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Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) - "What should be clear to any reader of Scripture is that the immigrant is front and center in God's scheme of things," James Brenneman, Old Testament scholar and president of Goshen College, said during a weeklong focus on immigration at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

"The immigrant is the prototype, the archetype, for what it means to be people of faith," he continued in his chapel message on October 30. The biblical commands to care for the immigrant, along with the widow and fatherless, "remind the people of Israel never to forget they were once themselves sojourners in Egypt and before that their immigrant roots are traced back to Abraham and Sarah."

Brenneman emphasized that the status of immigrant fits everybody. "From a biblical point of view, because God owns every grain of sand, every mountain top and every fertile valley, then any and every nation who claims to own or maintain sovereignty over any inch of real estate anywhere on earth is an occupying force, claiming land that does not truly belong to them." He concluded, "True biblical faith always calls us to live as pilgrims, as perpetual immigrants in God's territory."

The chapel service in which Brenneman spoke was one of several public events scheduled during the week of October 29 to November 1 to provide information and opportunities for discussion and hearing first-person accounts of immigration issues. The focus was planned by students who were part of a January interterm course in Guatemala and the seminary's Peace and Justice Committee in collaboration with the AMBS Church Leadership Center.

Allan Kauffman, mayor of Goshen, Ind., echoed the biblical themes when he addressed the seminary's weekly forum on Thursday. He said, "As a Christian I understand what the Bible tells us about how we're to be welcoming to the stranger, but as a mayor I struggle with the capacity the community has to welcome everybody. We are struggling with such a pace of immigration in our community that it has been very, very hard to assimilate everybody," he said, noting that the population of other-than-white people in Goshen has grown from 4.5 percent in 1990 to 20 percent in 2000 to around 40 to 45 percent in 2007.

"This is a long journey that we're working on with our immigration issues," Kauffman said. "It takes a strong collaboration between the city, the chamber of commerce, the Anglo community, the Hispanic/Latino community and Hispanic churches—everybody needs to be pulling together. There is a really ripe mission field in Goshen for churches."

A panel of three responded to Kauffman, looking at the issues in Goshen from different perspectives. Maria Sanchez-Schirch, immigration counselor with the social service agency LaCasa, emphasized education. "I understand people are afraid of immigrants because they don't know them," she said. "Education is a very important key so everyone can understand, especially churches, why this is happening and why they are moving here."

Robert Reyes, another member of the panel, is the research director of the new Center for Intercultural Teaching and Learning at Goshen College. He also called for education and conversation in faith communities. "If we are going to be talking to people outside the church, we need to be talking as a community internally, and learn how to do that with people who have different perspectives."

He called on churches especially to address concerns about immigration. “We need to provide Christian education opportunities that draw parallels between concepts of peace, racial reconciliation and outreach to the poor and marginalized. We need to teach about this.”

Panel member Tina Schlabach, pastor of care at Waterford Mennonite Church in Goshen, described how the congregation is a neighbor to a new Hispanic congregation on the south edge of the city, and the two groups worship together several times a year. One of the benefits of this is that Waterford supported Adulam with prayers and gifts on that congregation’s recent mission trip to Haiti, and Adulam supported Waterford with a summer camp hosted at a local school. “That happened because we were sitting down together and talking about what our churches are doing.

“It’s become all about neighboring for me as a pastor,” Schlabach said.

Another session of the week featured three AMBS students who are immigrants to the U.S.: Saulo Padilla and Rolando Sosa Granados, both from Central America who first emigrated to Canada and now are in the U.S., and Heli Chambi, who initially came from Peru to the U.S. to study at Iowa Mennonite High School and then completed studies at Hesston and Goshen Colleges.

Sosa Granados explained how when he graduated from high school, the university he planned to attend was closed by the government of El Salvador because of unrest. He rejected the two easier options of joining the army or a guerilla group and came to the U.S. instead.

“The U.S. immigration office did not connect the fact that what was going on in El Salvador and in Latin America was a result of politics that Washington was drafting at that time,” he said. “I presented my case to immigration offices in Houston and after three and a half years of staying here in the U.S. they told me I did not qualify for refugee status. What I find fascinating is that I presented the same case to the Canadian government, and the Canadian government without hesitation said, yes, you are a refugee and you can go to Canada.”

Padilla compares his experience of emigrating from Guatemala to Canada to that of being reborn, “not in the evangelical way, but like actual birth. You’re being pushed and pulled out of the womb. Pains are happening and you don’t know why. You’re being pushed out of your comfort zone and then all of a sudden you have to get out.”

Padilla related how his family left his home country when his father was forced out after being caught in a protest and arrested. “It’s important to inform people that immigration happens because there are pushes and pulls. You don’t want to move, but you are being pushed and pulled. If we can educate people about the pushes and pulls that bring us here that would be an accomplishment.”

Additional speakers during the week were Krista Zimmerman, staff member at the Mennonite Central Committee Washington Office; and a panel with Carlos Romero, executive director of Mennonite Education Agency; Jason Shenk, representing Mennonite Mission Network; Yvonne Diaz, executive director of Mennonite Central Committee-Great Lakes; Susan Mark Landis, peace advocate for Mennonite Church USA; and Steve Braden, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Elkhart.