



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AMBS brings Spanish-language certificate program to Texas

For two intense weekends in the fall of 2006, more than a dozen pastors of Hispanic Mennonite congregations converged upon the Mennonite community of Dallas, Texas, to begin graduate-level theological studies at the Seminario Bíblico Anabautista.



The Spanish-language pilot program, a project of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), came into being as an attempt to provide theological education to pastors whose fluency in English and ministerial responsibilities would make a full-time graduate degree at AMBS next to impossible.

According to Marco Güete, conference minister in Western District and South Central Conferences and local coordinator of Seminario Bíblico Anabautista, "The idea was to give the pastors, church planters and leaders the opportunity to enter into a seminary program without needing to leave their places—to bring the seminary to Texas."

The Seminario offers a certificate in theological studies equivalent to the one-year certificate offered at AMBS, but the Certificado course of study is presented entirely in Spanish, on-site in Texas.

AMBS Academic Dean Loren Johns commented, "The Hispanic church is the growing edge of the Mennonite church, so it is absolutely essential, if AMBS wants to be a part of tomorrow's Mennonite church, to connect with and prove to be of some use to the Hispanic church. This program brings us to the table."

Johns sees the Seminario as one way that AMBS faculty and administration are trying to reimagine theological education in order to engage and empower a broader spectrum of the constituency. To strengthen those connections, two AMBS Bible professors—Jacob Elias and Steven Schweitzer—met with the class during its second session.

Esther Martinez, executive director of the Dallas-based Learning Leadership Institute, coordinator for Church Plant Support and church planter, is one of the students in the first cohort of the Seminario. "Our pastors are bi-vocational, so it is hard to travel," she said. "They work six days out of the week, and on the seventh day they have church."

The first cohort of students is a diverse group, originating from a number of countries in Latin America and ranging in educational background from pre-high school to some previous seminary education. The common ground is their leadership roles in Hispanic Mennonite churches.

The inaugural course, Misión y Paz (Mission and Peace), was taught by John Driver, longtime missionary and teacher in Latin America. In Driver's view, the students exhibited a marvelous acceptance of the ideas, which were largely new to them. The majority of students share conservative evangelical or Pentecostal background, emphasizing radical faith and ecclesiology.

The final assignment, "Becoming Churches of Mission and Peace," encouraged students to bring the ideas presented in class back to their congregations.

Samuel Morán, pastor of Ministerios Restauración (Oak Grove, Ore.), a Hispanic Mennonite Church affiliated with the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference, traveled the farthest to attend the Seminario. He had first heard of the project two years ago from Güete. Morán was excited to think of a theological program available to busy Hispanic pastors, acknowledging their need for classes taught in Spanish and on the weekend, so they could maintain their ministry in their home congregations.

The first course, Morán comments, "was very enriching for me and it has expanded my vision towards the mission of peace within my own congregation."

Martinez added, "We want to plant healthy churches with good theological doctrines, not just a Mennonite name on a church. To be able to tell people, 'This is what we live out, and this is why.' Most of us live in cities, and a sound gospel of hope is needed here."

Driver notes that "Hispanic society is more oral than literate—memory and details of the past are stronger for them." Some students enjoyed and benefited from the first course, but couldn't complete it because of the writing requirements. While the next course is in the planning phase, students will gather for an extra non-credit class to strengthen their formal writing skills. The second course, *Lectura de la Biblia* (Reading the Bible), is scheduled for May and July 2007. The current schedule has the first cohort graduating in September 2009.

According to Lois Barrett, Director of AMBS–Great Plains and the Seminario, "This project grew out of a desire to serve the whole Mennonite church, and not just those for whom English is their first language. It is also a way of making connections and building relationships between Hispanic churches and the larger Mennonite church."

Barrett notes that Hispanic churches that have participated in the Anabaptist Biblical Institute (Instituto Bíblico Anabautista, IBA), originally operated by the Commission on Home Ministries of the General Conference Mennonite Church, are more likely to be well-connected to their local conference, and to have developed an owned Mennonite identity. IBA, based in Newton Kan., is a curriculum of high-school level theological education that occurs at a congregational level over the course of several years. The Seminario seeks to offer the next level of theological education.



"We're very grateful for the opportunity," said Martinez. "We realize that bringing classes and professors here involves cost and travel. With church growth being predominantly in Hispanic communities, I think it's a very worthwhile investment."

The Seminario was launched with support from Schowalter Foundation, Hesston, Kan., and AMBS's Engaging Pastors program, which brings pastors and professors together for collaboration, learning and support. Engaging Pastors provided the funding for Elias and Schweitzer to join the Hispanic pastors for the second class session.

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