

Study Guide for

Martyrs Mirror

by J. Daniel Hess

The victims of violence in our nonviolent history

**Martyrs Mirror—a textbook for your
class?**

by J. Daniel Hess

When I was growing up on the farm in Pennsylvania, our short library shelf contained song books, *The Hive of Busy Bees*, and back issues of *Farm Journal*. Some of the old books I never opened until one day I lifted “the big book” and started to browse. In minutes I was astonished. There, in large drawings, I saw people being tortured and killed. I called to Mother. At that moment she became a teacher, in much the same way that Israelite mothers picked up their troubled children who came asking about the blood smeared on their door mantels.

With *Martyrs Mirror* open before us, we remembered what had occurred 400 years earlier. I will never forget.

Years later the *Martyrs Mirror* took on even more meaning when I found this on page 1, 115: “Among those who suffered in the Swiss persecution, there was none of the least Hans Jacob Hess” who was imprisoned three times, the final occasion for a year and a half, and his unnamed wife who died from bad treatment in prison.

All of these memories came to the fore recently when I read James E. Brenneman’s words in Gospel Herald, “The North American church has almost completely lost any sense of what it means to be a witnessing church, a church of martyrs.”¹

Hmmm ... he may be right. You and the other members of your Sunday school class come dressed in their finest. You may travel the main roads on your way to a public meeting. You don’t have to hide on your way to church. Some of those in your class have no context at all to imagine or comprehend why a defenseless person would be deliberately killed when his or her only guilt was an uncompromising faith. They—and perhaps you—may have forgotten

what it was like for our spiritual and (possibly) genetic ancestors.

Words from James Brenneman's essay will provoke your students into thoughtfulness. "... We need to realize that suffering for righteousness' sake is part of what it means to mirror Christ to the world."² Many Christians today may doubt the truth of that statement. Menno Simons, the Anabaptist from whom we get our denominational name, suggested six measures for discerning whether a church is truly following Christ:

1. The true church holds to the Word of God as its only standard for belief and practice.
2. A faithful church practices baptism and communion in the way the early Christians did.
3. Christ's followers show love for their neighbors.
4. A faithful church expects persecution.
5. The true church boldly confesses Christ "in the face of cruelty, tyranny, fire, and the sword."
6. A faithful church brings forth the fruits of Christ.³

Might this year or this quarter be the occasion for you to give to your students an opportunity, like I had, to open the big book and to be astonished?

If you decide to teach a unit on our ancestral faith, and if you decide to use the Martyrs Mirror as a textbook, I can promise that your students will not forget. Here are several steps you might follow.

Step one: Introduce the book

From your church library or a Mennonite college library, obtain a copy of Martyrs Mirror compiled by Thieleman J. van Braght. The current edition has 1,157 pages. Contact Herald Press (1-800-245-7894) or your local bookstore to purchase a copy.

Give your students an overview of the book. The first part records accounts of believers baptisms and sufferings from the first through 15th centuries. The second part has accounts of the martyrs in the 16th and 17th centuries. You may find help to prepare this introduction in the article "Martyr Books" in The Mennonite Encyclopedia (vol. 3, p. 517).

Check with your church librarian and your pastor to find some of the many books written

about martyrs. (See list on page 18.) A walk-through exhibit, called “The Mirror of the Martyrs,” has been built up around the reprinting of some of the images from the same copper engravings used in production of the 1685 illustrated edition.

Step two: Bring the history to life

Select one story, perhaps the familiar story of Dirk Willems, to present in its totality. As you read it (p. 741), show an overhead transparency of the art that accompanies the text.

Assign a student to prepare well to read an Anabaptist’s defense of his or her faith. You might wish to role-play a 16th-century courtroom questioning.

Ask others in your class to browse the index beginning on page 1,145 for namesakes or ancestors who were persecuted or martyred from 1525 to 1660.

Turn to other excellent resources to give context, vividness, and interpretation to the early Anabaptist history. I recommend a recently published history book designed for Mennonite high school students: *Through Fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History*. Authors Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt use stories to reveal our history “populated by real people.”

Schedule a showing of *The Radicals*. Mennonites produced this film and video to help us remember the testimonies of George Blaurock, Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel, Michael and Margaretha Sattler, and other faithful 16th-century Anabaptists.⁴

In several Mennonite communities, information centers and museums tell the story of Mennonite history. For example, Menno-Hof in Shipshewana, Indiana, is one of the state’s outstanding museums that enriches a family or school field trip.⁵

Step three: discuss

1. Why did religious people kill Anabaptists in the 16th century?
2. Are Mennonites martyred today? If so, where? For what reasons?
3. Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”⁶ Do people who are not persecuted miss a blessing?
4. Do Mennonites today still believe and practice the basic 16th-century Anabaptist convictions?
5. Do any of the factors that precipitated the reformation in the 16th-century exist in the political or religious sphere today?
6. What religious groups other than Christians must fear for their lives today? What are the circumstances?
7. How can we keep the memory of our spiritual ancestors alive without making idols

of the martyrs? ·

Notes

1. James E. Brenneman, "From Flaccid Whiners to Authentic Witnesses," *Gospel Herald*, October 22, 1996, p. 1-3, 8.
2. The article motivated an editorial in the same issue (October 22, p. 16), a letter of critique (November 12, p. 8), and three letters (November 19, p. 5). All of these items may help contribute to leading class discussion.
3. Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt, *Through Fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History*, Herald Press, 1996, pp. 77-78.
4. Order through Mennonite Media Ministries Office, 1251 Virginia Ave., Harrisonburg, VA 22801-2497 (540 434-6701).
5. Check in the current issue of *Mennonite Yearbook* (Heritage and Information Centers, Mennonite; and Historical Archives, Libraries, and Societies) for the library or museum nearest you.
6. Matthew 5:11, NRSV

A Martyrs Mirror Bibliography

by Anne M. Yoder,
archivist for the [Swarthmore College Peace Collection](#), 500 College Avenue, Swarthmore,
PA 19081, phone 610 328-8030.

[Amnesty International News](#) (Amnesty International, 1 Easton Street, London, United Kingdom) Periodical \$13.00/year.

Probably the best source for learning of present-day martyrs (political, religious, and other) who suffer for conscience' sake. Annual reports provide statistics of the number of known cases of persons worldwide who have been killed, detained, disappeared, tortured, or tried unfairly. Annual reports and other information are available on the world wide web at <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/aireport/ar96/index.html>

Becoming Anabaptist: The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism by J. Denny Weaver (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987) Paper.

Explores the multiple origins and diversity of early Anabaptists (the Swiss, the South German/Moravian, and the Dutch) and suggests implications concerning whether the Anabaptist vision/s should be recovered or reformed.

Cloud of Witnesses. Video series (Harrisonburg, VA: Mennonite Media 1 800-462-8866). Shares the major themes of Anabaptism as seen through the eyes of Christians not born in the Anabaptist tradition, namely persons connected with the London Mennonite Fellowship in Great Britain. Brings a fresh and often fascinating viewpoint that promotes discussion. Can be viewed in its entirety, or seen by segments over a period of weeks. Leader's guide is included.

"From flaccid whiners to authentic witnesses" by James E. Brenneman. *Gospel Herald* (10/22/1996), p. 1-3, 8

Urges North American Mennonites to note how persecution in other countries has caused tremendous church growth, whereas affluence in the United States has had the opposite

effect. Questions whether Mennonites are being faithful to Christ if they suffer no opposition.

Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism by Leo Dreidger and Donald B. Kraybill (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994) Paper.

Provides a historical overview of the legacy of nonresistance passed down by the Anabaptists who referred to themselves as “defenseless Christians.” Follows the history of peacemaking among Mennonites in the twentieth century from their being the “quiet in the land” to their active witnessing and intervention in the interests of peacemaking.

Mirror of the Martyrs by John S. Oyer and Robert S. Kreider (Intercourse, PA: Good Books 1-800-762-7171, 1990) Paper.

Offers a selection of short tales that highlight the lives and faith of twenty-three martyrs. The stories are arranged by subject: how the executions of martyrs were enjoyed as a public spectacle, how Anabaptism either strengthened or divided families, and how quarrels made some Anabaptists easier to capture. Drawings reproduced from Jan Luyken etchings found in *Martyrs Mirror*. Well-suited for youth and adults. The story of Dirk Willems (p. 36-37) and Luyken’s etching illustrating it, are available on the world wide web

<http://www.goshen.edu/mcarchives>

. This book serves as a companion guide to the exhibit by the same name. For more information about the exhibit, to be shown on the west coast this year, contact Lester Janzen, 625 East 4th Street, Newton, KS 67114. See also an article written in response to the exhibit: “Bloody theatre” by Walter Unger <http://www.cdnmbconf.ca/mb/mbh3508/unger.htm>.

On Fire for Christ: Stories of Anabaptist Martyrs retold from Martyrs Mirror by Dave and Neta Jackson (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989) Paper.

Tells about fifteen male and female martyrs through short stories and reproductions of the Jan Luyken etchings found in *Martyrs Mirror*. Study questions help focus attention on making the stories relevant for us today. Suitable for youth and adults.

Praying with the Anabaptists: The Secret of Bearing Fruit by Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall (Newton, KS: Faith & Life Press, 1994) Paper.

Moves beyond intellectual understandings of Anabaptism, to tap into the deep wells of Anabaptist spirituality. An accompanying resource is *Praying with the Anabaptists: Hymns for Meditation and Prayer* (Newton, KS: Faith & Life Press, 1994) Hymns are performed by the Chamber Singers of Eastern Mennonite University.

The Radicals (Gateway Films, Vision Video; available through Provident Bookstores 1 800-759-4447) Video \$19.95.

Tells the story of Michael and Margaretha Sattler, both of whom left religious orders in search of New Testament belief. Although their lives and their brief marriage ended when they were martyred in 1527, their legacy of radical faith helped to shape the Anabaptist movement for many years.

“The Relevance of *Martyrs Mirror* to our time” by Alan Kreider. *Mennonite Life* 45:3 (Sept. 1990), p. 9-17. This whole issue is about the *Martyrs Mirror*, including articles by Robert Kreider and Joseph Liechty; articles available through inter-library loan from public and

university libraries. Suggests that the *Martyrs Mirror* be used as a tool for renewal by “looking at the martyrs, listening to their convictions and hearing their hymns.” Argues that we also must integrate a spirituality and social non-conformity which “bear the stamp of Jesus” and inevitably lead to a collision with society and the powers that be.

Through Fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History by Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996) Paper. Study guide by Elwood Yoder available on the world wide web at [http:// www.mph.lm.com/fire.html](http://www.mph.lm.com/fire.html) or call Herald Press (800-245-7894) to order.

Traces the history and teachings of the Mennonite Church, as it grew from a small area in Switzerland to encompass its present global membership. Written with laypersons in mind, each chapter presents a historical perspective and then moves on to tackle a relevant question, such as: “How do you know when your church is faithful? Is your life a witness to the spirit, water, and blood? What does it mean for you to be a peacemaker? Where does your citizenship lie? Do you see many members forming one body in Christ?” Maps and pictures help to engage interest and understanding. Suitable for youth and adults.

Anabaptist Portraits by John Allen Moore (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984). Provides biographies of six Anabaptist leaders (Conrad Grebel, George Blaurock, Hans Denck, Felix Mantz, Michael Sattler, Balthasar Hubmaier) who were pivotal in shaping and spreading the Anabaptist movement in the 1520s.

No Permanent City: Stories from Mennonite History and Life by Harry Loewen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993). Through 45 short stories, beginning with anecdotes of Anabaptists in the 1520s, explores the history of a people searching for its place, including the humorous and often imperfect aspects of the search.

Deadly convictions: Do our beliefs merit martyrdom? by Kim Ode, Staff Writer (*Star Tribune*, Minneapolis, St. Paul, 04/17/1995). Posits the question: is martyrdom a "practical strategy" for Christians today? Written in response to *Mirror of the Martyrs* exhibit.

But Why Don't We Go To War?

Finding Jesus' Path to Peace by Susan Mark Landis (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993) About teaching peacemaking to children. Uses the M.M. for illustrations. One of the few things I've seen that present the Anabaptist martyrs to children as models.