

Faith groups get total of \$92 million for innovative programs for children

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Dozens of Christian groups seeking to instill faith in the nation's children have been given grants of as much as \$1.25 million to help them meet their mission.

Lilly Endowment, through its Christian Parenting and Caregiving Initiative, recently approved a total of \$92 million for [77 organizations](#)—including denominations, local congregations, and regional districts of national church groups—as they seek to create or expand home-based programs and parent networks that will nurture the spiritual growth of young people.

“We’ve heard from many parents who are seeking to nurture the spiritual lives of their children, especially in their daily activities, and looking to churches and other faith-based organizations for support,” said Christopher L. Coble, Lilly Endowment’s vice president for religion, in a July statement announcing the grants.

“These thoughtful, creative and collaborative organizations embrace the important role that families have in shaping the religious development of children and are launching programs to assist parents and caregivers with this task.”

The grant recipients include a range of faith groups that represent people of different branches of Christianity, including from a diversity of racial and ethnic groups, as well as educational institutions. Most of the programs will start later this year, with funding intended to support the first five years of their work.

The initiative seeks innovative ways to engage children in lives of faith, inside and outside of church buildings. During the height of COVID-19, many of the traditional methods of children’s ministry—Sunday school, vacation Bible school, confirmation classes, baptisms— [disappeared](#) or were adapted. In the aftermath, parents and church leaders [continue to grapple with the best ways forward](#) for spiritually educating children in their homes and congregations.

In its request for proposals, Lilly Endowment noted the finding of the National Study of Youth and Religion about the outsized role parents have on influencing the religious practices, beliefs and values of their children. The finding “underscores the importance for churches and other Christian organizations to provide support and guidance to interested parents as they navigate the challenges of raising children today,” according to Lilly Endowment.

Rubén Ortiz, director of national programs for Esperanza, said his Philadelphia-based organization, which seeks to strengthen Hispanic faith-based organizations, will use its \$1.25 million grant to expand services to help families and caregivers share their values and faith with their children. It plans to focus on equipping parents by holding “train-the-trainer” events for at least 200 congregational leaders at predominantly Hispanic churches in its region.

“Whether it’s fragmentation, technological advances or spirituality, we need to refresh the traditional approaches to our faith,” Ortiz said in an interview. “We spent several months learning more deeply about child and adolescent development, parenting styles, attachment theory, family systems and so on, with an emphasis on faith development.”

Middle Collegiate Church, a New York congregation that received a \$1.25 million grant, intends to use books, mealtime “conversation cards” and parental guides to offer biblical and action-oriented stories to engage children and families.

“Our aim is to help parents and other caregivers nurture children’s development of a trustworthy theology and daily practices of faith through the power of story,” the church wrote in its proposal to Lilly Endowment, noting that it will create children’s resources based on concepts from *Fierce Love*, a book by the church’s senior minister, [Jacqui Lewis](#).

“We will pilot facilitated Just Love Story Circles to gather diverse parents/caregivers as they nurture babies, toddlers, and preschoolers with just love in a setting that fosters appreciation of racial diversity and promotes healthy development.”

The Yvette A. Flunder Foundation, a nonprofit affiliated with City of Refuge United Church of Christ in Oakland, California, and supporting the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, has been approved for a \$930,000 grant.

[Bishop Yvette Flunder](#), the foundation’s executive director, said the money will be used to develop books, curricula, and home activities to accentuate her religious groups’ support of Black LGBTQ families. The nonprofit plans to create a “Radically Inclusive Parenting Project” that will provide in-person and online spaces for supporting parents and caregivers and a seminary-partnered certificate program for faith leaders to create programs in their communities.

“There’s a lot of hubbub in the air about young people not being able to read certain books, young people not being able to experience families other than perhaps what I call the *Leave It to Beaver/Father Knows Best* kind of nuclear family,” Flunder said. “The intention is to open up an understanding of the divine that suggests that all people are loved and all people are received and all people matter and there is no greater race than another or a greater kind of family than another.”

Like other grant recipients, leaders at Calvary Lutheran Church, a rural Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation in Alexandria, Minnesota, expect to instill confidence in parents to take greater leadership in building the faith of young people. Its grant of \$976,470 will help fund programs involving technological tools for parents to guide their children.

“We’re living in a time where rural families are increasingly isolated and the demands of work, school and activities make it difficult for traditional programs to be successful,” Pastor Angie Larson said. “We hope to decentralize the work of faith from being in the church to coach parents with the tools to implement it at home.”

Judith Cebula, Lilly Endowment’s communications director, said the June grantees follow an initial 22 organizations that received grants in 2022, bringing the total funded to more than \$124 million.

“We are especially interested in efforts that nurture the religious lives of children, youth and young adults and that share the beauty and vibrancy of Christian faith with a new generation,” she said in a statement. —Religion News Service

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