



Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Receives Prestigious \$5M Lilly Endowment Inc. Grant for Black Church Rural & Small Towns Ministry Initiative

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Louisville, KY [December 23, 2024] – **Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary** (LPTS) has received a grant of \$5 million from **Lilly Endowment Inc.** through its Ministry in Rural Areas and Small Towns Initiative. The grant will support the **LPTS Black Church Rural & Small Towns Ministry Initiative** (BCRSMI), under the direction and care of **Rev. Dr. Perzavia Praylow**, Director of Black Church Studies and Assistant Professor of Historical Theology and Black Church Studies at LPTS.



The aim of the Ministry in Rural Areas and Small Towns Initiative is to provide resources to help churches in rural areas and small towns enhance the vitality of their ministries and strengthen the leadership of the pastors and lay leaders who guide them.

Dr. Praylow, who began her pastoral journey in a rural Black Presbyterian congregation in Winnsboro, SC, reflected on the grant's impact: "I'm deeply thankful for this opportunity to work with Louisville Seminary, ecclesial partners, educational organizations, and faith leaders as we equip, empower, and encourage Black congregations in their transformative ministry work. We look forward to building a network of Black faith leaders and congregations who learn, grow, and strengthen their leadership while addressing the unique realities facing rural and small-town Black faith communities. Louisville Seminary, the Office of Black Church Studies Program, my staff, and I are grateful and humbled for this shared opportunity to serve." Louisville Seminary, President Rev. Dr. Andrew D. Pomerville shared the following reflecting his enthusiasm on receiving the grant: "I am exceptionally proud of the partnerships in ministry that went into the formation of this new initiative. LPTS is eager to support strong relationships between the seminary, Black congregations, faith leaders and ministries that lead to vitality."

The **BCRSMI** seeks to support rural and small-town Black congregations and Christian faith leaders as pillars of faith, culture, and community while addressing challenges they face in sustaining their ministries. This new initiative builds on the success of the seminary's Thriving Congregations Initiative (also Lilly Endowment Inc. funded), specifically **The Nehemiah Project: Strengthening Historic African American Congregations**, which concluded at the end of 2024 and supported fourteen primarily rural, historically Black churches helping them to deepen their relationships with God, achieve strategic goals, strengthen connections with each other, and contribute to the flourishing of their communities. The **LPTS Black Church Rural & Small Towns Ministry Initiative**, in addition, harnesses the strengths of Louisville Seminary's long-standing commitment to **Black Church Studies** (BCS). The BCS program at LPTS is nationally recognized for its ability to cultivate liberatory and prophetic leaders who are deeply informed by both historical and contemporary understandings of Black Christianity, Black religious life, and the broader experience of Black life.

The **BCRSMI** will amplify the Seminary's focus on equipping leaders to serve rural and small-town Black congregations. It will ensure they are empowered with theological knowledge, spiritual resilience, and practical tools to navigate their evolving ministry contexts.

Four Key Priorities of the LPTS Black Church Rural & Small Towns Ministry Initiative:

1. **Church Growth** – Supporting holistic growth beyond numerical metrics to foster transformation in congregations and communities.
2. **Evangelism** – Equipping churches to reimagine and implement innovative, liberative evangelism practices.
3. **Engagement with Black Church Rural Heritage** – Connecting historical Black Church practices with innovative responses to present-day challenges.
4. **Black Women in Ministry** – Recognizing and empowering Black women leaders to address their unique challenges and enhance their vital roles in ministry.

The **BCRSMI** will focus on Black church leaders and organizations serving rural and small-town congregations through educational programming, resources, and sub-granting. Specific activities include:

- **Sankofa Project** – Documenting Black Church traditions through oral history.
- **Continuing Education Certificates** – Offering tailored theological and leadership training.

- **Seminars** – Addressing leadership needs for rural and small-town pastors.
- **Workshops & Conferences** – Specialized tracks at BCS events to explore challenges and opportunities for rural and small-town churches.
- **Virtual Network** – Facilitating collaboration among church, community, and nonprofit leaders.
- **Leadership Summits & Cohorts** – Supporting marginalized leaders, including Black women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, through leadership formation groups.
- **Micro-Grants** – Funding practical ministry projects aligned with initiative priorities.

LPTS will serve as a hub within our geographic regions partnering with Black Christian ecclesial organizations, denominational bodies, and educational institutions. This effort will involve 14 key collaborators who will play a critical role in the regranting portion of the initiative, ensuring resources and support to reach congregations in innovative and impactful ways. Collaborators will award 10 to 15 one-time micro-grants to rural/small-town Black Church congregations each grant year. These micro-grants will fund the design and implementation of ministry projects or programs that align with the initiative. Additionally, educational ministry organizations will offer 5-10 micro-grants annually to congregations and/or ministry leaders to design and implement ministry programs or projects aligned with the educational training offered by the granting ministry educational organization.

We are pleased to announce the following 14 organizations as our regranting collaborators:

- **Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kentucky**
- **Christian Methodist Episcopal Church**
- **Dr. Jazz Ministries**
- **Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary**
- **Kentucky First Jurisdiction - Church of God in Christ (COGIC)**
- **National Association of the Church of God**
- **National Black Presbyterian Caucus (NBPC)**
- **Presbytery of Charlotte PC(USA)**
- **Presbytery of Coastal Carolina PC(USA)**
- **Presbyterians Concerned About African American Youth (PCAAY)**
- **Pride in the Pew**
- **South Central Conference of Seventh-day Adventists**
- **The Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership, Union Presbyterian Seminary**
- **Trinity Presbytery PC (USA)**

This \$5 million grant marks a milestone for Louisville Seminary, empowering LPTS to support the flourishing of rural Black congregations by equipping leaders with essential tools and networks to sustain impactful ministries amidst contemporary challenges and opportunities. Through a focus on leadership development, church growth, and community engagement, LPTS seeks to strengthen rural and small-town Black churches as vital anchor institutions within their communities. The **LPTS Black Church Rural & Small Towns Ministry Initiative** exemplifies the powerful intersection of collaboration, tradition, and innovation in revitalizing rural congregations nationwide.

Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary is one of 20 organizations from across the United States receiving grants through the initiative, including colleges and universities, denominational agencies, church networks, and parachurch organizations, among others.

“Our hope is that these grants will provide much needed resources and support to rural and small-town churches to help them address their challenges and enhance and extend the many ways that they serve their communities,” said Christopher L. Coble, Lilly Endowment’s vice president for religion.

About Louisville Seminary

Founded in 1853, **Louisville Seminary** offers an inclusive and diverse learning community, welcoming students from wide ecumenical backgrounds while maintaining its long, historic commitment to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A). Louisville Seminary is led by the Holy Spirit to educate people to proclaim the Gospel, to care for all, and to work for justice in communities everywhere. It is distinguished by its nationally recognized marriage and family therapy and field education programs, the scholarship and church service among its faculty and a commitment to training persons to participate in the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ.

About Lilly Endowment Inc.

Lilly Endowment Inc. is an Indianapolis-based private philanthropic foundation created in 1937 by J.K. Lilly, Sr. and his sons Eli and J.K. Jr. through gifts of stock in their pharmaceutical business, Eli Lilly and Company. Although the gifts of stock remain a financial bedrock of the Endowment, it is a separate entity from the company, with a distinct governing board, staff and location. In keeping with the founders’ wishes, the Endowment supports the causes of community development, education and religion and maintains a special commitment to its founders’ hometown, Indianapolis, and home state, Indiana. A primary aim of its grantmaking in religion is to deepen the religious lives of Christians, principally by supporting efforts that enhance congregational vitality and strengthen the leadership of Christian communities. The Endowment values the broad diversity of Christian traditions and endeavors to support them in a wide variety of contexts. The Endowment also seeks to foster public understanding about religion by encouraging fair, accurate and balanced portrayals of the positive and negative effects of religion on the world and lifting up the contributions that people of all faiths make to our greater civic well-being.

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At Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, we strive to make quality theological education accessible to people in all kinds of contexts:

- Our flexible in person and/or online **Master of Divinity** allows folks with busy lives -- parents with young children, those working full time, caretakers of aging family members, and so many others -- to pursue a **graduate theological education** as a part of our LPTS community.
- Our **Master of Arts in Religion** program -- both in person and online -- gives students an opportunity to ask questions and develop research projects about the areas of religious life and Biblical study that matters to them.
- Our residential **Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy** program offers the ability to work with our world class faculty and ministry and clinical professionals across the Kentuckiana area.



- Our **Doctor of Ministry** offers flexible, advanced training for experienced ministers through spiritual renewal, refreshed skills, and self-directed research. In our cohort-based program, students experience a supportive peer learning group and receive instruction from our world-class faculty. Apply now to join the January 2026 cohort with an Early Decision Deadline of April 1, 2025. [Click here](#) to learn more about admissions requirements.

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Led by the Holy Spirit, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary educates people to proclaim the Gospel, to care for all, and to work for justice in communities everywhere.

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