

Hearing Aid: Helping Youth Listen to God

By Barbara Saunders

Todd Smith is a seventeen-year-old who isn't exactly sure where God is leading him—but he has some clues, and they've been strengthened recently. He spent a weekend in Fresno, California, at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, along with a dozen other high school students who had been identified as eventual possible candidates for ministry.

When Smith left for Fresno, he said, "I wasn't sure whether God was saying something to me." Smith's parents, who he says are not Christians, have been supportive of his plans to attend Bible college, but have not been major players in his wondering whether to pursue pastoral ministry as a vocation. So he was relieved to spend time with his pastor and with professors at the seminary. They told him that they had shared his uncertainty, that in Smith's words, "They wanted to run from the calling, but God just kept working on them and it became clear that this was where they had to be."

Divining a Way

Ron Toews is Smith's pastor at Dalhousie Community Church in Calgary, Alberta. He is also the MBBS board chair and the driving force behind "Hearing the Call of God: Seminary Exposure for Young Adults," the program Smith attended.

Toews had been concerned for some time

about what he calls "the failure of the church to call out those whom God is shaping with leadership gifts." Then he realized he was in a position to do something about it. In 1999 Henry Schmidt, MBBS's president, surveyed district ministers in the United States and Canada to learn whether the school is educating people in sufficient numbers to fill the small denomination's future leadership needs. The answer was troubling: The church, which comprises 25,000 members in 180 U.S. churches and 34,000 members in 235 Canadian churches, will need fifty-seven pastors within the next ten years, as well as church planters, youth ministers, missionaries, and other leaders. Twenty-five to thirty-five people graduate from the school each year, and only about fifteen of those go on to pastoral ministry.

MBBS recruiters organized a series of workshops about the topic of deliberate recruitment—

inviting to the academy those candidates who have been "discerned, called, blessed, and confirmed," who already showed promise. Faculty spent days fasting and praying for guidance in this goal, and the school's representatives presented their ideas and statistics at conferences in both countries. The idea resonated with the active clergy. In March, when denomination leaders met in Winnipeg, the issue of "calling out" young people ranked second place on the list of concerns. Pastors resolved to set up discernment committees within their congregations.

The MBBS board came up with a concrete proposal: Professors and seminarians at the Fresno campus would host a small group of high school seniors and college freshman for a weekend and would introduce them to the world of theological scholarship and the vocational ministry.

Implementing the Plan

Toews initiated and spearheaded the project. He anchored the contribu-

Youth Called

Presumably God hasn't stopped calling young people to ministry, but sometimes it's hard for them to feel secure in making that choice. Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary recognized the problem and stepped up to make a way for the church's next generation of leaders to hear—and heed—the call.



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Participating in the Hearing the Call of God program let these young Canadian and American Mennonites get a taste of seminary life and discuss the nature of ministerial vocation.

tions of pastors, board members, and young participants in the overall vision. First, Toews contacted twenty-two Alberta pastors and explained the pilot program MBBS envisioned. He directed pastors to look for four things in prospective participants: They should have a passion for Christ and a track record of using spiritual leadership gifts within their church or school. They should be baptized. (The denomination dictates that baptism follows confession of faith.) Finally, they should have been given the opportunity to acknowledge openness to a calling for vocational ministry. He insisted that the pastors, not MBBS representatives, make the initial approaches to prospective participants they identified in their own churches. These ministers were encouraged to regard the approach as the first step in an ongoing mentoring relationship.

Next, he asked his fellow board members to provide necessary financial support. Two made specific commitments. Harold Ennis of Reedley, California, the board's vice chair, donated rented vans to transport students while in California; Dr. Bill Loewen of Goddard, Kansas, donated airfare for the fifteen students and two chaperones. Administration and faculty also provided for the practical needs of the participating youths: The seminary arranged for their meals and for lodging in professor's homes.

Twelve Canadian students signed on; a thirteenth called after the deadline, desperate to be included. The final party

was composed of thirteen Canadians (including Ron Toews and Diane Toews, his wife, as chaperones, and their son Nathan as a student participant) and two Americans from Kansas. The young people were asked to demonstrate their sense of investment by contributing \$75 Canadian or \$50 U.S. The total cost of the project was approximately \$7,000 U.S. Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary has applied for a planning grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to help the school continue the program and to explore ways to expand and deepen it.

Germinating Ideas

Teaching took place in a variety of settings, from inside the president's home to outside under a General Grant sequoia tree to poolside. In a seminar entitled, "Why Study Theology?," Valerie Rempel, an assistant professor of history and theology, guided participants through a study of the connections between denominational positions and the scriptures that beget them. Mark Baker, professor of missions, told his faith story. Toews explains that seminars "focused heavily on stories. We felt that people this age would be open to the power of story."

Since the typical MBBS student matriculates about five years after first considering it, the program's success as a recruitment tool may not be known for several years. Already, it is bearing fruit in young people's lives. Toews was moved by the stories of two of his own church members. They come from "homes where Christ is not known or followed,

and they were blown out of the water by the worldview" of the people they met at MBBS, he said.

Toews actively keeps in touch with the youths; deliberate, personal follow-up is part of the project's design. He is reserved, but optimistic, about the program's direct effect on future enrollment and clergy shortages. First, he notes that the average age of seminary students is over thirty years old. Most eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds are, rightfully, still in the "hearing" process and lack life experience. He hopes that their participation with "Hearing the Call" will lead them toward choosing experiences, such as short-term mission assignments, that might shape them as Christian leaders, in whatever role to which God is calling them. •IT•

