

What is Next Level Innovations? - FAQs

What is Next Level Innovations (NLI)?

NLI is an Alexandria/Arlington District initiative based on the Healthy Church Initiative (HCI) which is ***“a transformation process for church leaders desiring to grow their church and reach new people.”***

NLI is an investment in churches that have a recognized potential for reaching more people in their community and inviting them to become disciples of Jesus. These churches have healthy and coachable leadership (clergy and lay). Its goal is to help these churches to recognize and respond to contextualized issues of vitality and opportunities for growth in order to reach new people and make disciples for Jesus Christ.

NLI is based on similar programs in other UMC conferences, such as Missional Church Consultative Initiative (MCCI) out of West Ohio Conference and Healthy Church Initiative (HCI) from the Missouri Conference. Like these programs, NLI has multiple components including a foundation of prayer, establishing a culture of collaboration with other NLI congregations, monthly pastor training, two to three laity training events, an intensive weekend of church study, a detailed report and recommendation for innovations specially developed for the church, and follow up coaching for a year or more.

Who is Invited to Participate?

District Superintendents have carefully studied and selected potential church participants. Churches selected have met size, health and potential growth requirements. Leadership, both clergy and lay, should be teachable and ready to lead change.

What is the Church's Commitment?

NLI churches commit to a number of activities over a period of three or more years. They commit themselves to a practice of daily prayer for the ministry of their church. They support their pastor's participation in monthly training. Each church forms an NLI team that helps the pastor implement the training they receive. Church leaders participate in two to three training events designed for laity, around issues such as breakthrough prayer and stewardship. Church leaders and attendees participate with a consultation team and mentors in a weekend long intensive study of the strengths and weaknesses of their church, and the best potential innovations to move forward. Upon receipt of the NLI report and recommended innovations at the end of the weekend, the church will hold a series of town hall meetings to decide whether or not to proceed with the innovations. If the innovations are accepted, the church then works with their mentor to implement the innovations. If the innovations are not accepted, the mentoring, peer groups and laity training come to an end.

What is the Clergy Commitment?

Lead clergy (senior pastors) are expected to attend approximately nine NLI meetings – these will be held locally for the majority of the work day. There will be associated reading and projects with these trainings. Clergy are then expected to return to their church and with the help of their NLI team begin to implement the ideas and innovations about which they have learned. Clergy will help organize, prepare for and fully attend the Innovation Weekend.

Topics that are likely to be included in clergy training are all from the larger church perspective, including breakthrough prayer techniques, how to lead change, stewardship, discipleship, staffing, and aligning vision with staff and laity. Special topics may be designed for the needs of each particular group of churches.

What is the District Commitment?

The Alexandria/Arlington Districts (hereafter “the District”) will provide leadership and administration for NLI and secure outside funding to offset much of the significant cost of this ministry. The District will secure training locations and leaders and district staff will participate fully in each of the NLI weekends. The District will arrange for and oversee the Innovation Mentors for each church. The District is giving significant staff time to the development of this process and these churches over the next several years. This is possible due to the income from the new District Offices and grants from the Virginia Conference and the Virginia Foundation.

Of the \$12-13,000 cost of this program, the Winchester District has committed to invest \$7,000 WD Board of Mission funds to LUMC's participation in NLI. LUMC has committed to invest \$3000 over the next three years (\$500 for 2017, \$1,500 for 2018, \$1000 for 2019), and the remaining cost will come from the aforementioned sources.

How is this different from every other conference/district program we've seen come to us over the years?

First of all, this program has been developed after a study of several very successful programs in other conferences and states – this model of intensive training of the clergy, mentoring of leadership, and an intensive weekend study, followed by individualized plans for growth has been used over and over again over the last ten years or so to revitalize congregations throughout our denomination.

We didn't want to just take someone else's model though – we think Northern Virginia churches are unique, and large churches in our area have significant struggles that are not the same as other churches. So we invested the past year in interviewing and designing this program with a team of large church pastors who have already succeeded in growing large churches in this area. The team committed to bringing you the best resources they wished they'd had as they grew their churches- and that became NLI.

This is not “a one size fits all” program. Each church will take what they need from the program and contextualize it to the current situation. Each church will have an individual mentor, so it is not just information shared, but a plan to implement with accountability as well.

There is also a significant investment of Conference and District funding and staffing. These investments would not occur if there was not significant belief that NLI will make a difference in these churches and in their communities for Christ.

What if we already have a mission, vision and strategic plan set out, or in development?

NLI is intended to work with the church wherever it is in its lifecycle to help move to the next level. The innovations that will come from the Innovation Consultation Weekend will not occur until year 2 of the NLI process, and at that time the church can discern if those innovations become a new part of the strategic plan, or they can choose not to implement them.

How much laity time and effort will this take? How much clergy/staff time and effort will this take?

Each church agrees to form an NLI team that has been oriented to the process, and will assist the lead pastor in communications and accountability. During the first year, this group will meet at one Orientation meeting, and 2-3 additional times with the lead pastor for training, as needed. There should also be a team working to prepare for the Innovation Weekend Consultation that will occur in the second year; they will do a self-study of the church and prepare for the special weekend. After the weekend, if the church goes forward with the Innovations, there will be substantial laity teams working on each of the Innovations.

For the first year, the major time commitment will be for the lead pastor. There will be approximately nine full or partial day meetings to develop resources, insight, and leadership techniques specific to large, Northern Virginia churches to help lead changes that are to come. The pastor may need additional help or scheduling work-arounds, and the church should be prepared to allow this time investment. Other clergy and/or staff can plan a role in both some of the training events and in assisting the pastor in implementation and administration.

Who is our mentor, and how does that part work?

Mentors have been recruited and will be assigned to churches by the NLI District team, including your District Superintendent.

Mentors are for the whole church, and will probably most often have a one-on-one relationship with the pastor as well. They will coach, resource, challenge, and help implement innovations throughout the entire process. Your church will not be alone in figuring out what to do next – you will have a mentor who has already done this work in their own churches and ministries.

How do we know if this is the right time for this church to participate in NLI?

First, we ask that each church spend at least 30 days in prayerful discernment with God.

Second, we'd like you to know that each District Superintendent has already been in prayer for your church, and picked your church as one that would benefit from the NLI program and is probably ready for the program. This program is by invitation only.

Third, while this may seem like a stretch in some cases, the whole purpose of the NLI program is to help churches move up to the next level of their abilities, challenging the status quo and encouraging innovations that help each community make disciples for the transformation of the world. It won't be easy! But it will be your piece of building the kingdom.