



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 9, 2008

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, ordination, and being the challenges of being a young parent and pastor.

According to Myrna Miller Dyck, pastor of Steinmann Mennonite Church in Ontario, 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.

"As a beginning pastor, I sometimes feel like I have so much to learn," says Miller Dyck. "It was encouraging and supportive to meet with other new pastors, many of whom were former classmates, and talk about what it means to be a pastor in the congregations where we've been called."

Dianne Hildebrand Schlegel, of Morden Mennonite Church in Manitoba, also found value in renewing ties and meeting new pastors.

"In a sense it was a reunion with my classmates, as about half of the other participants were from my class. And it was a great to meet people whom I'd never met before," says Hildebrand Schlegel. "It was an incredible opportunity to be in a room with 13 other people who were either recently ordained or exploring the questions and struggles of ordination to ministry."

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 Hildebrand Schlegel what she benefited from most was the much-needed break to step out of her situation to pause and intentionally reflect on her journey as a pastor.

"The weekend gave me time to really think about how I wanted to be as a pastor," Hildebrand Schlegel says. "What was really helpful was exploring pastoral imagination, looking at my call to ministry through the context of a biblical narrative and my own narrative—seeing how these stories shape me personally, and as a pastor."

For Miller Dyck, who has served in ministry for three years, the discussion of the pastoral role and responsibility gave her a clear understanding of interpersonal boundaries.

"The reminder that as pastors we are responsible for our relationships to God and to our congregation, but we are not responsible for our members' relationships with God, was encouraging," she says. "We're called to point and direct others to God, but not to fix those relationships, as that is a personal relationship between God and the individual. So often, it's easy to take on more than what is my responsibility, and it was liberating for me to revisit the

limits of pastoral ability.”

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.

“During that experience, I felt a real sense of God at work,” says Hildebrand Schlegel.

Now, a few months later, that benefit can be seen in how the experience continues to inform new pastors’ ministries. For Hildebrand Schlegel, the program helped her reframe challenges into opportunities for growth.

“One struggle I was grappling with was how to be a parent and a pastor. I saw it was a real obstacle,” Hildebrand Schlegel says. “But since that weekend, I see it as part of what God is calling me to learn.”

Miller Dyck says that the support she gained from the weekend was rejuvenating and renewed her sense of calling.

“I really appreciate AMBS for making this retreat happen,” says Miller Dyck. “I felt very supported while a student, but it was wonderful to feel that ongoing support as I am further along in my journey.”

The fourth Clarifying the Call weekend retreat, an initiative of Engaging Pastors program funded by a grant through the Lilly Endowment, will be offered in spring 2009. More information is available at www.ambs.edu/clarifyingthecall.