



## Igniting Inclusive Catholic Education\*

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FIRE Foundation, an advocacy and funding organization supporting inclusive Catholic education based in Kansas City, Mo., has received a grant of \$1.25M from Lilly Endowment Inc. to help establish Project BONFIRE, a five-year initiative designed to build the capacity of Catholic K-12 schools and educators to welcome and support students with disabilities.

This project is being funded through Lilly Endowment's Christian Parenting and Caregiving Initiative. The aim of this initiative is to help parents and caregivers share their faith and values with their children.

Project BONFIRE (Building an Organized Network of Families for Inclusive Religious Education) seeks to expand the availability of high quality inclusive Catholic learning environments in which students who are diagnosed with intellectual / developmental disabilities can learn, grow and thrive in faith-based schools with their typically developing peers. Through this initiative, FIRE and its network of affiliate organizations aim to expand opportunities for children who have not historically been served in Catholic schools.

"As more parents seek enrollment of their children with disabilities in Catholic schools, it's imperative that educators are well trained in best practices and that appropriate resources are available," said Lynn Hire, executive director of FIRE Foundation. "With support from Lilly Endowment, FIRE will be positioned to expand the scope and depth of support for students with disabilities available at Catholic schools in nine dioceses across the country. We are deeply grateful for Lilly Endowment's trust in FIRE Foundation and believe this investment in our work will be a catalyst for expanding the growth and impact of FIRE's work."

Project BONFIRE provides resources focusing on development in three areas: Advocacy and Outreach, Professional Development and Capacity Building. FIRE and affiliates will be able to engage in a range of initiatives including opportunities to build awareness with enhanced marketing and communications tools, to build parent networks of support, and to enroll in inclusive education training programs developed by the Program for Inclusive Education at the University of Notre Dame.

FIRE Foundation, based in Kansas City, Mo., is regarded as a leading model for supporting inclusive Catholic education. In the past decade, FIRE has partnered with start-up groups across the country to launch seven affiliate organizations: FIRE Foundation of Northeast Iowa (Archdiocese of Dubuque), FIRE Foundation of Central Illinois (Diocese of Peoria), FIRE Foundation of Dallas, FIRE Foundation of Denver, FIRE Foundation of Milwaukee, FIRE Foundation of New Hampshire, and FIRE Foundation of Northwest Iowa (Diocese of Sioux City). Two additional affiliate organizations are launching this fall: FIRE Foundation of Northeast Florida (Diocese of St. Augustine), and FIRE Foundation of Northern Kentucky (Diocese of Covington).

FIRE Foundation is one of 77 organizations that are receiving grants through this competitive round of Lilly Endowment's Christian Parenting initiative. Reflecting the diversity of Christianity in the United States, the organizations are affiliated with mainline Protestant, evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox Christian and Pentecostal faith communities. Many of the organizations are rooted in Black church, Hispanic and Asian Christian traditions.

"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. "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."

Lilly Endowment launched the Christian Parenting and Caregiving Initiative in 2022 because of its interest in supporting efforts to help individuals and families from diverse Christian communities draw more fully on the wisdom of Christian practices to live out their faith fully and well passing on a vibrant faith to a new generation.

#### **About FIRE Foundation**

FIRE was founded in 1996 by parents who shared a common dream; for their children with special needs to attend their parish schools with siblings and friends and to experience the benefits of Catholic education. Since that time, through the efforts of parents, dedicated educators and countless volunteers who embrace inclusive Catholic education, more than \$7 million has been granted to partner schools in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph (MO) to support inclusive Catholic education.

#### **About Lilly Endowment Inc.**

Lilly Endowment Inc. is a private 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. While those gifts remain the 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 hometown, Indianapolis, and home state, Indiana. A principal aim of the Endowment's religion grantmaking is to deepen and enrich the lives of Christians in the United States, primarily by seeking out and supporting efforts that enhance the vitality of congregations and strengthen the pastoral and lay leadership of Christian communities. The Endowment also seeks to improve public understanding of diverse religious traditions by supporting fair and accurate portrayals of the role religion plays in the United States and across the globe.