

Reframing Anabaptism

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First Session – Unlearning Anabaptism

I. Introduction

1. A provocative image

Consider the following photograph. What do you see here? What does it represent? What is its significance?



Credit: Servizio Fotografico de l'Osservatore Romano, Citta del Vaticano, 2007.

The two main people depicted are Pope Benedict XVI and Nancy Heisey, who at the time was the president of Mennonite World Conference (MWC). In the background is a third person—an official at the Vatican. This picture was taken in 2007 on the occasion of an official visit by a MWC delegation to the Vatican. While the delegation met mainly with members of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, they also had an audience with the pope in which he was presented with a gift – an icon of the Anabaptist Dirk Willems.¹

But what does this picture represent? As descendants from the 16th century Anabaptists who broke away from the Catholic Church, this meeting represents the first ever meeting between the highest levels of what we generally regard as two churches. It was made possible by many years of informal exchange, encounter and dialogue, and several years of formal dialogue, culminating in the 2003 document “Called Together to Be Peacemakers.”²

It’s striking to note that the highest representative of the Catholic Church is a male, cleric, and celibate, while the Mennonite representative is female, lay, and married. Very different ecclesiologies are thus embodied by these leaders.

On the surface, this might seem like a polite but banal encounter – friendly words and the presentation of a gift. However, I see an underlying dynamism which challenges both Catholics and Mennonites, and provides a point of departure for what I want to say today.

The Mennonites chose to present the pope with an image of Dirk Willems, perhaps the most highly regarded of all Anabaptist martyrs. Dirk had been arrested for the crime of rebaptism and imprisoned at Asperen, in Holland, 1569. He escaped from prison and crossed a frozen lake. His jailer pursued him but fell through the ice. Dirk returned to pull the man to safety, was rearrested, and later executed. The story embodies strongly held Anabaptist and Mennonite values of nonresistance, service, and love of enemy. In giving this image to the pope, Mennonites suggested that these are gifts we have to share with all Christians.

But could the pope regard Dirk as a martyr? He was arrested by Catholic authorities for the religious crime of rebaptism. By his actions Dirk had declared that Catholic infant baptism (the same baptism by which the pope himself is a Christian) was no baptism at all. The *Martyrs Mirror* reports that he “had to endure severe tyranny from the papists.”³ What are we asking Catholics to do by proposing that Dirk’s life and death is a witness even to the spiritual descendants of his persecutors?

And how would Dirk himself regard this exchange? Could he recognize himself in the icon? Anabaptists, together with other reformers, generally rejected icons as idolatry. Yet, we have asked those from churches that do venerate icons, especially the Orthodox, to “write” icons of Anabaptist figures. Even as we claim Dirk’s story, we adapt it and transform it according to our present spiritual convictions; Dirk might be horrified. If we are heirs to the early Anabaptists, then we participate in a tradition that to continues to change.

¹ This image may be viewed at the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee’s Anabaptist Icons website: www.mcusa-archives.org/anabaptisticons/index.html.

² Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference 1998–2003, available at: www.bridgefalk.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/ctp_english.pdf.

³ Thieleman J. van Bracht, *Martyrs Mirror*, 18th English printing (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994), 741.

2. Orientation to the themes

I was given the assignment of speaking on “Anabaptism Today” and have chosen the theme “Reframing Anabaptism.” I should say that today will not be primarily a history lesson. I have a deep interest in Anabaptist history, but that is not my training. Nor is history the only way to think about Anabaptism. I’m plan to address a more contemporary question: how do we think about our distinct identity as a church today?

My basic framework is to understand Anabaptism as a reform movement within the wider church. That was its vocation, and that remains our vocation if we want to use the Anabaptist label. The impulse of the Reformation, including the Radical Reformation of Michael Sattler, Conrad Grebel, Pilgram Marpeck, Menno Simons, and others, was not, at root, to start a new church but to reform the one church towards greater fidelity to Jesus Christ. The early Anabaptists were intensely missionary in orientation – but the nature of their mission was a particular one. As Christians, our mission is to the world; as Anabaptists, our mission is in relation to other Christians. We dare hold to those things that are distinctive to Anabaptism only as we engage constantly with other Christians on precisely those issues. At the same time, we confess together with these other Christians the same faith in God the Father almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit.

I recognize that I am speaking to a fairly diverse crowd. I know that some of you have been explicitly teaching Anabaptist themes in churches for decades, you may know this history very well, and you may have thought through what it means for today. For some of you, this may be unfamiliar territory; and some of you may also be skeptical about whether Anabaptism bears relevant resources for today. I acknowledge this and will attempt to keep all of this in mind, as I try to cover both some basic ideas, but also to advance a claim that will spark some debate and discussion.

II. Thinking about “Anabaptism”

1. Possible starting points

We can think about Anabaptism, first of all, as a historical movement. It characterizes certain communities that originated in the 1520s and 30s in the Swiss Cantons, Southern Germany, and the Netherlands, that had in common at least the practice of believers baptism, and to groups such as Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites who trace their roots historically to these origins.

But secondly, Anabaptism may refer to a set of theological convictions (which may or may not have been articulated in the 16th century) but are claimed to be “in their spirit.” Groups such as Baptists which didn’t emerge historically from the Anabaptists per se, may identify as Anabaptists in their convictions about believers baptism, and religious freedom. The language of “Nonviolent resistance” or “nonviolent witness” is different than the language of “nonresistance” used in the 16th century, yet many of us who understand Jesus’ life in this way may link “nonviolent resistance” with Anabaptism.

I am reminded by my father-in-law Ray Steinmann, who grew up in Wellesley Ontario in a congregation of the Western Ontario Conference, that the word Anabaptism was not used when he was young. Rather, “Anabaptism” was retrieved and claimed for a particular purpose: to

draw attention to certain features of the past that the present church needs to hear right now, and act on, in order to be faithful to Jesus Christ in its place.

2. The “Anabaptist Vision”

US Mennonite Historian Harold Bender – proposed an “Anabaptist Vision” in a famous speech in 1942.⁴ He addressed this vision to several audiences.

First, he addressed church historians, most of whom viewed the Anabaptists as heretics or enthusiasts; the theocratic and violent “Kingdom of Munster” both defined and marginalized the Anabaptists. Bender reframed the Anabaptists as precursors of enlightened ideas of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and religious liberty. This moderated them historically, and legitimized them within the American framework, even though they were also dissenters on matters of serving in the military.

Secondly, Bender also addressed his own Mennonite church with a vision for the future, rooted in the past. He proposed that the Anabaptist vision was characterized by three themes: church as voluntary community, believers baptism, separation; discipleship – following Jesus in life; nonresistance.

This framework was a particular solution to the dichotomy of modernism and fundamentalism that was ripping apart especially American Mennonite churches and institutions. Thus, against the individualism of fundamentalism, Bender asserted that for Anabaptists the community has priority. And against the political pacifism of modernism, Bender asserted an Anabaptist account of biblical nonresistance.

The Anabaptist vision has been criticized for its “spiritual poverty.”⁵ It seems to be all about ethics, and little about salvation. From my perspective, it is important to see the “Anabaptist Vision” as a statement for its time, not of everything the church should be, but of specific themes that Mennonites in the middle of the 20th century needed to retrieve and consolidate and build on. It is not timeless, not ultimately about getting history exactly right, but deeply contextual.

Bender was really doing theology – he was proposing a vision for the church – while claiming to merely be doing history. Historians have since shown, for example, that Bender has a screen of “true Anabaptism” which meant he excluded humanists, mystics, as well as those who endorsed or actually used violence, from his account of Anabaptist origins. He believed Conrad Grebel was the founder of the movement – though later historians have shown the origins are much more complicated. As an aside, I believe that if this institution, named around 1960, had been named either 30 years earlier or 30 years later, it would not bear Grebel’s name. The point to be made here is that this is not simply a debate about history, but a debate about the present identity of our church, and its future.

Some voices reject the use of “Anabaptist.” John Thiesen, librarian/archivist at Bethel College in Kansas argues that we should not call ourselves Anabaptist because this is not the 16th century. To call ourselves Anabaptist places an undue and distorting focus on a few decades in the 16th

⁴ *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (1944): 67-88, and elsewhere.

⁵ Stephen F. Dintaman, “The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 10/2 (Spring 1992): 205-208. The Winter 1995 issue of the *Conrad Grebel Review* included several responses to this article.

century, and ignores a wider Christian history, and our more recent history as well. We are Mennonites, and we should work at defining (and redefining) what that means.⁶

On the other hand, another Mennonite leader in the U.S., Gilberto Flores argues that Mennonitism is too closely linked with particular cultures, with ethnocentrism (Swiss and Russian streams), and a recovery of Anabaptism as a *faith* movement is an antidote.⁷ This is a revealing comment, since early Anabaptism is 100% European, yet Flores identifies it with the capacity to transcend its origins and be transformative today.

For Bender, Anabaptism was a concept which functions to call his own church to a certain self-identity, to reform it if necessary. This is instructive for us. We should keep on discussing what Anabaptism is, precisely as a conversation about what reforms we need today.

3. The Naked Anabaptist

Stuart Murray and Herald Press have certainly done well with the title and marketing of *The Naked Anabaptist*, and provided teachers and preachers with clever opportunities to engaging innuendo. *The Naked Anabaptist* is a conversation starter. How many have read it? An implicit agenda throughout the book is to distance Anabaptism from the highly ethnic connotation of Mennonite. To do this, the book is structured around seven “core convictions” or “bare essentials” – and these are as good a list as any.

1. We are committed to following Jesus as well as worshipping him.
2. Jesus is the focal point of God’s revelation. We are committed to a Jesus-centred approach to the Bible, and to the community of faith as the primary context in which we read the Bible and discern and apply its implications for discipleship.
3. Christendom seriously distorted the gospel... Western culture is slowly emerging from the Christendom area, when church and state jointly presided over a society in which almost all were assumed to be Christian...
4. The frequent association of the church with status, wealth, and force is inappropriate for followers of Jesus and damages our witness...
5. Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission, places of friendship, mutual accountability, and multivoiced worship... leadership is consultative, roles are related to gifts rather than gender, and baptism is for believers.
6. Spirituality and economics are interconnected...
7. Peace is at the heart of the gospel...⁸

The historians may tell us that some of this is anachronistic. When Murray writes of the Anabaptist critique of their neighbours’ “church-going” due to social pressure it is probably more accurately descriptive of the 1950s than the 1550s. But that aside...

Let me propose the following soundbite. I’m not as interested in seeking out *the* naked Anabaptist as I am in 20 fully clothed Anabaptists, and it has nothing to do with prudishness on

⁶ John D. Thiesen, “To Bury, Not to Praise,” in *Anabaptist Visions for the New Millennium*, ed. Dale Schrag and James Juhnke (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000), 123-128.

⁷ Gilberto Flores, “Church as an Instrument of Hope,” in *Anabaptist Visions for the New Millennium*, ed. Dale Schrag and James Juhnke (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000), 43-48.

⁸ Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 45-46.

my part. I think we need to be much more explicit that we always live out the gospel in culture. I don't think it is helpful let alone possible for me to deny that my own identity as an Anabaptist/Mennonite Christian has been shaped by the Russian Mennonite history of my forebears, their particular experiences of trauma, of immigrating to Canada, etc. The problem comes when this experience is privileged as “the Mennonite experience.” But I believe our task ought to be to learn to listen to 20 or 30 or 40 clothed, inculturated Anabaptists, and hear their testimony.

Murray himself recognizes that there are no “naked Anabaptists,”⁹ only particular Christians (my term) or Anabaptists – but he quickly moves on from this insight, which is too bad. The “bare essentials” approach might be especially relevant to the Anabaptist Network in the UK Murray has worked with – though that is not the context everyone finds themselves in. And I believe the book is best understood not as some timeless distillation of the essence of Anabaptism, but as a highly contextual and specific argument about a vision of church that is resonating with many in the contemporary UK. I regret that this widely-read book does not tell us more about some of the particularities of the Anabaptist Network in the UK. This Network has been about not planting churches but resourcing Christians who have been drawn to various aspects of Anabaptism. Study groups of Anabaptist-Anglicans and Anabaptist-Methodists have formed as a result. What does that look like? Such would be a reminder of a deep well of faith we hold in common with others, it would frame for us in new ways just what Anabaptism offers that it a needed corrective in other Christian communities. It would provide insights about how Anabaptism may be understood not as a self-contained thing, but always in relationship with the wider church. How do individuals hold apparent anomalies together – Anabaptist Anglicans both committed to separation of church and state, and at the same time participating in the established Church of England, of which the Queen is the supreme governor?

But there is one thing about the “nakedness” with which Anabaptism is presented that I think is especially important, though it is just noted at the very end of the book. Nakedness is vulnerability. It is openness, though I know that this begins to stretch the image to the breaking point. Vulnerability and openness are themes I will return to in the next session, because I think they reflect Jesus Christ, the centre of our faith, and indicate the kind of posture that Anabaptism ought to have with other Christians, and together with others to the world.

III. Thinking About the Church as Church

1. The believed church and the experienced church

I propose a basic distinction between the believed church and the experienced church. And once this difference is in mind, we must always hold them together in a productive tension. The believed church might be the “ideal” church – what we believe the church is called to be; while the experienced church is the church around the corner. Sometimes our reflection on the church is solely on the believed church – what the church is called to be. And yet, our lofty words will seem dramatically disconnected from the mundane reality of the church around the corner. That is a recipe for disillusionment.

⁹ Ibid., 43.

The church we are interested in is the actual church, the concrete church, the church as it exists in history. And we don't have a theoretical interest but a practical one – the faithfulness of this church to Jesus Christ, for the sake of God's mission in the world, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This move away from talking about the church only in the abstract and the ideal will mean, among other things, attending to the sinfulness and failures of the actual church. Thus, ecclesiology – our talk about the church – should also remind us what the church is called to be precisely in relationship to what the church actually already is. Even we say something about the believed church, implicit within it is a diagnosis of the condition of the experienced church – a prophetic proposal for reform where this is needed, and an affirmation of what the church may be doing well.

2. Ecclesiology as practical and prophetic

Theologian Nicholas Healy puts it this way: “Ecclesiology's main function is to help the church respond as best it can to its context by reflecting theologically and critically on its concrete identity.”¹⁰

But, you might say, isn't ecclesiology simply biblical theology? Doesn't the Bible have the first and last word? This tension between believed and lived church is there in the text. The New Testament writers do not have a single definition of the church, but rather employ up to 96 images for the church. The church as people of God (1 Peter 2:9-10) highlights continuity with Israel at a time when the newness of the Jesus movement might have obliterated this link; the church as bride of Christ emphasizes loyalty and exclusivity to a community tempted otherwise; in 2 Corinthians 3:2-3, the church as “a letter from Christ” highlights the way Christ is to be transparent in the lives of Christians – the danger is that individuals forget that others will see Christ, or not, through their lives; and the famous Pauline image of the church as the body of Christ, among other things, draws attention to the importance and interconnection of all members and their gifts, bound together under Christ the head – precisely in a context where individuals claimed that they had no need of lesser members. Buried within all of these images is an account of the experienced church, and on the basis of that, a particular calling which should not be ignored. Our talk about the church follows a biblical pattern when we learn to think and talk in this way. All of our talk about the church, our ecclesiology, is practical and prophetic in this sense.

Think of our use of missional church language. Really, we are just saying the church should be the church. Period. Why does “missional” add? Saying it in this way corrects bad habits and calls us to act differently as a result. It draws attention to the fact that the church itself is the mission (rather than mission being a mere program or task of a few specialists), and draws attention to the fact that the one whose mission the church is, is God (that is, despite our frequent forgetfulness of this, it is not all about us and what we can accomplish).

So it is with the word Anabaptist – it may *also* be descriptive, or historical (but there are a lot of other influences in our tradition too – medieval monasticism, Protestant pietism, evangelicalism), but we should claim it as a practical-prophetic rhetoric. It can highlight aspects of Christianity often neglected and calls for response. But note that I'm saying, it's not just who we are – and if we use it simply to justify and insulate our existence as Mennonites, we are missing the point.

¹⁰ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical–Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 22.

Anabaptism is Anabaptism only if it is commended to all Christians – and, I want to add quickly – we also truly hear and engage what others Christians are calling for from us. Anabaptism is not an ultimately identity, but a usable one, in the service of ultimate Christian identity.

Bear this in mind when I suggest that there are aspects of Anabaptism that we need to “unlearn.” I’m not suggesting rejecting the church, or even what we might call Anabaptist or Mennonite history. The very core of our identity is “in Christ,” it is as Christians, not Anabaptists. But, just as I believe that at this time Anabaptism can help us to be Christian, so Anabaptism is not the whole picture, and has brought with it some habits, practices and assumptions that have inhibited our faithfulness as Christians.

3. Where’s the True Church? A migration to the margins of identity

After the Reformation, there emerged what I would call “the pastoral problem of the true church.” Given a diversity of churches, how do I know that the one I’m part of is the true church, and thus a gateway to salvation? Each church had to give an account of itself that justified its existence, especially in light of what a serious thing it was to have schism among Christians. As we might say it today – each church had to come to the marketplace with brand differentiation.

The subfield of theology known as ecclesiology became increasingly important as it attempted to answer this question. And while this is an existentially understandable question, the answers the various churches gave to it had an unfortunate consequence: the differences between churches came to be seen as their essences.

One example may be found in a 19th century Catholic manual of theology, written by John Brunsmann. “Here... our object is to demonstrate which of the different Christian denominations is the true church... A man can become a member of the true church [a positive duty for all Christians] only if that church is knowable as such, and can be with certainty distinguished from every other rival claimant. Since God in his wisdom and justice cannot make demands which it would be impossible for a man to comply with, the true church must of necessity be visible, so that she may be recognized with certainty and distinguished from all false claimants.” The visible clarity of the church “is based primarily upon the existence and exercise of the power of jurisdiction, culminating in the primacy of Peter and his successors, the Roman pontiffs.” God uses the pope to make it possible for us to know which church is true, and to no one’s surprise, the pope identifies the Roman Catholic Church as the true one. The logic is circular of course. The point is that the papacy – the one thing that the Catholic Church has that on one else does – becomes the essence, because it is the pivot for the claim of truth. The marginal becomes central. The difference becomes the essence.¹¹

Similar dynamics can be seen in Protestantism, especially with regard to which church has true doctrine, “salvation by faith through grace.” Or in various forms of Methodism and pietism – which tradition facilitates true spiritual experiences, such as identifiable moments of conversion, or assurance of salvation; or in Pentecostalism, speaking in tongues as a sign that the Spirit is active there (and by extension, not in churches where glossolalia is not practiced)

¹¹ R. R. Reno, “Theology in the Ruins of the Church,” *Pro Ecclesia* 12 (2003): 15-36, quote at 22-23.

IV. What about Anabaptism?

1. Suffering and martyrdom

Let us return to the 16th century Anabaptist martyr. I submit that the memory of having been persecuted, and persecuted for reasons of faith, has come to be a significant element of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity. Martyrs point to the existence of faith worth dying for. They point to depth of conviction, and faith in Christ. They point to perseverance in suffering. They point to non-retaliation, to an understanding that just as Christ suffered, so true Christians may well suffer rejection, persecution, and death. They have been a source of hope and comfort in times of trial.

Many of the images in the *Martyrs Mirror* capture the serenity and peace of the Anabaptist martyr in contrast to the harshness of the world, embodied in the executioner and crowd.

But the most famous martyr image is also the most unusual image in the *Martyrs Mirror*, since it does not portray a death, or a capture, but the act of service that resulted in death. It is that of Dirk Willems, as already discussed, and is often interpreted in terms of nonresistance, service, and love of enemy.

And this story, and recognizable image, has become deeply intertwined with a sense of peoplehood. For example, one Winnipeg Ultimate Frisbee team, consisting mainly of Mennonites, goes by the team name of “Dirk” and uses an adapted image of Dirk catching a Frisbee. The image of Dirk Willems is used widely on Mennonite websites, brochures, books, and advertisements. It was even part of the label for a now-defunct beer, brewed by Mennonites in the U.S.

Yet, we may also be somewhat ambivalent about these stories. Do they valorize suffering? Do they celebrate purity and absolute non-compromise, which may not be faithful responses in every situation? Does this history recommend that we draw our lines in the sand, plant our flag, and say: this is what we believe, like or not, take it or leave it? How does this history shape relations with other Christians?

On the one hand, it is evident to anyone who looks at this history that Anabaptists were put to death by fellow Christians, essentially out of rival interpretations of Christianity, though Anabaptist beliefs were feared to have negative social as well as religious consequences. At the same time, we tend to forget that the persecutors believed that their actions were faithful Christian responses to a profound crisis. The classic drama of Christian martyrdom is that of the early church in which Christians were put to death by a pagan empire for refusing to worship the emperor. The martyrological imagination that developed from that experience was one of sharp contrasts: Christian vs. pagan; good and evil; light and darkness; faith and idolatry; God vs. Satan.

This is a deeply ingrained element in Anabaptist and Mennonite history and thought. A sectarian need not be a group who withdraws from society; rather, the key is the belief that other churches are not truly churches and their members not truly Christian. In the heated rhetoric of the Reformation, this kind of polemic was not uncommon. The Catholic church was not just a flawed church, but the whore of Babylon. And it might be perfectly understandable to find in the *Martyrs Mirror* a stream of self-righteousness together with condemnation of the churches and

Christians responsible for the deaths of Anabaptists. The narrators of the *Martyrs Mirror* occasionally dwell on the earthly sufferings of their persecutors as evidence of God’s judgment: One priest who had condemned Anabaptists “was very sorely punished by God: for such putrefaction entered his flesh, that it fell off piecemeal.”¹² Again, this might be understandable given the context of the day, but what is this legacy?

In the International Lutheran-Mennonite dialogue, the Mennonite delegation said: “We confess that Mennonites have sometimes claimed the martyr tradition as a badge of Christian superiority and have sometimes nurtured an identity rooted in victimization that has fostered a sense of self-righteousness and arrogance and has blinded us to the frailties and failures that are deeply woven into our tradition.”¹³

In dialogue with Catholics, we confessed that we have “thoughtlessly perpetuated hostile images and false stereotypes of Catholics and the Catholic Church” – and this has contributed to ongoing division.¹⁴

I want to emphasize here that I’m not criticizing martyrs – my point here is how we choose to remember them. Our challenge will be to rethink this martyr legacy in a way that recovers the fact that Anabaptist martyrdom is not its own end, and cannot ultimately be about our own identities in a narrow sense. Whereas our Mennonites lenses may view these martyrs as heroes of our faith, our challenge will be to consider whether and how this history might contribute to the reform of the wider church, even the reconciliation of divided churches. I will return to this theme later.

2. The peace position: *Defenseless Christianity*

One recent proposal for the contemporary relevance of Anabaptism is found in the book *Defenseless Christianity* by Gerald Mast and J. Denny Weaver.¹⁵ This book makes a positive contribution in many respects. It proposes that Anabaptism is about a particular way of being church, though rejects the search for a simple “essence of Anabaptism” (or claims to reject this) because the church is always responding to its context. It characterizes Anabaptism as a movement of persuasion – attempting to attract others to this particular kind of Christianity. The “Christianity” in the title indicates that this vision is for all Christians, not just Mennonites and a select few others.

However, there is an essence here, and that is peace. The subtitle is revealing: *Anabaptism for a Nonviolent Church*. The root and core is nonviolence. Mast and Weaver argue that nonviolent Anabaptism is distinct from other forms of Christianity all way the down, in all doctrines and practices. God, cross, salvation, revelation – everything has to be rethought from the perspective of peace. The early Anabaptists understood themselves as a separate church for this reason, the authors claim. The danger is that peace becomes the lens through which we see Christ, rather than the other way around. If peace is the foundation, we are at risk of detaching it and thinking that as long as we say peace, peace, we have the whole gospel. And we may think that we could

¹² Cited in Jacob Peter Letkemann, “A Critical Evaluation of the Anabaptist Conception of Martyrdom in the *Martyrs Mirror*,” unpublished M.A. thesis (McMaster University, 2004), 81.

¹³ “Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ.” Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission (2010), 107.

¹⁴ “Called Together to be Peacemakers” (2003), § 204.

¹⁵ (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009).

actually do it – could actually live out this calling – without Christ. If we have it all right, and other Christians have it so essentially wrong, right down to the core – God, Jesus, cross, church, etc., do we have anything to learn from them? We might preach and proclaim and pronounce, but will we enter a vulnerable and true communion with them, convened by Jesus Christ?

3. Purity and divisiveness

The church is called to be one in Christ, but is everywhere divided, and dividing more and more, in spite of some high profile reconciliations. We know about a history of splits in our Mennonite tradition. And while we might work together through MCC, the fact remains that we do so as dozens of separate Mennonite groups. Why the divisiveness? I think it is because we have been influenced by both Protestant and Catholic dynamics.

I think we have become afflicted by what some have called the “Protestant dilemma.” In his book *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age*,¹⁶ Gerald Schlabach writes that what may have been a virtue at the time of Reformation can quickly become a vice. For example, what was the courageous individual conscience for Luther can become a lazy individualism – in which I don’t need to engage in the faith in the community but simply follow my convictions or whims or personal preferences.

Schlabach explains the dilemma in this way. The virtue of Protestantism is the recognition that all human institutions, including the church, are human, not divine, and thus in need of constant reform. Prophetic critique and reform ought to be permanent parts of the church’s life. The form of the church did not descend from heaven, and thus we have the freedom and responsibility to continually reshape it. But, being humans, we disagree about precisely what the problems are, and how to fix them. Thus, we break off into ever smaller groups – or denominations – as we each hold to our own view of the church. Furthermore, as each person interprets the Bible directly, and comes to his or her own conclusions – perhaps apart from the community – we multiply the divisions.

This is to say that Protestantism has something important to say, but the price of saying it has often been a loss of a sustainable community, and thereby the capacity to keep on saying it. Or, as Schlabach puts it, “Protestantism tends to undo itself.” We have established the idea that it’s okay to divide the church, to split apart, because the church itself is not the gospel, and not divinely ordained in one particular form.

However, Protestants have a strong view of the pervasiveness of sin, and consequently have held that we humans can never get the church exactly right. By contrast, Anabaptist/Mennonites have taken from Catholicism the idea that when God works in our lives, the result is a capacity to actually follow Jesus, to actually act righteously, to actually be holy. The Anabaptist and Mennonite tradition have thus taken the image of the “church without spot or wrinkle” (Ephesians 5:27) to refer not to some future heavenly church, but to the actual true church here on earth. And the idea that the church may be perfected here on earth has resulted in a dynamic that aspires to purity of belief and action. That purity has often meant uniformity.

We already assume that it’s not a sin to split the church, in fact we often believe it would be sinful not to. And so we draw lines in the sand, condemn each other and split apart. In our

¹⁶ (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010).

history, this has often been over issues of degrees of separation with the world such as the use of cars or participation in public education. And of course issues of biblical interpretation and human sexuality continue to multiply these splits. Of course, we believe, we cannot compromise our faith – and so strive to keep it pure. But what is our faith? – to what extent is gospel itself manifest in communities bound together by love?

In discussion of the martyrdom theme, I have already identified the temptation to place purity of belief and action above all else. The martyrs were the very epitome of uncompromising faith. This temptation, and I think it is a temptation, is a tricky one because what one person may call uncompromising and rigid, another will regard as steadfast and faithful. And by raising a question about rigidity, I don't at all want to veer to the other extreme of a total relativism, or anything goes. The questions are rather: how do we live as a pilgrim church, on the way but not yet at our goal? And how do we inhabit our communities within bonds of love and patience?

Now, we may not be splitting apart as we used to, but how many assume that if one's congregation is not holding to a particular belief or practice, the appropriate response is to leave, and find a church that does? This might be a kind of church splitting on a personal level – a contemporary version of this legacy.

Schlabach argues that Mennonites have much to learn from Catholics about staying together even through strong disagreements. He does not advocate staying together as simply blind or dysfunctional loyalty, but asks rather what kinds of practices nurture the capacity for loyal dissent and deep patience in the midst of our disagreements.

4. Complacency and denominationalism

In light of my comments about purity and divisiveness, what I say next might seem like a contradiction, but in many ways it is an overreaction or an overcompensation for a history of divisiveness. That is, perhaps we have come to say that the church on earth cannot be perfect, and we shouldn't keep splitting. For many, I suspect, the temptation is to be satisfied with the status quo. There are different churches and this diversity makes us all richer, so the thinking goes. Catholics, Lutherans, Pentecostals – each has their thing, and Catholic liturgy may appeal to some while a free flowing Pentecostal service to another – and Christianity is richer for it. If I go for high liturgy I should go there, and if I don't like what some in my church are saying about sexuality, then I will move to one that is closer to my own convictions.

The problem is that this is a view of the Jesus movement ultimately without the church – ultimately without the challenge that the followers of Jesus are called to be in true and deep communion with one another. We might not be able to come together at the Lord's Table, we might not recognize each other's leaders as ministers of the gospel, and we might not even be able to call each other's community "church" – how can say that somehow the sum total is church?

This view of church is rather disincarnated. It does not take seriously that a call to unity (though not uniformity!) extends to beliefs, practices, and communal life. The Anabaptist conviction that the inner and the outer, the invisible and visible, faith and life, should not be separated, is a helpful corrective (even though Anabaptists often used the *belief* that inner/outer should be held together as a basis for division).

I want to be clear that I'm not suggesting by any means that diversity is the problem. Unity does not mean uniformity, though the challenge is to discern the right kind of diversity. What I'm saying is that we too easily become complacent about our differences – you say this, and I say that – and leave it there. Rather, given our differences as Christians, both within church and between churches, we express our unity by engaging passionately, persuasively, and with humility. Of course, there are all kinds of differences among Christians – the things I have particularly in mind for the purpose of today concerns those things that have been distinctive emphases for Anabaptists.

This temptation to complacency can surface in unexpected places. No doubt you have heard of the remarkable request for forgiveness and reconciliation between Lutherans and Mennonites in Stuttgart, Germany last year. I believe National Bishop Susan Johnson will be addressing our Assembly later this evening and drawing from the spirit of that event. It should be celebrated.

But pay attention to the sin that was confessed. Over and over, the Lutherans confessed their complicity in the persecution of Anabaptists. They acknowledged their collusion with state authorities, and the consequent use of violence to enforce their confessional beliefs. Now, I agree, this was a sin. I say that as a Christian pacifist. But it can lull us into thinking the problem was the use of violence, not the fact that underlying this was profound discord and division within the body of Christ. It can lull us into thinking that as long as we aren't killing each other, our separation from our brothers and sisters is not a problem.

The danger here is that we lose the sense of scandal; that we are called to unity in Christ, we are in fact divided. If we lose the sense of scandal we will lose the sense of urgency to respond to it – to engage with Lutherans over our different understandings of baptism, pacifism, and relation to the state, because we think these things really matter, and if they divide us in Christ, they matter all the more. And engage with other Christians not just at high level and formal discussions, but at the level of congregations, ministries, and interpersonal relationships. Our division—even from those we get along fine with—nevertheless impairs our witness and our credibility. In John 17:21 we read that Jesus prayed to God, that those who believe in him may all be one. He said “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

I think it is possible to start from our own deeply held convictions, and at the same time to feel a deep and gaping wound that these convictions, and our history, and our current practice, separate us from our Lutheran brothers and sisters, and other Christians too. I think I must hold to our Anabaptist distinctives at the same time both passionately and lightly; passionately in terms of constant engagement with other Christians especially, and lightly precisely because as we enter true dialogue with others in Christ, we participate in a communion that promises to transform us. That will be where I begin for session two.

Second Session – Learning Anabaptism

The guiding theme for the first session was “unlearning Anabaptism,” and I discussed a number of practices, habits and beliefs that I think continue to inhibit our mission, especially to the wider church. This second session’s theme of “learning Anabaptism” will make frequent reference to the Anabaptists of the 16th century, but it isn’t primarily a history lesson. Learning Anabaptism is an ongoing task for us as a church, which involves return to the Bible, engagement with our diverse histories, attention to present context, and genuine listening to each other.

I want to develop my claim that what is “Anabaptist” about our vocation as Christians concerns our commitment to the reform of the wider church, for the sake of the gospel and ultimately the world. We are Christians with respect to our mission to the world, and Anabaptist with respect to our mission within the wider church.

I. Repentance

1. Early Anabaptism

The Anabaptist reformers of the 16th century framed many of their writings, and undoubtedly much of their preaching, with a call to repentance. This was a notable theme in the writing of Menno Simons, the early Dutch Anabaptist who was a tireless pastor, preacher and as we’d now say, organizer.

He wrote: “Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Test yourself with these. If you are born of the pure seed of the holy Word, the nature of the seed must be in you. And if you have become like little children, then pride, unchastity, avarice, hatred, and envy no longer reside in you, for the innocent children know nothing of such sins. But if you continue to live in the old Adam, and not in the new nature of Christ, and walk after the base, impure desires of the flesh, then you prove indeed that you are not born of God and have not His faith.”¹⁷

Note the reference to innocence of children, a key claim in his argument elsewhere against infant baptism. And of course, there is the sense that your faith is evident and visible in how you live.

“A true regenerating Christian faith is, inwardly in power before God, and outwardly in fruits before one’s neighbor... [T]he true Christian faith must bring forth its own good fruits.”¹⁸

One could make a case that the integral connection of the inner and the outer was at the very core of the Anabaptist impulse, including believers baptism. Faith has its roots in God’s grace and works inwardly, but necessarily manifests in good works. Moreover, repentance and conversion are not merely singular events, but ongoing; Menno will speak of a “penitent life.”

“For a genuine Christian faith cannot be idle, but it changes, renews, purifies, sanctifies, and justifies more and more... Notice how true, Christian faith, thanks to grace, is the only living

¹⁷ Menno Simons, “The True Christian Faith,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, tr. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 393-394.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 391.

fountain whence flows not only the penitent, new life, but also obedience to the evangelical ceremonies, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper.”¹⁹

In his explicit language, Menno seems to be talking about the personal dimension of repentance and new life. But his critique of those who say they love God with their mouths, but don't show it in their actions, is more than this. Priests and monks exhibit “such insatiable avarice that they offer to sell prayers... sermons... absolutions... together with their own souls.” They “like to be flattered and honored by men... they take the first seats at the table.” They violate one matron after another, one virgin after another. They “ponder day and night how they may pamper their proud, lazy flesh with the least effort.” And then, “turning to the common people we find such an impossible, carnal, blind... horde, that we are astonished... If nature teaches anything reasonable, that is their piety, but of the Spirit of Christ, His Word, ordinances, will, and life they indeed know but very little.”²⁰

Menno is describing a systematic problem, deep structural corruption, dysfunction through and through. It is the failure of the church to be a discipling community, to lead people to true repentance. It is the failure of the church through a chasm between priests and people. Menno calls for repentance and dramatic reform. Repentance is a change of direction. It's a turn. It's the move from darkness to light. And yet, as profound as that change is, it is not an absolute rupture with the past. In personal repentance, it is still you, only walking in a different direction. It is still you, really the real you, propelled not by your own desires, but by God's will. That difference makes all the difference, of course, but there is an underlying continuity. It is death to the old self—yes—or perhaps rather death to the false self and birth of the true self, the one God has always intended. In repentance, there is discontinuity on the basis of a profound continuity.

This is also the case in the repentance of churches, a phenomenon we have witnessed with greater frequency in recent years.²¹ The Episcopal Church USA repents of its support of slavery; the United Church of Canada repents of its involvement in Indian Residential Schools, the Catholic Church in France repents of its complacency and inaction during the Holocaust, the Lutheran World Federation repents of the persecution of 16th century Anabaptists. In all these cases, there is a decisive break with the past. Slavery is abolished, and the church is unequivocal it was wrong to have defended it. Residential schools are closed, the Holocaust is over. But while repentance may culminate in a singular declaration of break with the past, there's ongoing work to do; the work of undoing racism and anti-Semitism is ongoing, and requires continued reform. And while some churches are pledging to walk in a different direction with respect to racism, for example, not everything about who they are as churches is thrown out, or up in the air. The church was still the church, even when it betrayed the gospel. Continuity is ultimately rooted in Christ's presence in the church, and the promise of the Holy Spirit. There is some break with the past, some discontinuity, but only on the basis of a much deeper continuity. And this is how it ought to be with reform in the church.

Mennonite churches have been involved in several acts of repentance for the disunity of the church. Sometimes Mennonites have initiated this. Thus, in 1960, the General Conference

¹⁹ Ibid., 396.

²⁰ Ibid, 401-402.

²¹ For the development of a theological framework for understanding this practice, see Jeremy M. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

Mennonite Church issued a statement of confession to the Mennonite Brethren church about the “feelings, words, and deeds expressed by our fathers in an unbrotherly way and in a manner contrary to the Spirit of Christ.”²² From the perspective of today, the statement is vague, yet made at a time when very few churches acknowledged some responsibility for division among Christians.

Some of you may recall that in 1986, at a Conference of Mennonites in Canada assembly here in Waterloo, representatives of the Mennonite Brethren conference repented specifically for their practice of excommunicating members who had married outside the Mennonite Brethren church.²³

Sometimes Mennonites have been invited to witness and respond to the confession of others, such as the request for forgiveness from the Lutheran World Federation just last year. In 2004, Mennonites were invited to Switzerland to hear the repentance of the Reformed Church of Zurich which had recently learned about its own history of persecuting Anabaptists (and here we see Dan Nighswander representing us there). They confessed that “persecution was, according to our present conviction, a betrayal of the Gospel and that our Reformed forefathers were in error on this issue.” And they continued, “It is time to accept the history of the Anabaptist movement as part of our own, to learn from the Anabaptist tradition and to strengthen our mutual testimony through dialogue.”²⁴

Notice the discontinuity – the attitude and actions of the past are disavowed as having betrayed the gospel; and the continuity – enlarging the sense of “we” to include even the history of a group once despised. That is a profound continuity, deeper than before, walking towards a vision of the church as visibly united in Christ.

But this unity is not just sentimental, not just a good feeling. It is not just good manners, or polite acknowledgement. Of course, what any church says may be “just words,” but true repentance shows itself in its fruit (as Menno Simons wrote), and if that is the case, then the repentance by the Reformed Church of Zurich, and the response of the Swiss Mennonite Conference points the way to deeper relationships.

The Swiss Mennonite Conference responded, in part, in this way: “History may designate us as victims, and could incite us to find satisfaction in that. However, those here among you today, descendants of those Anabaptists persecuted in the past, no longer feel as victims. . . [I]t is sometimes embarrassing for us to be once again asked for forgiveness. . . We maintain however strong convictions, which are often shared by other free church movements. . . in particular to that which pertains to more ethical and ecclesiological questions, that we would like to see more widely shared throughout the body of Christ.”²⁵

Neither side was abandoning “strong convictions” – rather they were clearing away the barriers for the discussion of strong convictions to truly happen within the Body of Christ. Repentance

²² Statement is recorded in *Yearbook of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren of North America* (1960), 38.

²³ *CMC Yearbook* (1986), 81.

²⁴ Michael Baumann, ed., *Steps to Reconciliation: Reformed and Anabaptist Churches in Dialogue* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 2007), 81-82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

and reconciliation are conditions within which strong convictions, commitments to reform, even the seemingly incompatible, can matter truly.

At the same time, I want to say that my own study of churches repenting for their pasts draws our attention to the experienced church, the church as it actually is in history. And while we should not be complacent about this church, neither should we believe that perfection is just around the corner, that if only this reform would be made, if only *this* sin was confessed and blotted out, if only those troublemakers leave, then the church would finally at least be without spot and wrinkle. We have been given the vocation to dwell in the church as it actually is—in the ongoing tension between the believed church and the experienced one.

I will structure the remainder of my presentation along the lines of the four classical marks of the church. According to the Nicene Creed (more specifically, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed of 381), Christians confess that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. This provides us a framework for thinking about Anabaptism together with the wider church, rather than apart from it, though also in some tension with it.

II. First Mark of the Church: Unity

We are unified in Christ. We are called to unity with each other. Unity is both a description and the prescription. The disjunction between the believed church and the experienced church here is especially stark.

In Ephesians, Paul evokes both these dimensions. First, he refers to the experienced church which is not unified, and often downright messy, and calls them to embrace particular habits and practices: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Then, the believed church: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:1-6)

1. Baptism

One baptism? Hardly. The Anabaptists of the 16th century had strong and controversial views about baptism. That’s an understatement. They were united that the Bible was clear that baptism was for believers only, that is, adults. Make disciples, then baptize – according to the Great Commission – was a pattern that could apply to adults, not to infants. According to Schleithem Confession of 1527, one of the very earliest Anabaptist statements of belief, “infant baptism is the first and greatest abomination of the Pope.”

Luther, Calvin and other reformers defended and continued the practice of infant baptism. In the Mennonite-Lutheran reconciliation at Stuttgart, differing beliefs and practices of baptism were identified as one of just two remaining substantial doctrinal disagreements between these groups (the other being the relationship to the state). Baptism, if anything, appears to divide. And yet, we must zero in right here, because in baptism we have unity, and in baptism we are called to unity. Baptism ties us to Christ, and Christ is the source of our unity, the only true source.

One of the great realizations of the ecumenical movement of the 20th century is that only as we move closer to Christ do we move closer to each other. True unity and communion among divided Christians is not a matter of “give and take,” it’s not a matter of settling for the lowest common denominator, and it’s not a matter of cutting a deal. Rather, our own blinders come off as we move towards the common light at the centre – Jesus Christ. And it is in baptism that each Christian has already been bound to Jesus Christ, and on this basis, we must move towards each other.

At the MWC Assembly in Paraguay, we welcomed the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, Rev. Ishmael Noko, to address the delegates. He spoke of the process of repentance and asking forgiveness that would culminate, a year later, in the Stuttgart reconciliation. As a sign of peace, he embraced the incoming president of the Mennonite World Conference, Bishop Danisa Ndlovu. Both men were born in Zimbabwe, without any strictly ancestral connection to the 16th century European history their embrace addressed. But baptism into Christ transcends nations and boundaries, and as their embrace promised, history as well. In the church, we are linked to each other not in terms of biological connection, but by being incorporated into Christ by baptism. And because each church designated either Noko or Ndlovu as its representative, they are most fittingly the face of our history as Lutherans and Mennonites within the body of Christ.

There is already a remarkable recognition of each other’s baptism among churches – when it is done with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Most mainline churches and the Roman Catholic Church will recognize a Mennonite baptism thus performed as true baptism into Christ. While the Catholics do not regard us as “church” properly speaking—they use the awkward term “ecclesial communities”—they do regard us as Christians. Furthermore, we should remember that when Anabaptists rejected infant baptism, they were not denying that God could work in the lives of children, they assumed it. Rather, the rejection of infant baptism was about the voluntary nature of the church, free from the power and privilege and coercion of the state. I know there is diversity of practice in our own churches – some accept an infant baptism as basis for membership together with a mature confession of faith, and others insist on believers baptism as the only true baptism. This might be something we want to talk about further in the discussion time.

2. Spirit, water, blood

The early Anabaptists had an understanding of baptism that remains, I believe, a compelling one for the entire church, and for us. It is the three-fold baptism of Spirit, water, and blood, alluded to in 1 John. Early Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hubmaier wrote a dialogue which outlines this quite plainly.

Leon: How many kinds of baptism are there?

Hans: Three.

Leon: Which?

Hans: The baptism of the spirit, the baptism in water; a baptism in blood.

Leon: What is the baptism of the spirit?

Hans: It is an inward enlightenment of our hearts, caused by the Holy Spirit through the living Word of God.

Leon: What is water baptism?

Hans: It is an outward and public testimony to the inward baptism of the spirit. A man makes it by receiving the water, when in the sight of all he acknowledges his sins. He also testifies hereby that he believes in the pardon of those sins through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. He then allows himself to be outwardly marked, enrolled, and incorporated into the community of the church by baptism. ... And henceforth he will believe and live according to the divine Word...

Leon: What is the baptism of blood?

Hans: It is the daily mortification of the flesh even unto death.²⁶

Here we see the integral connection of inner and outer. The inner is the transformative work of the Spirit, in each person; the outer is a response of baptism, the intrinsic link to the church, and to discipleship. “Baptism of blood” obviously meant, for the early Anabaptists, the possibility of death, of martyrdom. But martyrdom is not fundamentally about death; it is about life lived completely in Jesus and for Jesus. And it is about the fact that this life is holistic – spirit and body together; not just Jesus in my heart but Jesus in my hands and feet. “Daily mortification” might sound like hitting oneself with whips, but it refers to living not by one’s own desires but according to the will of God. [As an aside: water baptism is also connected to church discipline and mutual accountability – themes about which we are often ambivalent, especially given a painful history of shunning and church division. This is an important theme, but one that I’m just not able to give sufficient time today.]

We have sometimes presented baptism as a milestone in the life-cycle, a human event marked by a human community. By emphasizing the decision to be baptized, we have sometimes projected the idea that baptism is a human initiative, an act of will. But this was not the core, for the early Anabaptists. God’s action is always prior to ours. God transforms, we respond. God’s spirit baptizes, we respond with water baptism. And ultimately, it is God’s action, not ours, that is the hope and basis for our unity as Christians. The Anabaptist insight was the perception that God is active and transforming in the lives of each person. And very often this transformation will be a long slow burn, rather than a dramatic explosion.

Following this insight, we must be profoundly Anabaptist, but not narrowly so. Let’s continue to give testimony to believers baptism as a response to God that integrates the Spirit, discipleship, and church – all together binding us to Christ. And while we keep saying it, let’s listen to the testimony of other Christians too. We might hear echoes of this pattern where we don’t expect to.

Several years ago, I lived for 4 months at the Open Door Community in Atlanta, Georgia, an intentional Christian community that worked for justice together with homeless people and people in prison. The Open Door was also a worshipping community, rooted in the Presbyterian or Reformed tradition. The work, together with people who lived on the streets, who battled with addictions, with the police, with the rejection of society, was gritty and hard. Daily soup kitchens, scrubbing public toilets. I visited with one man on death row, and prayed regularly against the machinery of death that is crystalized in state-sponsored executions. And in the course of those 4 months, I witnessed one death.

²⁶ Balthasar Hubmaier, in *Anabaptism in Outline*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1981), 167-168.

It happened during a regular Sunday afternoon worship service. Two persons who were regular participants in worship rose, and the man announced, “Today we are putting our newborn son Carson to death.” My heart skipped a beat. I’d never been to a baptism like this. “And soon after that we hope to raise him again. Brenda and I have come to believe that this is necessary because we are sinners living in a broken and distorted world, and we cannot protect him from the powers of violence and death. And so we’ve decided to give him back to God.”²⁷

In the abstract, the practice of infant baptism seems to reflect a problematic theology of children and to undermine the church as a community of discipleship. But in that context, life is about discipleship, and powers of death are painfully visible. Most significantly, it shows a kind of “separation” from the world that Anabaptists believed followed from baptism. We cannot live in the world without God’s grace. It’s not just that it’s not a good idea, we really cannot; death is the only end. In baptism, we really are set apart from the world. In this sense separation is not a matter of choice or an act of will, but reflects a deeper division between church and world that exists nevertheless.

To “learn Anabaptism” today is to recover the central, or the pivotal importance of baptism in the Christian life; a practice that is fundamentally a response to God, at the same time as it is a commitment to discipleship and to the church. Irma Fast Dueck, professor at Canadian Mennonite University, has written about the fact that many persons in Mennonite Church Canada, often young adults, publicly confess Christian faith but don’t plan to be baptized. In some cases because they don’t believe they are good enough, or in other cases, that the church isn’t good enough. What is going on here? Taking baptism too seriously, or not seriously enough? We must understand it. So as we engage with other Christians about baptism, we must also engage in a conversation ourselves. Irma proposes expanding our conversation to encompass the “ecology of baptism” – that is, to move away from thinking of baptism as a single moment, to the practices of our ongoing formation as Christians – an idea deeply consonant with the fullness of life named by the three-fold baptism of Spirit, water, and blood.²⁸

III. Second Mark of the Church: Holiness

1. The spotless church

The second mark of the church is holiness. The church is holy, and the church is called to holiness. In the Bible, holiness often refers to being set apart, to purity, or to ritual cleanliness. In Israel, the Holy of Holies was the most restricted space on earth – which only the high priest could enter at very specific times and under strict conditions. In our Anabaptist tradition, the holiness of the church has often been tied to the notion of moral purity – the church “without spot or wrinkle.”

Please don’t hear me advocating any sort of moral laxity here, but the idea that holiness is something that we achieve is profoundly mistaken. Rather, the holiness to which the church is

²⁷ Stan Saunders, “A Death in the Family,” in *A Work of Hospitality: The Open Door Reader, 1982-2002*, ed. Peter R. Gathje (Atlanta: The Open Door Community, 2002), 218.

²⁸ Irma Fast Dueck, “(Re)learning to Swim in Baptismal Waters: Contemporary Challenges in the Believers Church Tradition,” in *New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology*, ed. Abe J. Dueck, Helmut Harder, and Karl Koop (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2010), 237-255.

called is not an accomplished holiness, but a received holiness. We are made holy as we receive the Holy Spirit; as we receive what we do not have. The church is holy because it is the body of Jesus Christ, not because it is a ragtag mass of sinners. However, we sinners are transformed into the body of Christ by what we receive – forgiveness.

2. Anabaptist martyrs as witnesses for the whole church?

Stay with me on this idea of receiving – and I want to draw us back to the theme of martyrdom. Martyrs are ultimately those who receive from the Spirit. They are made holy because the Spirit has worked through them. The church regards martyrs as particularly holy not because they are the best human beings, but because they have been open to receiving God’s Spirit to enable them to endure what they otherwise would not. And in turn, the memory of the martyr’s witness is given to the church so that it may instruct and inspire.

Our Anabaptist martyr history gives us an opportunity to receive. In the first session, I raised some concerns about how this history has been remembered, and how it has functioned to shape our identity. Does it valorize suffering? Does it encourage us to be rigid in our beliefs, self-righteous, or vindicate separateness from other Christians?

Some Anabaptists were put to death by Lutherans, whom we have now forgiven. Do we still say that they were martyrs, representing Christ in a battle with the anti-Christ? We can no longer say that their deaths followed the classical martyrological pattern of a contest between the true friends of God on the one hand, and the forces of evil on the other hand. Some might question whether we can regard them as martyrs at all, especially if we see Lutherans as Christians. Rather, we are confessing a profound tragedy within the Body of Christ. The challenge, as I see it, is to hear whether and how Anabaptist martyrs may inspire and instruct the spiritual heirs of their persecutors – and thus, the entire church. If these early Anabaptists were given power by the Holy Spirit, then that Spirit always points to Christ. If they are truly martyrs, if they were given power by the Holy Spirit, then they point to Christ with their entire lives as well as with their deaths. Then they are witnesses for the entire church, not just for Mennonites. If they are martyrs, they must ultimately be Christian martyrs, not Anabaptist martyrs.

But, in the meantime, let us *let go* of this history. But by no means ignore it or forget it. Rather, let us engage with those who have come to us, the Lutherans in this case, and say – we have this history, can you help us understand it? What do you see here? Do you see in the lives of these Anabaptists, the work of the Holy Spirit? If so, how so? Are they witnesses for the entire church? And wait to see whether and how we might receive this history back.

There has already been some significant ecumenical conversation about martyrs. Westminster Abbey recently erected statues of 12 martyrs quite intentionally from a range of Christian traditions including, for example, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Baptist Martin Luther King Jr., the Roman Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero, and the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In the Jubilee year of 2000, Pope John Paul II presided over an “Ecumenical Commemoration of Witnesses to the Faith in the Twentieth Century” at the Roman Coliseum along with leaders of other Christian traditions. Testimonies were read about those of many denominations who suffered and were killed under Soviet and communist totalitarianism, Nazism, and fascism out of hatred for the faith and those who died while evangelizing and serving in various parts of the

world. The pope said: the witness of the martyrs speak louder than what divides us. They point to Christ, and are thus witnesses for the whole church.

However, all of those honoured died at the hands of non-Christians. This service did not yet deal with the question of what to make of those killed for the faith by those who believed they were acting in the name of the same faith.

I honestly do not know what would come of the conversations I'm proposing with other Christians. Indeed, at Stuttgart it was evident that many Lutherans did not really know about the Reformation history of other groups such as the Anabaptists. And we must be prepared for the possibility that others will not see in the witness of Anabaptists burned at the stake the same thing many of us have. Those too will be important conversations, and may help us to learn that our identity is not in what we grasp on to, but in what we receive, ultimately from God, but also from God through others.

Nevertheless, I think our Anabaptist history, even in its ambiguity, can help us to be a holy church in what we receive. Let us let go of our grasp on this history and pray that we might receive it back in such a way that the Spirit of God may use it to instruct and inspire the entire church.²⁹

IV. Third Mark of the Church: Catholicity

1. Universal?

When we say “catholic” we often qualify and explain. The version of the Apostles Creed in our current *Hymnal: A Worship Book* includes an asterisk that says “catholic” means “universal.” The *Mennonite Hymnal* did the same thing, to address the concern I suppose that catholic sounds like “Roman Catholic” – presumably not something we’d want to confess our belief in. These hymnals are wrong. Catholic is not the same thing as universal. At the very least, “universal” is dangerously misleading.

We tend to think of “universal” as everywhere the same. McDonalds is universal in the sense that it can be found in most countries, and a Big Mac is generally standard everywhere. Coca-Cola is universal – every bottle or can contains that same secret formula inside. Everywhere, and everywhere the same. In fact, economic globalization provides many of our images of what universal might mean. The classic theological definition of catholicity, by the fifth-century theologian Vincent of Lerins, seems also to have this sense of uniformity. He said, the catholic faith was “that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.”

Church historian Justo González has strongly challenged this account of catholicity. Rather, catholicity means “according to the whole” – or “that in which all have a place.” It means something like “including all that should be included.” It is much more like “unity in diversity” than “uniformity.”³⁰ Consider the wind, an illustration used in the early church. If a particular place gets only a west wind, you can say that wind covers that whole place. But that is more like

²⁹ See also Jeremy M. Bergen, “Problem or Promise? Confessional Martyrs and Mennonite–Roman Catholic Relations,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41 (2004): 367-388.

³⁰ Justo L. González, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 70-72.

uniformity. The Catholic winds, as it were, are the four winds; that is, a place that receives wind from the north, south, east and west gets the “fullness of wind.” If Latin is the language of every church, then it seems to fulfill the requirement of “everywhere, by all” – but it is not Catholic in the sense of each one hearing and speaking in her own language. The same faith, spoken in many tongues, shows us more vividly the catholicity of the church. Likewise, we might say that the four gospels reflect the catholicity of testimony about Jesus. The early church wisely rejected attempts to reduce this testimony to a single voice.

Of course, catholicity does not mean indiscriminate inclusion. Many gospels were rejected. What is contrary to the faith is not catholic at all. But catholicity does push the church to constantly ask itself how the same faith assumes different forms, in different places, and in different times.

2. The whole faith in the local congregation: communion

The Anabaptist tradition can contribute to the catholicity of the church because of its emphasis on the *local congregation* as a community of listening, discernment, and action. Though our culture is now imbued with democratic assumptions about the rights and privileges of everyone to have a say, this was a radical development for early Anabaptist communities. The early Anabaptist took with utmost seriousness that where two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, there Christ is too. This extended to all of life, the inner and the outer. And the early Anabaptists placed great emphasis on economic sharing, often holding goods in common on the pattern of Acts 2. The gathering of two or three isn’t just symbolic, but concrete – persons in the same physical space, coming into contact, encountering one another. This is concrete community – physically proximate, materially interdependent.

According to some accounts, Anabaptist meetings and worship were occasions in which anyone could pray out loud, interpret the Scripture, admonish others to righteous living and give testimony. In *The Naked Anabaptist*, Stuart Murray highlights multivoiced worship and consultative leadership as crucial to Anabaptism. The high point of life of these concrete communities was the Lord’s Supper, in which not the bread itself but the many persons who receive it are truly made into the Body of Christ. The miracle of communion is unity in Christ, not uniformity in human characteristics. And you cannot be the body if you do not gather in one place, and pass the actual bread and wine to one another. This miracle of communion is a *basis* for true catholicity, but we know from history that the trend was to seek uniformity, and for communities to become quite closed.

The questions for us are: How do we really listen to each other? How will our own conceptions of the whole gospel be enlarged by practices of truly encountering each other?

3. Mennonites and First Nations

Mennonite Church Canada, and predecessor conferences, have made several public statements of confession and repentance about relationships with Aboriginal people. Here we have acknowledged suppressing Catholicity by linking the gospel with Western culture. In repentance, we indicate our resolve to move towards a more truly catholic vision of the church. Already in 1970, we confessed to First Nations people that “We have not allowed your voice to be heard... We have wanted you as converts but we weren’t sure we wanted you as brothers...”

We have recognized you as Indians but we didn't recognize you as a people who were called of God to be his people."³¹

In 1992 MCC said, on our behalf, "We have been unwilling or unable to separate the intertwined goals of gold, God, and imperial glory; We have used a false notion of cultural superiority as rationale for forceful takeover."³² In 1992, the General Conference assembly made a statement of repentance and said: "We pledge to listen as you share your pain and anger over the injustices you have endured. We will listen to your hopes and your vision for the generations to come. We will seek to respond with justice and love as joint heirs of the kingdom of God."³³ And last year, we acknowledged the complicated legacy of Residential Schools, and the fact that "destructive individual attitudes, such as paternalism, racism, and superiority are still present among us."³⁴

The Catholicity of our own churches, as well as the wider church, are challenged by these relationships. Reframing Anabaptism calls us to really hear what faith looks like in different contexts. It calls us to encounter the whole Christ—the whole faith in the local congregation. It calls us to really learn from the global Mennonite community, and from Christians next door and our Aboriginal neighbours. And it reminds us that we cannot do this by reading books or talking about it, and even grand public statements are just a start. Rather, we must do this in physical communities, in true communion with one another, in face-to-face relationships. It calls us to recover just how radical the early Anabaptists were, for their time, in recognizing that each one has a voice in the meeting, and in potentially each voice, the work of the Spirit.

Each of us live in culture, and are embodied as Christians in particular cultures. The Catholicity of the church embraces this. But we must resist privileging any one culture, and strain to hear the always-inculturated faith of those with whom we share the Lord's Supper, and those with whom we need to get close enough to in order to share the Lord's Supper. We must seek to hear not the non-existent Naked Anabaptist, but the many clothed, and inculturated ones.

V. Fourth Mark of the Church: Apostolicity

Finally, the church is apostolic. The church is the church of the apostles. The church is called to be the church of the apostles. Certainly one of the themes of the early Anabaptists was a recovery of the Christian church as it had been experienced in the early days – as reported in the book of Acts for instance, with the same urgency for preaching as had Peter and Paul and others in the early church.

The apostolicity of the church has two interrelated aspects. First of all, it is the church whose faith is rooted in the witness of the apostles – of those who encountered Jesus directly. Now how to ensure that the content of our faith now, in a different time and place, is still the same in essence as the apostles has been a matter of debate among Christians. Roman Catholics have emphasized that unbroken succession of bishops, starting with Jesus' commissioning of Peter, as the sign that the church remains in their truth. Protestants, and here I would place the

³¹ Conference of Mennonites in Canada, *Conference Bulletin* 6, no. 3, 1970.

³² Mennonite Central Committee, *The Teachable Moment* (Winnipeg, MCC Canada, 1992), 11.

³³ General Conference Mennonite Church, *Program Book* (1992), 28-30.

³⁴ Mennonite Church Canada, *2010 Minute Book*, 10-11.

Anabaptists, have emphasized the written testimony of the apostles – the New Testament. (Though Roman Catholics would be quick to say that what their bishops teach is always the Word of God.)

And secondly, the apostolic church is the church that is sent, just as an apostle is one who is sent. Not just the church in mission, but the church as mission, with all the urgency and outwardness that this implies.

1. Peace witness

It is here, under the mark of apostolicity, that I want to reflect briefly on the peace witness of Anabaptism. On the one hand, the connection may be a simple one. We believe that the life and witness of Jesus embodies shalom, wholeness, and peace; those who follow Jesus are called to love their enemies, and not to retaliate against them. We received this from the apostles, and we seek to follow it today. When I teach the course on “War and Peace in Christian Thought” here at Grebel, to students from all across the university, there is usually little disagreement that Jesus himself taught and modeled peace, in the shape of nonresistance, or nonviolent resistance – especially after spending several classes working through John Howard Yoder’s classic book, *The Politics of Jesus*. The debate is whether it is realistic or responsible for Christians today to follow that pattern.

But on the other hand, the connection between apostolicity and peace needs to be expanded a bit more. The Anabaptists were convinced that the church must go about its mission in a particular way. *How* it spread the message was crucial for truly receiving the *content* of the message. The message had to be offered in a non-coercive way. In fact, it had to be lived out in a non-coercive way. Thus, the rejection of infant baptism made possible the separation of church and state. Baptism was to be motivated neither by fear of judicial punishment nor the promise of social advancement. Moreover, the community made possible by voluntary commitment could be a community of accountability as well as reconciliation. The church as a reconciled and reconciling community – that is the mission, as well as the strategy for mission.

At the core of the peace witness is the belief that right relationships cannot be coerced. They cannot be coerced on an interpersonal level, on a social level, on the church level, and God has chosen to relate to human beings in such a way that we are invited to faith, but not coerced. Jesus modeled this not only in his teaching but in his willingness to suffer rather than to retaliate; God vindicated this way through the resurrection. And when I sin against others, I ought to seek their forgiveness, and work for the restoration of relationships.

The creation of this new peoplehood is founded on the shocking reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in the church: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” (Ephesians 2:13-16)

There has been interest in the Anabaptist peace witness from other Christians. We have been engaged with other Christians on this particular theme. On a global level, the World Council of Churches just concluded a Decade to Overcome Violence – an initiative proposed and advocated

by a German Mennonite, Fernando Enns, and then coordinated by a Swiss Mennonite, Hansulrich Gerber. It just concluded with a large and broadly representative International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in Jamaica which issued to the churches a “Call to Just Peace.”³⁵

On a more grassroots level, the Bridgefolk describes itself as a movement of sacramentally-minded Mennonites and peace-minded Roman Catholics who come together to celebrate each other's traditions and to learn from each other.³⁶ More locally, churches in Mennonite Church Canada have been reflecting particularly on the public nature of acts for peace, and the LiveforPeace campaign – which no doubt many of you have been directly involved with – is a notable instance.

We preach peace; we ought to call other Christians to this way of Jesus. But we must do so in great humility. I daresay we enjoy being sought out as the experts on peace, getting publicly patted on the back for our accomplishments. Peace is the vision and promise of the believed church, but it is not the reality of the experienced church.

So let me add to what it might mean for us to be apostolic. We must recognize that ultimately we are not Jesus Christ, but at best his apostles. Peter and Paul betrayed Jesus, and put him to death. Not in the most literal sense, of course. When he was still Saul, Paul persecuted the earliest followers of Jesus such that when he is confronted on the road to Damascus, the voice of Jesus says to him “you were persecuting me.” Peter denied Jesus, and fled when he was arrested.

In the resurrected Lord, Peter and Paul both encountered forgiveness from the very one they had betrayed and persecuted. The peace which we proclaim in Jesus Christ is not just the rejection of *that violence*, or of those things which others do, but ultimately *our* violence, and our complicity. In Luke 22, Jesus tells Peter to “strengthen your brothers in the faith” – words spoken precisely when Peter was about to deny him.

Pope John Paul II, who in Catholic theology is the successor to Peter, reflected on this and wrote: “It was as if the Master himself wanted to tell Peter: ‘Remember that you are weak, that you, too, need endless conversion. You are able to strengthen others only insofar as you are aware of your own weakness. I entrust to you as your responsibility the truth, the great truth of God, meant for man's salvation, but this truth cannot be preached or put into practice except by loving.’”³⁷

Peace is a great gift we have to give to the church and to the world. We can give it not because we have it, not because we've got it right, but only because it has been given to us by Jesus Christ.

2. Adopting our persecutors

I spoke earlier about what it might mean to ask Lutherans whether Anabaptist martyrs could indeed be witnesses to the whole church. That was about adopting each other's martyrs. But there is a flip side which might sound even stranger. That is to adopt each other's persecutors. If we believe that we can indeed extend forgiveness to Lutherans, it is only because we believe

³⁵ See www.overcomingviolence.org.

³⁶ See www.bridgefolk.net.

³⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Orientale Lumen* (1995), no. 20. Available at: www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_02051995_orientale-lumen_en.html

God in Christ has forgiven us, then the persecutors of the Anabaptists are one with us in the body of Christ. Can we regard the men in these images as not “them” but “us”? We are bound together with them, and the tragedy is the deep sinfulness of this one church. When we hold up the mirror of the martyrs to our own faces, do we see ourselves also in the persecutors? We may have different histories as Anabaptists and Lutherans, but as sinful persons with the capacity for violence and division, even in the church, we share a profound guilt which is only overcome by Jesus Christ. This is reframing Anabaptism – away from the notion of a righteous and faithful remnant amidst a sea of false Christians – and towards a vision of a pilgrim church on the way.

VI. Holy Spirit: *Gelassenheit*

Let us look again at the photo of Nancy Heisey and Pope Benedict. In 2007, we offered a gift to the Catholic Church rooted in our history and identity as Anabaptists. What gifts do we have to receive from others? What gifts do we need? And where might the reception of such gifts take us?

The early Anabaptists understood themselves to be responding to the Spirit’s leading. This Spirit was calling for the reform of the church, working in the life of each believer, convening small gatherings of disciples, and grounding all things in Jesus Christ. This is my view as well, though with some hindsight we might propose that not everything they did was Spirit-led.

Key among the spiritual practices by which the Anabaptists aimed to reform the church was *Gelassenheit*, often translated as yieldedness, abandonment, dying to self and living only in Christ. This message is: stop striving, stop seeking to accomplish. The implication of this is not at all that the outer does not matter, but to recognize that the outward works which must follow must have their root in God’s Spirit. It is ultimately not about us, but about God.

Shortly before she was about to be martyred (Antwerp, 1559), Maeyken de Corte wrote from prison: “I notice that the less I make of myself, the more our mighty God works in me and the more he pours his mercy over me.”³⁸

Gelassenheit applies not only to individuals, but to movements within the church. Being yielded to God and to one another in the body of Christ may take us where we do not expect to go. The Spirit is not within our grasp, but is distributing gifts, renewing the church, illuminating, equipping, and sending in ways we cannot predict and cannot control. Are we prepared to not be in control?

³⁸ Cited in C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 42.

Third Session – Discussion

1. What are the practices, habits, and assumptions we need to unlearn as a church today?
2. What resources does Anabaptism provide for our mission as Christians?
3. What are concrete ways to engage with other Christians, from an Anabaptist perspective, that both offer our gifts and receive gifts from them?
4. How should we relate to the history of the early Anabaptist martyrs?