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New models for mission

First call pastors have it rough—especially the young ones. Right out of seminary, they are often placed in struggling congregations that cannot afford the higher salaries of a leader with more experience. The Lilly Endowment discovered that 50% of first call clergy under age 30 will drop out of the ministry within five years. That statistic is the basis behind the Lilly Endowment’s Transition-into-Ministry Program: a unique residency program that allows newly-ordained pastors to serve a few years in a strong parish, developing their skills so that when they move on to lead their first parish, they are equipped to handle conflict and take care of themselves.

Saint Peter’s Lutheran Church in Manhattan is a strong parish with a history of interns. Working with local Episcopal and Presbyterian congregations, Pastor Amandus Derr and his ecumenical counterparts applied for a grant from the Transition-into-Ministry Program in 2009. The ecumenical group was awarded a \$1.9 million grant in January 2010—enough to fund residents in the participating churches for six years.

Student Kevin O’Hara had already finished his seminary classwork in 2009 when he was in conversation with Saint Peter’s about doing an internship there. In fall of 2010, O’Hara began his internship with the understanding that he would be called to Saint Peter’s as pastor-in-residence



Pr. O'Hara at Redeemer,
Queens Village

in his second year as a Lilly grant recipient...but, as it turned out, a new door was opened.

When the pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in nearby Queens Village was called to another parish in summer 2011, Pr. Derr contacted the synod staff about the possibility of Saint Peter’s “deploying” O’Hara to Redeemer. The Lilly Endowment was supportive as well—the unique arrangement made it possible for a small congregation with fiscal challenges to have a pastor, but with the full support of a seasoned congregation. O’Hara was ordained in June and began a call as pastor of Redeemer in September.

During the next two years, Redeemer has pledged to work on their stewardship and their deficit. The congregation has adopted a financial plan and is determined to take care of building issues. While Pr. O’Hara’s salary is fully covered this year, the grant decreases every year. The expectation is that Redeemer will be responsible for paying more next year, then able to pay a full salary and benefits by the time the term is up.

Pr. O’Hara will work with the congregation to develop a viable strategic plan. Through the Lilly grant, Pr. O’Hara meets regularly with the other ecumenical fellows to learn about healthy congregations and reflect on the responsibilities of being a good pastor. There are also weekly meetings with Pr. Derr as supervisor. Having a year at Saint Peter’s “encouraged me to use my voice a lot,” says Pr. O’Hara. “I was shy about what God’s calling was for me. That year gave me the confidence to say ‘this is who I am.’ They prepared me.”

The covenant seems like a win-win for all involved. Pr. O’Hara receives support, supervision, and encouragement to make his first call a strong one. The subsidized pastoral leadership enables Redeemer to stabilize its finances and make a sustainable mission plan. And Saint Peter’s can creatively use its resources to develop new models for mission and resource-sharing. Pr. Derr reflects, “We’re not a rich parish that can do anything we want—we have a huge deficit from last year. But we are interested in outreach and that means having partners.”

“It seems like this partnership is one that will propel the church forward,” says Pr. O’Hara. “I’ve already noticed: Redeemer has hope. There is definitely a difference between congregations and people who don’t have hope and congregations and people who do. Already I’m seeing a blossoming of new ideas and inspiration. It’s changing the way they approach ministry.” + SARAH GIOE is Director of Communication and Interpretation.

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