

Keep the Fire Alive!

(from the application to the Lilly Endowment Thriving in Ministry Initiative)

The aboriginal peoples of North America appointed one of their number to the role of [fire keeper](#).¹ The role of the fire keeper was worthy of tribal support to the exclusion of requiring additional duties. Fire keepers were on the Trail of Tears, safeguarding the embers of the sacred council fire as the Cherokee left familiar territory for a new and unfamiliar way of living in a land unlike their own. Today, in most congregations, Christian clergy must perform so many tasks once handled by volunteers and/or paid staff that we can lose the primary focus of our work which Jesus described to the first leaders of the Church and we call the Great Commission. This loss of focus and adequate support now requires that we not only replace closed churches by planting new ones in new ways, that we transform remaining congregations for sustainable ministry – a task for which few clergy are adequately prepared. At the same time, it is imperative that middle judicatory ministries like ours help clergy in our eighty-two congregations to regain their own primary focus and the support necessary to thrive in ministry. Our program combines significant Regional resources and strategic plans for transforming and planting churches with renewed efforts to support our clergy individually and corporately through participation in the Thriving in Ministry Initiative. We test a hypothesis that an important means of strengthening mentor/mentee relationships is through shared continuing education that offers tools and strategies that can be implemented in the ministry settings of mentees. We believe that this approach affords as much rejuvenation for the mentor as for the mentee and aids in the mentor's own ability to thrive in an expanded role. At the same time, we borrow liberally from the experiences of our fourteen Bethany Fellows² alumni to offer to all one hundred and twenty active clergy in our Region the opportunity to engage together in retreats, facilitated Circles of Trust, and workshops - making use of qualified leadership available in our four local seminaries, church planting networks, and ecumenical groups. We would appreciate the opportunity to participate in and contribute stories and data for the Thriving in Ministry Initiative