



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Pastors Week presenter urges questions

Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) – Why do houses no longer have front porches? How did skateboarding become a popular sport among youth? Why do car dealerships in the U.S. fly large flags? What do drive-through restaurants say about the experience of eating and fellowship?

With these specific examples, Rodney Clapp, speaker for Pastors Week at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, urged listeners to question the culture around them.

This year's theme for the annual event, "Meeting Jesus in Popular Culture," was shaped by three lectures by the author, lecturer and editorial director of Brazos Press, an imprint of Baker Books.

"Cultures help us shape what we pay attention to," Clapp said. "Popular culture gives us narratives and stories we will live by and die by."

Popular culture is not just entertainment and corporations, he explained. "It also includes the way people engage or appropriate the products of entertainment and corporations." Because of this, all of us endorse and enter in to popular culture, knowingly or unknowingly.

What some participants found surprising was Clapp's challenge for them to develop a curiosity about popular culture. Find things you like in popular culture, Clapp told the group, in order to understand the desires and longings that bring people to embrace it.

In his third presentation during the January 22-25 event, Clapp gave listeners tools for Christians and churches to use in approaching popular culture. He emphasized asking questions so that we become more aware of how our culture influences us. He urged the 220 participants to make careful choices about what to appropriate into their lives.

"We are Christians first and what orients us foremost is our baptisms," he said.

In addressing media specifically, Clapp explained that the church is a kind of medium, standing between God and the world, representing God to the world. "The church is a unique medium charged with witnessing to Christ. One of the ways we do this is with gathered worship." He admitted that the church is imperfect, "but it is the way God has chosen to work."

Extending his emphasis on asking questions, Clapp encouraged pastors to help their congregations develop "Christian cultural agency," so they don't passively take in media. This includes asking what symbols mean, what stories are being told and by whom, and how patterns of living and communicating have developed and how they are changing.

In order to developing this Christian cultural agency, Clapp said, several foundational elements are needed: participation in Christian community and mission; regular, formative and transformative participation in worship; grounding in Scripture; awareness of other cultures; and finding similarities and differences between Christian signs, traditions and practices and those of other cultures.

When asked about how Christians can counter the pervasive messages in the U.S. that emphasize war and conflict, Clapp reiterated that Christians themselves are media. “We have to supplement the messages around us. There’s no reason we shouldn’t be talking to Christian brothers and sisters in Iraq. We don’t need to get all of our news from CNN. The church is the most catholic (with a small ‘c’) body on earth. Those connections are important and we need to help those stories be heard.”

During the four-day event, workshops delved into specific aspects of popular culture and media. Mary H. Schertz, professor of New Testament, led a workshop on the Gospel of Judas; Loren Johns, academic dean, on the Left Behind Series and Revelation; Alan Kreider, associate professor of church history and mission, on *The DaVinci Code*; Andy Brubacher Kaethler, director of !Explore, on youth and culture; and Mary E. Klassen on storytelling as a medium for communicating values and faith.

Worship services invited participants to look for Jesus in our culture and our world.

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Mary E. Klassen

