

New grants program seeks young clergy, local church support: Congregations can apply for Fund for Theological Education grants.

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With many mainline Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church expecting fewer young pastors in coming years, the Fund for Theological Education (FTE) says that it will receive \$6 million from the Lilly Endowment for matching grants to congregations that back seminarians starting their Master of Divinity studies.

The Atlanta-based FTE announced this month that the new four-year grant marks a significant shift for the organization by looking to local congregations and church-related institutions to nurture candidates for the ordained ministry.

“For 51 years,” said Ann Svennungsen, president of the fund, “we’ve been giving fellowships to individuals to help them get their degrees.” Now, she said, after two pilot programs, FTE officials hope to establish a national network of 500 congregations and institutions that will nominate and support young first-year M.Div. students.

Mainline and Catholic seminaries have seen the average age of new seminarians hover around the mid-30s in recent years. That statistic has increasingly worried church officials about a missing generation of new pastors between 25 and 35 years old.

“This grant is an investment in engaging congregations more deeply . . . to develop future leaders for the church,” said Craig Dykstra, senior vice president for religion at Lilly Endowment.

In the “Calling Congregations” competitive grant program, the FTE will match grants of between \$2,000 and \$5,000 raised by churches to offset tuition and living

expenses of seminarians. The fund (www.thefund.org) will make up to 40 grants yearly to winners of the nationwide competition.

Though some local churches have backed home-grown seminarians with the help of FTE grants in a pilot program, the new Lilly grant will also establish four regional centers to help congregations with workshops and conferences aimed at encouraging vocations in the ministry.

“Without encouragement, many young people defer, deny or hide their interest in serving the church,” said Svennungsen. The first center will be a Midwest one based in Chicago and is expected to start in the summer, she said. Other regions will start in 2007 and 2008.