
What makes a high-quality proposal?

The Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs at Christian Theological Seminary (the National Clergy Renewal Program and the Clergy Renewal Program for Indiana Congregations) are structured to provide congregations and their leaders maximum freedom to propose renewal leaves suited to their own context. These programs actively seek to encourage pastors and congregations to imagine creative possibilities for clergy renewal projects that will re-energize their ministries.

Since its inception, the Clergy Renewal Programs have provided grants to more than 2,500 congregations. We have watched closely as many pastors and congregations have benefited from renewal programs and learned a great deal through the reports from the participating clergy and churches. In the spirit of that learning, we have observed that the strongest clergy renewal programs share several common characteristics. Below, we list four such characteristics for the consideration of potential applicants.

In addition, we note three characteristics that may undercut the quality of a renewal program and weaken an otherwise excellent proposal. Several examples of these features are listed.

One way to understand how these factors all work together in an excellent proposal is *coherence*. In a coherent proposal, the character of the congregation, the personal and professional needs of the pastor, the proposed activities and accompanying budget, and the shape of the planning process come together in a way that makes sense and indicates a meaningful and efficacious renewal experience.

There is no one formula for crafting a successful proposal. Instead, they are offered as observations from experience, illustrated by examples, to encourage you to design the most fruitful renewal program possible for your leader and congregation.

Characteristics of Strong Proposals

1) A sense of purpose

Strong proposals convey a sense of purpose or direction. They usually are grounded in a central vision or idea which integrates the

proposed leave activities and which clearly matters to those who pursue it. That vision or idea may reflect a deeply held personal interest or commitment on the part of the

pastor. It may be rooted in the history and character of the congregation's or pastor's religious heritage. It may come out of the current congregational context. Whatever the impetus, it can best be described as "home-grown"— as growing out of the particular soil, or situation, of the church and its leader.

Examples

An Episcopal priest had led his congregation in the discipline of centering prayer through a series of workshops, lectures and prayer support groups. The proposal, which probed the theological roots of centering prayer, requested funds to support a leave during which the priest could have two long, uninterrupted periods of prayer and meditation. Building on the theological foundation laid by the proposal, a strong case was made for the ways in which this leave would aid the spiritual growth of the congregation and also would allow the pastor to explore his interest in writing a personal essay. All involved, as the proposal explained, would have a chance to live Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God."

A Midwestern congregation entitled its proposal, "We Make the Road By Walking." This title, taken from a Spanish proverb, "aptly describes our minister's ... way of being a minister and ... [our] way of being a church." Beginning from this common ground, the proposal detailed the "walk" that pastor and congregation had gone on together to prepare the proposal. The renewal leave, it was clear, would further the pastor and congregation on their walk.

2) A sense of balance

High-quality proposals demonstrate a sense of balance in their plans for renewal. This sense of balance may be reflected in the attention paid to both the pastor's personal and professional life during the renewal period. A sense of balance also can come across in the range of activities in the renewal plan. The strongest proposals contain more than one proposed activity and frequently involve a retreat or reflection component.

Examples

A minister in the rural Northeast proposed a renewal leave in which he enumerated four goals for his time away: spiritual renewal, intellectual stimulation, physical and emotional refreshment, and strengthening of family relationships. To these ends, he detailed a plan that included travel, retreat and a two-week period of "wind down" time at the end of the leave. The proposal was explicit about the ways in which his family would be included in the plans.

A couple serving as co-pastors of a racially and socioeconomically diverse congregation drafted a shared proposal. Each pastor's renewal time away included continuing education and reflection on the church's goal of creating Christian community. The two pastors' renewal periods were designed to occur at separate times of the year, providing each of them with three months of individual renewal time and six weeks of shared renewal time, thereby allowing church life to continue with minimal interruption. Because the couple shared one full-time position, the budget for the grant request adhered to the \$30,000 limit.

3) Evidence that the congregation understands and affirms the value of a renewal program for its leader

High-quality proposals offer evidence that a congregation worked with the pastor on developing the proposal and will be involved in the maintenance of congregational life during the pastor's leave. It is important to note that strong proposals do not always detail a smooth proposal preparation process. Indeed, the best proposals may record how the congregation gradually came to support the pastor in his or her request for renewal, identifying initial concerns of church leadership or parishioners and the ways in which these concerns were addressed.

Examples

A pastor in the Midwest served two congregations. One congregation immediately approved the pastor's request for renewal leave; the second congregation was initially cautious, believing the pastor to be asking for an extended vacation. The proposal explained how this second congregation developed a better understanding of the importance of renewal through the circulation of newsletters, formal and informal discussion, and requests for congregational input. "A flood of responses came in from the membership at large," the pastor noted in his proposal. "The overwhelmingly positive response was a very affirmative experience for the congregation and for me."

The leadership of a small rural congregation that had broken from its former church requested a renewal grant for their pastor who had shepherded them through the

break and had helped them grow as a new church. The congregation' enthusiasm for their pastor and the leave she had designed were made evident in the fact that the congregation was committed to supporting her plans for renewal leave regardless of the success of her application.

4) Benefits both the pastor and the congregation

In the strongest proposals, renewal activities arise from the congregational context and clearly contribute to congregational goals, thereby maximizing the effect of the leave period. For instance, the planned renewal time may allow the pastor to research, reflect on, or explore an issue of concern to the congregation, resulting in a dual benefit. Given a respite from having to respond daily to the problem, the pastor can step back and look at the larger themes surrounding the issue. In this way, the pastor is being refreshed and consoled that he or she is not alone in facing the challenge. At the same time, the congregation is able to anticipate a benefit upon the pastor's return. Here it should be noted that proposals that do not allow the pastor enough distance or freedom from challenging issues are also less likely to benefit the leader or congregation. The primary goal of the program is to ensure a period of rejuvenation for a pastor and congregation. The best proposals demonstrate that this sort of renewal remains the top priority of the proposed leave.

Examples

A minister in a predominantly African American urban church was facing an

increasingly aging population. He had performed more than 145 funerals in his five-year tenure and was constantly working with parishioners to find solutions to adult day-care needs. His proposal included a request to gain perspective on this challenge by researching issues related to gerontology—specifically the representation of African Americans in retirement homes—with an eye toward the creation of an adult day-care center at the church. As the proposal suggested, this time away would not only energize the pastor but also would "benefit the church, in that a portion of our pastor's vision ... developing an adult day-care [center] ... can be

accomplished through the gerontology studies."

A pastor serving a church striving to be open and accepting to a variety of marginalized populations requested funds for a trip to New Zealand. The purpose of this trip, aside from the inherent renewal value of travel, was to explore the ways in which the English-speaking people of New Zealand have learned to celebrate and embrace the traditions of the native Maori people. The pastor wrote, "Working as I do in a multicultural setting ... I would be most interested in exploring this aspect of New Zealand society in search of lessons for my own community."

Characteristics that Weaken Proposals

1) Too much contact between pastor and congregation during renewal leave

Renewal leaves are intended to provide pastors a chance to step away from the daily demands of parish leadership. Congregations should seek to limit contact with their pastors during the renewal leave, except for extreme emergencies. Congregational members (except family members) should not accompany pastors on renewal leave activities.

Examples

A pastor was traveling to South America. While the congregation was on board with him being away, they planned with him to have him Skype into the Sunday morning service in "real time" in order to give the

congregation a flavor of his travels. While the goal is admirable, we have observed that this plan forces the pastor to be "back on in Sunday morning mode" during the leave. Proposals with this level of contact are routinely declined. Alternatively, congregations may have their pastor record a video or social media post at his leisure that can then be shared with the congregation by someone else.

A congregation put forward an application for their pastor's renewal leave but indicated that, since the pastor would be local for much of it, "she would be available to come to funerals and other emergencies." Extreme circumstances might arise that require the pastor to be in touch with the congregation, but proposals should include

funds to secure enough pastoral coverage that, ideally, even emergencies won't disrupt the leave.

2) Inappropriate expenditures for the congregation

While we welcome and even encourage congregations to use a portion of the grant funds to pursue activities that will allow congregation members to enter into the spirit of renewal along with their pastor while the pastor is away, not every expense is congruent with the aims of the renewal program. Congregations are discouraged from requesting funds for capital expenses not directly connected to the clergy renewal program. These include funds for renovation of church facilities as well as the purchase of equipment.

Examples

A pastor proposes a renewal leave in which she will focus on immersing herself in her love of music. In the same spirit, the congregation proposes to bring in a series of gospel choirs to help the congregation celebrate a wider range of the Christian musical heritage. The congregation requests significant grant funds to upgrade the church's sound system. The request for capital funds for a long-term facilities improvement weakened an otherwise strong proposal.

A minister interested in religion among millennials proposes a leave that would allow him to engage millennial culture in a number of domestic and international settings. The congregation, sharing this interest, proposes to use grant funds to pay the first three months of salary for a new

youth pastor as a kind of "probation" period to see if they want to bring him on staff permanently. This request for the congregation's long-term staffing weakened the proposal.

3) Guest speakers to facilitate conversations best carried on with the pastor present

Congregations are encouraged to invite guest speakers to provide pulpit supply and lead educational events while their pastor is on renewal leave. Yet some conversations should include the entire congregation and are best had when the pastor is not away. These include conversations about long-term strategic planning, significant financial expenditures, staffing and personnel needs, etc.

Examples

A congregation interested in philanthropy and giving patterns in the 21st century proposes inviting a consultant whose expertise in church finances to come give a day-long workshop on stewardship and help them design a major capital campaign. While the educational component is helpful, preparing to launch a major fundraising campaign without the knowledge and input of the pastor may be a counterproductive experience for both the congregation and pastor.

A congregation proposes to invite a consultant to help draft a "Five-Year Plan for Mission" while the pastor is away on her renewal leave. Making significant plans for

the congregation's future without the knowledge or input of the pastor seems unwise. We have discovered that many congregations engage in generative periods

of long-range planning when the pastor and congregation are reunited and re-energized immediately after the end of the renewal leave.

We hope these observations from clergy renewal experiences will help you imagine a significant and valuable renewal program for your pastor and your whole congregation.