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Clarifying the Call retreat offers timely support for pastors in first five years of ministry

Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS)—Fourteen new pastors from diverse congregations across the United States and Canada traveled to Elkhart to participate in AMBS's third Clarifying the Call, February 15-17, 2008.

Designed for pastors with two to five years experience in ministry, the weekend retreat gave participants an opportunity to meet with each other in a supportive environment to share, explore, reflect on the unique challenges they face during the initial period of serving in their first congregation and experience a renewed commitment to their call. These challenges include the many "firsts" new pastors face like providing comfort and support to a member who is dying, pastoral self-care and ordination.

According to Sue Conrad, associate pastor of East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church in Lancaster, Pa., the weekend was extremely helpful in providing an opportunity to relate to other pastors, who were at the same point in ministry grappling with similar issues.

"To talk with others who share this small window of experience was incredibly valuable," says Conrad. "Someone would share a story or ask question, and I would think, Yes! I thought I was the only one who thought that. It was an empowering experience."

Rachel Epp Miller, pastor of the San Antonio (Texas) Mennonite Church, echoes Conrad's view.

"It was a blessing to share my stories and hear stories from other pastors, and to give and receive support and encouragement," says Miller. "I felt strengthened in my call to ministry through this process of sharing and reflecting."

The program consisted of six workshops, led by a team of seminary faculty members and denominational leaders, in which participants engaged in discussion and reflection on topics such as pastoral reasoning, interpretation and imagination, pastor's role and self care, emerging issues and goal setting.

According to David Elkins, pastor of the Lima (Ohio) Mennonite Church, the topic that he found most helpful was self-care.

"The event helped me see more clearly the importance of personal spiritual growth and the ongoing need for spiritual reflection and renewal. I had often been ministering 'by my own wits' and now after two years, I had reached the 'end of my wits,'" says Elkins. "Clarifying the Call provided a needed insight into the crucial necessity to abide in Christ for my own health, for my family's health and for the health of the ministry."

The retreat culminated in a banquet on Saturday night in which letters of affirmation from participants' congregational members, written prior to the weekend unbeknownst to the participants, were read aloud to each pastor, and this was followed by a blessing. This level of support and encouragement confirmed and renewed participants' calling.

"This expression is what usually happens when a pastor is leaving a congregation," says Conrad. "To have this level of affirmation early in the ministry was so encouraging. It inspired me to keep on doing what I've been doing."

"I found myself strengthened, wanting to return home and open my eyes to this call in other people's lives," says Epp Miller.

According to Conrad, in addition to reuniting with former classmates and meeting new

pastors, the weekend was effective because of the program's leadership.

"Unlike other weekend retreats where leaders give their presentation and leave, the leaders were part of the experience. They shared their experiences with us, listened to us, ate with us, asked us questions. It was a unique experience, and incredibly beneficial," she says.

Now, a few months later, that benefit can be seen in how the experience continues to inform new pastors' ministries. Elkins says since the retreat he has developed a plan for self-care and spiritual nourishment on a daily, monthly, bimonthly and yearly basis.

The fourth Clarifying the Call weekend retreat, an initiative of AMBS's Engaging Pastors program funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, will be offered in spring 2009. For more information, please visit www.ambs.edu/clarifyingthecall.

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