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*Pastor-professor study group explores wisdom in pastoral care*

Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) – Seminary professors need confirmation that their ideas work in life situations. Pastors need confirmation that the way they work in their congregations is effective. So Daniel Schipani, professor of pastoral care and counseling at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, created an opportunity to meet with eight pastors over several months, hoping to answer both needs.

Schipani is author of the book *The Way of Wisdom in Pastoral Counseling* (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2003) and editor of *Mennonite Perspectives on Pastoral Counseling* (Institute of Mennonite Studies and Herald Press, 2007). He wanted to continue testing and expanding his concept that pastoral counseling involves wisdom, a combination of being, doing and knowing, that is different from other kinds of counseling. He specifically wanted to confirm and expand his ideas surrounding pastoral counseling as a specialized form of pastoral care. These are concepts he tests with seminary students, but he wanted to test them with pastors, too.

“I had not had sustained conversation with pastors about this model of pastoral counseling,” Schipani said. “There’s a different dynamic in working with pastors than students. Pastors can make connections with other aspects of the congregation; they have a whole-picture view.”

Schipani arranged for a group of eight pastors in the northern Indiana area to meet together with him for eight sessions in late winter and spring. They used his book, *The Way of Wisdom*, as a foundation for their work, but spent most of their time presenting and working with case studies.

Robert Martz, pastor of Topeka (Ind.) Mennonite Church, said, “The sessions helped to flesh out what I was already doing and gave me new insights. Daniel’s book and the discussions were an encouragement in making sure we have a balanced approach to pastoral care, not just a secular approach. We articulated more than just how to work out relationships between people, but also looked at how God comes into that mix.”

Janet Cook, who oversees pastoral care for the River of Life congregation in Elkhart, said, “I received clear direction from the participants when I presented my case studies. I got solid biblical input.”

Participating pastors found that the opportunity to step aside from pastoral duties even briefly was helpful. Jim Smith, pastor of Bethel Missionary Church in Goshen, said, “Within the demands of the pastorate, it is quite easy to slack off from disciplines of research as well as theological reflection and expansion. With the assistance of Dr. Schipani, our discussions and reflections pushed us into the realms of research and theological reflection.”

Four of the participating pastors were Mennonite—three of these working in congregations and one in a college setting; four were not Mennonite. This mix of denominational affiliation was a goal of Schipani’s when he set up the group. “It was obvious that we were coming from different perspectives,” he said, “But it felt complementary. It brought different kinds of spirituality to the conversation.”

Martz said, “In counseling we are about rebuilding relationships and bringing peace to relationships. As Mennonites we focus on that peace-building perspective. Pastors from different backgrounds approach relationship issues in different ways, and seeing how others worked at it was something we could learn from.”

“This small gathering of pastors was unlike any other I currently participate in,” Smith said. “Though we were from different denominations, we were not a local ministerium. Though we were gathered in seminary space, we were not a class. We were simply a small group of God-called men and women intent on learning from one another as well as carrying one another’s burdens for a time.”

As a result of the collaboration, the pastors will take with them the new and deeper insights into working with pastoral care issues in their congregations. Schipani will work at incorporating this kind of input from pastors into his classes so students get the benefit of hearing from experienced pastors. He also hopes to work on a book of pastoral care case studies and reflections which correspond to *The Way of Wisdom*.

The study group was funded by Engaging Pastors, a group of programs coordinated by AMBS’s Church Leadership Center. Engaging Pastors, funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., has the goal of strengthening both the seminary and congregations through sustained conversations among faculty and pastors.

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