

Grace Notes

A collection of wisdom and advice from recipients of grants in the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs

Introduction

Over the years, the Lilly Endowment has asked more than 600 Clergy Renewal Program grantees—pastors and congregations—to share with us any wisdom they have gained from their experiences, so that we could pass it along to future applicants.

This collection contains, in their own words of hope and grace, a series of reflections to help pastors and congregations think about how they might move through the various steps of conceiving and preparing a renewal proposal and then living into it with great joy and expectation. We have also included some helpful hints from those who have served on our proposal consultation teams over the years—the pastors, teachers and former grantees who help us read and adjudicate the renewal proposals.

While there are a number of “do’s and don’ts,” you won’t find this to be a “how-to” manual in the strictest sense of that term. Some have asked if they might see a completed “successful” application. We decline to do that because no application is successful in a vacuum; all the pieces must come together in a creative and authentic way for a particular pastor and that congregation.

You may find some of these comments contradictory, and we have purposefully presented them so applicants can see that there is no single perfect way to approach this

process that is applicable to every pastor or to every congregation. One thing that is constant, however, is that all the congregations represented in this collection were prepared and open to supporting their pastor in an experience that had the potential to be life-changing and transformational. For them, the renewal experience was far more than an opportunity to “get away,” but a chance for all to drink again from God’s creative, life-giving fountain.

This compilation of “Grace Notes” is a series of candid responses to some aspect of the Sabbath journey. The reflections of these pastors and congregations range from the philosophical to the practical to the playful. You won’t find here a fully developed musical score, but you might discover a theme or two that will encourage you and your congregation to approach this journey with glad and generous hearts, a spirit of purpose, and above all, prayer.

The hearts of these pastors sing, even yet—in many cases several years after the completion of their renewal journey. Lilly Endowment thanks all the pastors and congregations for the expressions of encouragement, joy and gratitude that grace these pages.

Preparing the application

- ♪ Having a theme to my sabbatical was very helpful; I was able to travel with a sense of integration and purpose.
- ♪ Don't write the application entirely by yourself; it shows. Engage the congregation.
- ♪ Set up a parish committee early and work with its members. Don't put it all together and then bring them in for the signature! And don't leave it to the last month.
- ♪ Discover what your passion is and design renewal time around it. Use the language of your need as well as the intellect.
- ♪ Attention to details is important in preparing the application and the budget narratives, and there are real benefits during the time of renewal. I found that it took me as long to plan the time of renewal as it did to actually do it.
- ♪ Number your pages and number the questions. Each panelist must read 80, 90 or more renewal applications. Don't put the readers in the position of having to hunt for something.
- ♪ Don't forget to double-space, and remember there is a 10-page limit; it might not be a bad idea to have the checklist in front of you as you are making copies and assembling them for sending to the Endowment.
- ♪ Use the application brochure as a boost to creativity. After internalizing what is in the booklet, the pastor should present his or her ministry and its struggles honestly, design a well-balanced program that takes care of spiritual, intellectual, physical, relational, emotional needs. I think readers are more impressed with applicants who use their own words and images and experiences to present their needs.
- ♪ Make sure that the grant clearly explains in what ways you hope to be renewed.

Involving the congregation

- ♪ I would say to congregations, "See this as the extraordinary thing it is. The renewal program speaks the language of grace."
- ♪ When leaders experience renewal, congregations are re-energized, too. Things don't just return to normal when the leader returns. New patterns of leadership emerge. New vision sprouts up.
- ♪ It is critical for the congregation to be healthy and whole in order for the sabbatical to be valuable. In my estimation a troubled congregation is not a good candidate for a sabbatical. The pastor needs to have the assurance that all will be well in his or her absence.
- ♪ The sabbatical was intentional and well-planned. Many parishioners had a hand in its development—I was not the only visionary. The collaboration that happened, and continues to happen, is wonderful and life-giving to me and to our parish.
- ♪ Do not fear the possible changes that might occur. Rather, embrace the risk of change that might renew the life and hope of a congregation.
- ♪ Give your pastor the freedom to shape the renewal time according to what will best feed and replenish him or her. Appoint a committee to help with logistics. Create intentional rituals of sending forth and welcoming home; include welcoming and releasing the temporary pastor in these rituals. Be open to the newness that will be brought back by your renewed pastor.
- ♪ Understanding and articulating my purpose in conversation with the [congregational] planning group was important in making this a pilgrimage, and not a tourist trip.
- ♪ Integrate what you do as pastor with a congregational program while you're gone that engages the congregation in a parallel or supplementary experience.

- ♪ Allow the pastor to be truly free from pastoral duties. Let the sabbatical provide the time the pastor needs to examine his or her professional and personal needs and dreams. Commit to support your pastor when the sabbatical ends and formal ministry is resumed.
- ♪ The amount of preparation leading up to the sabbatical leave and the educational process and involvement by the lay leadership was critical. This is an area that could easily be overlooked, and yet may be one of the most important. My congregation understood the need and benefit of such an endeavor and therefore had a very healthy attitude toward my time away.
- ♪ Trust in your congregation members' and staff's blessings and abilities to carry on in your pastor's absence. Thoroughly plan in advance to keep the extra load on other clergy and staff to a minimum (e.g. arrange for additional pastoral support).
- ♪ Be generous to those you leave behind. Develop a fine program for the congregation; there is money for that. AND, give a generous stipend to your associates or those who fill in for you. Not to do so betrays a stinginess that is inimical to the spirit of the program.
- ♪ Plan for the rest of your staff to have some vacation time a couple of weeks after you get back. After they fill you in on what's been happening in your absence, they will need some time to rest.

Thinking about the amount of time for Sabbath

- ♪ The only surprise during the renewal period was how short the 12 weeks seemed.
- ♪ We believe three to four months is a good time period for a sabbatical. It is long enough to get into a different rhythm, but not so long as to feel disconnected from the church.

- ♪ The only thing I would do differently is ask for more time. I think one more month would have been beneficial, and I would have used it at the beginning of the sabbatical.
- ♪ Don't accept one day less than three months for your sabbatical. Take four months if you can. In my experience, more than four would have been too long.
- ♪ It was fully three weeks or more before I had unwound enough to begin to fully concentrate and appreciate what was before me.
- ♪ I wish that I had scheduled more time for rest and reflection. In the desire to submit a really strong grant application that would look impressive on paper, I overscheduled myself. Quiet and reflective time is something most pastors do not have. The renewal leave could have been an opportunity to receive the gift of time if I had planned my leave a little more carefully.
- ♪ As members of the congregation, we feel honored to be able to give the gift of time to our pastor.

Setting a pace for renewal—before and during

- ♪ I would say to pastors, "Don't go from one draining activity to another. Allow time for freedom of exploration, for the primary, essential and restorative work of discovery, reading and prayer."
- ♪ I was fortunate to receive the clergy renewal grant in 2004 for my sabbatical in 2005, allowing me to have more than a year to plan and prepare. I found that I had to pace myself so as not to plan more than I could accomplish.
- ♪ Living in a foreign country [Italy, for three months], shopping for groceries, navigating the transit system, and thinking in another

language all forced me to get out of my own head and culture for awhile.

- ♪ I took time every day to walk, explore, write and pray.
- ♪ My own experience indicates that moving quickly from place to place or from activity to activity is way too much like the life of a pastor. Pay attention to pace and balance. Take a week at the beginning and at the end (as suggested in the application brochure) to unwind and to gear up. Balance time alone with family time. Balance study with relaxation and travel.
- ♪ I actually took off my watch for awhile at Chautauqua. I've always been such a creature of the clock that such a prospect once might have seemed to me extraordinarily improbable.
- ♪ My renewal time involved some research in a library. I found that I gave myself enough time so that I could examine records and visit places at leisure. Working with original materials, often loosely stored and incompletely indexed and catalogued, requires time and imagination.
- ♪ Spiritual vitality, like physical health, requires daily disciplines rather than great gulps of occasional spiritual recreation.
- ♪ When traveling, don't do package tours (or include them sparingly). Take the time to be in a place—to know it and to become acquainted with the people.
- ♪ I loved all the experiences I had but did get travel weary. I would not travel from Sorrento, Italy, to Athens, Greece, by land and ferry. It was the 33-hour trip from hell.
- ♪ I would not be too compulsive with having a big plan. Too many activities, too much travel can make this journey become more stressful than it is renewing.
- ♪ First and foremost, I would encourage other pastors to incorporate "play" into their plans

for a renewal program. The Galapagos Islands trip was fantastic, and it created a surprising opportunity for interesting reading and study that I had not anticipated. Second, it is most necessary to build in some significant blocks of rest and reflection in between segments of travel.

- ♪ Leave town (or the country) at the beginning of your sabbatical. That gives you a clean break with your congregation. Go to the "Talk" site on Fodors.com if you need help planning your travel.
- ♪ Plan to be out of town at the end of your sabbatical. Being gone at the end will keep you from going crazy trying to get everything done during that last week or so at home.
- ♪ Don't forget to have fun. When the question is raised regarding what makes your heart sing, take that seriously. Ponder it. Turn it over. Discover some long-hidden passion. And then find a way to integrate that into a unique renewal program that no one else could have prepared. Share that passion in the story that gets told in the application.
- ♪ It is essential to allow for the working out of God's plans and to be willing to be carried by the unknowable and unpredictable power of the Holy Spirit.
- ♪ At some fundamental level it is important to experience the essential goodness of existence, the wonder of life. You can't really talk about transcendence if you haven't been able to live it.

Creating a realistic budget

- ♪ The money made it possible, but the discipline of the process made us focus on the real purpose of this time.
- ♪ A word about proportionality: some renewal programs will require the pastor to use grant funds for equipment and supplies that are essential to the renewal program.

Requests for equipment and supplies should make sure that the cost of such items is appropriate to their significance for the proposed renewal program and proportional in relation to the overall budget. In preparing the renewal proposal the congregation and the pastor should determine to whom equipment and supplies purchased with grant funds will belong (the pastor or the congregation) once the renewal program is complete.

- ♪ Be sure to provide the requested detail in the budget narratives. This is not intended to be a budget with numbers only, but a budget *narrative*.
- ♪ If you find that it is so expensive to purchase an item that it skews your budget, think about renting it instead. You don't want to weigh down your budget with major expenses and limit your options to pursue other activities.
- ♪ Clarity regarding numbers will go a long way toward impressing the readers.
- ♪ Put all sabbatical money in one separate church account.
- ♪ Use a credit card on the account if you are doing any significant travel so there will be a record of expenses. Even clergy supply can be paid from that account.
- ♪ Don't do travelers' checks. The best way these days is to get cash from ATMs—just make sure that the places you're going have them. Also, be sure you know what your daily/weekly limit is for cash. I had a problem when I was going on a ferry and needed cash two days in a row. I had to call the U.S. and get my credit card company to release a larger amount.
- ♪ Nobody had to spend a lot of time making decisions about how we were going to spend the (grant) money or provide ministry in my absence—it was all there in black and white. A detailed plan provides a lot of freedom for people not to worry.

- ♪ If you travel with a laptop computer, be sure to secure your computer. And just in case your best efforts at security fail, be sure to back up your work on a disk.
- ♪ When planning on renewal activities such as music or art lessons, use your good judgment to decide whether purchasing a new guitar or a potter's wheel is the best way to use renewal funds. For example, you might want to use grant funds to rent equipment or instruments to get you started during the renewal period. Whether you propose to rent or purchase, you will want to avoid including excessive budget amounts for equipment and supplies.

Planning ahead for re-entry

- ♪ The biggest surprise was the difficulty I found in the re-entry phase. If I had to do this over again, carefully planning my return would be a higher priority.
- ♪ I would offer this one thing: Be prepared for the re-entry. It is not as simple as it would seem. With a bit of planning prior to leaving and a bit of work following the return, any negative impact can be reduced. There seems to be a sense of grief with which one needs to deal.
- ♪ Some of the challenges I encountered on my travels were still very fresh in my mind upon my return and it would have helped to have a therapist or spiritual director to talk to. I would encourage future grant applicants to build this into their budget. I wish I had.
- ♪ Pastors should be reminded that the personal depth and meaning of the renewal period is not necessarily transferred to the congregation when those members have not experienced the depth of inward focus, refreshment, and growth that the pastor has. The sharing will likely take months or years to see final fruit.

- ♪ We planned beyond the return time to enable the pastor to transition back easily.
- ♪ Don't plan to preach during your first week back. Better yet, don't lead worship at all—just participate as any parishioner would.
- ♪ Don't be surprised if you go through a time of grief at the end of your sabbatical. This doesn't mean that you don't love your congregation or that you don't want to be a pastor. It means that you've lost a golden time when you were able to focus on you and your family. Two years later, and my heart still aches a bit when I think of my sabbatical.
- ♪ Celebrate upon the pastor's return!

Continuing renewal

- ♪ The work done prior to the sabbatical and the continuing conversation during it and since have helped us look toward the future in a purposeful, mission-oriented way. We will not move forward based on what is convenient or expeditious, but will be guided by our fresh-found commitment to being a hospitable presence of God in the community.
- ♪ Make sure to find ways to continue renewal throughout your ministry. It is what we preach to our congregations; it is what we should do ourselves.
- ♪ The most prevalent impact on the congregation was that we bonded beyond any expectations we could have had. By working together and intentionally putting God and the church first, we grew as one and accomplished things that we were not sure were possible.
- ♪ We believe our church is stronger for having had this experience. We discovered . . . some new leaders, and they are making a difference in the life of our congregation.

- ♪ The impact upon our congregation has not been one specific event or outcome, but rather a deep, pervasive energy coming from within the pastor.
- ♪ I traveled as a pilgrim, not a tourist, and this made all the difference.
- ♪ While I returned rested and refreshed, I also returned highly charged and somehow more resolved. It has been an amazing and life-changing journey.
- ♪ I think I had somewhat forgotten that it is prayer that marks time, rather than finding time for prayer. Indeed, my sabbatical was so successful that, upon my return, I could not remember which key opened my office door.
- ♪ Even though my experience was difficult at times, I would do it all over again. I learned a lot about myself away from the label of minister.
- ♪ We absolutely recommend this practice to other congregations. This program is biblical, practical, and tests in a way few things can, the mettle and unity of the congregation. Our experience is that sabbatical produced healthy results for pastor and congregation.
- ♪ The renewal program was a life-changing ministry, a sustaining, direction-giving experience for me. It will give shape to the next 10 years of my ministry at the church and in the community. It has enlarged my vision and renewed my call and commitment.
- ♪ Our whole worldview shifted. Our relationships within the family matured. Our sense of confidence and identity as God's children was deepened. Our commitment to the way of Christ became more resolute. Our view of future work and calling has changed. The whole experience could not have had a more profound or positive impact on our family.