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Scriptures shape the missional congregation, leading missiologist says
Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) – Being missional means being continuously converted by the Scriptures, Darrell Guder, dean of Princeton Theological Seminary, emphasized in recent lectures at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

“Many Christians understand themselves to be ‘in’—to be saved—and are primarily interested that the church should help them maintain that status.” However, this individualistic, self-centered approach to discipleship is not what the Scriptures have in mind, Guder explained as he gave two presentations in the AMBS Shenk Mission Lectureship, November 29 and December 1. Instead, God’s chosen instrument for mission is the congregation, and the Scriptures are the source of the ongoing formation of the community of believers.

“The inescapable conclusion of the missional reading of the Bible is that God is carrying out his saving and healing purposes through gathered communities, through congregations.”

The gospel story begins with the earthly ministry of Jesus, the professor of missional and ecumenical theology said. Following this, the apostle’s intention was not simply to save souls—although that happened. “It was their intention to form communities,” and those communities were to be obedient and faithful witnesses in their particular settings.

Even today, Guder said, baptism is not a rite of salvation alone, but it is a rite of incorporation into the witnessing community. An individualistic understanding of evangelization focuses on what Jesus and his gospels do for me, he said, “while leaving aside or never even encountering the call to follow Jesus as part of a new kind of community where walls of separation are being dismantled by the gospel reality.”

“You shall be my witnesses,” Jesus says, and this is a holistic call, according to Guder. “The entire community is made up of persons who are defined as witnesses. Witness itself is not an activity of these persons, it defines who they are.”

A common theme through all of Paul’s letters is that we should “live worthy of our calling.” That calling is to be witnesses, and Guder enumerated that we must witness to God’s love by living together lovingly; we must witness to peace by living together peacefully and as

peacemakers; we must point to God's intention of healing for all creating by living in ways that foster healing and reconciliation.

In response to Guder's two lectures, Neil Amstutz, member of the pastoral team at Waterford Mennonite Church in Goshen, shared examples of how scripture has shaped and motivated the congregation. The leadership team selected one passage, the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000, as a focus for the congregation and centered on it for six weeks. "That captured our imagination and the sparks are still growing," Amstutz said. Some results have been a bluegrass event on the church lawn to which the neighborhood was invited, a four-day summer camp at a local school, and regular joint worship services with local Hispanic congregations.

Guder is author of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans 1998) and *The continuing Conversion of the Church: Evangelization as the Heart of Ministry* (Eerdmans 2000). He has served as secretary-treasurer and currently is second vice president of the American Society of Missiology.

The Shenk Mission Lectureship also included presentations on what seminaries are saying about teaching missionally, theological education in post-communist Europe, church growth and leadership in Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia, mission and business ethics from a Paraguayan perspective and mission church theology recently examined in Doctor of Ministry projects. This lectureship is named in honor of Wilbert R. Shenk, noted missiologist, former administrator at Mennonite Board of Missions and former professor at AMBS and Fuller Theological Seminary.