CHRIST CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
An Open & Affirming, WISE for Mental Health congregation.
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NEWS RELEASE FOR RECIPIENTS OF GRANTS IN THE 2026 NATIONAL CLERGY RENEWAL PROGRAM

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Christ Church United Church of Christ has received a grant of (amount of the award) to enable its minister, Rev. Gilbert Martinez, to participate in the 2026 National Clergy Renewal Program. Christ Church UCC is one of 210 congregations across the United States selected for this competitive grant program, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and administered by Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Established by the Endowment in 2000, the program's grants give Christian congregations' pastors extended time away from ministerial duties and responsibilities.

Ministers whose congregations receive grants use this time away from daily ministry demands to renew and revitalize. The approach respects the "Sabbath time" concept, offering ministers a carefully considered respite that may include travel, study, rest, prayer, and immersive arts and cultural experiences.

Through the National Clergy Renewal Program, congregations apply for grants of up to $60,000 to support renewal programs for their pastors. The program is collaborative in both its design and implementation, allowing congregations to partner with their ministers to develop experiences that address their unique renewal needs and aspirations. Recognizing the stress and demands placed on pastoral leaders and their families, the program encourages pastors to involve their families in renewal activities. The program also considers congregational needs during the minister's renewal experience. *Up to $20,000 of the grant may support interim pastoral leadership during the pastor's retreat, as well as renewal activities within the congregation.*

Since the inception of the National Clergy Renewal Program and the Clergy Renewal Program for Indiana Congregations, more than 4,781 congregations throughout the United States and in Puerto Rico have participated, including the 210 congregations receiving grants in 2026.

During the 2027 sabbatical, Rev. Gilbert Martinez and Christ Church United Church of Christ will participate in separate but interconnected renewal experiences centered on the theme "Reconnecting with Our Roots."

Rev. Martinez will spend time in Spain and Mexico, reconnecting with his ancestral, cultural, and spiritual heritage. His travels will include visits to historical landmarks, Indigenous heritage sites, religious institutions, and cultural centers, exploring the intersections of faith, identity, history, and colonialism. The

sabbatical will also provide intentional opportunities for rest, personal reflection, spiritual renewal, and meaningful time with family.

Meanwhile, Christ Church UCC will continue its own renewal journey by reconnecting with the United Church of Christ's historical and theological roots, particularly its longstanding commitments to social justice, inclusion, advocacy, and working toward a just world for all. Through worship, educational opportunities, congregational activities, and guest ministry leadership, members will explore how these traditions continue to shape their faith and calling. These experiences will build upon the congregation's commitments as an Open and Affirming, WISE for Mental Health, and Immigrant-Welcoming congregation.

After the sabbatical, Rev. Martinez and the congregation will share their experiences and reflections, exploring how their journeys can strengthen their shared ministry and inspire renewed purpose, spiritual growth, and a renewed commitment to serving their wider community.

“Pastors play such important roles in nurturing the spiritual lives of individuals and families and guiding the ministries of congregations,” said Christopher L. Coble, Lilly Endowment’s vice president for religion. “Yet the demands of ministry can seem relentless. We hope that these grants help congregations honor their pastors for their extraordinary service and support them with the time and other resources to step away for rest and renewal so they can return to their congregations reenergized.”

Dr. Robert Saler, Director of the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs at Christian Theological Seminary, noted that interest in the grant programs has grown significantly in recent years, with more applications and increased competitiveness.

“In these challenging and exciting times, we’re watching the applicants and awardees of these programs expand the definition of what sabbatical can mean. Some pastors are stepping away to rest, while others are stepping away to devote themselves to other aspects of their ministry and their being. Our goal is that these programs supply congregations with the means to express appreciation for their leaders and actively invest in what reenergizes their pastors for long-term ministry,” Saler said.

Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis also directs the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Program for Indiana Congregations through its Center for Pastoral Excellence.