

Courier Correo Courier

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**Mennonite
World Conference**
A Community of Anabaptist
related Churches

**Congreso
Mundial Menonita**
Una Comunidad de
Iglesias Anabautistas

**Conférence
Mennonite Mondiale**
Une Communauté
d'Églises Anabaptistes

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Word from the editor



A rediscovery of Scripture was both a root and a fruit of the Reformation, the movement out of which Anabaptism grew. Not that the Bible had been lost, but it was not accessible to the average person. Nor did many people who understood themselves to be Christian have the conviction that the Bible has something to say about how they lived. Anabaptists in particular are characterized by our attention to Scripture, to the point of sometimes even appropriating the moniker “people of the Book.”

Mennonite World Conference is calling us to recognize the 500 year anniversary of the beginning of the movement that birthed Anabaptism and urged us to examine Scripture for guidance in our everyday lives. It is a remembrance, for though there is much to be celebrated in the Reformation, there was much schism, which is something to be mourned. MWC’s 10-year span of commemoration events is called Renewal 2027.

The first Renewal 2027 event occurred in February 2017 and was called “Transformed by the Word: Reading the Bible in Anabaptist perspectives.”

This issue of *Courier* shares presentations from that first of 10 annual events to mark the birth of the Anabaptist movement.

What does reading Scripture look like today, 500 years after the Radical Reformation? We may read it on our phones instead of on paper. We may have several translation options to read it in our own language. Some things have changed, but the stories remain the same.

We have not shaken in our conviction it is the Word of God. However, we may have added to our understanding of how it was written, and how therefore we read it.

In this issue, Antonio Fernandez Gonzalez of the Peace Commission calls Anabaptists back to the imperative interpretive key: the Word of God, Jesus Christ. God incarnate. The simplicity of written words may tempt us to draw simple pronouncement from what we read, but Gonzalez encourages us to keep Jesus as our guide. God has inspired the Bible, but the Bible is not Godself.

Valerie Rempel of the Faith and Life Commission challenges Anabaptists to approach the Bible with the radical zeal of the first reformers we admire. But she calls us to do so in full awareness of the world we inhabit. She invites us to live out our faith with a desire to come together with other believers – sometimes different in perspective than us – “to explore, to study, to learn from each other and to spur each other on to love and good deeds.”

In the Perspectives section, the members of the Young Anabaptists Committee explored the Word itself. These young leaders representing five continental regions interpret the Great Commission according to their understanding from their surroundings.

Argentina – first location of Anabaptist mission in Latin America – marks 100 years in 2017. For *Courier*’s country profile, church leader Mario Snyder tells the story of Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina.

Every 500 years, American religious scholar Phyllis Tickle suggested, Christianity sees a shift. The Reformation started a 500-year focus on Scripture. Perhaps, has the time come to begin another shift in focus? Some have suggested the next 500 years may be a time when we learn more about the Holy Spirit. Keep tuned for 2018’s Renewal 2027 event in Kenya where speakers will address “The Holy Spirit transforming us”!

Karla Braun is editor of *Courier* and writer for Mennonite World Conference. She lives in Winnipeg, Canada.

Courier connects the global Anabaptist family around the world twice a year through its publication in April and October. Our next issues will look at creation care and the Holy Spirit. Do you have photographs or artwork that illustrate those subjects? Submit your photography or artwork to photos@mwccomm.org for consideration for use in *Courier* and other MWC publicity. Or mail to “Courier submission,” Mennonite World Conference, 50 Kent Avenue, Suite 206, Kitchener, Ontario N2G 3R1, Canada.

Cover Photo:

“Flight,” an art installation by Lynn Leegte in the Verenigde Doopsgezinde Gemeente Amsterdam – Singelkerk (Mennonite church) in the Netherlands.

Photo: Karla Braun

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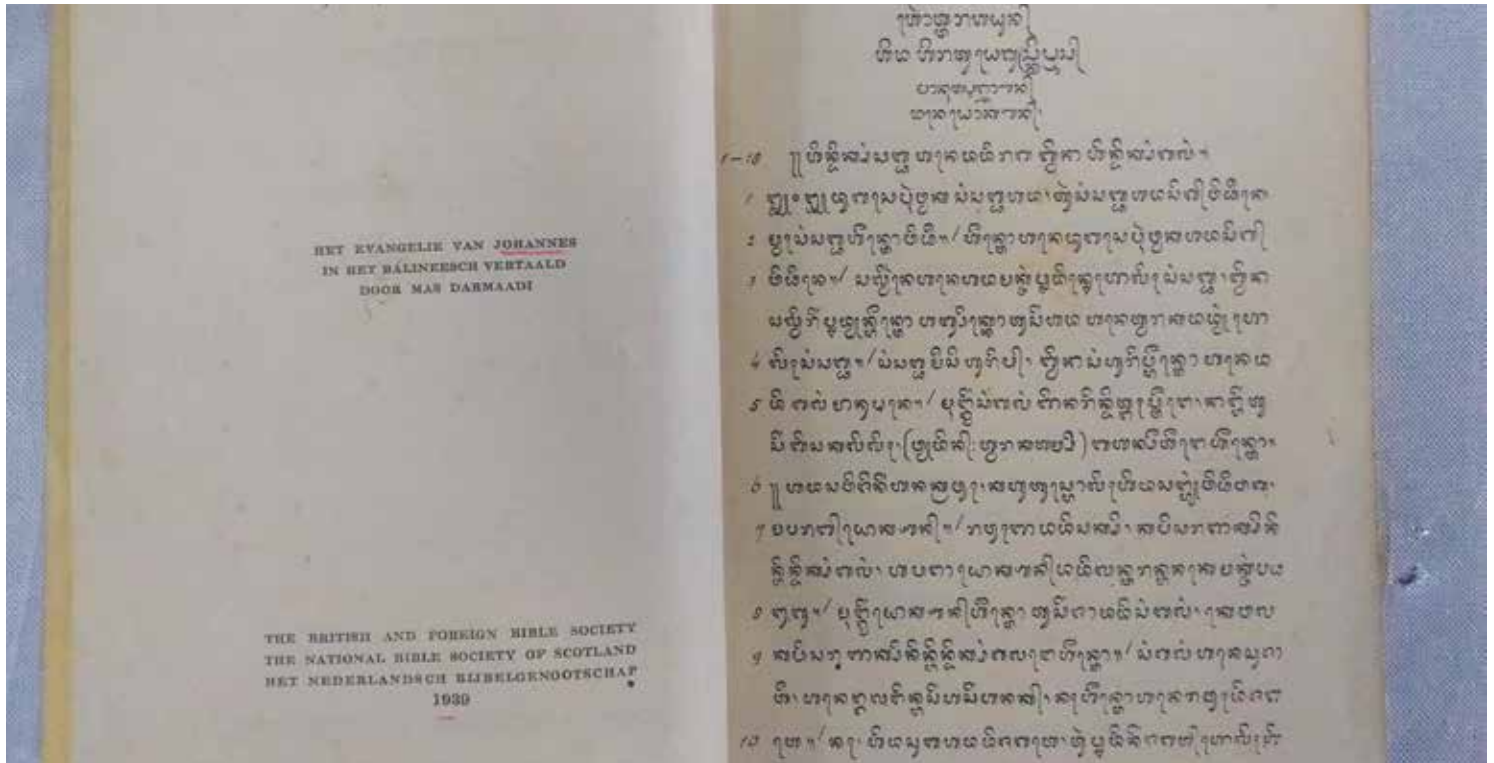
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The future of biblical interpretation



by Antonio González Fernández

In Europe, when we speak of *the future*, it can seem a bit bleak. The economic crisis, lack of political vision and religious situation leave little room for hope. Secularization seems to have prevailed over the national churches; alternatively, some anticipate a future in which Islam will be the majority religion on the continent. Talking of the future of *biblical interpretation* can seem almost senseless.

One could think that everything has already been said about the ways in which Scripture can be interpreted. Furthermore, secularization tends to set the Bible aside as a text that is barely noteworthy, nothing more than a way to learn about religious forms that are already outdated.

This decline in the authority of Scripture is not merely a fruit of secularization. The dynamics of traditional biblical interpretation have contributed to this process. In the classic Catholic perspective, the biblical text is the basis for church authorities' construction of dogma. Over the course of centuries, new layers of knowledge are produced and their authority is added to the original text.

In the liberal Protestant perspective, authority does not belong to biblical text either. Instead, it is turned over to historical criticism. Authority belongs to cultural and theoretical constructs that judge the text. Over time, contemporary relevance displaces the text and, in the process, negates itself.

In this context, the “fundamentalist” solution does not offer much hope for the future. It seems to demand a type of intellectual sacrifice, where the “true” believers must break with the scientific culture. The fundamentalist alternative ignores its own process of biblical interpretation. It confuses the Anselmian idea of redemption, or the Arminian concept of grace, or 19th-century opposition to Darwin, or modern speculations regarding the millennium with doctrines that have always existed in Scripture, independent of the context in which they were conceived.

Of course, some people will always prefer the interpretations offered by religious authorities at the cost of their own responsibility in the interpretive process. Others, disillusioned with religious abuse,

This photograph shows the inside of a Bible in Javanese script (Aksara Jawa). Javanese is one of the languages spoken in Indonesia where there are three Mennonite national churches.

Photo: Ezra Wirabumi, Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa Semarang

reject authoritarianism, reconciling with the dominant culture that itself becomes held in higher regard than Scripture. And, there will always be a fundamentalist niche, because it is human nature to confuse temporary human doctrines with that which it is hoped the biblical text said for once and all.

However, niches are just that: recesses carved in walls or tombs. They are not places where biblical interpretation can open ways for the future.

How can we then look toward the future? From my perspective, some of the ways the Anabaptists initially approached Scripture can offer us methods that are worth exploring. We can explore them as relatively new paths, because though often prescribed, they have rarely been practiced.



“Transformation is a process, like a road,” says Tigist Gelagle of Ethiopia. She is mentor to the Young Anabaptists Committee.

Photo: Tigist Gelagle

Authority of the Word

Above all, we would do well to remember that, from an Anabaptist perspective, interpretive authority is not primarily an ecclesial authority nor the authority of a “Paper Pope,” as Karl Barth said. Authority is from the Word: the Word made flesh, Jesus himself, the Messiah. Biblical interpretation presupposes not a type of blind acceptance, nor merely cultural or pseudo-scientific acceptance, of the authority of certain texts. Biblical interpretation presupposes the occurrence of an encounter between the believer and his or her Lord, and a confession that this Lord is Jesus.

Here is revealed the primary character of Scripture as relative: Scripture is relative to the Lord Jesus, and not that the Lord is relative to Scripture.

And this is what the early Anabaptists of the 16th century said: Scripture is the wineskin, not the wine itself. If Scripture is not the wine itself, its writings are not a timeless doctrinal manual, nor do they need to be replaced by another timeless doctrine. Rather, all doctrine contained within Scripture is ultimately a reference to the Lord, who is the Word *par excellence*, the authority who bestows upon Scripture the character of the Word.

Some of the ways the Anabaptists initially approached Scripture can offer us methods that are worth exploring.

The reference of the Word

The reference or relativity of Scripture concerning Christ Jesus implies yet another essential element of the hermeneutic of the future. We can call this its historical-practical character. The encounter with the risen Lord and the recognition of his authority leads to use of Scripture as a function of following this Lord. You cannot know the Lord if you do not follow him in your life, say the Anabaptists. Scripture, before being a book of theology, is an instruction manual for following the Lord. This is not to deny the doctrinal or worldview dimensions that can be found in Scripture, but to recognize that those dimensions are always in reference to following Jesus. And this is a practical process, historically situated, in which all interpretation takes place.

Of course, identifying the practical character of all interpretation implies a dose of humility that is necessarily for the unity of the body of Christ. In following Jesus, our interpretations are linked to a specific context. And that context is always layered with significance. Be it the local church context, the broader cultural context or the context of cultural periods, the texts always take on meaning in relation to that context. Recognizing this contextual connection does not mean ignoring the spiritual elements that are present in the interpretive process. It is simply a recognition that the Spirit, in guiding us to Truth, does so via historical means, through people, contexts and concrete situation. If it were not this way, maybe we would not even need a Holy Spirit: it would be enough to have an eternal doctrinal manual, valid for all times.

The Spirit and the Word

Of course, biblical interpretation is inevitably a spiritual process. This is easily forgotten when Scripture is confused with a system of doctrine, or when Scripture is evaluated on the basis of more “modern” doctrines.

The Spirit blows wherever it pleases. Of course this “spiritual” freedom is the same freedom we find in the concrete ways in which Jesus, Paul, and John read the Old Testament. Far from seeking definitive meaning, located in the past, the Holy Spirit opens up new meanings, depending on new contexts, converting dead text into the living Word.

The process of interpretation

This means then that the interpretive process is always an open process. Even in the Catholic perspective, which is open to assuming “definitive” interpretations, these same interpretations are submitted to a necessary revision process throughout history. Even in a fundamentalist perspective that identifies Scripture with fixed doctrines, it is impossible to avoid revision or enrichment of past interpretations. And this means that no interpretation can claim to be definitive.

“Tomorrow, we will have more light,” said the early Anabaptists. And precisely because of this, it is not possible for Scripture to be concealed under a continuous accumulation of new layers of interpretive sediment. The openness of all interpretation relativizes the interpretations of the past, because not one is definitive. And this relativity allows for the transparency of all historical experience, however important, with respect to an original event. However, this original event is not the composition and compilation of the texts that make up Scripture. The original event is Christ himself, the authentic and definitive Word of God.

This is what the early Anabaptists of the 16th century said: Scripture is the wineskin, not the wine itself.



Mario Hernández, from the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita de Tocoa, in Colón, Honduras, shared the transforming news of Scripture on the beach in La Ceiba, Honduras during a national Mennonite youth retreat.

Photo: Mario Antonio Hernández Aguirre

The encounter with the risen Lord and the recognition of his authority leads to use of Scripture as a function of following this Lord.

The absolute criterion

For this reason, the openness of the interpretive process does not lead to chaos. All biblical interpretation has an “absolute” criterion for the believer: Jesus himself is the definitive Word of God. Biblical interpretation cannot be reduced to personal interpretation. It is the same Lord whom believers have encountered and met. It is the same Spirit who guides their interpretation.

The process of biblical interpretation therefore is a communal process, as the Anabaptists well understood. It is not something that can be turned over to a definitive authority. Neither is it a process that can be delegated to official theologians on the payroll of the national church or the state (or new interpretations on the internet).

The communal ideal

In the face of all of these perspectives, the Anabaptist ideal of a communal interpretation enjoys enormous relevance for the future. Communal interpretation understands the local church as a hermeneutic agent of the first order, and helps to relativize all human or ecclesial authority as dependent on the definitive authority of the Messiah. Communal interpretation – precisely



As the MWC Commissions met in Germany in February 2017, they also meditated on Scripture.

Photo: Wilhelm Unger

because it is the interpretation of a concrete community – knows its own historicity and fragility, at least it knows more about them than popes, pastors, and theologians tend to know. Communal interpretation knows in a way that is not definitive, because of its need to always be learning more.

It also knows its own need for the Spirit, so that whatever interpretation is not converted into an intellectual exercise or a mere struggle for influence. When this interpretation arduously looks for complete agreement within the community, as was the case with the early Anabaptist, the interpretive processes are transformed into

an open path, something the future desperately needs. Processes that can open up broader horizons in the ecumenical context, but that do not overlook the truth that following Jesus is walking humbly together with our God.



Antonio González Fernández is a member of the MWC Peace Commission, a pastor in the Brethren in Christ church in Spain and a teacher at Centro Teológico Koinonía. He spoke at Renewal 2027 – Transformed by the Word: Reading Scripture in Anabaptist Perspectives in Augsburg, Germany 12 February 2017. This paper been adapted from his presentation.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

At **Renewal 2027 – Transformed by the Word: Reading Scripture in Anabaptist Perspectives** in Augsburg, Germany 12 February 2017, the YABs committee (Young AnaBaptists) reflected on Matthew 28:19–20 from their local perspectives. The columns in this section have been adapted from their presentations.

Paraguay

Evangelism in action

by Dominik Bergen

This text is a commission from Jesus to his disciples. Jesus wanted the gospel to reach all nations and for that he decided to use people. In the first instance, he used his disciples. These, in turn, made more disciples, who had the same charge: “to go and make disciples.” Thus, the mission of the church, as a group of disciples of Christ, was to reach other people with the good news.

The word “go” is active. Jesus did not say, “Wait for me to send you people to make disciples,” but said, “Go and make disciples.” Therefore, if the disciple of Christ wants to make more disciples, he or she needs to be proactive. Instead of waiting for other people to approach the church, we need to go into the world to share the good news with our neighbours.

Now the question is, how am I going to share the good news with the people around me?

There are several methods for evangelism. The three most well-known and used in South America are house-to-house evangelism, mass evangelism and friendship evangelism. Each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages, especially when considering the time and depth of work.

However, all are valid methods that can be used according to context and need.

In the case of the Mennonite Brethren church of Paraguay, a method used is that of social impact. The church members are dedicated to establishing homes for needy children; starting hospitals, schools and churches – always depending on the need of the area. In addition, the church established a radio station to transmit the gospel and Christian values.

Through these organizations, we seek to provide a basic service to the people around them, so that we can share the gospel with them.

One method used in our youth group and in some other churches in Paraguay is soccer. In Paraguay, you can not play volleyball, basketball or baseball; there is only “football” – and everyone plays it! That is why some churches, including ours, choose to play soccer on Saturdays and in the evenings on Sunday to attract people. The primary purpose of these event is not to listen to a preaching or to sing spiritual songs but to play football and to make friends with new people. We hope that these people will then be encouraged to go to youth meetings and accept Christ as their Saviour.

When people feel comfortable with the community, they are invited to

youth meetings or a Bible study group. Sometimes they also come on their own. Some of these people accept Christ as their Saviour through a friend, others during a worship service or camp.

In Latin America we believe that evangelization must be adapted to the culture and context in which each church lives. Regardless of the method, believers are motivated to naturally and actively transmit their personal faith in Christ.

For us, evangelizing does not mean being intolerant. We believe that Jesus’ redemptive work on the cross is the only way to the Father and to heaven, and that is why it is our duty to share this message of grace and salvation with the people around us.



Dominik Bergen, a member of the Mennonite Brethren church in Paraguay, represented Latin America on the YABs committee from his appointment at the Global Youth Summit with Assembly 16 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, USA, in July 2015 until the Executive Committee meetings in Augsburg, Germany. Embarking on seminary studies in Germany, he stepped down from his position to ensure local representation for Latin America. Oscar Suárez from Colombia is now the Latin America representative.

The Netherlands

You will be my witnesses?

by Jantine Huisman

There are many tasks assigned to us by God. It is forbidden to steal or kill (Exodus 20:15,13). We are instructed not to be jealous (Exodus 20:17), and to live a life of peace and truth (Romans 12:18).

Many of those instructions require us to change our way of life – to act better, be more generous, forgive those who have wronged us.

Other assignments focus more on the lives of others – to take care of the poor, those who are hungry or need clothes (Matthew 25:34-36).

But what about the task Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 28:19–20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Many Christians, including Mennonites, see this assignment as one of the most important in all of Scripture. Thanks to this commandment, there are many Christians in the world today. Imagine if the disciples had returned to their families and their day jobs. Maybe they would have occasionally thought about the great times they had with Jesus, but the teachings of Jesus likely would have slowly slipped away.

Instead, we find gatherings of people committed to the teachings of Christ in all parts of the world. Together we share our hopes, faith and vision for love and peace, and find fellowship in associations like MWC.

A multicultural society

But, coming from the Dutch context, I have a few problems with carrying out this assignment. The Netherlands is a multicultural

society. As with many other Western countries, the number of immigrants has steadily grown since World War II. This has given us many good things. Our culture has been enriched as we learned to know other faiths.

How should Jesus’ instructions be understood in a multicultural world?

Is it my task to go to my Muslim neighbour and ask him or her to convert to my faith? Is it my job to tell my Jewish friends that they are wrong? That I will *teach* them what is good? That doesn’t sit well with me.

I love to talk about my faith with people from all backgrounds, cultures, religions. But my faith is also personal. There are many differences even among Mennonites; sometimes there are as many commonalities between a Muslim friend and me as between another Christian and me. Am I supposed to tell others I am right?

It seems better to me to follow the example of Jesus with the Samaritan woman in John 4. As they sat and drank water together, they shared stories, and in that way, they also shared their faith. I believe that is an example of living in harmony together from all nations.

A secular society

However, not only do I live in a multicultural world, I also live in a secular world where many people feel that the “institution of the church” is outdated, and faith has no meaning anymore. So, I tell everyone who wants to hear it that I am a lay preacher in our Mennonite church. I invite people to come and listen, to see whether they are interested in my kind of faith and becoming a Christian as well.

Most of all, I believe that your actions are the most powerful way of letting people

Your actions are the most powerful way of letting people know what it means to have faith; to create a better and peaceful world all around you.

know what it means to have faith; to create a better and peaceful world all around you. So I live the other final words of Jesus:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

By caring for my neighbours, by always acting kinder than I feel and helping those who are in need, I try to give hands and feet to this assignment. We all can.



Jantine Huisman is a member of the YABs committee (Young AnaBaptists). She is from Doopsgezinde Kerk Joure (Mennonite church Joure), an Algemene Doopsgezinde Societeit congregation in the Netherlands.

The Philippines

Systematic disciple making

by Ebenezer Mondez

I grew up in a small village in the Philippines far from cities, close to mountains, lakes and farms. I live in a close-knit community with a modest lifestyle.

We are relationship-oriented people. We share our things with our neighbours, expecting that someday you can ask for their help when you need them too. Sometimes several generations live under one roof. We tend to be emotional: Filipino has words for different intensities of feelings which other languages may not have.

In a poor community like ours, when we are in need of certain things, we ask the Lord for it. When a child is suffering from a disease, we pray for healing because it is our only option. When you have nothing, you experience miracles, and you appreciate every small act of God's grace.

We have pastors who have barely finished high school, and only few of our church leaders were able to get a formal education. None of them graduated from a Mennonite seminary. I have a dream for our young people to be more exposed internationally,

to be properly trained and to be more united in theology.

That brings me to our text: Jesus' instructions to his disciples at the end of his time on earth.

The first step of discipleship is letting Christ own you. Being completely dependent on his will, a boat without a paddle, fully dependent on the wind. Nurturing a heart that is willing to sell all possessions and give it to the poor just to follow Christ – that's the heart of a disciple. Just like the early Mennonites, willing to die for their faith, willing to leave everything behind to live a peaceful life in other parts of the world.

The second step of discipleship is about training, a process of learning to follow Christ. One does not immediately become a mature disciple after baptism.

Thirdly, being a disciple means you are responsible to make disciples. Discipleship is a mandate to every single believer, not just the pastors. It's your destiny as a follower of Christ. Jesus intentionally looked for disciples, asking them to follow him, teaching

them, taking care of them – and afterward, asking them to do the same and make more disciples. It's not a gift that only few have, it's everybody's responsibility.

The passion for discipleship comes from our deep understanding and full experience of God's power and grace.

Mentoring or teaching others should be undertaken with a systematic approach.

In our Mennonite youth organization in the Philippines, we realized young people were leaving, so we created a system. In the past few months, it has doubled the number of our youth attendees and created a lot of leaders. The concept is a cycle of mentoring and teaching that promotes relationships and accountability with each other.

We select a few young people who are involved in ministry. We start training them how to be a good leader, how to teach, how to take care of new believers and how to handle a small group. As they are equipped and encouraged, they start taking care of each other, inviting friends, conducting their own Bible studies, reaching their parents, siblings and their friends, making more disciples for Christ.

My hope is that we can have a culture that encourages everyone to mentor and to have accountability to one another. And I ask those who are graduates from seminary, those who are theologians, those who have more experience – would you please share your knowledge?

If we really want to stay relevant in this world to be the voice and ambassadors for peace in this world, we need to be more intentional on our approach in obedience to Christ's command! We must deeply soak ourselves in the love of Christ to discover unspeakable passion for discipleship. People multiply by birth, but as a church, we multiply through discipleship.



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The current YABs Committee (Young AnaBaptists) met in Germany in February 2017. Pictured (l-r): Ebenezer Mondez, Larissa Swartz, Makadunyiswe Ngulube, Oscar Suárez, Jantine Huisman.

Photo: Wilhelm Unger

USA

Rediscover our calling

by Larissa Swartz

As we are approaching 500 years of Anabaptism, it seems fitting that we should address the Great Commission with renewed vision and zeal. After all, this commission was central to the life and mission of the early Anabaptists during the Reformation. From the beginning, evangelistic preaching was a strength of Anabaptism, along with practical and applicable discipleship and a strong emphasis on community.

In the USA, Christianity has fallen asleep in Christ's call to "make disciples of all nations." Christians from the Global South are coming to evangelize the West, white Christians are no longer the majority and people who have never heard the gospel are coming to areas that are regarded as "Christian" instead of missionaries going to the unreached.

Today, without leaving their own cities, all believers can love and serve immigrants and international students who may have never heard the gospel.

Threats to faith

Two of the biggest threats to American Christianity, in my opinion, are pluralism and materialism. *Is Jesus the only way? Is Jesus more valuable than anything in this world?* Living in a comparatively wealthy, comfortable, individualistic and materialistic society, I have struggled with my answers. But I think the more our hearts say "yes," the more we will be drawn to mission with joy.

In a pluralist, multicultural and secular society, we have become more sensitive to proselytization, and tend to regard faith as personal and private. People think that individual beliefs can be simultaneously correct and different – as long as they

don't infringe on the well being of others. "Missions" has become taboo for my generation, almost synonymous with imperialism and Western colonization.

All of us have limited beliefs about God and about how to live a holy life. My Mennonite upbringing has been challenged and stretched over the years as I have interacted with Christians from other backgrounds, and also with Muslims, Hindus and atheists. There are some things that people from other cultures understand better about God than we do. Yet despite our differences, Jesus' message remains the same: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

How can we claim to know absolute truth? The answer to this question lies in our relationship with a person, and not in a system of thought or morality. We must present Jesus humbly without reducing his message to our own cultural traditions and baggage.

Together on the journey

What has encouraged me most is Jesus' promise to be with us on the journey. We are not able to fulfill his call on our own. "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me," Jesus said (John 6:44). Sharing the gospel with others in word and in deed comes down to the reality of whether we believe Jesus is who he says he is. Do we believe that he is the Son of God, the fullness of life on earth and for eternity? Do we believe that the gift of knowing him is greater than anything else?

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to move in people's hearts and convict them, drawing them to the Father. Our

God doesn't need us, but works through us if we are willing.

job, as ambassadors of Christ, is to be faithful to his calling. We may have grown complacent in our faith, but our sovereign God continues to draw people to himself. Will we heed Paul's reminder: "...But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?..." (Romans 10:13–15)

God continues to reveal himself to those who are truly seeking (Jeremiah 29:13). God doesn't need us, but works through us if we are willing. Our choice is to allow him to use us to bring people into his glorious kingdom.



Larissa Swartz is a member of the YABs committee (Young AnaBaptists). She is from London Christian Fellowship, a Conservative Mennonite Conference church in Ohio, USA.

Zimbabwe

Everyone is called

by Makadunyiswe Ngulube

I grew up in Zimbabwe, in Southern Africa, where Christianity was brought to my ancestors along with civilization and commerce. In that context, I never felt obliged to pass on the message of Christ to anyone.

The Great Commission was for the elite – those who were “called” to do so. As a member of the body of Christ, I simply had to do away with sin, read the Bible, pray and wait to get into heaven. Spreading the message was the obligation of those who brought Christianity to our churches in Zimbabwe. A missionary was someone whose skin was lighter skin than mine; who spoke in a language that was regarded as superior to mine because it had no clicks; who had come from a place far way. I never thought there would be any need for a black man or woman to even think about being a missionary.

A command to follow

Today, I realize that once you have repented, you have an obligation to fulfill, a command to adhere to, and that is to tell others about Jesus Christ.

As Christians, once we begin to follow in Jesus Christ’s footsteps, we also desire to love like him, to live like him, and above all, to share about the kingdom of God just as he did when he walked this earth. Our duty is to help the lost by introducing them to Jesus, so that he can save them.

My understanding of Matthew 28:19 is centred on the fact that the Great Commission is a command to every follower of Jesus Christ. And this command is instrumental in the expansion of the kingdom of God.

Making disciples

Making disciples is an action process that calls us out of our usual routine. It involves stepping out of your comfort zone. Sometimes you will have to approach



YABs danced and sang at the Renewal 2027 event in Augsburg, Germany. Pictured (l-r): MWC Chief Events Officer Liesa Unger, MWC president Nelson Kraybill, Makadunyiswe Ngulube, Deacon Commission member Enock Shamapani, Ebenezer Mondez, Larissa Swartz, Jantine Huisman.

Photo: Harry Unger

strangers and tell them about Jesus Christ. In my country, the reception varies. If you attempt a one-on-one form of sharing the message of Christ, you may be mistaken for a thief or someone who has nothing important to do. In my context, you might share the message of Christ at crusades or outreach programs where the response is usually positive.

Making disciples also means that followers of Christ are not selective about whom we share with. The gospel is for everyone. There is no segregation when it comes to the message of Christ, neither those sharing it nor those receiving it: Jesus Christ instructed us to go and make disciples of *all* nations. Regardless of race, tribe, language, gender or age, you are never too young or too old to tell someone about Christ.

Our perception of others and our view of their world should never affect our decision whether they are worthy to receive

the message of Christ. You can never be either good enough or too bad to receive God’s grace – it is a gift. The Holy Spirit will transform each person as they walk their journey of faith.

As you walk on the face of this Earth, are you adhering to Christ’s command? Once we all understand that this is a matter of eternal life and eternal punishment, we will be vigorous in our quest of making disciples, with the goal to tell as many people as we can about Jesus Christ. If you are being selective as to whom or where you will preach the message of Christ, think carefully and pray, because the kingdom of God is open to everyone!



Makadunyiswe Ngulube is a member of the YABs committee (Young AnaBaptists). She is from Mount Pleasant Brethren In Christ Church, a congregation of Ibandla Labazalwane kuKristu eZimbabwe in Harare, Zimbabwe.

The role of Scripture today and for the future

by Valerie G. Rempel

In the 16th century, some of the greatest theological minds of that era began to read the Bible in new ways. The text itself hadn't changed, but because of their experience in the Roman Catholic church, their own study of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, they began to develop a new understanding of God's grace and free offer of salvation.

Among those who were committed to reforming the church were those who wanted a more radical reform of theology and practice and who longed to restore the kinds of communities described in the New Testament. These were the men and women who became known as the Anabaptists. Many of them lost their lives because of their witness to a new way.

Disciples of Jesus

Early Anabaptists were radical Bible readers at the core. They understood the reign of God to be centred in the church rather than the state, and believed that the body of Christ was to give visible witness to its proper citizenship. They saw themselves as present-day disciples of Jesus and because of that, they gave special weight to Jesus's teaching – to his invitation to live generous lives, to his call for love of enemies, to his encouragement to participate in God's work of healing and justice and hope. They formed voluntary churches based on an adult confession of faith. They practiced mutual aid. They practiced church discipline.

As spiritual descendants of those early radicals, these ideas have informed our theological tradition and our church practices. But, nearly 500 years later, we live in a very different context. Separation between church and state has morphed from a theological idea about proper allegiances, to, in my American context, a political idea embedded in a constitution.

Old enemies, church bodies that persecuted early Anabaptists, are now brothers and sisters in common endeavors such as mission enterprises, community



World Mennonites celebrated the transforming power of the Word at the first Renewal 2027 event in Augsburg, Germany, in February 2017.

Photo: Wilhelm Unger

development projects, health and human service ministries and educational programs.

We continue to witness the demise of Christendom, a political and cultural reality that privileged Christianity, but also invited – indeed, welcomed – compromise. In its place is an increasingly secularized society and an increasingly secularized church.

Radical Bible reading again

Nevertheless, our day also calls for radical Bible reading in the spirit of the early Anabaptists. The text hasn't changed, but the times we live in have. They call us to re-engage with God's Word and with our own theological tradition to see how it can offer us wisdom for living as Christians in our world and for engaging in mission that invites all people to become followers of Jesus and children of God.

Active imagination and courage to lead

Anabaptism is as needed in the 21st century as it was in the 16th century. The question of allegiance – to God or to the state – has not gone away. For those of us living in the USA, with its strong military power, the temptation is especially strong to rely on the state for protection.

We have grown used to our privileges. In my context, we struggle with an increasingly secularized society and its impact on the church. We have grown comfortable in the world. It is sometimes difficult for us to resist the lure of a consumer society – to live lives of simplicity and generosity. Sadly, even in our own tradition we find ourselves fighting over theological differences rather than joining together to proclaim the message that Jesus does indeed save, and that through him, people and communities can be transformed.

We need active imaginations that can envision ways for our congregations to live out their calling to be the body of Christ and we need the courage to lead.

We need active imaginations that can envision ways for our congregations to live out their calling to be the body of Christ and we need the courage to lead. The Bible still speaks to these things.

De-centring Anabaptism

Something else has changed. For centuries, Anabaptism as a theological movement was primarily lodged within the historic Mennonite and Anabaptist church traditions. Today, however, Anabaptism is being embraced by a diverse group of Christians who are linking together in networks rather than denominations and who are discovering each other through publications and websites. Christians around the globe have discovered the biblical ideas that gave birth to the early Anabaptist movement and are trying to live them out in their own faith communities.

These neo-Anabaptists, or “naked” Anabaptists to use Stuart Murray’s term, often remain embedded in their own church traditions, but are drawn to the theological orientation and practices that have long characterized Anabaptist communities. It is exciting to live in a time when “old” and “new” Anabaptists are coming together to explore, to study, to learn from each other and to spur each other on to love and good deeds. This gives me hope for the church and for the world.

It is important, I think, to read the Bible through the lens of Anabaptist thought and practice not simply to recover the past, or to honour our spiritual ancestors, but so that we might live faithfully as 21st-century followers of Jesus. May God grant us the courage of those early radical reformers.



Valerie G. Rempel is a professor at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, Fresno, Cal., USA, and a member of College Community Church Mennonite Brethren, Clovis, California. She spoke at Renewal 2027 – Transformed by the Word: Reading Scripture in Anabaptist Perspectives in Augsburg, Germany 12 February 2017. This paper has been adapted from her presentation.



Attendees at the Renewal 2027 event studied Acts 15:1–21 in small groups. They asked about controversial understandings of church practice that are a source of tension in each other’s settings, then looked for insights from the passage.

Photos: Harry Unger

Renewal 2027: “The Holy Spirit transforming us”

**Saturday, 21 April 2018
Kisumu, Kenya**

Renewal 2027 is a 10-year series of events commemorating the 500th anniversary of the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement.

A day-long public conference on the theme “The Holy Spirit transforming us” will take place 21 April 2018 in Kisumu, Kenya. The gathering will explore how Anabaptist-Mennonites around the world have understood the Holy Spirit in the past, and how the Holy Spirit animates our global community today.

Anabaptist-Mennonite speakers will reflect on the theme, with opportunities for all participants to join in worship, singing and discussion. The gathering



takes place in connection with meetings of the MWC General Council, Networks and Commissions.

This is the second in a series of annual regional events that will culminate at MWC Assembly 18 in 2027.

For more information, go to mwc-cmm.org/renewal2027

Relentless servants of the gospel

History of the Argentine Mennonite Church

by Mario O. Snyder

We, the members of the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina (IEMA), are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the first missionaries [from USA], Joseph Shank and his wife Emma E. Shank; and Tobias Hershey and his wife Mae E. Hershey, whose work would change forever the lives of many people. The current presence of 50 congregations, with 3600 members in different provinces of the country, is a living testimony of their work.

Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina (1917–2019)

The Shanks and Hersheys arrived on the morning of September 11, 1917, at the Port of Buenos Aires, after a four weeks' journey by ship. They were welcomed by Methodist and Baptist representatives, as well as the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Argentine Bible Society, who served as God's instruments in counselling and guiding them as they took their first steps, and eventually when they established themselves to begin their work in the city of Pehuajó, Province of Buenos Aires.



The Argentinian Mennonite pastors institute met in La Esperanza de Bragado country house 19–21 September 2017.

Photo courtesy of the centennial anniversary committee for Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina (IEMA).

Their first year and a half was devoted to learning about the country, the people and their customs, the Spanish language, making visits and field trips to discern their permanent place of residency. Furthermore, Joseph and Emma Shank drew strength and confidence from God as they rose to his challenge, according to Revelation 3:8, "He has placed before you an open door that no one can shut."

Also, Tobias and Mae Hershey demonstrated such enthusiasm and faith, showing the same willingness as the Apostle Paul expressed in Romans 1:15: "That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you." This phrase characterized the first missionaries at the outset of their work,

for they were relentless servants who with boundless determination travelled the country on their task.

All of this influenced the other missionaries that came afterwards to work with the Argentine pastors. The first ones were Albano and Querubina Luayza, faithful exponents of the Protestants (called *evangélicos* in Argentina) originally from the Christian Alliance, who bravely proclaimed in streets and squares that Christ meant hope for a new and true life.

Firstly, we are grateful to God, and to the members of the [Mennonite] church in the United States, and later Canada, for their interest in extending missionary work to South America.



Evangelistic mission was carried out with the Bible car which provided lodging and a kitchen as workers travelled to outdoor meeting places.



The Mennonite church in Morón, Argentina, began by meeting in an old tram. Photo taken in 1973.



Tobias and Mae Hershey

Photos courtesy of the centennial anniversary committee for Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina (IEMA).

Celebrating the 100th anniversary

Thus on 16 September 2017, a commemorative event was held outdoors at the same place where the ship had arrived, now a beautiful neighborhood called Puerto Madero in the capital city. Present at the event were MWC president J. Nelson Kraybill, John Lapp, Madeline Maldonado and Linda Shelly of the Mennonite Mission Network, together with other representatives of the local Iglesia Evangélica Menonita; furthermore, several Buenos Aires city government officials also attended, as well as Mennonite delegates from neighbouring countries, representatives from 18 congregations, Mennonite members, and the pastors who had organized this special event.

That evening, we also shared a commemorative meal with a large group of national pastors, visitors and dignitaries. On 17 September 2017, in appreciation for the presence of representatives from the mother church, a missionary conference was held in the modern facilities provided by Mr. Nardini, mayor of Malvinas Argentinas. We thank the Lord and those brothers for their goodness. They inspire us to continue serving the Lord with the same love, sacrifice and courage of the early Christians and our XVI century Anabaptist forebears. We

Argentina***Alianza Evangélica Menonita***

Total baptized members	33
Total congregations	1
Presiding officer	Esteban Alejandro Memetow

Alkolonier Mennonitengemeinde

Total baptized members	
Colonia Las Delicias	292
Pampa de los Guanacos	376
El Algarrobal	14
Nueva Esperanza	67
Presiding officer	Omar Onischuk

Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church (Argentina)

Total baptized members	7
Total congregations	1
Presiding officer	David Weaver

Iglesia Hermanos en Cristo, Argentina

Total baptized members	75
Total congregations	2
Contact	María Caridad Perdomo

****Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina***

Total baptized members	3650
Total congregations	79
Contact	Juan Sieber

* indicates membership with MWC

Source: Global Statistics – 2015 Directory



A church gathering in Morón in 1996.

Photo courtesy of the centennial anniversary committee for Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina (IEMA).

proclaim the gospel of hope in Christ and his kingdom until the second coming of the Lord to the earth.

Origins of the work in Pehuajó (1919)

On the recommendation of the Bible Society, it was decided that the work should begin in the city of Pehuajó; its literature evangelists, who traveled throughout the country to spread the Word of God, knew that there wasn't any evangelistic work in the western area of the Province of Buenos Aires. The first missionaries arrived there 21 January 1919. Thus it was on 26 January 1919 that they sang joyfully and with gratitude, "Nearer, my God, to Thee" in the first worship service, as Ernesto Suárez recounts in his book on the 50th Anniversary [of the Argentine Mennonite Church]. We note with joy and gratitude that we personally knew the first converts; among them, some members of the Cavadore family, especially Pablo, Anita, María and Santina, and Grandma [Nicolasa] Fattone (a relative of ours). These are people who believed and continued to be faithful all their lives, serving the Lord with all their strength.

Moving on toward the western towns

Later the gospel was brought to Trenque Lauquen, Carlos Casares, Tres Lomas, Bragado and many other small towns, where churches were planted, small groups of Christ's disciples. Furthermore, kindergartens were opened, as well as first aid centres, a children's home, and, years later, a print shop.

Also, a Bible School was established in Pehuajó, and was later moved to the city of Bragado. Eventually, it was moved to Montevideo, Uruguay, and became known as the Seminario Evangélico Menonita de Teología, with students joining from the Mennonite colonies and conferences in Uruguay, Brazil and Paraguay. This meant a significant effort, carried out under the direction of missionary Nelson Litwiller, our brother and visionary leader, who was also closely involved in the settlement of those escaping from [World War II in Europe]. These settlers disembarked in Montevideo, Uruguay, to establish three colonies in our neighbouring country, with whom we have been blessed with fraternal ties up to the present.

In a very useful study, professor Delbert Erb prepared a synthesis of the four stages in the history of the Mennonite Church in Argentina, explaining its development in the following way:

1. First stage: The mission and its missionaries (1919–1954)
2. Second stage: The transition (1954–1989). This period led to the end of the [US] mission, during which foreigners and Argentines worked together. The Mission introduced new principles to be followed:
 - a) self-governance: Agustín F. Darino, pastor and one of the creators or father of IEMA, participated in the drafting of the Constitution for the new institution; b) self-financing; and c) outreach.

Then the following missionary projects were developed:

(i) the Patagonian Project in the southern Argentine region in Choele Choel, promoted by the missionary Floyd Sieber and his son Juan, assisted by brother Rafael Stábile; (ii) the Northern Argentine Project (PROMINOA), basically an extension of the Adolfo Sourdeaux [Kilómetro 30] congregation and its pastor Delfín Nacho Soto; (iii) the Central Region Project (VEMZO); (iv) the Church of Córdoba Project (EMIDOCOR).

3. Third stage: National organization
4. Fourth stage: The reorganization of IEMA into four regions (1989–2019), each one with its own organization, leadership, meetings and activities (see map).



IEMA leaders in 1990 (l–r): Mario Snyder, Sara Buhlman, David Dutra and Delfin Soto.

Photos courtesy of the centennial anniversary committee for Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina (IEMA).

During this last year, we have been evaluating these changes and progress, considering and praying how we could improve and advance so as to reach what still needs to be attained, “and to the end of the earth.”

Who we are and what we believe

We humbly and sincerely confess that the emphasis of missionaries and the church has always been essentially “evangelistic”: namely, that men and women are God’s children, brothers and sisters; we are all members together. The Mennonite church appeared as such in the official documents but without Anabaptist characteristics, although these were imbued in the walk of the faithful brothers before us. Rather than convey and establish another denomination, we have defined ourselves as Christians.

But we do hold a Confession of Faith from an Anabaptist Perspective that guides us, and which we must strengthen in knowledge and practice. We also have



Missionaries Frank and Anna Byler and family.

the problems common to all conferences, and some very serious conflict situations with our brothers that need to be solved. Therefore, we request the prayers of our world fellowship.

Mario O. Snyder, Pablo Snyder, Billy Nuesch and Heriberto Bueno comprise the centennial anniversary committee for Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina (IEMA), the largest Mennonite-affiliated conference in Argentina and the only national member church of Mennonite World Conference. See chart (page 16).

MWC Assembly: Indonesia 2021

Indonesia – a diverse country with thousands of Islands and hundreds of languages – has many vibrant and growing Mennonite congregations. This is where Mennonites and Brethren in Christ will meet for the next Mennonite World Conference Assembly in 2021.

In July 2017, the National Advisory Council, which represents the three Mennonite synods of Indonesia, met for the second time to plan the MWC Assembly. They discussed themes and dates.



MWC Chief International Events Officer Liesa Unger's visit with members of the National Advisory Council who represent the three Mennonite synods: Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia (GKMI), Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa (GITJ), Jemaat Kristen Indonesia (JKI).

(Standing l-r): Endang Langlang Buana (GKMI), Tri Gunarto (GITJ), Andi O.S. (GKMI), Agus Setianto (GKMI), Lydia Adi (JKI), Liesa Unger (MWC), Paulus Sugeng Widjaja (GKMI), MZ. Ichsanudin (GITJ). (Sitting, l-r): Daniel Talenta (GKMI), Simon Setiawan (JKI), Suharto (GITJ), Heri Purwanto (GKMI).

Photo: Agus Setianto

Worship Resource: World Fellowship Sunday

“The Holy Spirit transforming us”

*Joel 2:28;
Micah 3:8; Acts 1:8;
1 Corinthians 12:13*



Throughout the history of the Christian church, followers of Jesus have been transformed and renewed by the living presence of the Holy Spirit. We persevere with hope in the face of overwhelming challenges.

Today, the churches in the Global South are especially attentive to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The Mennonite World Conference regional representatives from Africa prepared worship resource materials for World Fellowship Sunday 2018.

MWC World Fellowship Sunday is your opportunity to help the people in your congregation become aware of what it means to belong to a global Anabaptist faith community. It is our annual celebration of worshipping in spirit with Anabaptist brothers and sisters around the world.

The prayers, songs, biblical interpretation, personal stories and cultural suggestions for worship included in the package invite everyone to worship in the style of African Anabaptist churches today.

Download this resource to celebrate World Fellowship Sunday in your local congregation with the global Anabaptist family in January or at whatever time is convenient for your congregation in 2018. Send pictures and stories from your congregation's celebration to photos@mwcc-cmm.org.

mwcc-cmm.org/wfs

MWC financial update

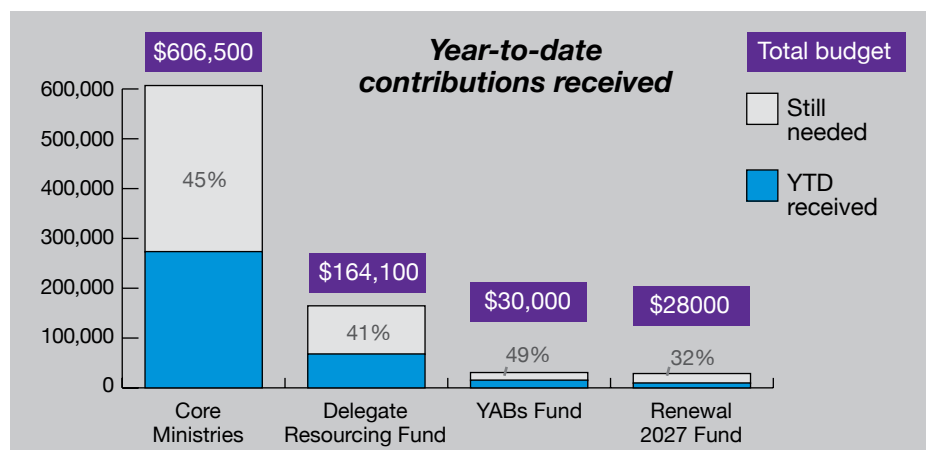
We are grateful for the steady flow of contributions in support of Mennonite World Conference, whether from our national member churches, local congregations, or individuals. During the first part of the year, we received strong support for our core activities; however we still rely on end-of-year contributions to meet our financial commitments. It is a challenge for us to anticipate how much we will receive when so many of the contributions are received in December.

In addition, MWC has designated funds that are used to carry out specific ministries. We encourage you to consider supporting these along with the core ministries of MWC.

Please consider how you might continue to support MWC's ministry and presence now, especially in these years between global Assemblies.

See mwcc-cmm.org/donate

—Len Rempel, Chief Operating Officer



Contributions received as percent of budget as of 31 August 2017.

Give a gift to MWC

Your prayers and financial gifts are deeply appreciated. Your contributions are important. They will:

- Enable and expand communication strategies to nurture a worldwide family of faith,
- Strengthen our communion's identity and witness as Anabaptist Christians in our diverse contexts,
- Build up community through networks and gatherings so we can learn from and support each other.

Go to www.mwcc-cmm.org and click the “Get involved” tab for prayer requests and on the “Donate” table for multiple ways to give online. Or mail your gift to Mennonite World Conference at one of the following addresses:

- PO Box 5364, Lancaster, PA 17808 USA
- 50 Kent Avenue, Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1 CANADA
- Calle 28A No. 16-41 Piso 2, Bogotá, COLOMBIA

Meet your Mission Commission



(L-r): Andi Santoso, Agus Mayanto, John Fumana, Philip Okeyo, Rafael Zaracho, Stanley Green, Hermann Woelke, Kelbesa Demena, Barbara Hege-Galle.

Photo: Wilhelm Unger

The Mission Commission provides resources and a forum for dialogue on global witness and service.

The commission brings together the Global Anabaptist Service Network (GASN) and the Global Mission Fellowship (GMF) and enables dialogue and direction. Together, these two sub-commissions represent more than 120 service and ministry agencies around the world.

For GMF's mission agencies and churches, the commission stimulates global, continental, regional and local partnerships, focusing on places where people have not yet heard about Jesus Christ.

For GASN's service agencies, the commission enables both dialogue and inter-agency collaboration in response to pressing needs everywhere.

The Mission Commission creates space to learn from each other, support each other and collaborate at gatherings such as the upcoming triennial MWC meetings in Nairobi, Kenya, where GMF and GASN will meet 17–20 April 2018 under the theme "Sent to the world."

"We hope to stimulate global, continental, regional and local partnerships in outreach, dialogue, and support," say Mission Commission secretary and chair Rafael Zaracho and Stanley Green.

Resources:

Foundational documents on Anabaptism and mission (mwc-cmm.org/missionresources) including the 10 MWC statements about mission "God's People in Mission: An Anabaptist Perspective."

Forthcoming:

God's People in Mission: An Anabaptist Perspective, a 120-page volume on Anabaptist missiology for the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Shelf of Literature,



to be released in at the triennial meetings in Kenya. Its 10 writers represent diverse voices and experiences from different geographical contexts within the Anabaptist church. They will each provide biblical/theological/ministerial foundations on mission from Anabaptist perspectives on one of the 10 statements. The book will serve as a resource material for workshops, training, Sunday school classes and seminaries by promoting dialogue, reflection and commitment to action.

Mission Commission members (9)

- Stanley Green, chair (USA)
- Agus Mayanto, vice-chair & Global Mission Fellowship chair (Indonesia)
- John Fumana, vice-chair & Global Anabaptist Service Network chair (DR Congo)
- Rafael Zaracho, secretary (Paraguay)
- Kelbesa Demena (Ethiopia)
- Barbara Hege-Galle (Germany)
- Philip Okeyo (Kenya)
- Andi Santoso (Indonesia)
- Hermann Woelke (Uruguay)

President's column

Remember, and look to the future



Wolfgang Krauss leads an Anabaptist history walking tour in Augsburg.

Photo: Nelson Kraybill

When the Mennonite World Conference Executive Committee met in Augsburg, Germany, this year, a group of us walked through old parts of the city to learn Anabaptist stories. We stopped by a large house where 88 Anabaptists were discovered in an illegal meeting on Easter morning in 1528. Persons arrested that Easter Sunday were deported, tortured or executed.

Someone in our group expressed gratitude that Anabaptists "are no longer being persecuted today." Immediately, a brother from Ethiopia raised his hand and said, "Can I tell you about persecution today?" In parts of the Global South, the Anabaptist church is struggling, suffering and growing. The experience of remembering *together* at Augsburg helped build understanding between widely diverse Anabaptist people.

Some persons have questioned whether it is appropriate for MWC to coordinate the 500th anniversary celebrations of Anabaptism. Will we simply review dusty history and champion bygone male European church leaders? No. Examining the story of European Anabaptist origins will be life-giving if we do it as a global conversation, constantly relating what we learn to the experience of today's church.

A one-day MWC Renewal 2027 event at Augsburg in February included presentations by young Anabaptists from five continents on how they embody the Great Commission in their context (see pages 7–11). The whole event emphasized the present and future mission of God's people, not romanticized history. In 2018, a Renewal 2027 celebration will be in Kenya, with focus on the Anabaptist story in Africa.

Remembering historic places and events can become idolatrous, much like icons in other Christian traditions can become idolatrous. But icons also can be windows into the divine. In a similar way, heroes and stories from Anabaptist church history can become portals for understanding what the Spirit is saying to the church today.

—Nelson Kraybill is president of MWC (2015–2021). He lives in Indiana, USA.



MWC Publications Request

I would like to receive:

MWC Info

A monthly email newsletter with links to articles on the MWC website.

- English
- Spanish
- French

Courier

Magazine published twice a year (April and October)

- English
- Spanish
- French
- Electronic Version (pdf)
- Print Version
- Mailing delays? Consider the benefits of electronic subscription. Check this box to receive your *Courier/Correo/Courrier* subscription via email only.

Name

Address

Email

Phone

Complete this form and send to:

Mennonite World Conference
50 Kent Avenue, Suite 206
Kitchener, Ontario N2G 3R1 Canada



Photo: Life TV Indonesia

Transformed by the Word



“Renewal 2027” is the name that Mennonite World Conference has chosen to mark the decade of regional events that will be held to commemorate the five centuries our faith community has existed. We would like to approach these 10 years of commemorative acts by focussing on the global, ecumenical and transcultural perspectives on our history.

During this decade of regional events, we remember the past in order to look to the future. As noted by the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez, “What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it.” We want to bring our roots to the fore so that we may thank God for the faith inheritance that we have received. At the same time, we wish to

approach our Lord in a spirit of repentance and renewal, learning from the past in order to grow in our relationship with God here and now as well as in the years to come.

At the first event, “Transformed by the Word: Reading Scripture in Anabaptist Perspectives,” we explored how Martin Luther’s maxim of *solus Scriptura* together with the monastic ideals of imitating Christ played a role in our own tradition, and how the sacred Scriptures continue to be relevant in our global faith community today.

During that day in Augsburg, Germany, I kept in mind an art installation I saw in one of our Mennonite churches in Amsterdam (see cover). On the pulpit at the centre of the sanctuary, there is a Bible that is opened and moving. Pages are leaving or entering the Bible, blowing about the room.

This installation depicts Scripture as a living text that inserts our own histories within it through the work of the Holy Spirit. In this way, the story of the first disciples in Acts is carried forward. Our Anabaptist emphasis on imitating Christ invites us to see Scripture as a script for our own lives, a play that requires us to live it out, to put it into practice on a daily basis.

Even so, the Bible has not always been seen in this light during our Anabaptist history.

More often than not, we have used the sacred text as a tool for measuring the doctrinal orthodoxy of others, thus causing division and fragmentation within the body of Christ. This has happened too frequently in our churches when we have found that our perspectives on Scripture do not coincide.

We have often put aside the passages that invite us to live out the gift of unity in the midst of diversity. We have neglected the gift of communion in spite of and through diversity. Sadly, we have come to believe that our ethical or doctrinal divergences are reason enough to break apart the body of Christ.

Today, while we thank God for our emphasis on a communal and Christ-centred interpretation and living out of Scripture, we must keep a repentant attitude toward the divisions that exist amongst us due to an inadequate approach to reading the Scriptures. Let us seek the renewal that comes from a contrite heart, able to recognize our sin and how it causes lack of unity in the church.

It is my prayer that today our understanding of the Bible will be renewed through the living text that speaks to the now; that we can see our division as a sin that needs to be eradicated; and that our desire to live out and apply the Bible today would unite in a spirit of interdependence.

May we leave transformed by the Word!

César García, MWC general secretary, works out of the head office in Bogotá, Colombia.