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Conference minister explores old and new Mennonite churches

Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) – When Sheldon Burkhalter planned four months of sabbatical time from his role as conference minister of Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference, he had a very specific goal. He wanted to better understand two trends he sees in the conference: traditional Mennonite congregations that are struggling with aging membership and look to megachurches for models of how to thrive, and, on the other hand, the influx of Christians from other faiths who join Mennonite churches because of their distinctive faith.

To pursue that goal, Burkhalter divided his sabbatical into two main segments. First, he wanted to learn early Anabaptist congregations, to see how that perspective could inform his work now. For this historical research, Burkhalter spent five weeks at Bienenberg, a Mennonite seminary in Switzerland. There he learned how the Swiss Anabaptists survived for three hundred years when they were not allowed to worship openly and were forced out of some communities because of their beliefs. “The story of Mennonites in Switzerland is a survival story,” Burkhalter said.

To work with the contemporary aspects of congregational thriving, Burkhalter spent six weeks at AMBS during October and November. His previous seminary studies were at Fuller Theological and Princeton Theological Seminaries, and though he had served on the board of AMBS for 12 years, he had never studied at AMBS.

This segment of his sabbatical was funded by a project in AMBS’s Engaging Pastors program that provides lodging, meals and a stipend for pastors who come to campus for sabbatical time. In return, the pastors pursue projects of their choice and share the results with the seminary community.

Burkhalter’s project, “Old and New Mennonites Together for a Revitalized Church,” examined how people new to the Mennonite church and those from traditional Mennonite congregations might strengthen each other. He asked pastors new to the Mennonite church to share what brought them to the Anabaptist faith; reflected on challenges facing declining, aging congregations; and explored practices of worship, community and mission for revitalizing congregations.

While at AMBS, Burkhalter met with faculty members, attended chapels, sat in on classes and ate lunch in the campus dining room where he could interact with students. He kept himself very busy, Burkhalter admitted, even though being on sabbatical is supposed to be a time of rest. "I was motivated to work on my project and interact with the campus community, so didn't sit in on as many classes as I could have."

However, the time away from his regular duties was a good change of pace. At the beginning of his sabbatical, Burkhalter spent one week each in a monastery and in the Taizé community in France. "Both were very different than anything I have experienced before," he said.

For the time at AMBS, he explained that "being at one place" was a benefit, because in his work he travels frequently and worships in his own congregation about one Sunday a month. "Here I was spending a lot of time receiving, not needing to fulfill a function or a role.

"I spend about half of my time at the computer," Burkhalter said about his conference work; "here it was holding a book and engaging with faculty and students. This was a break for me."

Among the highlights for Burkhalter at AMBS was experiencing classes. "The way faculty naturally integrate prayer and spirituality into study and classes is something I have never seen done better," he said.

After leaving AMBS on November 21, Burkhalter travelled to Pennsylvania to spend a time with family members there, then attended the annual conference ministers gathering. He returned to his conference work on December 7.



Photo caption: Sheldon Burkhalter, conference minister of Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference, visits with AMBS student Franklin Kandal after a forum during which Burkhalter reported on his study of aging congregations and pastors new to the Mennonite faith in the conference he serves. Photo by Mary E. Klassen