



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 21, 2009

Conference explores issues central to healthy Mennonite congregations

Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) – One hundred pastors and church leaders from Canada and the U.S. gathered at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in early December to grapple with issues at the heart of strengthening congregations and pastors in the Mennonite Church, both in Canada and the U.S.

“The ecology of ministry” was the focus of the conference and Jewel Gingerich Longenecker, who directed the five-year Engaging Pastors program at AMBS, defined this as the network of church institutions that work together to maintain vibrant congregations.

Over the last five years, Engaging Pastors has fostered collaboration among pastors, professors and church leaders, and several key learnings emerged. The Summative Conference, December 1–3, tested these learnings with representatives of the roles involved in preparing and sustaining pastors: professors, conference and area church ministers, denominational leaders, deans of Mennonite theological schools and pastors themselves.

The key learnings address different needs gleaned from the five years of interactions:

- The practice and teaching of ministry is strengthened when pastors and professors regularly engage each other;
- There is an urgent need to strengthen pastoral, biblical and teaching authority in the church;
- The church and seminary need to equip pastors and professors to read and engage their missional context with joy.

Participants readily agreed that ongoing collaboration between pastors and professors will strengthen the ministry of both. Dorothy Nickel Friesen, conference minister for Western District Conference, shared that in pastor-professor conversations “we were surprised how easily we learned from each other, how thirsty we were for each other’s passion for Jesus Christ” However, she noted, “There are no formal exchanges, no structures, and little encouragement to become engaged.”

Both Samuel Olarewaju, pastor of Berean Fellowship Church, Youngstown, Ohio, and Gayle Gerber Koontz, AMBS professor, affirmed the value of professors being engaged in a variety of congregations and pastors spending time with professors. Olarewaju spent several

weeks of sabbatical time at AMBS and reported that even his church members noticed “that I returned to my pastoral duties with more excitement and vigor to serve the Lord.”

The learning that calls for training pastors and professors for their missional contexts also brought affirmation. Joel Miller, pastor of Cincinnati Mennonite Church, noted, “Along with visiting and reading Genesis, Isaiah, Luke and Revelation, I wonder what would happen if we were to frequently visit and read the welfare office, the courthouse, the jail, the military recruitment center and the local elementary school. This could happen in our seminary training and we would also learn ways of continuing this practice within a ministry assignment.”

Marco Guete, conference minister for Southeast Mennonite Conference, surveyed pastors in his conference on this issue. Quoting one, he said, “We need to state and understand our missional contexts in such a way that they invite a joyful response. When the missional context is inviting and exciting, it generates an enthusiastic and heart-felt response.”

For the second learning—the call for strengthening authority in the church—discussions did not reveal clear understanding or agreement. In her presentation, Mary Schertz, AMBS professor, said, “Our beloved denomination is hugely ambivalent about how, when and why we confer authority.” She also asserted, “The amount and kind of ambivalence is ... hindering the mission of God in the world.”

Tim Kuepfer, pastor of Peace Mennonite Church, Richmond, B.C., reflected that strengthening authority of leadership will not have easy solutions. “As I look at my own pastoral ministry over the past six years, I see how intimately connected to leadership authority is the renovation of the heart,” he said.

A Listening Committee, charged with summarizing the discussions, concluded, “We need more clarity about what authority means (what it authorizes one to do, to say, to be), and what it does not mean (what it does not authorize).” They summarized, “This learning addresses the heart and the core of what pastoral ministry is about; this is an important conversation to be facilitated.”

Listening Committee member Noel Santiago, executive minister for Franconia Mennonite Conference, compared the ecology of ministry to a stream he observed in Costa Rica. In this stream, water from two sources did not blend until it neared the ocean. Each part of the ecology of ministry also is unique, he explained. “If nature can put together things that are distinct yet similar, surely we can too. With the Spirit of God, the resources of heaven, the participation of the community, and given the context of the world, what is impossible?”

Megan Ramer, also a member of the Listening Committee and pastor of Chicago (Ill.) Community Mennonite Church, observed that each of the three learnings names a breach in the ecology. “The first learning identifies a disconnect between the academy and the church in all its forms. The second learning identifies a disconnect between pastor and church—the church at all levels, but particularly the congregation. Learning three identifies a disconnect between the academy, church and pastors, and missional contexts.”

Ramer concluded, “We hear in these learnings and the discussions an invitation first to be repaired, and then to step into our calling to be repair-ers of the breaches with which we are faced.”

Ervin Stutzman, who was dean of EMS at the time of the conference and was anticipating taking the role of executive director of Mennonite Church USA, said, “I particularly valued the discussion about the role of the denomination vis-à-vis seminary, conference leaders and pastors. I believe the denomination has a vital role in continuing the conversation that was begun by the Engaging Pastors project.”

Jack Suderman, general secretary of Mennonite Church Canada, said, “The raising of our collective consciousness that leaders emerge out of an environment cannot be assumed, but needs to be nourished at every level, is a significant outcome.”

Rebecca Slough, AMBS academic dean and moderator of the conference, pointed out that Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA are small enough that it was possible to bring key representatives from the many different roles together. “We worked well together and there was a lot of energy and creativity around shared questions and concerns.”

Longenecker noted the value of having seminary deans and presidents at the table with leaders of denominations, area churches and conferences. “This conference called the denomination to reshape structures to foster this in an ongoing way, so that this becomes the first of many similar gatherings.”

Presentations and the findings of the Listening Committee will be prepared for distribution by AMBS in early 2010. Serving on the Listening Committee, in addition to Santiago and Ramer, were Suderman and Sara Wenger Shenk, associate dean of Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, Va.

Sidebar

The Summative Conference was the concluding project of the Engaging Pastors program which began in 2005. AMBS received funding from Lilly Endowment, Inc., for Engaging Pastors in order to provide opportunities for collaboration and sustained conversation between pastors and professors. The goal is to transform the way pastoral training programs prepare and support pastors. Engaging Pastors included ten components, including pastor sabbaticals at AMBS, colloquies and study groups that brought pastors and professors together multiple times, listening visits in which professors traveled to congregations for weekends devoted to listening to the pastor and the congregation, and interactions between AMBS professors and students in the Spanish-language seminary program, Seminario Bíblico Anabautista, in Dallas, Texas. More information about Engaging Pastors is available at www.ambs.edu/engagingpastors.