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Pastors share experiences of crossing divisions

Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) - Imagine the stories emerging in a group that includes African-American pastors; pastors originally from Africa now serving in the U.S.; a Hispanic pastor; Caucasian pastors who became Mennonites as adults; and a mix of seminary students, staff and faculty members.

Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary's Engaging Pastors program hosted this gathering on April 30 so the pastors could talk about how they see God at work and so that AMBS staff and faculty could learn more about ministry in diverse contexts. The evening began with stories from three pastors who are now at AMBS on sabbatical: **Angela Nze** from Christ Life Chapel, Avondale, Ariz.; **Horace McMillon** from Open Door Mennonite Church, Jackson, Miss.; and **Samuel Olarewaju** from Berean Fellowship, Youngstown, Ohio. Two pastors of churches in Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference also shared their experiences: **Maria Crockett** from House of Power, Elkhart; and **Cora Brown** from Church Without Walls, Elkhart.

These pastors shared stories about how the congregations they serve deal with diversity within the congregation as well as in their neighborhoods. One story that caught the attention of the group was Crockett's story about using a donkey to break down barriers. She described how the homes around the church in the southwest part of Elkhart have fences, signs for no trespassing and dogs to discourage people from coming to the doors. So church members borrowed a donkey, hooked a cart behind it and put a music player on the cart. Then they walked through the neighborhood singing.

"It was just a way to get someone to open the door and say 'What is goin' on?'" Crockett said. "Then we could greet people. We could touch them for the Kingdom of God."

Diversity within the congregation is a challenge Nze described. Christ Life Chapel in the Phoenix area comprises people from many different countries and cultures in Africa. They have a rule that everyone must speak English, because that is a common language for all. However, they occasionally have a "culture" Sunday when everyone is encouraged to express their culture. "We don't believe culture should die," Nze said.

They recently focused worship services for two months on the Holy Spirit and encouraged members to share what the Spirit of God is saying to them. "The more we see through the eyes of the Spirit, the more our colors disappear." Nze emphasized.

Olarewaju told the group that if you heard the singing from outside his church, you would think it was a white church, when instead it is predominantly African-American. This is because their pianist cannot play other styles of music. But he sees a benefit in this. "We are a local church that learns to appreciate all kinds of music. Here I am from Africa and I love country music!" he said.

Nina Bartelt Lanctot, associate director of Engaging Pastors, invited participants to share what they believed God was saying through the stories. McMillon reflected, "The Mennonite church nearest to Open Door is a 90-minute drive away. So hearing stories of like-minded people working for the Kingdom of God, we know we are not alone."

Seferina DeLeón, a lay leader at Iglesia Menonita del Buen Pastor in Goshen, said she believed God was saying, "Be still and know that I am God." She added, "God knows where He is going to take us and we need to let Him lead the way."

Crockett noted three things: "It's important to be led by the Holy Spirit; God has no color; and it's time for us to encourage each other."

Reflecting on the evening, Lanctot later said, "I wanted to do more listening and learning about opportunities where divisions are being bridged. Some of these divisions are race, but others are socio-economic classes, nationality, education and theological differences.

"Making room for 'the other' takes energy; there are hurdles to overcome," Lanctot observed. "But when we cross the hurdles, it's energizing."

AMBS's Engaging Pastors program is funded by a grant from Lilly Endowment. The goal of Engaging Pastors is to bring faculty members and pastors together for collaboration and conversation. Through this program the sabbatical guests receive some funding and in exchange they share the projects they are working on with AMBS.

—*Mary E. Klassen*



Maria Crockett, co-pastor of House of Power in Elkhart, Ind., described the challenges of ministering in the neighborhood surrounding the church at an event hosted by Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary on April 30. Listening are **Kay Bontrager-Singer**, co-pastor of Faith Mennonite in Goshen, and Loren L. Johns, AMBS Bible professor.

Pastors who minister in settings of diversity were invited to share stories and insights with each other and AMBS faculty and administrators. Presenters at the gathering also included **Cora Brown**, co-pastor of Church Without Walls, and three pastors who were at AMBS on sabbatical.

(Photo by J. Tyler Klassen)