



**Mennonite
World Conference**

A Community of Anabaptist
related Churches

**Congreso
Mundial Menonita**

Una Comunidad de
Iglesias Anabautistas

**Conférence
Mennonite Mondiale**

Une Communauté
d'Eglises Anabaptistes

www.mwc-cmm.org
info@mwc-cmm.org

General Secretariat:
50 Kent Avenue, Suite 206
Kitchener, Ontario N2G 3R1
Canada
T: (519) 571-0060
F: (226) 647-4224

PO Box 5364
Lancaster, PA 17606-5364
USA
T: (1) 717 826 0909

Brief overview and highlights of the *Report*

You are invited to read, reflect and respond to

Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church: The Report of the Trilateral Conversations between Lutherans, Mennonites, and Catholics (2012-2017)

In engaging with other communions in the body of Christ, we as Anabaptists-Mennonites want to respond faithfully to Jesus' prayer in John 17 that we all may be one. Differing understandings and practices of baptism present a real challenge to us. However, given the Bible's clear insistence that there is "one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4), we believe it is important to do our very best to address what has been so divisive.

We also sense a deep need among us as Anabaptists to recover why baptism matters and to rekindle its connection to discipleship. We believe we can be helped in this by listening carefully to other Christians, but also by seeing ourselves through their eyes. We invite you to carefully read and learn from the *Report* and engage it in ways that are relevant to your setting. After all, as a diverse global communion we ourselves come to the matter of baptism from very different life experiences and church settings.

This *Report* includes convictions, learnings and challenges each of the communions brought to the five years of conversation.

For assistance in engaging the *Report*, Tom Yoder Neufeld, chair of the Faith and Life Commission, has prepared ***Growing in Faithfulness: Living out our Baptism: Guide for Study and Reflection*** on the Trilateral Conversations. It summarizes and outlines the *Report* and offers questions to help in study and reflection.

A few highlights

Sin, grace, salvation, sacrament vs sign, and "living out our baptism" in discipleship are focal points around which the three communions shared convictions, differences, and challenges.

They came to value each other as sisters and brothers in Christ and found points of strong agreement. The conversations partners all stressed the centrality of God's saving grace at work in peoples' lives. Only God's grace can save humanity from the bonds of sin and alienation. They all shared the conviction that God calls persons to faith, to become part of the body of believers and to live a life of faithful discipleship. All agreed on the central importance of baptism in the work of God's grace.

At the same time, ***it was at the places of common conviction that sharp differences also came to light.***

For example, what discipleship looks like differed significantly. Convictions around baptism differed as sharply. For example, Catholics and Lutherans tie baptism to God's intervening through sacrament and promise to deal with original sin and human inability to transcend alienation from God. The practice of infant baptism grows from wanting to make sure that the God's saving grace accompanies a person from the very beginning of life.

In the Anabaptist understanding, God's grace does indeed accompany life from the very outset, not via baptism of infants, but in preparing and calling a person to faith, who then is able to own that faith personally and confess it publicly, to commit to participation in the life of the gathering of believers, and to make a life-long pledge to be a follower of Jesus. The common practice among Anabaptists of child dedication is a pledge to provide preparation for this journey of discipleship. Until children are mature enough to choose to sin, we believe they are enveloped by God's grace. Thus, we speak of baptism not as a sacrament but as a "sign" of the transforming grace that has been at work and will continue to be at work throughout the believer's life. But baptism is also a pledge of commitment on the believer's part to faithful discipleship and full participation in the church and its mission.

These differences in our understanding of baptism have a long history and have sometimes been severe points of tension.

Anabaptists believe that it is *believers* who are baptised on confession of their own faith. The baptism of infants and young children who cannot yet believe, confess their faith, or their commitment, is not baptism faithful to the Bible, in our understanding. Lutherans and Catholics, on the other hand, believe that baptism is *God's* free and gracious act. It is God who promises; it is Christ who baptises. As a sacrament of grace, baptism is necessary for salvation, freely offered by God, and thus quite appropriately provided to infants. Yes, faith is important, but it is primarily the faith of the body of Christ, of family and church, that is at work. To "re-baptise" such persons has no theological or biblical merit. Indeed, as the Lutherans say in the *Report*, to do so calls God a liar.

Even with such seemingly irreconcilable convictions, the participants listened to each other with genuine openness, respect, and trust.

Each of them was honest in admitting to falling far short of their convictions regarding baptism. They expressed regret that many do not live up to the promise of their baptism, neither participating in the community of believers nor living out their baptism in discipleship. Honesty compels us as Anabaptists to humbly confess our own failures. For too many of us, baptism has become routine, or its meaning and connection to following Jesus has been forgotten.

The three communions share a pastoral concern that we actually "live out" our baptism and are equipped to strengthen our ability to do so.

They see "remembering our baptism," making it central to our "formation" as Christians, as key. Our desire is to use the Trilateral Conversations to spur us to repentance and recommitment to our baptismal vow to follow Jesus.

Finally, after clearly reaffirming our commitment to believer's baptism, the Mennonite delegation also expresses respect for those who have theological grounds for baptising infants.

In the desire to respond faithfully to Jesus' prayer that we might be one, the Mennonite representatives thus ask us to consider the following:

When the link between infant baptism and a subsequent personal faith lived out in discipleship is fully evident, could we accept such a person into membership without re-baptising them?

In other words, are we able to hold to our convictions and also practice a kind of hospitality to those whose faith journey has been different with respect to baptism? We encourage you to consider this question prayerfully, giving thought to potential blessings and dangers of such a stance. Keep in mind that MWC will not and cannot decide these matters, but at the same time we are of one mind that our commitment to our baptismal vows need strengthening, and wish to do what we can to help.

We invite you to engage the Report, with the help of the ***Guide*** if it is useful to you, and to send the Faith and Life Commission with your responses. The *Guide* contains many questions to help you in your reading. Here are a few sample questions:

- What did you learn that can help deepen your understanding of baptism and living it out in discipleship?
- Was your understanding of baptism represented well by the Mennonite delegates?
- What can we learn from Catholics and Lutherans about baptism?
- What can they learn from us?
- Would you consider accepting into membership without rebaptism such persons who were baptized as infants and who show a faith and commitment to discipleship? Why, or why not?

There are many ways to engage the Trilateral Report:

- As individuals
- As congregations (Bible study groups, discussion groups, etc.)
- As national church bodies
- We invite the Global Anabaptist Higher Education (GAHEN) network to encourage schools, professors, to include this in their contexts (classes, discussion groups, etc.)

Please send your responses to baptism@mwc-cmm.org by 1 November 2024.

The Faith and Life Commission will gather and summarize the responses and include them in a report for the General Council in Zurich in 2025.

May God's Spirit and Wisdom accompany us in our discernment,

Tom Yoder Neufeld
Chair, MWC Faith and Life Commission