



Sustainable Faith

The School of Ecclesial life (SEL) identifies, accompanies, and resources smaller, newer, parish-minded churches who feel called to express their life and mission in geographically well-defined neighborhoods. Several motivations drive this initiative.

First, as an organization, we're drawn to churches and leaders with an incarnational instinct, who look to pitch their tent among those they serve (John 1:14). Second, we resonate with Phyllis Tickle's description of the modern church as "a soul looking for a new body to inhabit." These alternative-style churches often have a holy dissatisfaction with the status quo and are looking for this new body. They represent a vanguard, and much of what they collectively discover will become normative for the larger church over time. Third, we think their overall capacity to experiment, adapt, and innovate is higher since they're on the frontside of their ecclesial lifespan. Their ecclesial DNA is still forming. In our conversations with leaders of such churches, they routinely express a sense of isolation and loneliness in conjunction with a strong desire for encouragement and accompaniment.

The overarching goal of SEL is to serve as an accelerant for the transformation of the Western church. SEL 1) pastors leaders of nascent, alternative-style faith communities; 2) puts them in collaborative, learning communities of like-minded peers; 3) provides them with the resources needed to thrive and to implement their learning; and 4) transfers the outcomes of our own learning to the wider church.

SEL creates the opportunity for small cohorts of church leadership teams to participate in a 21-month program where they clarify their values, flesh out their communal practices, and find their unique "evangelistic skin" within their sociological context. We examine these three key areas sequentially, moving from individual, to team, to congregation. The first half of SEL's course series emphasizes unearthing and exploring values, practices and neighborhoods; the second half moves toward identifying, naming and implementing these within your community of faith and neighborhoods.

Your own interest the School of Ecclesial Life (SEL) delights and encourages us! In order for you to discern well if SEL is for you and your faith community, there are three things that seem very important to share with you. We've captured these directly below.

TO WHOM ARE YOU SAYING YES?

Well, in some measure it's to us. SEL is a 21-month exploratory and formation process that's run by Sustainable Faith. We're the sole facilitators. But we ourselves are strictly accountable to the Lilly Endowment. Out of 800+ grant proposals, they singled out ours and a few others as deserving awards. And they gave us a lot of money, enough for salaries and flying you to retreats among other things. With this award comes the firm expectation that we'll be reporting to them regularly about our learnings and how you're faring. Understandably, they want to know that the money they gave us is well-stewarded. So a truer way of seeing this is that your greater yes is to the Lilly Endowment's Thriving Congregations Initiative.

Each year for the next 4 years we'll select only 4 Christian faith communities to work with for a 21-month stretch. If we say yes to you, that means saying no to others who want in. If you were to decide halfway through the process to drop out for any reason, that spot is lost and can't be offered to another group. Because SEL is a sequential process in which we begin and end together, no one can enter midstream. So the loss of a group within the cohort is huge. Additionally, it affects our own discovery process and reporting to the Lilly Endowment.

WHAT'S THE CULTURE OR ETHOS OF SEL?

After all that serious talk above you'd be forgiven for wondering if our time together might feel serious, metric-driven, and fast-paced. It won't. Of course we expect that everyone will take this opportunity seriously and apply themselves, but our time together on retreats and in online gatherings will feel leisurely, reflective, personal, intimate, collegial and mutually encouraging. We'll share the delights of the table – good food, wine, coffee, tea – and we'll share the delights of our mutual learning journey. David Nixon will lead this inaugural cohort not as a consultant but as a pastor and spiritual director who's eager to see what God has for you.

WHAT ARE OUR DESIRED OUTCOMES?

We anticipate that your ecclesial team will leave with:

- ▶ Mutually edifying, supportive relationships within your cohort (and with our organization) that will persist beyond the 21-months of SEL
- ▶ A practiced conviction that prayer and contemplation (nurtured by relationships, practices, self awareness, and discernment) initiate and sustain the outward-focused life
- ▶ Clear, established values as well as a transferable process for clarifying values
- ▶ Core spiritual practices that fuel your individual and ecclesial life

- ▶ An established and transferable model for discernment and decision-making
- ▶ A Christ-centered “Triadic Lens” for evaluating your personal and corporate responses to societal-cultural challenges
- ▶ New and potentially fruitful relationships with civic, business, educational, nonprofit and church leaders within your locale
- ▶ New relationships with your neighbors
- ▶ New missional objectives that flow from a prayerfully conducted, sociologically sensitive, and comprehensive neighborhood survey
- ▶ A neighborhood survey that can be shared with other churches in your area
- ▶ A more in-sync congregation able to name its values, shared practices and missional objectives

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS?

Retreat Participation

Over the course of 21 months there are 9 cohort retreats, 4 in person and 5 online. It's assumed that you make your best effort to be present at all our 3-day face-to-face meetings and 1.5-day online retreats. We make allowances, of course, for emergencies and sickness. In the event of an absence, a plan will need to be established for “catching up.”

Group Projects

In between retreats, your ecclesial team agrees to complete several group projects which will empower your developing church community. Projects include:

- ▶ Creating a doc that names a core set of shared values, providing a rationale for each
- ▶ Creating a doc that names a core set of shared spiritual practices, providing a rationale for each
- ▶ Developing a well-defined team process for discerning and decision-making
- ▶ Creating 9-month plan for disseminating key practices into your congregation
- ▶ Completing a 3-month, congregation-wide period of hard research (numbers and data) and soft research (interviewing, collecting stories, listening to the Spirit, journaling, etc.) regarding one's locale
- ▶ Creating and administering congregational surveys as snapshots-in-time of the congregation's current understanding of values, practices and mission; collecting data on pre-existing missional efforts and new aspirations awakened during the 3 months of researching the neighborhood
- ▶ Discerning and setting specific goals for moving forward at the conclusion of the cohort.

Periodic Assessments

Your ecclesial team will complete several assessments over the 21 months that will increase the team's self-awareness in at least three pertinent areas: individual leadership capacity and sustainability, communal cohesiveness, and neighborhood context. The cumulative data from these assessments also illustrate the developmental process and will be shared with the Lilly Foundation, without identifying markers, in keeping with our grant agreements.

Required Readings

In our present culture we have a nasty habit of confusing information with wisdom. We mix up the intellectual comprehension of a spiritual fact with the embodied practice. Let's instead read to be formed, not informed. Reading, of course, will never substitute for experience, but joining your reading and practice will accelerate our communal development. We'll give your ecclesial team articles and short books for inspiration and fostering formation as they become available.

Sharing-Learning Labs

The conversations we have are an equally significant part of our group learning experience. In guided discussion that touch on values, self-awareness, inner experiences, practices and field work, each participating church offers its part for the sake of others. Your voice matters in the group, so we look forward to hearing it all: the good, the bad and the ugly.