Sponsor/Title: Lilly Endowment: Exploring Christian Practices Initiative

Website: https://lillyendowment.org/exploring-practices/

Submission Limitation per Institution: One (1)

Notre Dame Limited Submissions Listing: https://research.nd.edu/our-services/funding-opportunities/faculty/limited-submissions-program/

Internal Expression of Interest Deadline: 2026-02-09

Sponsor Application Deadline: 2026-03-25 (Interest Form), 2026-05-18 (Full Proposal)

Description: Lilly Endowment's Exploring Christian Practices Initiative seeks to fund organizations in developing and enhancing programs that help diverse individuals explore Christian practices to address spiritual questions and nourish their religious lives. Successful proposals will focus on retrieving, adapting, or refining practices from their specific theological and ecclesial traditions—such as meditation, prayer, retreats, discernment, pilgrimages, small groups, testimony, music, and scripture study—to serve groups both inside and outside their current constituencies. Proposals must provide a compelling response to how these practices will be made accessible to "seekers" and others who are not currently connected to a religious community.

Proposals should detail how an organization will build its capacity to lead these initiatives, including the use of qualified staff, clergy, and lay leaders who can effectively mentor others in Christian practices. Furthermore, the Endowment values proposals that include a clear plan for evaluation and the sharing of insights with broader networks to foster learning and innovation across the religious landscape. Organizations may submit one proposal requesting up to **$2.5 million** for a period of up to **five years** to implement these strategies.

Required Internal Application: Upload the following information to the Google Form at https://forms.gle/XZrZhFoc7YoV4ENv7 by the internal deadline:

- Name of the Principal Investigator (PI)
- Names of Collaborators (ND or External):
    - For each ND or external collaborator listed, include the individual's name, department or unit, and specific role on the project. Limit each collaborator's description to a maximum of three sentences.
- Project Summary (maximum of two (2) pages, single-spaced). In reference to the attached RFP, please address the following questions:
    - What is the purpose of the proposed project, and how will it advance the aim of the Exploring Practices initiative?
    - What are the proposed project's key activities, and how will they result in a coherent and effective strategy that advances the project's purpose and the initiative's aim?

- What are the anticipated outcomes for the proposed project over a 3-5 year period?
- What is the estimated funding request for a 5-year grant in support of this project?

Questions? Contact Amanda Retartha in the Office of Foundation Relations at amichael@nd.edu.

Unless otherwise noted, all internal applications are due by 11:59 PM Eastern Daylight Time on the internal expression of interest deadline.

Applications submitted after the deadline will not be accepted.

Exploring Christian Practices Initiative

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS 2026

Lilly Endowment is pleased to announce its Exploring Christian Practices Initiative (Exploring Practices). The aim of the initiative is to multiply opportunities and increase access to settings that help individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds explore and engage in Christian practices to address their spiritual interests and questions, find and build community with others, nourish their religious lives and grow in faith:

In this new, competitive initiative, the Endowment invites eligible charitable organizations to submit proposals for grants of **up to $2.5 million** each that may be used for **up to a five-year period** to develop new and/or enhance existing programs that present promising strategies for advancing the aim of the initiative and provide compelling and thoughtful responses to the following guiding questions:

1. Who are the specific groups of individuals (both inside and outside the organization's current constituents and the congregations that the organization supports) that the organization seeks to reach and serve, and what are the spiritual interests and questions of these individuals?
2. What Christian practices that are grounded in the organization's theological and ecclesial tradition have played central roles in nourishing the faith of individuals in the organization's community, and how can the organization retrieve, adapt, refine and deploy these practices in appropriate ways today to help individuals address their spiritual interests and questions, find and build community with others, nourish their religious lives and grow in faith?
3. What are the most appropriate and promising settings (both inside and outside of congregations) that are most conducive for individuals to explore and engage in a variety of Christian practices that the organization identified as most helpful and appropriate for today, and how can the organization both multiply opportunities and increase access to these settings to enable more individuals to explore and engage in these practices?

The Endowment anticipates awarding **approximately 60 grants** to charitable organizations that submit the most compelling proposals that demonstrate they have the imagination, commitment and capacity to design, implement and sustain high-quality programs.

Interested charitable organizations may submit proposals through the following procedures:

Interest Form and Letter of Interest: Interested charitable organizations should complete and submit an Interest Form and a one-page Letter of Interest **by March 25, 2026**, through the Exploring Practices webpage on the Endowment's website. Although not a requirement, the submission of the Interest Form and Letter of Interest indicates the organization's intent to submit a proposal and assists the Endowment in implementing the initiative.

Proposal Submission: Organizations must submit complete proposals **by May 18, 2026**, through the Exploring Practices webpage on the Endowment's website.

Eligibility, selection criteria and proposal guidelines are described below. The Endowment anticipates announcing grant awards **in December 2026**.

Rationale

During the last several months, the Endowment has received many reports from pastors, campus ministers, theological educators, other religious leaders, and researchers, among others, about an increasing number of individuals who are approaching them with spiritual questions and expressing a desire to connect with something beyond themselves. But these individuals are not sure how to do so. Pastors report, for example, that a growing number of visitors, as well as congregants, are seeking to learn more about their faith traditions; these visitors and congregants are asking deeply spiritual questions and are interested in discovering and engaging in a variety of Christian practices to help them explore their questions and strengthen their relationships with God. Campus ministers similarly note that more students are showing up for worship services, joining small prayer groups and participating in spiritual retreats; these young people are searching for community and wanting to learn and draw on Christian practices, such as contemplative prayer and sabbath practices, to help them create spaces where they can step away briefly from the digital devices that seem to consume their lives, find belonging and reflect on questions of purpose and meaning. Theological school faculty share that they are encountering a high number of younger students who are not sure about pursuing vocations in ministry as pastoral leaders in congregations but bring with them a vibrant spiritual curiosity; these seminary students jump at chances to learn about and engage in time-honored Christian practices that help them reflect on their lives, foster connections with others exploring spiritual questions, and deepen their relationships with God.

Common across these reports is how little knowledge many of these individuals seem to have of scripture or historic practices and traditions that have nourished the faith of Christians for centuries. According to these reports from religious leaders, there are a growing number of individuals today who are actively seeking opportunities to explore their faith and engage in activities to help them grow in their knowledge and love of God.

These reports resonate with findings from several recent research studies. The Pew Research Center's recent Religious Landscape Study, for example, noted that overwhelmingly most Americans believe in God or a universal spirit (83 percent) and think that there is something spiritual beyond the natural world (79 percent). Probing these findings, Christian Smith, a highly renowned sociologist at the University of Notre Dame, conducted in 2023 the Millennial Zeitgeist Survey and found a significant uptick in interest in spiritual questions (especially among younger generations), noting that a "re-enchantment of American culture" seems to be underway. Smith observed, however, that younger generations are experimenting with spirituality without knowledge of or connection to religious traditions, resulting in an emerging spirituality that is marked by fragmentation and incoherence. Drawing on the survey's findings, Smith challenges religious organizations, including churches, to identify the spiritual practices and traditions that are at the core of their identities and to find ways that they can be shared more broadly with individuals (especially young people) who are seeking opportunities to explore their spiritual interests and questions and connect with something beyond themselves.

Throughout the centuries, Christian communities from a broad spectrum of theological traditions have cultivated a wide variety of practices and devotional rituals to help individuals explore spiritual questions, reflect on events and experiences in their lives in light of their faith, build community with others and deepen their relationships with God. A brief and partial list of some of these Christian practices and devotional rituals includes:

- Daily meditation and prayer that help individuals reflect on their lives and commune with God.
- Retreats that provide intentional periods to step away from daily tasks and responsibilities for spiritual reflection and prayer.
- Discernment exercises that help individuals draw on faith when making major life decisions.
- Pilgrimages and other intentional travel experiences to sites of religious significance that nurture spiritual growth.
- Small faith-sharing groups and similar regular meetings with others that provide support and accountability.
- Testimony and other intentional opportunities for sharing stories and accounts of faith with others.
- Communal singing provides opportunities to express faith and form community through music.
- Disciplined study of and reflection on scripture and theological traditions.
- Mission and service trips that provide intentional engagement and reflection on experiences of serving others.

Christian communities have tended to emphasize different sets of practices that express their theological traditions' particular beliefs and commitments about God and humanity. Some Christian communities, for example, place a high emphasis on structured and cognitive practices of study and personal reflection, while others emphasize more emotive, spirit-inspired experiences. In all cases, Christian practices have provided one of the most important vehicles for nourishing the religious lives of individuals, as well as broader communities, and for helping to cultivate experiences of awe and wonder, foster expressions of gratitude, build community with others and grow in faith.

The deployment of Christian practices has never been static, and Christian communities have created, retrieved, adapted and refined practices and devotional rituals to meet the challenges and demands arising in different times and contexts. Christian communities, for example, have created and adapted a wide variety of meditation and prayer practices to help individuals reflect on their lives and commune with God. These meditative practices range from centering prayer to journaling, from *lectio divina* to walking labyrinths, from daily morning watch devotions to web-based prayer groups. Christian communities also have created prayer books that help Christians employ specific prayer practices in a wide variety of settings, including weekly corporate prayer services, bedside devotions with a friend who is sick, family-centered and home-based daily prayers, small prayer groups in college dorms before final exams, chants and meditations to be repeated while taking pilgrimages to holy sites, and reflection exercises for use on mission trips, among others. In a similar way, many Christian communities have developed and engaged in a variety of practices focused on testimony or faith sharing. These practices give voice to experiences of wonder and awe and encounters with God. Different communities feature practices of testimony or faith sharing in a broad range of settings, including corporate worship and prayer services, communal singing, preaching and silent witness. In addition to prayer and testimony, Christian communities use many other Christian practices to express and share their

deepest convictions about God, and they continue to adapt these practices in ways that are most appropriate and helpful for nourishing their religious lives.

The reports from religious leaders and recent research findings, as well as the historic role that Christian practices have played in nourishing religious lives of individuals and communities, point toward a critical challenge facing Christian communities today: *How can churches and related faith-based organizations retrieve, adapt, refine and deploy Christian practices in appropriate ways today to help individuals (especially those who may not be familiar with scripture or Christian traditions) explore their spiritual interests and questions, find and build community with others, nourish their religious lives and grow in faith?*

Program Design Considerations

Although interested organizations are encouraged to design Exploring Practices programs that advance the initiative's aim and make sense for their mission and constituents, the Endowment is especially interested in supporting proposals that provide evidence that organizations have examined thoughtfully the guiding questions listed above and designed programs that respond in compelling ways to these questions. Thus, the Endowment encourages organizations to consider the following in designing their programs and preparing their proposals:

- **Listening to individuals that the organization seeks to reach and serve and understanding their spiritual interests and questions.**

  Organizations should identify the specific groups of individuals that they seek to reach through their programs, engage them in conversation about their spiritual interests and questions and listen carefully to their responses. These conversations may include individuals who are unaffiliated with or uninvolved in Christian communities and seeking to explore spiritual questions about God and the world around them and/or individuals who are currently participating in faith communities and wishing to deepen their faith. Proposals should include discussions about the specific groups that organizations seek to reach and what they have discovered through their conversations about their particular spiritual interests and questions. Organizations should give consideration in their proposals to why and how they intend to reach and serve these specific groups of individuals and address their particular interests and questions.

- **Identifying Christian practices and retrieving, adapting, refining and deploying them to nourish faith.**

  Organizations should identify Christian practices that are grounded in theological and ecclesial traditions and that have played central roles in nourishing the faith of the individuals in their communities. In preparing proposals, organizations should describe what Christian practices they intend to retrieve, adapt, refine and deploy and why these practices are most appropriate today for nourishing the religious lives of individuals and communities. Proposals also should present a clear and coherent program design that outlines how organizations will deploy these practices to advance their proposed programs' purposes and the aim of the Exploring Practices initiative.

- **Multiplying opportunities and increasing access to settings for individuals to explore and engage in Christian practices.**

  Organizations should identify opportunities and settings that are most conducive today to help individuals explore and engage in Christian practices. These settings may include opportunities

for engaging in practices in traditional religious settings (e.g., churches, religious shrines and sites, Christian retreat centers, monasteries) and/or other settings (e.g., nature parks, community gardens). They also may encourage individuals to engage in Christian practices at different times and locations, including holy seasons (e.g., weekly worship services, annual religious festivals and events) and/or daily life (e.g., daily home or family prayer times, workplaces). In preparing proposals, organizations should give consideration to and describe why these particular opportunities and settings are most conducive and appropriate for nourishing the religious lives of the specific groups of individuals that they seek to reach and serve and how these efforts will advance the proposed program's purposes and the aim of the initiative.

Eligibility and Selection Criteria

Charitable organizations in the United States that are tax-exempt public charities under Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3) and corresponding statutes and that have a demonstrated interest in nurturing Christian faith and life are eligible to apply for grants through the Exploring Practices initiative.

The Endowment intends to award grants to organizations that demonstrate that they have the imagination, commitment and capacity to design, implement and sustain programs that advance the initiative's aim and respond to the guiding questions. Funding decisions will take into consideration the extent to which an organization in its proposal demonstrates or provides the following:

1. A clear understanding of the spiritual interests and questions of the individuals that the organization seeks to reach and serve.
2. A thoughtful exposition of the Christian practices that the organization intends to retrieve, adapt, refine or deploy and how these practices are most appropriate and fitting today for helping individuals explore their spiritual interests and questions.
3. A coherent and compelling program design that will multiply opportunities and increase access for individuals to explore and engage in Christian practices.
4. A clear statement of the program's anticipated outcomes and a sound plan for tracking and evaluating the program's progress toward these outcomes.
5. A credible plan for how the organization will raise funds and identify resources needed to continue the program, if successful, beyond the end of the grant period.

The Endowment encourages each organization to apply for an amount appropriate to its capacity, the needs of the proposed program and the organization's ability to sustain its program beyond the end of the grant period. An organization should have no expectation that additional Endowment funding will be available to sustain its program after the grant period ends.

Grant funds may be used to support the program and related costs required to develop and implement an Exploring Practices program. Along with supporting program expenses, grant funds may be used to evaluate the program and track its progress toward its anticipated outcomes, communicate about the program with constituencies and stakeholders and engage in fundraising and related activities to raise funds needed to sustain the program beyond the grant period. Grant funds may not be used for scholarships, endowments or organizational operating expenses unrelated to the program.

Proposal Submission Procedure

Interested organizations are asked to submit their Exploring Practices proposals through a two-step procedure.

Step One: Interest Form and Letter of Interest

The Endowment requests that organizations complete and submit through the Exploring Practices webpage on the Endowment's website an Interest Form and a one-page Letter of Interest to indicate their interest in submitting an Exploring Practices proposal. The **Interest Form** identifies the organization and names a proposal contact person. The **Letter of Interest** should provide a brief description of the organization and initial thoughts about its proposed program's purpose and design. Although the submission of these materials is not a requirement, it will assist the Endowment in implementing the initiative.

The deadline for the submission of the Interest Form and Letter of Interest is **March 25, 2026**.

Step Two: Exploring Practices Proposal

Organizations must submit their Exploring Practices proposals through the Exploring Practices webpage on the Endowment's website. The proposal and required accompanying materials must be uploaded as a single PDF. The required proposal materials are described in the Proposal Guidelines section below.

The deadline for submission of complete Exploring Practices proposals is **May 18, 2026**.

Proposal Guidelines

A complete proposal must include the following:

Official Request Letter: This **one-page** letter requesting a grant must be signed by the organization's chief executive officer and the chair of its governing board.

Information Form: This form, which is provided on the Exploring Practices webpage, requests key information about the proposal and the individuals responsible for the proposed program.

Executive Summary: This summary, which should **not exceed one page**, provides a description of the organization, its mission and constituencies, the primary purpose of the proposed program, the program's key activities and its anticipated outcomes. *This summary is not included in 12-page limit for the Proposal Narrative.*

Summary Budget: This **one-page** summary budget must include only income and expenses for the requested grant period years of the proposed program's budget and should condense budget line items from the detailed Line-Item Budget. *See the Guide to Budget Preparation for more details.*

Proposal Narrative: This narrative, which should **not exceed 12 pages** (excluding the budget and other supporting material), must address the following topics and questions:

1. **Organizational Information:**
    - What is the organization's mission, its primary constituencies and its organizational structure? What is the organization's relationship to a Christian denomination or ecclesial community? Is the organization connected to a theological tradition? Which tradition?

- Why is it important for the organization to undertake this work?
- Who are the organization's key leaders and staff (especially related to the proposed program)?
- Who was involved in the decision to apply for this grant? What support does this program have from the organization's leadership and governing board?

2. **Program Purpose:**
   - What is the purpose of the proposed program, and how will it advance the aim of the Exploring Practices initiative?
   - How does the proposed program respond to the guiding questions noted above (see page 1)?
     - Who are the specific groups of individuals that the proposed program seeks to reach and serve, and what are their spiritual interests and questions?
     - What Christian practices will the proposed program retrieve, adapt, refine and deploy?
     - What are the most conducive opportunities and settings for individuals to explore and engage in these practices?
   - How does the purpose of the proposed program align with the organization's mission?
3. **Program Design:**
   - What are the proposed program's key activities and how will they result in a coherent and effective strategy that advances the program's purpose and the initiative's aim?
   - Who will lead the proposed program and implement its activities?
4. **Collaborations and Partnerships (if any):**
   - With whom will the organization collaborate (e.g., denominational judicatories and agencies, colleges and universities, campus ministries, Bible institutes and theological schools, Christian retreat and conference centers, church camps, congregations, pilgrimage sites, faith-based arts organizations, church networks and independent religious agencies, etc.) in implementing the proposed program? Are these existing or new relationships?
   - What are the responsibilities of each collaborating organization? What activities will they implement?
   - How will the organization manage these relationships?
5. **Outcomes, Performance Indicators and Evaluation Plan:**

   <u>Outcomes</u>:
   - What are the anticipated outcomes for the proposed program? For individuals exploring and engaging in Christian practices? For churches and other faith-based organizations? For clergy and ministry professionals? For others?
   - What does the organization wish to achieve through the proposed program? In three years? In five years? In ten years?

Performance Indicators:

› What specific performance indicators will the organization use to measure the program's progress towards the outcomes stated above? Please include the intervals for achieving these indicators in the timetable described below.

Note: Outcomes and performance indicators may be quantitative and qualitative in nature. For example, one of the proposed program's outcomes may be that at least 200 individuals participate in spiritual discernment retreats. An accompanying quantitative performance indicator may be that at least 100 individuals participate in retreats by the midpoint of the grant period. Another outcome may be that at least 80 percent of individuals who participate in spiritual pilgrimages indicate that their experiences enabled them to explore their spiritual questions, nourished their religious lives and helped them grow in faith. Based on pre- and post-pilgrimage surveys and interviews, an accompanying qualitative performance indicator may be an increasing degree of satisfaction of individuals participating in the pilgrimages and positive narrative accounts from participants about how the experiences deepened their faith.

Evaluation Plan:

› What is the organization's plan to evaluate the proposed program? How will the organization track the program's performance indicators? What qualitative and quantitative methods will the organization use in the evaluation process (e.g., interviews, focus groups, surveys)? Who is responsible for evaluation?

6. **Communication:**

› How will the organization communicate and share insights and resources about the program with its various constituencies?

› With whom will the organization seek to communicate what is learned?

› What communication tools will the organization employ and how?

7. **Sustainability and Continuation:**

› If successful, how does the organization intend to sustain the proposed program beyond the end of the grant?

› How will the organization embed the proposed program into its ongoing operations?

› How will new sources of funding be cultivated to replace grant dollars? When will such cultivation efforts begin? Will the organization include in its budget for the proposed program funds to support expenses for raising sustaining funds (e.g., development staff expenses, fundraising campaign expenses)? What are these expenses?

› If collaboration is included in the program design, how will the collaborating organizations participate in these efforts?

8. **Organizational Capacity:**

› What is the organization's current annual operating budget, and what are the major sources of revenue that support its operating budget?

› What past successes and achievements demonstrate the organization's capacity to do this work?

- How does the proposed program relate to the organization's current programs and organizational structure?
- What challenges does the organization anticipate facing? What are key strategies for addressing these challenges?

Program Timetable: This **one-page** timetable should include the proposed program's key activities, including evaluation (i.e., when specific performance indicators will be assessed to track progress towards outcomes), communication and sustainability activities. *The timetable is not included in the 12-page limit for the Proposal Narrative*.

Letters of Support (where applicable): If the proposed program involves other collaborating organizations, letters of support from the leaders of the other organizations or agencies must be submitted with the proposal.

Line-Item Budget and Budget Narrative: The budget for the proposed program must include the following materials (*see Guide to Budget Preparation for more details*):

- **Line-Item Budget:** This detailed budget must specify how the grant funds will be used for the activities described in the letter of request.
- **Budget Narrative:** This narrative must include written explanations of how the organization calculated each line item included in the Line-Item Budget.

The Guide to Budget Preparation, which is provided on the Exploring Practices webpage, includes examples and required budget formats. The Endowment recommends working closely with those responsible for accounting procedures and financial policies in the organization to create a Line-Item Budget that aligns with those procedures and policies.

Copy of Organization's Current Year Operating Budget: The operating budget submitted with the proposal must be for the organization's current fiscal year at the time of the proposal's submission.

Copy of Organization's Annual Audited Financial Statements: The annual audited financial statements should be for the organization's most recently completed fiscal year. The financial statements should include a balance sheet, income and expense statement, and any footnotes that provide an accurate assessment of the financial condition of the organization. If the organization does not have audited financial statements, it may submit with its proposal reviewed financial statements conducted by a certified public accounting firm.

Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form: This form, which is provided on the Exploring Practices webpage, is used to verify the organization's tax status as a qualified recipient of grants from private foundations such as the Endowment. The organization must check a box in Section 3 of the form to reflect the organization's status as a church (including a convention, association or integrated auxiliary of a church), school, publicly supported charity, etc. The organization's status may be located on an Internal Revenue Service exempt status determination letter, as indicated in Section 3 of the form and as described below.

Copy of Internal Revenue Service Exempt Status Determination Letter: Most churches and public charities (including regional judicatories and church networks) that are qualified recipients for grants from private foundations will have received a tax-exempt status determination letter from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). This letter provides verification of the organization's status as a 501(c)(3) organization and indicates the section of the tax code under which the organization's public charity status has been established. Some regional judicatories or church networks may not have asked for or received such a letter from the IRS. If that is

the case, the judicatory or church network should determine whether it is listed in the group exemption ruling for a denomination or other charitable organization. If so, the judicatory or church network should attach evidence that it is covered by the ruling. For example, by sending copies of the directory cover and the page on which the judicatory or church network is listed in the official directory of the denomination or charitable organization. No grants will be awarded until the proper tax status is confirmed.

Proposal Submission Guidelines and Checklist

Proposals must be submitted by May 18, 2026, through the Exploring Practices webpage on the Endowment's website. The proposal materials must be combined into a single PDF and organized in the order listed below:

- ☐ Official Request Letter (one page)
- ☐ Information Form (available on the initiative's webpage)
- ☐ Executive Summary (not to exceed one page)
- ☐ Proposal Narrative (not to exceed 12 pages)
- ☐ Program Timetable (one page)
- ☐ Letter(s) of Support from any collaborating organizations
- ☐ Line-Item Budget (see Guide for Budget Preparation, available on the initiative's webpage)
- ☐ Budget Narrative (see Guide for Budget Preparation, available on the initiative's webpage)
- ☐ Copy of Organization's Current Year Operating Budget
- ☐ Copy of Organization's Annual Audited Financial Statements
- ☐ Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form (available on the initiative's webpage)
- ☐ Copy of IRS Exempt Status Determination Letter

Further Information and Questions:

The Endowment will host information webinars in February 2026 to provide more information about the Exploring Christian Practices Initiative and respond to questions about the proposal submission procedures. Organizations may register to attend the webinars on the Exploring Practices webpage on the Endowment's website.

Regretfully, due to the competitive nature of this initiative, Endowment staff is unable to communicate individually with organizations to discuss ideas or provide feedback on drafts of proposals. If an organization has a technical question about the proposal eligibility, proposal guidelines or submission procedures, please email: Jessicah Duckworth, Program Director, at exploringpractices@lei.org.