



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Erland Waltner, pioneer of integration, dies

Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) – Erland Waltner, president emeritus of Mennonite Biblical Seminary, died late Easter Sunday, April 12, in Goshen, Ind. He was 94 years old.

Waltner served the seminary and the church in many roles over a long lifetime of ministry, not only with Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, but also with Mennonite World Conference (MWC), the General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC), Mennonite Health Association and Mennonite Medical Association.

Waltner's most significant contribution was his leadership in bringing together Mennonite Biblical Seminary (MBS), the General Conference seminary in Chicago, and Goshen Biblical Seminary (GBS), a seminary of the former Mennonite Church (MC) in Goshen, Ind. Over a span of several years, he negotiated the possibility of an association between the two seminaries with Harold S. Bender, dean of GBS, and with others. Then as president of MBS beginning in 1958 when it relocated to Elkhart, he helped guide the cooperative program to maturity. He retired as president in 1978, but continued to teach at AMBS until the 1990s and to provide spiritual direction to students until shortly before his death.

Waltner's ministry began in 1935 when he served as summer pastor of Wisner Mennonite Church, Wisner, Neb. From 1938 to 1949, he served as pastor of Second Mennonite Church, Philadelphia, Pa., and then Bethel Mennonite Church Mountain Lake, Minn. In 1949, he responded to a call to join the faculty of Bethel College, North Newton, Kan., where he taught Bible and religion for eight years.

In addition to Waltner's service with AMBS, he also served the church in other significant ways. He was president of the General Conference Mennonite Church from 1956 to 1962 in addition to being a member of the GCMC Board of Education and Board of Missions. He served as a member of the presidium of MWC (1957–1963) and then president of MWC for ten years (1963–1973). Later in his life he became involved with health organizations, serving as a member of the board of Mennonite Health Association and one year as president (1983–1984) and as executive secretary of Mennonite Medical Association for thirteen years (1979–1992).

"Erland Waltner might very well be the most influential GC leader of the twentieth century," Rich Preheim, director of Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee, said. "The

role he played in the creation of AMBS was absolutely crucial to the creation of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. I think he can safely be called a grandfather of the denomination.”

Nelson Kraybill, current president of AMBS, said, “No one did more than Erland Waltner to bring together the two largest Mennonite denominations in North America and inspire us to work together for God’s mission in the world. With theology deeply grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus, Erland was a formative presence in the development of AMBS. He was a teacher and mentor to hundreds, and could still preach a resounding message of conviction and hope in the last year of his life.”

Waltner was born July 7, 1914, to Ben J. and Emma P. Waltner of Hurley, S.D. He had early leanings to church work, beginning already when he was seven years old. A younger brother had pneumonia and in an era before penicillin, Waltner prayed for healing, promising to serve God in some way if his brother recovered. His brother did recover, and Waltner kept his promise.

Waltner attended Freeman (S.D.) Junior College and Bethel College, North Newton, Kan. He earned an S.T.B. from Biblical Seminary in New York in 1938, and also a master’s degree in theology in 1940 and a doctorate in theology in 1948, both from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He also studied at Temple University, Princeton Theological Seminary and Cambridge University, in addition to completing Clinical Pastoral Education at Andover Newton Theological Seminary.

Waltner wrote numerous articles for church publications, including *The Mennonite*, *Mennonite Life*, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, *Mennonite Weekly Review* and *Mennonite Encyclopedia*. He wrote the commentary on 1 Peter in the Believers Church Bible Commentary series, with J. Daryl Charles writing the commentary on 2 Peter and Jude in the same volume.

June Alliman Yoder, AMBS professor of communication and preaching, said, “It was the quality of his person rather than the positions that he held that made him important to me.” She and Waltner team-taught preaching when she joined the AMBS faculty in 1981. “He was ‘former president of everything’ and I was the new kid on the block. But he made room for me in his courses and gave me respect beyond what was my due. He was a New Testament Professor first of all and from him I learned the importance of reaching into the scripture first and faithfully.”

Other AMBS professors note the same qualities in their work with Waltner. Jacob W. Elias, professor emeritus of New Testament, said, “As a student at AMBS and then as a member of the AMBS faculty, I had deep love and respect for Erland as my teacher, colleague and Christian brother. A humble man, he exercised gentle, wise and faithful leadership, not only at the seminary where he dedicated so much of his life but also in the church. In many ways, Erland has been my mentor, especially in his zeal for inspiring and relevant proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Waltner's impact on hundreds of students is difficult to measure, but is reflected in comments from Janeen Bertsche Johnson, AMBS campus pastor and former student of Waltner's: "Erland was instrumental in gently nudging me to accept a calling to pastoral ministry, and continued to nurture the development of my pastoral identity. I am grateful to God for Erland's role in my life and the lives of so many others for whom he was teacher, group facilitator, spiritual guide, mentor, colleague, pastor, prophet, friend and brother in Christ."

In 2002, AMBS honored Waltner for his lifetime of service with a festschrift, *The Work is Thine, O Christ*, edited by Yoder. At that time the seminary's main administration and classroom building, still unnamed after nearly 45 years, was christened Waltner Hall.

Waltner married Winifred Schlosser, daughter of Free Methodist missionaries in China, on June 5, 1939, and she survives. They are the parents of four daughters, Mary Adams of Oceanside, Calif., Irene Nadon and husband Alan of Elkhart, Ind., Kathleen Waltner-Toews and husband David of Kitchener, Ont., and Rose Graber and husband Dan of Red Hill, Pa. The family includes seven grandchildren, two great grandchildren and one great-great grandchild.

Erland and Winifred were charter members of Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Ind. The pastor of the Hively congregation, Rob Burdette, will officiate at the funeral service, scheduled for Friday, April 17, in the seminary chapel. Interment will be at Prairie Street Cemetery in Elkhart.

- 30 -

Mary E. Klassen