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AMBS Engaging Pastors Project fosters collaboration with conference ministers

Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) - What helps a pastor thrive in ministry? What are the barriers to effective ministry? How can seminary better prepare pastors for leadership in the church? How can pastors and seminary faculty collaborate and learn from each other?

These questions form the basis of the Engaging Pastors Project at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, which is nearing the halfway point of its five-year funding from the Lilly Endowment. In its first two years, the project has initiated several programs that bring church and seminary leaders together in sustained conversations about what makes for excellence in pastoral ministry. While AMBS benefits from these interactions in shaping curriculum and programs, conference ministers also are using them to get counsel on issues they are addressing.

Engaging Pastors programs like the Pastor-Faculty Colloquies and the Pastor-Faculty Study Groups have focused on small group discussion topics such as teaching within the church, female leadership and sustaining pastoral ministry.

“The ease of interaction between pastors and professors has confirmed a basic Engaging Pastors conviction: both groups have much in common and benefit richly by engaging each other,” said Arthur Paul Boers, assistant professor of pastoral theology and leader of the 2006-2007 colloquy. Boers also noted that the tone of collaboration between pastors and faculty during the colloquies is so genuine that “if a stranger walked into our meetings, they would not be able to tell who is a pastor and who is a professor.” The 2006-2007 colloquy, which focused on teaching the Bible in the congregation, held its final gathering February 26–28 near Kalispell, Mont., where they were joined by author and retired pastor Eugene Peterson.

Other Engaging Pastors programs like Barriers to Pastoral Thriving and Pastoral Habits are focused on researching the daily habits, character traits and congregational and personal situations that affect a pastor’s ministerial success. One goal of the Pastoral Habits research is to use the findings as a tool of self evaluation for future pastors.

Lawrence Yoder, professor at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, is leading the research on Pastoral Habits and has already received valuable feedback from pastors. One pastor even challenged that “we are not where we need to be as churches. If we are planning a method of

basing what should be done in the formation of future leaders on the best of what we are doing now, we will miss the mark.”

A complete overview on the progress of the Engaging Pastors Project was given to Mennonite conference ministers at their meeting in Pittsburgh in early December 2006. The Engaging Pastors grant funded an additional day of meeting to report on Engaging Pastors and AMBS curricular review and to discuss other conference ministers’ agenda.

“We need the input of conference ministers on these issues that are important to the church, to their work and to our project,” Jewel Gingerich Longenecker, associate dean for leadership education and director of Engaging Pastors, said. Longenecker believes it is important for conference ministers to be involved in outcomes of the project, which look at both exemplary ministry and ineffective ministry.

“I wish [Engaging Pastors] was available when I started,” Nancy Kauffmann, conference minister for Indiana-Michigan Mennonite conference, said. “It is especially helpful for younger pastors who are just beginning to make the relational and spiritual connections necessary for effective ministry.”

Muriel Bechtel, conference minister for Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada, agreed with Kauffmann, noting that the interaction that happens in Engaging Pastors programs is especially valuable in a North American context, where pastoring has become more challenging in the face of self-centered popular culture. “Church members are less willing to defer to the wider group of the congregation,” Bechtel said, “and pastors need more deliberate mentoring that really asks questions pertinent to their growth as church leaders.”

Nurturing pastors as church leaders also is the focus of additional collaboration between conference ministers and AMBS faculty on the subject of minimum educational standards for credentialing pastors in the Mennonite church. While there was unanimous agreement at the December gathering that a set of standards should be applied, there was no conclusion as to what those standards should be.

“All conferences are challenged with the reality that there are persons serving who have a broad range of training, from no formal education to a Doctor of Ministry,” Sherman Kauffman, executive conference minister of IN-MI conference, said. “The question is, what can we do to pull together across the spectrum to create a reasonable set of expectations?”

Kauffman expressed concern for smaller congregations and bi-vocational pastors who might not have the time or money for additional training. “It’s like walking up the edge of a mountain and figuring out which way to walk so you don’t fall off either side.”

Nancy Kauffmann agreed adding, “As a conference minister, I have seen what can happen to pastors who do not have a clear understanding of Anabaptist theology and history, congregational relations, worship planning and other aspects of pastoral ministry. When the congregation gets hurt, the pastor gets hurt and the church as a whole gets hurt.”

Bechtel sees increasing congregational diversity as another challenge faced by inexperienced pastors. “Pastors can get caught between the crossfire not knowing how to work with the different, sometimes highly diverse groups in their congregations. Good preaching and pastoral care skills will get coins in the bank, but are no longer enough for pastors to get by.”

The conference ministers have set goals for next steps and further discussion on the issue of ministerial credentialing that include getting input from other areas of the church. “We are all part of the church—congregations, schools, pastors, and other church leaders and organizations—so that when one part takes an initiative, it needs to pull in, always, persons from other parts of the church,” Sherman Kauffman said.

Nancy Kauffmann sees that sense of cooperation as a way to draw on the best the Mennonite Church has to offer. “The conference ministers can bring to the conversation an understanding of what their congregations need, and the seminary offers the latest resources and knowledge on issues related to the church.”

The Engaging Pastors Project at AMBS hopes to continue building on the foundation of cooperation and connection that was evident at the conference ministers meeting and has been evident throughout the other Engaging Pastors programs. The next Pastor-Faculty Colloquy, set to begin in fall 2007, is designated specifically for conference ministers, giving them a chance to participate further in Engaging Pastors.

Information and stories about all past, current and upcoming Engaging Pastors programs are available at the AMBS web site, www.ambs.edu.