

## LOCAL SOCIETIES INITIATIVE

*Diverse societies. Common goals.*

**The Local Societies Initiative provides three-year grants to fund start-up costs for dialogue groups exploring the dynamic interface between religion and science. While focused on colleges, universities and seminaries, the program also welcomes applications from a wide spectrum of interested parties in other venues worldwide.**

A three-year Metanexus Institute program, Local Societies Initiative (LSI) provides organizational seed money for scientists, theologians, philosophers, clergy and lay people to come together in local groups. The program differs from other scholarly grants because it helps to build organizations. Anyone active in the science/religion conversation can become part of a dynamic association. Members of local science and religion societies engage in many activities: reading and study groups, public lectures, web publishing, journal publication, newsletters and more. A multidisciplinary, multifaith and multicultural project, LSI promotes a balanced dialogue between the natural and social sciences and the world's faith traditions—drawing on the discoveries of the former and the wisdom of the latter.

As of the spring of 2004, some seventy-two LSI groups are active in 22 countries. Each individual society is dedicated to fostering the dialogue between science and religion in its own unique way. Each successful applicant is awarded a three-year challenge grant, which the host institution is required to match. The monetary award is intended to fund start-up costs and provide necessary support to form and maintain the membership societies.

“All the things that should be able to stir a human heart are happening here,” says LSI program director Eric Weislogel.

“Here” is the heartland of America – in Kansas City and Cleveland. It's also Northern Russia, the capital of Uganda, Bangalore, India, France, Germany and Australia. “Here is a grassroots network of communities, born as part of a desire to reunite the estranged disciplines of science and religion, and nurtured through the dedication of its participants and the Foundation. Here is LSI – a truly global program dedicated to bridging the communication gap between conversants who forgot how to speak to one another years ago,” said Weislogel.

Tracing the historic divergence of science and religion to the Enlightenment, Weislogel notes that, “the two disciplines have since been separated by some combination of benign neglect, indifference and outright hostility,” making a dialogue that effectively weaves them back together, a difficult task.” LSI, he believes, is one way to mend the rift that has deepened since the dawning of the Age of Reason.

“We want to try to get the whole story of the whole cosmos for the whole person,” says Weislogel. “It's an interdisciplinary effort to look at findings and insights of the two main paths human beings traverse when trying to find out about themselves and their place in the universe.”

The approach is not only interdisciplinary and interfaith, but multitiered as well. Not only does LSI encourage the pursuit of dialogue within each individual local society and its respective community, but the program seeks to engage another level of dialogue, between the groups themselves, as part of a larger, shared experience that is an integral part of being an LSI member.

“We provide a discussion space for people from different backgrounds, intellectual disciplines and cultural traditions to bat around ideas and see what opens up,” Weislogel explains, citing the Metanexus Web site, e-mail listservs and, most importantly, the annual conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, the primary means through which disparate local societies communicate and interact.

“The goal is to fund 200 vibrant, ultimately self-sufficient, self-sustaining societies of academics, religious practitioners and laypeople – anyone with a deep interest in the science and religion dialogue as pertains to their

background,” Weislogel says. “We have to respect the disciplinary boundaries, but we at least want to have a conversation over the fence.”

That conversation, under the umbrella of LSI at least, has certainly begun in earnest, and the fence over which it takes place is truly global.

“They’re not all talking about the same thing,” Weislogel says. “Some have a cosmological bent, some have a psychological bent, some focus on medical issues.”

Feedback from LSI members would suggest the beauty of the program is found at many different levels.

“We all believe that in exploring a dialogue between science and religion, LSI has made us all into students,” says Sehdev Kumar, director of FORUM, an LSI member from Ontario, Canada. “The subjects we explore are so varied, the questions that get raised are often so unanswerable, and the creative potential of the enquiries [sic] that emerge in discussions is so immense that sometimes we wonder if we are not sailing for a new world.” Which is precisely the kind of statement Weislogel is hoping for. “We’re trying to find ways to open up new insights, to get some information, some knowledge, we wouldn’t normally get,” he says. “We don’t know exactly what to expect; we must be willing to be surprised.”

For example, The Hazara Society in Pakistan is translating science and religion texts into Urdu and distributing them, free of charge, to universities and libraries across the country. Father Augustine Pamplany’s group in India undertakes similar translation efforts, but into the local Malayalam dialect, and they publish and distribute original texts as well.

Noreen Herzfeld’s group in Minnesota regularly brings together faculty, students and Benedictine monks to contemplate the role of religion in a society saturated with science and technology. They’ve forged a partnership with the local public television station to bring the dialogue into the living rooms of thousands of homes in the upper Midwest.

In Russia and Armenia, societies are using radio and television to promote the science and religion dialogue; and in Indonesia, members of the Yogyakarta society travel from university to university to form and nurture other discussion groups.

It’s all part of a global networking process that sprung from a vision of interdisciplinary dialogue and a commitment to renewed intellectual pursuit.

## **Additional Funding Initiatives**

### **Science and Religion in Schools in the United Kingdom**

What do students ages 11-18 learn about the science and religion debate? This four-year grant hopes to make a major impact on the teaching of these issues in UK schools. The goal is to develop well-informed students with a balanced view of the debate, who study both subjects with open-minded humility.

### **Oxford Seminars on Science and Christianity**

These summer seminars promote research and discussion on issues regarding science and faith, particularly among young faculty. The daily seminars accompany workshops, discussion groups and research counseling. Mentors serve as readers for research projects and provide feedback.

### **Nature in Belief: Evolutionary, Biological Function and Religious Purpose**

Are there natural causes for religious phenomena? This central question is the topic of a seminar at Calvin College followed by a working conference and colloquium.

### **National Conference on Religion and Science Expansion Grant**

This program builds upon the Science and Religion Project in Indonesia. The grant is awarded for developing instructional materials and pedagogical support for faculty. A research seminar, lecture series and essay contest help to broaden the grant's participants.

### **A Comparative Study of Religious Experiencing in Britain and China**

This grant supports research into religious experience in two very different cultures: Britain and China. The goal is to understand more fully the nature and significance of religious experience.

### **Speaking of Faith**

This grant provides partial support for the radio production "Speaking of Faith" from Minnesota Public Radio. This program looks through the lens of faith and theology to explore American public life and current events. Among the program's frequent domains of inquiry and discussion are science and religion, spirituality and health, and character development.

### **Program of Dialogue on Science, Ethics and Religion (DOSER)**

Since its beginning, almost a decade ago, the Foundation has supported the American Association for the Advancement of Science's Dialogue on Science, Ethics and Religion to facilitate communication between scientific and religious communities. The program builds on AAAS's long-standing commitment to relate scientific knowledge and technological development to the purposes and concerns of society at large. The objectives of the program are: to contribute to the level of scientific understanding in religious communities, and to promote multidisciplinary education and scholarship of the ethical and religious implications of advancements in science and theology.