

Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Project Report  
Lilly Endowment Inc.  
January – December 2010

Christian Reformed Church in North America  
“Creating a Culture of Pastoral Excellence”

Project Activities

The following activities occurred in the past year. They are grouped under our four areas of programming.

1. Promotion, Teaching, and Dissemination

- 2010 – Designed and placed two advertisements concerning the project in Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) related publications
- 2010 – Sent informational packets on the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) project to newly ordained pastors
- 2010 – Commissioned four articles on pastoral excellence that were published in CRCNA-related publications
- 2010 – Staff wrote four articles about the CRCNA-SPE project that were published in CRCNA-related publications
- January 2010 – Submitted SPE report for Synod (the governing body of the CRCNA)
- January 2010 - Gave presentation of SPE project and distributed copies of all SPE training tools and monographs to pastors at *Korean Institute for Ministry* event
- January 2010 – Gave workshop on CRC peer learning (PL) groups at Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry (SACEM) Conference
- January, April, and December 2010 – Hosted five informational dinners for seminarians and spouses – 35 seminarians/25 spouses attended
- March 2010 – Set up display board at CRCNA ministry fair
- March 2010 – Offered SPE/Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) course, “The Theology and Practice of Pastoral Ministry”, in Edmonton, AB – 16 pastors/seminarians attended
- March 2010 – Gave presentation of SPE project at Home Missions’ conference
- March 2010 – Submitted the 2009 report to LEI
- March and August 2010 – Sent postcards to pastors and clerks of council promoting SPE
- April 2010 – Set up display board at Ministry Fair held at denominational offices
- April 2010 – Posted 2009LEI report on website
- April 2010 – Distributed 2009 SPE LEI report to senior CRCNA staff and SPE Implementation Team
- April 2010 – Posted 26 new sabbatical polices to SPE website
- May 2010 – Sent letter and SPE publications to ministry candidates
- May 2010 – Posted *Evaluation Essentials for Congregational Leaders* training tool on website
- May 2010 – Attended SPE event in Indianapolis, IN
- May and December 2010 – Sent letters to churches informing them their pastor’s spouse is in peer group
- June 2010 – Offered SPE/Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) course, “The Theology and Practice of Pastoral Ministry”, in Grand Rapids, Michigan – 10 pastors/seminarians attended
- June 2010 – Set up display board at Synod gathering

- June 2010 – Gave report on SPE to Synodical Committee (part of the governing body of the CRCNA)
  - June 2010 – Set up display board at World Communion of Reformed Churches gathering
  - June 2010 - Gave presentation of SPE project and distributed copies of all SPE training tools and monographs to pastors at *Korean Institute for Ministry* event
  - June 2010 – Sent *Evaluation Essentials for Congregational Leaders* training tool to all pastors and clerks of council
  - June and December 2010 – Sent letters to churches informing them their pastor is in PL group
  - September 2010 – Sent postcards to clerks of council encouraging support of their pastor/pastor’s spouse
  - September 2010 – Granted request to One Challenge International to reprint SPE article—“Hometown Cross-Cultural Ministry” (written October 2008)—for classroom use
  - September 2010 – Gave CRCNA Board of Trustees written and verbal report on SPE
  - September – December 2010 – Worked on training tool focusing on pastor search committees
  - December 2010 – Sent flyers to US classes (judicatories) promoting National Clergy Renewal Grants
  - December 2010 – Mailed LEI CRCNA SPE recently published items
2. Peer Learning (PL) Groups
- May 2010 – Approved five proposals to fund one-year PL groups among pastors
  - November 2010 – Approved eleven proposals to fund one-year PL groups among pastors
  - November 2010 – Convened eighth annual meeting of PL group coordinators for sharing of experiences and mutual learning—an additional 56 nonparticipating pastors attended to learn about SPE
3. Pastoral Support
- April 2010 – Approved three proposals to fund one-year peer groups among pastors’ spouses
  - April 2010 – 107 pastors’ spouses attended pastors’ spouses’ conference
  - October 2010 – Approved two proposals to fund one-year peer groups among pastors’ spouses
  - October 2010 – Hosted 16 pastor couples at SPE Learning Event
  - December 2010 – Sent thank you card and gift to pastors’ spouses
4. Evaluation
- January to October 2010 – Worked on SPE 2009 survey
  - December 2010 – Posted 2009 SPE survey report to website
  - December 2010 – Distributed 2009 SPE survey report to senior CRCNA staff and SPE Implementation Team
5. Other Activities
- December 2010 – Interview of Project Director for SPE PL book project (coordinated by Penny Maler – Samford University)

## Impact

The agency given to our pastor peer learning (PL) groups results in a wide spectrum of group designs. However, one common factor is that each group is impacted in significant ways. These impacts occur in the following areas:

- theological and educational learning
- spiritual, emotional, and physical health
- collegial, familial, congregational, and denominational relationships
- sense of call
- community building
- support, encouragement, prayer

The following are brief glimpses into two recent PL groups.

### 1. *The Fort*

Ministry can be challenging. At times so much so that pastors find it difficult to carry on without intentional support and encouragement. The majority of *The Fort's* five pastors found themselves in such a place. The focus of their group was clear: needing “a safe place for encouragement and prayer for pastors who are, have been, or might be in difficult situations.” \*

Although the pastors all lived within 30 minutes of each other, it was the peer group structure that encouraged them to get together on a regular basis. The group committed to meet once a month to: remain encouraged through difficult times, clarify and strengthen their sense of calling, learn how to heal (in a healthy way) from conflict in ministry, and grow in their prayer life by learning ways of praying through conflict. Experienced leaders would give them instruction on conflict management and praying through conflict. A spiritual director would assist the group in thinking about handling the ups and downs of ministry.

During the regular gatherings tough questions were discussed. A couple of these were: “How do you handle public criticism?” and “What is the nature of justification by faith?” The group was a safe place to be heard, supported, and prayed for. When asked what the group was learning, one pastor said, “I’ve learned something about “presence”—that we have significant impact on each other’s lives when we are present for each other, that is, it is a relief and encouragement to meet with people who are willing to show up for each other.” Another noted, “No one walks alone—pastoring can feel that way. Having a peer group allows for walking together as ministry leaders.”

The impact on the pastors was significant. “The group helped me process a painful separation from one church such that I could enter a new one. They [the group members] gave me space to process and grieve and find joy again.” “It has become an essential part of my life, as a leader, to find peers to travel the journey with.” One member noted that he had time to stop and heal and because of the group, he had started to laugh again.

Not only were the pastors impacted by their time together but so were their congregations. [Our congregations were impacted] “by helping their pastors take care of themselves and find some healing. They [the congregations] are more encouraged and realistic about ministers. The shared experiences, concerns, and so forth have created healthier pastors, ready to engage their callings with wisdom and a sense of God’s grace.”

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\* All quotes are taken from group proposals/reports.

## 2. *Speaking with an Accent*

Serving in ethnically diverse communities of Florida, this group of pastors had a unique challenge. Most folks they interacted with had never heard of Reformed Christianity or the Christian Reformed Church. It was the pastors' desire to form a PL group to acquire what they saw as a necessary accent. Their proposal stated, "we must learn to speak with our own distinctive "Reformed accent" in such a clear and compelling way that people will choose to return to our churches week after week."

Their plans included retreat style meetings, reading *The Shack*, and attending a conference. They did many things that peer groups do: pray for one another, share joys and struggles, encourage each other, explore their topic, grow in their faith, and enjoy getting together. What they probably did not foresee happening were the changes that came about in their Classis (middle judicatory), in part, because of their peer group experience.

"Because we [the peer group pastors] began seeing each other more often and working together better, we started having extensive discussions with regard to how to cause renewal and growth in our Classis." Now, almost two years later, Classis is "working specifically on planting 20 new churches in the next 10 years and raising up 40 leaders in that same time frame. Over 12 future leaders have already been licensed to preach or ordained."

The pastors' congregations were impacted as well. "Our congregations are well aware of the fact that we are part of a peer learning group. The leadership at our churches is excited about the fact that their pastor is part of a group of pastors that pray for each other, encourage one another, and learn from one another. They believe this kind of group will prevent burnout and spur on innovative thinking. Also, our congregations are all more mission-focused as a result of the renewal that has happened among us as pastors."

The group members "have felt a specific call to be at work raising up 'Timothys' (see 2 Tim. 2:2). We are all now committed to identifying and training ordainable leaders for the cause of the gospel and Christ's Kingdom."

Of all the PL groups funded to date, this group has perhaps had the most significant impact outside of its members and congregations. The time shared by the five pastors has not only been felt by the leaders of 24 "local" CRCs—from South Carolina to Puerto Rico—but by other Classes within the denomination. "We have been contacted by pastors in other Classes who have heard about some of what is happening in our Classis and we have shared with them some of what we are working on and learning."

"God has been able to do incredible things simply by allowing us to work collaboratively rather than individually in isolation."

## Personal Assessment

### 1. What We Are Learning

In 2010, the reality that our funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. was coming to an end in the not-so-distant future was hitting harder. A number of steps had been taken to address the sustainability of the SPE Project: brainstorming sessions, a task force team exploring funding options, numerous discussions at Implementation Team meetings, conversations with the denomination's director of development etc. There was a strong desire by those who are administratively involved with the project to sustain the best of the current programming. Much positive feedback from participants had been received since the birth of SPE in 2003 telling us that the various aspects of the project were appreciated, valued, and desired.

What we learned during the past year is just how necessary, and needed, SPE is in fostering excellence in ministry in the majority of our pastors and many of our pastors' spouses. In April, the biennial pastors' spouses' conference was held in Vancouver, BC. During the closing session, it was suggested attendees share what the conference had meant to them. One response was, "Please, please find a way to do this conference again. It has been an absolute life line. I needed this, to be with others who also know and have had some of the same struggles."

At the annual Synod meeting a recommendation came to the floor, by the committee that had heard the SPE report, that the denomination secure funds to sustain SPE. A motion was made, the vote taken, and with an overwhelming majority, a mandate was given to the Board of Trustees (BOT) to do just that. A few months later, the BOT strongly endorsed SPE and the role in plays in the lives of pastors and spouses.

In the fall, the report on the third SPE survey was completed. (The survey was sent to pastors and clerks of council in all CRCs. Sixty-four percent of our pastors completed the survey.) Here are a couple of comments pastors made on the "do you have something you'd like to share with us" page.

- I believe that SPE is one of the best programs that the CRC has designed in years, perhaps decades. Meeting with my peers has been invaluable.
- This has been a great program. I hate surveys and I only filled this one out because you folks have been so helpful to so many pastors in this denomination. Thanks for all you do.

In November, the annual gathering of PL group coordinators was expanded to pastors who had never been part of an SPE peer group. In less than four hours of the email invitation going out, all of the available spaces were filled with 15 pastors on a waiting list. As a result, further arrangements were made allowing additional pastors to attend. The gathering saw just over 55 pastors eager to learn about SPE. When asked if they would consider being a part of a PL group, one attendee said, "Absolutely. The case 'for' was compelling on many fronts."

Putting all of these pieces together, in addition to many comments made in peer group reports, the message was loud and clear: SPE is needed in the CRC. It is a key piece in sustaining excellence in ministry. And while the program administration has been convinced of this for some time, the strong affirmation from a number of fronts was most encouraging!

## 2. What Strategies Have Worked Best

In the previous reports, a number of strategies have been noted. Many of those continue to serve the project well. Reflecting on the question for this year's report, one strategy that has been in place almost since the beginning of the project but has never been noted in the annual report came to mind: showing pastors and pastors' spouses that SPE cares about them.

This is done in a variety of ways:

- Sending small gifts and cards to pastors' spouses at Christmas. The card says, "Thank you for the many ways you support your husband/wife and his/her ministry. We appreciate you and all that you do in service for our Lord. You are truly a blessing!" Spouses have told us they very much appreciate the "thank you" as they do not generally hear it from their congregations.
- Sending a book to all peer group members (both pastor and spouse groups) as they begin to meet. These books have encouraged many group members.
- Offering to purchase and send copies of *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (by Tom Rath) to all pastors in PL groups who would like a copy. Many pastors are benefiting by identifying their strengths.

- Offering CRC coaches, to pastors who take the StrengthsFinder survey, to walk alongside pastors as they work through the survey results. The coaches do this at no charge to either SPE or the pastors.
- Encouraging pastors to use any remaining PL grant funds (\$300 or less) to either go out to dinner with their spouses (if married) or to purchase books. We have received wonderful feedback from group members when they learn of this opportunity.
- Offering extensive assistance in proposal writing. This is appreciated by pastors and spouses alike. SPE staff let applicants know the staff's goal is to help them submit the best proposal possible.
- Adjusting report due dates and budgets for peer groups. Knowing there is flexibility, on SPE's part, is welcome news to many.
- Offering to cover the cost of having a guest pastor preach for pastors attending an SPE Learning Event. This allows the pastor to enjoy the 48 hour event without the pressure of preparing a sermon(s) for the following Sunday.
- Encouraging councils to consider having a sabbatical policy for their pastor. Since SPE started this practice, an increasing number of churches have put/are considering putting a sabbatical policy in place.
- Encouraging congregations to show appreciation for their pastor/pastor's spouse.

All of these actions are meant to encourage and support CRC pastors and pastors' spouses. While most are relatively small gestures, they are sustaining pastoral excellence within the CRC.

### 3. What Has Not Worked As Well

Last year's report talked about how the interest in pastors' spouses' peer groups had not been what we hoped for. Rather than reiterate what was said in the 2009 report, suffice it to say interest remains low. However, we are confident the funds allocated for these groups will be distributed for the purpose they were intended. All other parts of the SPE project are going well.

### 4. How the Program Has Changed

Increasingly, the Implementation Team has become more flexible in the make-up of PL group membership. Originally our guidelines stated that all pastors in PL groups needed to be CRC. For most groups this was easily done. For others, it was challenging—those who are geographically distant from other CRC pastors. Currently the PL application states that the majority of group members must be CRC. This is giving more opportunities for pastors to become part of a group or coordinate a group in their area.

Recently a PL group was formed with ten pastors from seven churches and four denominations. The group focused on preaching with all the pastors using on same passage each Sunday. "The synergy generated has proven to be an eye opener...for the ministers." "It's been good for [Pastor Randy] to bounce off ideas with other ministers and listen to them explain biblical passages in ways he would not have considered."<sup>1</sup> This is a great example of a positive impact that came from a change in our project.

### Plans for Sustaining the Program

As noted above, the best parts of SPE (pastor PL groups, pastors' spouses' conferences, and pastor couple learning events) will be sustained by denominational funding (pending final budget approval at the May BOT meeting). Funding for PL groups will continue at the same level they have been at since the beginning of SPE. The budget for the spouses' conference will be slightly more than was

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<sup>1</sup> Kopenkoskey, Paul. 2011. One Body One Book. *The Grand Rapids Press*. Saturday February 12, 2100. P.1.

budgeted in the Lilly 2008 grant. Funding for the pastor couple events will be double what we are currently working. This will enable us to host two events each year with a total of 32 couples participating. We are very thankful for the generous denominational support and look forward to ministering to pastors and pastors' spouses as together we continue to foster pastoral excellence within the CRC.

#### Plans for the Next Year

After eight years of SPE programming, a comfortable routine has been established. And yet, we have not allowed ourselves to fall into a rut of merely repeating what has been done in the past. We are always looking for ways we can tweak what we do in order to keep programming fresh and inviting.

We are engaging in four large projects in 2011: planning the 2012 pastors' spouses' conference, conducting the fourth (and final) SPE denominational-wide survey, writing our final significant training tool (focusing on pastor search committees), and writing a chapter for a book on peer groups (being coordinated by Penny Marler at Samford University).

The following is a list of all planned activities for 2011:

- Publish a number of articles on issues pertaining to pastoral excellence.
- Promote and advertise the project in a variety of ways.
- Plan the bi-national pastors' spouses' conference in to held in Miami, FL in November 2012.
- Award two rounds of pastors' PL grants.
- Award two rounds of pastors' spouses' peer grants.
- Offer "The Theology and Practice of Pastoral Ministry" seminary course in March and June.
- Attend the Lilly SPE event in May. Have a display board on the project and copies of both monographs and all five published training tools available. Conduct a workshop on the CRC's SPE project.
- Write a chapter for the Peer Learning Group book being coordinated by Penny Marler at Samford University.
- Host a number of informational dinners for those entering ministry.
- Conduct the fourth, and final, denomination-wide SPE survey in the fall.
- Write a significant training tool for pastor search committees. To be published early 2012.
- Host a learning event for pastors and spouses on Mackinaw Island, MI in October.
- Gather PL group coordinators for the annual November meeting.
- Continue to disseminate SPE's monographs, training tools, and learnings.
- Investigate opportunities to encourage participation in SPE peer groups for nonparticipating pastors.
- Continue to work closely with the Sustaining Congregational Excellence program to cross-pollinate as much as possible.
- Continue to work collaboratively with our partners in the pursuit of pastoral excellence.
- Continue to nurture a culture of pastoral excellence in the CRCNA so that it will more deeply become a part of its DNA.

#### Feedback from Participants

We enjoy receiving feedback from pastors, pastors' spouses' and congregants. It confirms we are sustaining pastors and spouses in their ministry. The following is a sampling of comments received.

- The peer learning group is the first I have been in and is by far the best thing that has happened in 27 years of ministry. I appreciate our group but I think if it's possible, my wife likes her extension of it even better.

- The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program has done for me exactly what the name states and I couldn't be more grateful. It has improved my ministry, sustained my soul, and connected me with others in healthy and helpful relationships.
- The SPE program of the CRC is a career saver.
- The peer learning group has been the most important part of my life in terms of accountability, growth, and joy as a pastor.
- SPE has been a wonderful blessing for me, my family, and our congregation. I am more connected with other pastors and receive much-needed encouragement and support.
- SPE is an essential part of being an effective pastor especially over the long haul--and vitally important for new pastors.
- For me and my close friends, SPE has not only been a life-line, but a major energy booster for what we do. I pray God will continue to bless and increase the capacities of SPE, especially for those of us in church planting and cutting edge ministries. We would be lost in the shuffle without this wonderful ministry.

#### Project Leadership

- Jerry Dykstra is the Executive Director of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). He bears ultimate responsibility for the project.
- John Bolt is the Chief Financial Officer of the CRCNA. He has general oversight of the financial accounting of the project, although the day to day accounting is handled by the denomination's controller, Chris Cok.
- The Project Director is Lis Van Harten. She is responsible for program decisions, and the implementation and administration the project.
- The Administrative Assistant is Holly Koons. She assists the director and Implementation Team in a wide variety of tasks.
- The project Implementation Team has eight members and meets seven times a year:
  - Tom Bomhof, Pastor, Surrey, BC
  - Ron Chu, Pastor, Fullerton, CA
  - Al Mulder, Regional Church Planting Specialist, CRCNA
  - Denise Posie, Pastor, Kalamazoo, MI
  - Kathy Smith, Director of Continuing Education, Calvin Theological Seminary
  - Duane Visser, Director of Pastor-Church Relations Emeritus, CRCNA
  - Lis Van Harten, SPE Project Director
  - Harold Winter, Pastor, Fredericton, NB

This team plays a guiding role in the project. They also make decisions regarding proposals under our grants program. Lis Van Harten facilitates the team's meetings.

No changes were made in 2010.

## Appendix I

|  | 2010 | Total to Date |
|--|------|---------------|
| <b>A. Pastors' Peer Learning Groups</b>            |      |               |
| Number of groups begun by our project              | 12   | 141           |
| Number of pastoral participants in peer groups     | 66   | 716           |
| Number of lay participants in peer groups          | 15   | 127           |
| Number of congregations represented in peer groups | 62   | 647           |

|   |     |       |
|---|-----|-------|
| <b>B. Other Learning/Training Events *</b>        |     |       |
| Number of events conducted by our project         | 4   | 203   |
| Number of pastoral participants in all events     | 110 | 2,546 |
| Number of lay participants in all events          | 16  | 3,524 |
| Number of congregations represented in all events | 110 | 2,612 |

\* Note: many pastors and lay participants have attended more than one event. As a result both the participant and the congregation are counted each time an event was attended.

### C. Other Interesting Statistics

- 69% of ordained CRC pastors and ministry associates have been in an SPE PL group from May 2003 – December 2010.
- Our goal is to have 75% of CRC pastors in an SPE PL group by the end of 2012.
- 54% of CRC congregations have had a pastor/ministry associate in an SPE PL group from May 2003 – December 2010.
- 14 Pastors' Spouses' (PS) grants have been awarded to date.
- 12% of CRC pastors and ministry associates' spouses have been in an SPE PS group from April 2008 - December 2010.
- Our goal is to have 25% of CRC pastors' spouses in an SPE PS group by the end of 2012.

## Appendix II

| Date                                       | Event Description   | Location   |
|--|---|--|
| Thursday March 3 –<br>Friday March 4, 2011 | <u><i>The Theology and Practice of Pastoral Ministry</i></u><br>- The SPE/CTS course  | Bethel CRC<br>345 Elizabeth St<br>Listowel, ON N4W 2P7                         |
| Monday June 6 –<br>Friday June 10, 2011    | <u><i>The Theology and Practice of Pastoral Ministry</i></u><br>- The SPE/CTS course  | Calvin Theological Seminary<br>3233 Burton Street SE<br>Grand Rapids, MI 49546 |
| Wednesday November 16, 2011                | <u>Peer Learning Group Coordinators' Meeting</u><br>- Coordinators from the November 2010 and May 2011 grants will gather for a day of learning and sharing | Prince Conference Center<br>1800 East Beltline SE<br>Grand Rapids, MI 49546    |

### Appendix III

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PUBLISHED GRANT PRODUCTS January 1 – December 31, 2010

- January article in *Ministry Report to Classes and Councils* - "SPE Project Update – January 2010" – Lis Van Harten
- February article in *Christian Courier* – "The Cost of Not Caring for Your Pastor" – Rachel Boehm Van Harmelen
- March article in *Ministry Report to Classes and Councils* "Transforming Pastors" – Lis Van Harten
- April article in *Christian Courier* "Defining Success in Ministry" – Bob Zomermaand
- May article in *Ministry Report to Classes and Councils* "Sustaining Ministry" – Lis Van Harten
- June article in *The Banner* "Sustaining Pastors' Spouses" – Jenny deGroot
- June article in *Christian Courier* "Pastors Ponder Change" – Jim Dekker
- August article in *Christian Courier* "Widening the Circle" – Rachel Boehm Van Harmelen
- September article in *Ministry Report to Classes and Councils* "Cross-Cultural Peer Group" – Lis Van Harten
- October article in *Christian Courier* "No Longer Alone – Why Friendships Matter in Ministry" – Rachel Boehm Van Harmelen