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Sabbatical gives opportunity to read, reflect, pray, take the long view

Elaine Maust is a woman who is always open to spiritual growth. Elaine and Duane, her husband, have been part of Jubilee Mennonite Church in Meridian, Miss., for 21 years, served as the ministerial team for 11 of those years, and just signed on for five more. With that sort of long-term commitment, a break from routine is needed occasionally. And that is exactly what Elaine was a part of this September, spending the month on sabbatical through the Engaging Pastors program at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

She is grateful for the opportunity. "This sabbatical has been a gift," she says. "I am grateful to Jubilee, AMBS and my husband for the collection of contributions that allowed me to be here." The really great thing about sabbatical? "It's just fabulous to have *time*," she says. "And library access. To be able to read some book, note a cited author in that book, go and find the book by that author and read *it*, or at least the portion you need. How scandalous, right? Follow that long trail. It's a gift for someone who enjoys studying."

To Elaine, having time to follow thoughts to the end of their natural course is a luxury. "I'm grateful for that opportunity and time to think *complete* thoughts. When I'm reading something and I'm distracted by a thought, I just go for a walk and can think it out or process it, then go back and write it down."

As part of the Engaging Pastors program she is asked document some of her reflections to share with the AMBS community. Extra time for study has been just one of the benefits of Elaine's sabbatical. For pastors it is nearly inevitable at times to lose focus in the regular grind of committee meetings, sermons, and budget issues. That's why sabbaticals are a necessary part of the care of pastors who in turn are responsible for tending to the vision of the congregation. "There's no rhythm to this life! So here I am practicing pausing," Elaine says. Stopping to pray is big, she asserts. Those transitional times of the day are important; to "take teeny breaks, collect myself, and thank God for the person I was just talking with, and offer them up to God."

This was a part of her goal coming to AMBS. "I'm grateful for the opportunity to practice some prayer habits to capture the subtleties of the Spirit in ministry moments. I don't want to be a machine, cranking out sermons." How does a pastor keep from becoming a sermon machine? Elaine says the key is "Silence. A contemplative openness to God. That is one thing I am considering while I am here. How to integrate that contemplative openness with what I call the holy chaos of daily life."

On sabbatical there is time for honing other skills—like baking good bread. However, this task fits along with her spiritual growth at AMBS as well. "There are some things that I can just make without thinking. I know what bowl to use and ingredients and I can be on the phone but still make it because it is just routine." That is the goal with baking bread, but she also uses it as an analogy of how she wants her spiritual walk to be. "It's like autopilot. I want to be so in the Spirit I don't have to worry or think through every small decision. It just comes natural."

Taking a step back from her routine situation has given Elaine the chance to view the congregation she serves in a different light. "Being here I noticed the miracle of Jubilee. When I

step back, I see how beautiful and miraculous it is and how little I have to do with it. It's gotten on just fine without Duane and me, and it'll go on after us."

In the meanwhile, Elaine is prepared to be faithfully patient to what God is doing around her. "I always tell young people in ministry that you have to be patient. Wait for the glacier to melt, take the long view. God will be working tomorrow. Learn to work and wait at the same time." Sabbatical at AMBS has provided her a month to practice that very thing.

Nathan Ramer