



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Congregations benefit from listening professors

Elkhart, Ind (AMBS) - We may be quick to think that seminary professors speak—they lecture, preach and counsel. And it is easy to think of seminary professors reading and writing. But listening? How much do seminary professor do that?

Several congregations, led by pastors who are recent graduates, learned the value of a listening professor recently. The visits to these congregations were part of the Engaging Pastors Listening Project, in which a faculty member spends a weekend with a congregation—not to preach or teach Sunday school, but just to listen. The goal is to help the congregation better discern its ministries in its location and to help the pastor gain perspective on his or her role in the congregation.

San Antonio Mennonite Church in Texas and Rachel Epp Miller, the pastor, recently hosted Mary Schertz, AMBS Bible professor, for one of these visits. Rachel reported, “For me, after five years of pastoral ministry, having a professor come and listen and reflect together with me on what is going well, where my/our challenges lie, how the seminary plays into this whole experience, is such a gift.”

In addition, the visit is affirming and helpful to the congregation. One session during the weekend is a meeting of leaders from the surrounding community with leaders in the congregation. Rachel said, “It was helpful to have the weekend set up to allow many voices to be heard—pastor, congregational leaders, community leaders, congregation. It was a rich experience to hear many perspectives reflecting on our city and our congregation’s place in it. I trust that these conversations will continue beyond the Listening Project.”

Dee Custar, on the pastoral team of Salem Mennonite Church in Waldron, Mich., had similar reports after Ted Koontz, professor of peace studies and ethics, spent a weekend with the congregation. “We learned so much from the gathering with community leaders and are already implementing some changes based on that discussion,” Dee said.

In addition to helping the congregation and the pastor, AMBS also has a broader motive for these visits. When faculty have opportunities to learn about congregations by listening, rather than by being a featured speaker, they gain perspectives that are important in their ongoing teaching. They also help the seminary assess and reshape its program to train new pastors.

For example, Mary observed how Rachel has developed a particular identity in the San Antonio congregation. “One of the things that Rachel has to teach the rest of us is how to minister among peers. Of course, many pastors also minister to their peers but to minister to such a large group of young adults as a young adult is something that not many pastors are doing.”

Mary also reflected, “Some congregations can choose whether to address the issues of greater cultural diversity and understanding, but SAMC does not have that option. They are embedded in multiple cultures—and it will be instructive to the church as a whole to walk with them and to care about what happens in this congregation.”

Salem Mennonite in Waldron, Mich., is in a much different setting, Ted noted. It is in a rural area, hard-hit by the economic recession with members coming from significant distances. However, after nearly closing in 2003, the congregation has reorganized with a new vision for its ministries and is considering whether to build a new church building. Ted described the

congregation as one that loves: "At Salem one is immediately aware of the fact that these people like and love one another. It is this warmth that has made Salem's growth possible. Salem has been good news to its members, a place to which members want to invite friends and acquaintances."

Ted brought this message back to the seminary: "I was struck by the way in which pastoral leadership at Salem must take quite a different form than that which is typically assumed AMBS. I was told on more than one occasion that a typical full-time pastor would likely have killed the renewal of the church by undermining the widespread claiming of gifts and passions on the part of participants."

Both Rachel and Dee affirmed the visits as important for their congregations, two congregations not closely related to the seminary or church structures. Professors Mary and Ted affirmed the experience of learning about these congregations, two congregations who are vibrant and healthy, carrying out their ministries in ways that don't necessarily fit the typical pattern.

The goal of Engaging Pastors, which included nine other projects in addition to Listening Visits, was that the benefits of the learnings will extend even farther, and that Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA will be shaped by these learnings.

Engaging Pastors officially concluded early this year; however, learnings from the five years of collaboration between pastors, professors and church leaders are still being assessed and disseminated.