



**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

Teaching Resource

From the Faith and Life Commission

What does it mean for member churches of Mennonite World Conference to share an Anabaptist identity? What is the value of Anabaptist “tradition” – and what does that word mean in a global context? What are our Anabaptist understandings of mission and fellowship? In 2009, the newly appointed Faith and Life Commission was asked to produce three papers that could be used in helping MWC communities reflect on such questions: “A Holistic Understanding of Fellowship, Worship, Service, and Witness from an Anabaptist Perspective” by Alfred Neufeld Friesen of Paraguay; “The ‘Anabaptist Tradition’ – Reclaiming its Gifts, Heeding its Weaknesses” by Hanspeter Jecker of Switzerland; and “Koinonia – The Gift We Hold Together” by Tom Yoder Neufeld of Canada. All three papers were approved as a teaching resource by the MWC General Council in May 2012.

The ‘Anabaptist Tradition’ Reclaiming its gifts, heeding its weaknesses

By Hanspeter Jecker

Throughout Scripture God repeatedly confronts his people with this insight: if you want to reach the Promised Land, then remember the path in which God has led you until now (Deuteronomy 8:1-2). The parable of the talents (Matthew 25) invites us, as Anabaptist congregations, to ask ourselves what convictions have been entrusted to us as a treasure from our history, and what things we should readily toss aside in exchange for others. Could it be that certain important biblical perspectives have not yet been heard in the world simply because we do not nurture, develop or know how to appreciate those gifts?! Could it be that even the “Anabaptist tradition,” with all of its weaknesses, holds within itself precisely these treasures, which are not to be buried but rather are meant to be developed?

A short historical overview

“Anabaptists.” To some contemporaries in the early centuries of the movement, they were pious lunatics; to the official church they were dangerous heretics; to the government they were seditious rebels. For centuries they suffered persecution and discrimination, were imprisoned and tortured, disinherited and robbed, forced to flee and even executed. A minority, however, regarded them as earnest Christians who tried to live out what they believed.

Who were these “Anabaptists” who refused to attend worship services in the state church, swear oaths or participate in military service? The beginnings of the Anabaptist movement go back to the Reformation era of the sixteenth century. The Anabaptists shared many convictions with the churches of the Reformation, including a high regard for the Scripture and the centrality of God’s grace. In contrast to the state church, however, the Anabaptists envisioned congregations based on a voluntary fellowship, independent from the state. In 1525, in Zurich, several began to baptize

adults. At about the same time, similar movements emerged in the Netherlands, Moravia and other parts of Europe.

Through their criticism of what seemed to be an unholy alliance of church and state, the Anabaptists quickly attracted the anger of those in power. Despite the persecution that quickly ensued, the group – increasingly called “Mennonites” after the Dutch Anabaptist leader Menno Simons (1496-1561) – grew rapidly across Europe. Systematic and intense repression, however, drove the Anabaptist movement into isolation, especially in Switzerland, south Germany, and France. This helped to prepare the way for their growing separation from society. Internal conflicts led to painful divisions and the emergence of new groups, such as the Amish (1693). In some regions such as the Netherlands and several cities in north Germany, however, Anabaptists enjoyed significant freedoms. Here the separatist impulses of the Anabaptist faith increasingly gave way to integration and cooperation with the surrounding society.

By 1700 intense persecution had nearly eradicated Anabaptism from several regions in Europe. With the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, however, this external pressure generally began to ease. Influences from Pietism and the Awakening in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also led to local congregational growth and prompted signs of new life. Other groups, closely related to the older Anabaptist tradition, also emerged, such as the Baptists (1610ff) and the Apostolic Christian Church (*Evangelischen Täufer-Gemeinden*) (1830ff).

Since the seventeenth century – largely as a result of flight, migration and missions – expressions of the Anabaptist faith have emerged beyond Europe, first in North America, and eventually in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the twentieth century new impulses from North American Mennonites and the “recovery of the Anabaptist Vision” have led Anabaptists worldwide to deeper reflections on their own roots. Today, for both the historic churches and the new churches, the question remains: how can the common theological impulses of the “Anabaptist tradition” find expression in the midst of wide cultural differences?

Central theological themes

The Anabaptist movement was always colourful and multifaceted. Nevertheless, over time several central themes have emerged, forming the core of what can be described as the “Anabaptist tradition.” While the ongoing task of MWC member churches today is to “test all things; hold fast that which is good!” (1 Thessalonians 5:21), the following are proposed as key central themes of the “Anabaptist tradition.”

1. The centrality of Scripture. Reading the Bible is the point of departure for Christian faith and life. It is to be read expectantly, open to learning from its teachings, and – as a distinctive feature of the Anabaptists – in community. Communal Bible study is centered especially on Jesus Christ, whom the Anabaptists regarded to be the clearest revelation of God. Anabaptist readings of the Bible assume a high degree of readiness to implement concretely what one learns; to do so is a basic element of discipleship. Anabaptists also assume that the guidance of the Holy Spirit is crucial both for the interpretation of Scripture as well as its application.

2. The voluntary nature of faith and church membership. The practice of voluntary believers baptism follows from a rejection of obligatory infant baptism. Freedom of faith and conscience implies a rejection of every form of coercion in matters of faith and church membership.

3. The pursuit of an authentic personal faith. Receiving salvation does not happen through the mediation of the church, nor through the sacraments, nor through a simple affirmation of “justification by grace,” nor through belief based on the pure letter of Scripture.

Rather, we receive salvation through a personal encounter with God, a change of heart and a subsequent transformation of life, all made possible by the Spirit of God. The call to conversion and faith and to Christ-centred discipleship is central.

4. Establishment of congregations independent from the state. God and his kingdom are worthy of the highest loyalty in all questions of faith and life. Absolutely crucial for Anabaptists historically has been to maintain a critical, discerning distance toward earthly “principalities and powers” (nation, culture, spirit of the times, etc.).

5. Establishment of local congregations based on fraternal relationships. In a community of voluntary believers no one has everything; but everyone has something. This recognition requires that the gifts of the individual contribute to the wellbeing of the whole (for example, in biblical interpretation or in reaching decisions). This leads to an appreciation of “the least of these,” but also to a mutual sharing of burdens, and to the correction of the “strong.” Mutual encouragement and admonition are the foundations for decision-making and conflict resolution, and for becoming a forgiving – as well as a forgiven – community.

6. “Fruits of repentance.” The visible and practical consequences of faith are important expressions of thanks for that which has been received. Consistency in word and deed supports the integrity of one’s own claims. Wherever the “fruit of repentance” encounters resistance we turn to Christ for moral courage and a readiness to suffer on behalf of others. The “fruit of repentance” also includes a transformed attitude toward people outside one’s own community. Standing up in solidarity for others in need is crucial.

7. Love of enemy and renunciation of violence. God, in the person of Jesus, gave himself up to his enemies rather than destroying them with might and power. Love of enemy, reconciliation, and renunciation of violence are central and essential characteristics of God and God’s people. Overcoming evil with good is an explicit consequence of what it means to follow Jesus and bearing his name. Throughout Anabaptist history, the rejection of oaths and military service, along with a refusal to cooperate with the death penalty and other forms of destroying life, have often been considered as the most distinctive characteristics of their Christian witness.

Weaknesses and deficits

This summary attempts to distill several of the most important and distinctive motifs of historic Anabaptist faith in order to make them useful for contemporary Anabaptist-related churches around the world. It is important, however, to be conscious of dangers and weaknesses that can be associated with those same strengths. Unfortunately, we in the Anabaptist tradition have not always succeeded in being alert to those dangers. To learn from our own history requires that we be aware of these specific dangers and weaknesses – and even acknowledge them openly so that they might be corrected and overcome.

1. The Anabaptist emphasis on the voluntary nature of faith has sometimes led to an over-emphasis on the human contribution. One’s own individual “yes” to God can become more important than God’s “yes” to humans.
2. The Anabaptist courage expressed as non-conformity has sometimes led to an arrogant self-righteousness, to a notorious tendency to divisiveness, or to a “retreat from the world” into pious ghettos.
3. The Anabaptist emphasis on the “fruit of repentance” has occasionally meant an elitist attitude, debilitating forms of works-righteousness, or ungracious expressions of legalism.

4. The high moral and ethical expectations of the Anabaptists have occasionally fostered dishonesty and hypocrisy, ungracious and debilitating forms of self-deception, or denial of one's own failures and shortcomings.
5. The Anabaptist readiness to suffer has sometimes led to bitterness toward government and society, and it occasionally finds expression in attitudes of fear, melancholy and timidity.
6. The Anabaptist emphasis on the local congregation and its uncompromising grasp on the truth of Scripture have sometimes led to a narrow perspective on the larger totality of the church of Jesus Christ.

Conclusions

Light and shadows – both characterize the history and theology of the Anabaptist movement. Several of the emphases noted here as present from the beginning have persisted with ongoing relevance and impact to this day. The themes of the “Anabaptist tradition” are judged today in various ways, both within Anabaptist-Mennonite churches as well as outside the tradition.

But when we consider ourselves as part of a global Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship, in which each perspective is inevitably partial, then our varying expressions of the tradition can actually free us – both within our communion as well as in dialogue with other churches – to regard the differences of others not as a threat but as a blessing. They can also help us to accept our differences gratefully as an invitation to conversation and as an opportunity to reflect more carefully on our own convictions.

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