

Evangelical Lutheran Church has received a grant of \$49,824 to enable its minister, Rev. Eric E. Bakken, to participate in the 2011 National Clergy Renewal Program funded by the Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment Inc. It is one of 158 congregations across the country that will support their ministers in the program, which allows pastors to step back from their busy lives and renew their spirits for the benefit of their ongoing ministries.

Now in its 12th year, the program invites Christian congregations and ministers to consider and plan a period of intentional reflection and renewal. It provides a time for ministers to take a break from their daily obligations and gain the fresh perspective and renewed energy that a carefully considered “Sabbath time” of travel, study, rest and prayer can provide.

Each congregation is eligible to apply for a grant of up to \$50,000. Up to \$15,000 of that amount can be used to fulfill pastoral duties during the minister’s absence and for expenses related to the congregation’s own renewal. The 158 grants this year totaled \$6.8 million.

Rev. Bakken will spend his 4 months time of renewal (May 1-August 31, 2012) focused on three components. First, time focused on prayer, reading and study; second, time to focus on personal time with his family, culminating on a family trip to Norway; and third, time to participate in life-renewing hobbies, including time studying guitar and the recording of music.

This year’s group includes congregations in 40 states. In the mix are congregations of many sizes – some as small as 40 members, others as large as 3,000 present at Sunday worship services. The oldest is St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Baltimore. It was founded in 1692 as the parish church for Patapsco Parish, one of the original 30 parishes in colonial Maryland. Three churches – the Riverside Congregation of Alamo Heights United Methodist in Spring Branch, Texas, Downtown Presbyterian in Greenville, S.C., and United Disciples of Christ in Charleston, W.Va. – tie for the youngest. They were founded in 2004. The 2011 class brings to 1,598 the number of congregations that have received clergy renewal grants since 2000.

“We ask these congregations and ministers to consider the question, ‘What will make your heart sing?’, as they devise their plans,” said Craig Dykstra, senior vice president for religion at the Endowment. “They never fail to come up with wonderful and imaginative yet doable ways to fulfill their dreams. Their time away has freed them up to pursue personal and professional interests and needs in ways that have given them new energy for ministry – and the congregations have discovered that they too experience a refreshment of their own and a newfound sense of their own strengths.”

The Endowment’s larger goal is to bolster the good work that America’s pastors and congregations accomplish day in and day out and to reinforce and build upon important work being done on both sides of the pulpit. “In our religion grant making, we hope to strengthen the efforts of today’s excellent pastors because it is no secret that pastors who have reconnected themselves to the passions that led them to the ministry in the first place are more likely to lead healthy and vibrant congregations today,” Dykstra said.