a Lilly-funded research project, Jackson W. Carroll of Duke Divinity School noted the ambiguity of using “excellence” as a guide to understanding pastoral leadership and the challenges of the church (God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations). On the one hand, it draws rightly but perhaps too heavily on the models of the marketplace that place a premium on results and success. On the other hand, it fails to plumb “the more excellent way” of sacrifice, service, love, and devotion that are hallmarks of Christian discipleship.

Carroll’s book ought to be required reading for all church leaders — both lay and clergy. It is based on excellent research on the nature of ministry today and is informed by theological and moral vision. For example, Jackson argues that excellence in ministry has to be informed by Jesus’ cross and resurrection. He writes that the “core insights from the gospels . . . stand in stark contrast to an understanding of excellence based primarily on the values of market capitalism. Rather than efficiency, success, power, status, and strength, they reflect an excellence grounded in the experience of Jesus, whose path to the Easter triumph led through Gethsemane and Golgotha” (p. 197). Carroll emphasizes that excellent ministry is both communal and transformative. That is, it isn’t done on one’s own, and it changes people and their culture.

Jackson outlines five characteristics of excellence in pastoral leadership:

- *Resiliency and spiritual disciplines.* Resiliency is “a toughness combined with elasticity that enables [pastors and congregations] to endure without breaking when facing the tough challenges and difficult tasks that come from trying to follow in Jesus’ way.” That ability is only found from the spiritual disciplines of prayer and scriptural study. In fact, Carroll’s research demonstrated that those

pastors who were most dissatisfied with their spiritual lives were most likely considering dropping out (pp. 206-207).

- *Agility and reflective leadership.* Excellent leaders have “nimbleness and resourcefulness in response to new challenges,” and they provide the opportunity and context for people to reflect on their present and how to shape their future (pp. 207-211).
- *Trust and personal authority.* Leaders cannot be leaders unless they earn and deserve the trust of their congregations — i.e., demonstrate the qualities of faith that win the continuing support of those whom they lead (pp. 211-12).
- *Staying connected.* Here the issue is avoiding “the isolation that leads to burning out and dropping out.” Carroll helpfully points out the danger of loneliness in ministry, not only in eroding excellence but also in leading to pastoral misconduct (pp. 212-214).
- *Self-Directed, Career-Long Learning.* “Unfortunately, for some pastors resistance to continual learning through their career is not a matter of fearing the idolatry of career-management. It is rather a matter of laziness. . . . For whatever reason, some clergy’s personal and professional growth is badly stunted and they end, to use Paul Wilke’s words, as ‘sadly ordinary’” (p. 217).

That raises the bar high, Carroll admits, but not too high.

His prescriptions for excellence in ministry — what churches can do about creating it and nurturing it — are straightforward, and they are confirmed by the findings in the Lilly grant programs described in this article. They include:

- *Recruiting for excellence.* If there’s any single finding from the Lilly grants, it is that intentionality — actually trying to recruit promising leaders — works.
- *Theological education focused on excellence.* Theological schools confront a different world today. In so many ways, the coherence and context of theological education have been eroded. Students are less prepared. The curriculum is more specialized and complex. The three-year model of education is often a four- or five-year endurance run, with significant financial debts at the finish line.
- *Attention to clergy compensation.* No one enters the ministry to make money, Carroll is quick to acknowledge, but the toll on excellence exacted by clergy financial problems is huge. Expectations of excellence in the face of

indebtedness and financial stress are a chimera. Churches must find ways to pay all of their clergy reasonably, if not generously.

- *Clergy taking responsibility for excellence.* From all of the grants surveyed in this article comes a striking conclusion: Trust the clergy to help one another. There is a collective wisdom in groups of clergy sharing their hopes and fears and finding in each other the ways to nurture excellence. In other words, the “wounded healers” can heal each other. (See pp. 219-38)

Centuries ago, echoing the prophet Isaiah, the apostle Paul wrote, “How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (Romans 10:14-15).

By emphasizing the importance of excellence in pastoral ministry, in all its complexity, churches can reclaim their spiritual integrity and the power of the gospel to transform lives. Then we will hear more pastors say with Martin Luther, “There is no dearer treasure, no nobler thing on earth or in this life than a good and faithful pastor and preacher” (Carroll, p. 1).