



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) – Why are we reluctant to tell others about God’s presence in our lives? How can we give testimony in ways that are meaningful both to us and to listeners?

These are questions that participants and faculty explored at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary’s annual Pastors Week, January 28–31.

Arthur Paul Boers, AMBS associate professor of pastoral theology, set the stage for the week by explaining, “Testimony is a narrative of events and a confession of beliefs. We tell what we have seen and heard and we confess what we believe about what we have seen and heard.” We know we must walk the talk, Boers said, “but Christians also must talk the walk. We need to tell the story.”

As we tell our stories, we fit them into a larger framework that gives meaning to our lives, into a metanarrative, Boers explained to the 180 participants. “Christians live by the biblical metanarrative Being and becoming Christian means adopting and being adopted by God’s story.” From that we draw the language and content for telling our story to others.

Learning this larger story and the language for telling our own stories happens in the church, Ben Ollenburger, AMBS professor of biblical theology, suggested. In Christian worship, the hymns we sing, the prayers we pray, the sermons we hear, the Scripture we read, the rituals we practice together all form the substance of the curriculum in which we learn how to give testimony. “Corporate worship provides the language and context for testimony and it elicits testimony—or it should,” Ollenburger said.

Referencing the book *Testimony* by Thomas Long, Ollenburger added, “We do not know fully what we believe until we express that belief.” Expressing our faith helps form our faith, he emphasized. “Why should only preachers enjoy this experience?”

Alan Kreider, AMBS associate professor of church history and mission, suggested reasons why we have become silent about our faith. When Christianity was accepted by the Roman empire, there was no need for testimony; everyone was assumed to be Christian. Later, the Enlightenment brought toleration of differing beliefs, and Christian faith become a private matter. Today, in “Mennonite Christendom,” Kreider noted, “most of the people we have relationships with are Mennonite. If I want to break out of that, I have to work hard.”

Some necessary steps, Kreider suggested, are to develop relationships and friendships. “We can share our faith only when we have a relationship of trust.” This requires the stability of being in a location long enough to learn to know people, and we need to go to them—to enter their world. Focusing on hope more than on faith is another key that Kreider emphasized. Then he encouraged pastors to find people in their congregations who have the gift to be evangelizing and to encourage them.

Rebecca Slough, AMBS academic dean and associate professor of worship and the arts, also suggested ways we can proceed. We need to practice a basic repertoire of testimony, in much the same way that we practice other skills. “You don’t have to wait until the technique is perfect in order to use it. We grow by using it,” she said.

In addition to skills, such as telling the stories in Scripture and translating biblical stories and theological themes into everyday language, we need to develop practices which open the way for testimony. “You must first practice hospitality, so speakers trust their words will be valued,” Slough said. Listening, forgiveness and Christian worship also are important in preparing us to speak about our faith and to hear testimony from others.

Slough’s overall emphasis is for us to “just start talking. We are so careful about what we want to say that we end up not saying anything. We can get at what we know deep inside by talking without thinking.”

Workshops during the four-day event expanded the topic of testimony. These included testimony and testifying in Black church practice, opportunities and limits for testimony in postmodernism, autobiography in biblical interpretation, pilgrimage and testimony, and the best testimony in contemporary literature. Worship during the week was planned and led by a team from Benton Mennonite Church near Goshen, including pastor Brenda Hostetler Meyer and Karla Stoltzfus, who had been an intern in the congregation and now is minister of Church community life at First Mennonite Church, Iowa City, Iowa. Preachers for Pastors Week worship services were Regina Shands Stoltzfus, Esdras Ferreras and Barbara Smith-Morrison.

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Mary E. Klassen

Photo caption: Leah Dawn Bueckert (back to camera), Spiritual Care Coordinator of North Eastman Health Association in Manitoba, talks with other participants during Pastors Week at AMBS: John Stoltzfus, Lombard (Ill.) Mennonite Church; Rachel Siemens, First Mennonite Church, Wadsworth, Ohio (originally from Winnipeg, Man.); Ryan Siemens, Grace Mennonite Church, Prince Arthur, Sask.; Alissa Bender, First Mennonite Church, Calgary, Alb.
Photo by Mary E. Klassen