

2025 Clergy Renewal Grant Proposal for Lowell R. Michelson updated 5.27.2026

What is a renewal leave?

sab·bat·i·cal /səˈbədək(ə)l/ noun: sabbatical; plural noun: sabbaticals

1. a period of paid leave granted to a university teacher or other worker for study or travel, traditionally one year for every seven years worked. "She's away on sabbatical."

2. a sabbatical (from the Hebrew: שַׁבָּת Šabat (i.e., Sabbath); in Latin sabbaticus; Greek: σαββατικός sabbatikos) is a rest or break from work; "an extended period of time intentionally spent on something that's not your routine job."

The concept of the sabbatical is based on the Biblical practice of shmita (sabbatical year), which is related to agriculture. According to Leviticus 25, Jews in the Land of Israel must take a year-long break from working the fields every seven years.

How will Pastor Lowell spend his time away?

Seeking Sanctuary. Embracing Sanctuary. Creating Sanctuary.

A blend of time alone, with Tera, with family, with friends

reading, sleeping, biking, paddling, relaxing, exploring creation, traveling,
playing music, listening to music, worshiping & praying.

SUMMER 2026

MAY 31	Farewell & Godspeed Celebration
JUNE	Volunteer with HopeWood Outdoors - Ohio Red River Gorge Retreat - Kentucky
JULY	European Pilgrimage w/ Family including stops in Berlin, Leipzig, Kreinitz, Munich, Prague, Krakow, Auschwitz, Vienna, Sautens, and more.
AUG	Newport Jazz Festival – Rhode Island Musical Retreat w Friends – Minnesota Wild Goose Festival – North Carolina
SEPT 13	Welcome Back Celebration!
20	Renewal Grant Review

How will we pay for this?

The Lilly Endowment National Clergy Renewal Program at Christian Theological Seminary is a competitive grants program open to Christian congregations in United States and Puerto Rico that have an ordained pastor who serves in parish ministry and can envision this program as a means of renewing their commitment to the congregation and to ordained ministry.

It is designed for those congregations and pastors who have a strong relationship with one another, a high degree of mutual trust and support, and are eager to see their relationship strengthened and renewed for future ministry together.

Congregations may request a total maximum award of \$60,000. Of that amount, up to \$20,000 may be allocated to the congregational budget for costs associated with fulfilling pastoral duties during the pastor's absence and for activities that renew the congregation in its ministry.

PART A – PROGRAM RATIONALE AND DESIGN

Describe how the renewal leave and its activities will “make the pastor’s heart sing.”

Sanctuary has always been, and continues to be, much more than a house of worship for me. Miriam Camitta contends that “sanctuary refers to a church or other sacred place [as well as a] refuge or place of safety” (*Image*, Fall 2024). Throughout my life, sanctuary has shown up as home, congregational life, engagement with the arts, moments of creativity, and immersion in nature. Each of these places offers solace, holiness, safety, refreshment, comfort, hope, challenge, encouragement, and renewal. Each are liminal spaces where I’m invited deeper into the presence of God and the intersections of life and faith.

I am the son of a music educator and a Lutheran pastor. My entire life has been lived at the crossroads of music, theology, and creation, and my earliest memories are tethered to this triad. Each has been a constant in my life and is an essential component of who I have been, as well as who I am becoming.

Our home was a constant flow of melody, harmony, and rhythm streaming from piano lessons in the living room, cornet and flute practice in my sisters’ bedroom, folk and soul records on the turntable, and my older brother’s drumkit banging in the basement. The four of us children studied piano from kindergarten through eighth grade—no questions asked—and had the opportunity to choose additional instruments as the opportunities arose. In fifth grade,

following in the footsteps of my brother, I chose percussion.

Throughout my adolescence, you could find me immersed in the creative arts, including marching and concert bands, theater productions, choir concerts, architecture classes, photography, and other artistic endeavors. Creativity and collaboration were ways to process life and tap into something bigger than myself.

As I dream about what would make my heart sing through the renewal grant, I yearn for sanctuary in music, creativity, nature, and faith. Renewal comes for me when I am afforded extended periods of time alone with God, mingled with intentional time with others. Experiencing diverse music festivals with dear ones who share the same thirst for faith, music, and the outdoors refreshes a sense of creativity in my soul. Huddling with longtime friends to encourage one another, dream about justice, seek hope, and create new music together quite literally makes my heart sing. A European pilgrimage to share a meaningful place from my younger years and early call to ministry with my family will reignite a passion to bear witness to a legacy of hate that is defeated by the power of love. Grounding myself in these and other moments will help return me to my center.

Provide detailed description of the pastor's activities.

An uninterrupted block of sabbatical time is the best choice for me to fully unplug from congregational demands and cultivate a renewing spirit. I'll ease into my sabbatical with some time of solitude in June, as I retreat to the Red River Gorge in KY to recalibrate. Fresh air, silence, hiking, kayaking, biking, reading, cooking, and sleep will be the centerpieces of restoration to help me launch this holy time. I find physical labor to be invigorating, so I will partner with HopeWood Outdoors for a week of preparing one of our ELCA camps for summer campers.

Our family will take a trip to Europe in July. In 1991, right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, my life was changed by my participation with a music ministry team that traveled through a recently re-unified Germany, hearing and sharing messages of reconciliation and God's promises of a shared future. One of the centerpieces of my renewal time will be to stand with my family in places of horror and hope. It is important for my 20-, 22, and 24-year old children to join in bearing witness to places scarred by WWII like Berlin, Leipzig, and Auschwitz, while also visiting good friends who led an underground Evangelische Kirche (Lutheran church) in

former East Germany. We'll spend time reflecting in the majestic and charming Vienna and immerse ourselves in the history, theology, music, and creativity of Martin Luther and his colleagues in and around Reformation sites.

In early August, I plan to attend the Newport Jazz Festival in Newport, RI with my wife. One of the world's premier and oldest annual jazz events since 1954, this annual gathering of global musicians is a merging of jazz, blues, spirituals, folk, and soul artists and creators who unite at one of the premier music festivals in the world. This will be an opportunity to discover new music and be reminded of the power of song to activate love and peace.

Also in August, I will retreat to the woods of the upper Midwest with musical friends for renewal, reconnection, and recreation as we pile our instruments into a shared space for daily jam sessions and collaborative music making. Maybe we'll even give birth to some new songs!

Capping off my sabbatical at the end of August will be another family event at the Wild Goose Festival in NC. The Wild Goose Festival is a transformational community grounded in faith-inspired social justice. It is a place to "learn and grow by co-creating art, music, story, theater, and spectacle, engaging in a wide variety of robust, courageous conversations with each other and with thought leaders and artists from other communities." We'll invite friends to meet us there, too—a fitting end to reflect in a community of love to prepare for re-entry.

All along the way, I'll capture photos, videos, images, songs, and stories to help me remember this time of renewal, as well as build a treasury of compassion and grace for future teaching and preaching moments.

Provide a statement written by the pastor that explains why this is the right time in the pastor's ministry to engage this program and what benefits the pastor hopes to receive as a result.

As I approach my 20th anniversary of ordained ministry, I yearn for an extended break. There have been other moments when I was exploring and in discussion about applying for a sabbatical, but unforeseeable events derailed the process, including a murder in our church building (Reformation 2009), change of call (2014), the murder of a congregation member (Lord of Life 2018), and the all-encompassing COVID epidemic and related fallout (2020), which also extended our capital campaign from 3 to 6 years.

My wife and I are in the process of launching our three children, who are all young adults, but not yet limited by careers and their own growing families. In addition, Tera and I are

currently part of the sandwich generation: my 86-year-old mom moved in with us 3 years ago. This timing would allow a caregiving break and a sabbatical of her own, to share time with other family members.

Lord of Life Lutheran Church (LOL) is not only stable with staff and finances, but a thriving and growing congregation. We have strong council leadership, an experienced and more than capable staff, and a variety of ministry leaders committed to what God is doing in and through our congregation. I invite you to watch this video celebrating my 10th Anniversary at LOL in 2024: <https://tinyurl.com/PastorLowell10Year>

Because the demands of parish ministry can tether one in place, I am eager to spend these months traveling and exploring so I can return recharged and reenergized for all that is ahead.

Provide a statement written by a representative of the congregation that summarizes the congregation's views as to the intended benefits of the program for both the congregation and pastor.

The staff and congregation at LOL are in full support of the plans for Pastor Lowell to engage in a period of sabbatical. An extended time away for renewal is included in our governing documents and strongly encouraged by the ELCA. He has been tirelessly serving at LOL for over 10 years as mentioned above. In addition to multiple weekly services, Lowell leads Bible studies, visits those who are ill and struggling, and actively engages in all aspects of congregational life, including outreach, fellowship, and community involvement. He officiates weddings and funerals and has supervised and mentored five seminary interns as part of their learning and serving time at LOL.

Lowell has guided us through a season of clarifying our mission, vision, and core values, worked as part of a team to dream about short- and long-term goals, and led us through two capital projects. We view these months of sabbatical as an opportunity for Lowell to be refreshed, learn, and soak up different perspectives to allow both him and our congregation to continue to evolve.

Over the prolonged COVID shutdown, many responsibilities that had been decentralized to the congregation had to be assumed by the staff. Many of these duties fell onto Lowell's shoulders. His sabbatical will help spur volunteerism and allow more congregation members to step into leadership roles.

We are so grateful for Lowell's dedication and hard work and believe that in order to continue with such strong faith and energy, he must take time to step back, reflect, and engage in activities that make his heart sing and provide much deserved renewal. While Lowell practices lifelong learning and self-care, his deep and sustained commitment to this congregation requires an equally deep, sustained period of rest, reflection, and refreshment.

An extended time of renewal for Lowell has been discussed and prayed over for years. Now is the appropriate time to move forward in doing everything we can to make a sabbatical a reality.

Describe the congregation's plans for covering the necessary pastoral functions during the pastor's absence, for celebrating the pastor's leave-taking and/or return, and for programs or activities that will serve to renew the congregation.

During Pastor Lowell's sabbatical, LOL will use some of the funds from the renewal grant to contract with an interim pastor who will assist with weekly worship and other necessary pastoral functions. Before his departure, the congregation will provide opportunities to say farewell and offer a blessing for him and his family, as well as a welcome back occasion at the end of the summer to celebrate Pastor Lowell's return and to hear about his sabbatical experience. Prayers of blessing, food, and personal sharing will center these events.

Lowell's summer sabbatical will be an opportunity to revisit why congregational ministry is enriched and thrives when it is collaborative and explore new patterns for serving and learning as we prepare to kick off the fall season.

Ministry Area Coordinators will make decisions about their specific ministry areas and continue to lead, actively recruiting additional partners and offering training in their various areas. Worship announcements, weekly blogs, and other correspondence from the LOL staff will communicate additional ministry needs as they arise.

The LOL Care team is very active and helps provide transportation to worship and various appointments for those with mobility issues. They have offered to be available for hospital visits and pastoral care during Lowell's absence.

Funds have been designated for a congregational book study around Wayne Muller's *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*. The congregation is invited to learn more about the gifts of sabbath as Pastor Lowell engages in his sabbatical.

We hope this will be a time for the whole congregation to come together and reflect on what it means to be Church, engaging one another as we continue to care for and serve each other and our community during Lowell's intentional time away.

Tell us how the congregation plans to honor the program's expectation for minimal contact between the congregation and pastor during renewal leave periods.

The staff and church council have outlined clear expectations regarding honoring privacy for Pastor Lowell during this period of leave. An interim pastor will preach and preside, as well as connect with congregation members for pastoral needs.

Lowell has chosen to take his renewal leave in the summer when many of the recurring studies and events are on hiatus and Sunday morning worship is scaled back from three worship services to two. Church staff and council leadership have created a list of persons and resources beyond the interim pastor, including Stephen Ministers, the Care Team, and several of the five retired clergy who worship with us, to ensure that there is a variety of coverage available.

The LOL leadership structure enjoys a variety of lay leaders at the helm, a system already in place. Regular communication between the Ministry Area Coordinators, council, and staff provides a collaborative approach which easily adapts to shifting patterns and personnel.

Our social media, as well as weekly communication emails, will allow Lowell to stay informed if he chooses, without actively engaging with congregation or staff members. In order to protect the privacy of these months and ensure a period of renewal, an alternate phone number will be supplied for Lowell to utilize during sabbatical. We've identified the extreme scenarios under which he would want to be contacted and notified of congregational emergencies.

Give a description of the process by which the congregation made the decision to submit a proposal.

The LOL Church Council has been in discussion for several years regarding the need and support for a period of sabbatical for Pastor Lowell. Lilly offered an opportunity for a strong and healthy beginning to Pastor Lowell's career through the Pastoral Residency Program and their legacy of support has shaped his 20 years of pastoral ministry.

We have monitored circumstances, especially around being a teaching parish for ELCA seminary interns and our capital campaign, in order to find an appropriate time frame that would

be best for both Lowell and the congregation. After forming a renewal grant team, we requested information from a variety of sources in hopes of preparing a sabbatical plan with clarity. All along the way, formal and casual conversations about a time away for renewal have been greeted with enthusiasm.

Pastor Lowell has worked prayerfully and intentionally with Council President Jillian Campbell and Council Secretary Sarah Norman, other council members, and LOL staff to craft a plan that would grant him renewal and also reinvigorate the congregation.

As the proposal came to completion, it was publicized with the LOL parish and welcomed as a bridge to our collective future health and success. The application process for this grant helped us define and clarify an intentional sabbatical approach. As the application is submitted, the LOL community is praying in hope that these funds will be granted. They are deeply invested in the success of this sabbatical for the renewal of their beloved pastor.

Is there anything else you would like the readers to know about the congregation, its ministry, and why this program will be beneficial?

LOL is a congregation that has shown major growth over the last several years. Average attendance in 2019 was 210 per week and has since soared to a weekly average of 413 in 2024 (on site 225/online 188). The COVID pandemic caused churches, employers, and schools to pivot, in order to meet safety and health guidelines. There was no hesitation from leadership at LOL when considering these changes. We quickly reallocated funds from our mission spending plan and memorial gifts to purchase cameras, computers, and software to stream worship virtually, and once recommendations allowed, accommodate spacing restrictions. We continued faith formation for all ages through our digital presence.

Since coming out of the pandemic, we have been able to maintain our online worship community, while continuing to grow the on-site congregation. We have established a presence of collaboration in the local area as we work together with other congregations and agencies in our mission “to live, share, and celebrate God’s love in Jesus Christ with all people.”

Our congregation has a strong foundation of volunteer work and partnerships. Be sure to view these links celebrating the vast expressions of learning and serving ministries at LOL:

<https://tinyurl.com/LOLfaithformation> / <https://tinyurl.com/Feb25Lifeline>

PART B – CONGREGATIONAL INFORMATION

Describe any especially illuminating or distinctive historical events in the life of this church that will help the readers get to know the congregation.

God is faithful to Lord of Life Lutheran Church. Founded as a mission church, it has remained focused on serving God, each other, and the community. LOL has proven itself to be resilient and strong, adhering to a welcoming spirit through an evolving landscape. We have persevered through pastoral changes that caused division, a painful recovery, and weathered the global pandemic. Even without leadership for three years, LOL maintained the mission focus upon which it was founded. We are a dynamic, intergenerational, and Christ-centered congregation. While we don't always agree, we choose to love and respect one another as disciples on a shared journey as the Spirit of God leads us forward in faith.

List a representative sampling of current ministries, both internal and external, in which your congregation is engaged.

Internal ministries of LOL include worship moments, a robust calendar of faith formation for all ages including weekly and monthly serving and learning opportunities, Let's Talk About Race group, full inclusion and LGBTQIA+ emphasis, multiple retreats, Vacation Bible School, quilting ministry, Care Team, Stephen Ministry, and a host of musical ensembles. We share our space to partner with two other ministries: LOL Christian Preschool and Vida Eterna Iglesia Lutherana (VEIL). We host four 12-Step Meetings per week on-site and online.

True to its mission, LOL is a very outward-facing congregation. Some of our external ministry partners include Family Promise of Butler County, Hands Against Hunger, Matthew 25 Ministries, Stepping Forward, Tikkun Farm, The Faith Alliance of West Chester, and Appalachia Service Project. We regularly attend learning events at Temple Shalom and The Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati, and host three Scout troops. The video and Lifeline newsletter links in A8 are helpful in defining these many ministries of our church.

Provide the names and tenure of the four pastors who served the congregation prior to the pastor for whom the congregation is submitting this proposal.

Pastor Ed Williams 1987-2006

Pastor Deb Dingus 2004-2011

PART C – PASTORAL INFORMATION

Tell us about the pastor's educational experience after high school.

Master of Divinity, *Trinity Lutheran Seminary* ~ Columbus, OH, June, 2006

Bachelor of Arts, Religion, *Wittenberg University* ~ Springfield, OH, June, 1994

Provide the pastor's date of ordination, name of the ordaining body, and tenure and places of previous pastoral positions.

ORDAINED August 6, 2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

St. Paul Lutheran Church ~ Davenport, IA

CONGREGATIONS SERVED

Lead Pastor 2014-present, Lord of Life Lutheran Church ~ West Chester, OH

Lead Pastor 2008-2014, Reformation Lutheran Church ~ Wichita, KS

Lilly Transition Into Ministry Pastoral Resident 2006-2008, St. Paul Lutheran ~ Davenport, IA

Provide the readers with any additional information about the pastor and their ministry, career, and community involvement you believe will be helpful in the evaluation process.

ADDITIONAL MINISTRY

Musician 1994-present, Echelon Ministries ~ Minneapolis, MN

Pastoral Intern 2004-2005, Resurrection Lutheran Church ~ Portland, OR

Hospital Chaplain 2003-2004, 2005-2006, Wexner Medical Center at The Ohio State University
and The James Cancer Center ~ Columbus, OH

Director of Youth and Family Ministries 1995-1996, Salem Lutheran ~ West Saint Paul, MN

A SELECTION OF LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Vida Eterna Iglesia Luterana (VEIL) Advisory Board 2014-Present

The Faith Alliance Of West Chester Board 2024-Present

Youth Encounter Governing Board 2015-2017

Central States Synod Assembly Planning Team 2009-2014

Partners For Wichita Board 2009-2013

Lilly Transition Into Ministry Leadership Team 2009

Youth Encounter Alumni Council 2000-2001