



**Mennonite
Mission
Network**

Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world



What is an Anabaptist Christian?

Anabaptism at 500 edition

Special edition includes diverse voices from Africa, Asia, and Latin America

BY PALMER BECKER

Missio Dei #34

SERIES EDITORS
Joseph C. L. Sawatzky and Andrew G. Suderman

Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about God's mission in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

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Introduction to the Anabaptism at 500 Edition

Joseph C. L. Sawatzky

As 2025 marks 500 years since the beginning of the Anabaptist movement, Mennonite Mission Network is pleased to release this special edition of Palmer Becker's *What is an Anabaptist Christian?* Over the last two decades, Becker's definition of Anabaptism, in three memorable phrases — "Jesus is the center of our faith," "community is the center of our life" and "reconciliation is the center of our work" — has gained wide acceptance and has been eminently useful for explaining the faith to insiders and outsiders alike. In North American Mennonite circles, part of that appeal may lie in its resonance with earlier influential triads of Anabaptist identity, namely Harold S. Bender's *Anabaptist Vision* (1943), which spoke of discipleship or following Jesus, voluntary community and nonresistant love — a terminological debt that Becker himself acknowledged.

In the time since Bender's vision, which is reflected in Becker's view, the Christian family tree — including its Anabaptist branch — has undergone a massive transformation: 69% of the world's Christians today live in the Global South, up from 18% in 1900.¹ While this seismic shift has occurred numerically, its effects have been slow to

¹ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., "Status of Global Christianity, 2025, in the Context of 1900-2050," World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2025), <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2025/01/Status-of-Global-Christianity-2025.pdf>.

register theologically, that is, in terms of the whole's access to the parts' understanding of what it means to be the church in their respective contexts. One of those parts — Becker's essay itself — has been widely shared, not with the intent of raising an Anabaptist standard to which all must conform, but as an invitation for each part to raise its voice about the meaning of Christian faith, life and work. As one gesture toward a global conversation, Becker's text is offered again, yet with the major addition of five essays from African, Asian and Latin American authors.

Diverse, in terms of gender and geography, these authors shed light on the question, "What is an Anabaptist Christian?" in different ways. Coming from decades of pastoral experience in Mexico and elsewhere, Fernando Pérez Ventura writes most directly about Becker's categories, showing how Anabaptist accents on Jesus and community help to clarify biblical perspectives that are sometimes lost in conventional expressions of "faith" and "church." After stating the centrality of Jesus, community and reconciliation in her definition of Anabaptism, Bercie Mundedi unpacks Anabaptist Christian vocation under the headings of "proclaiming the good news" and "defending the faith." Her essay concludes by probing the meaning of "faith" and "life" through the prism of Congolese culture, shedding light on African Anabaptist identity. From another African perspective, Henok T. Mekonin addresses the question, "What is an Anabaptist Church?" by surveying "six markers" of the Meserete Kristos Church of Ethiopia, the largest national member church of Mennonite World Conference. Likewise employing an ecclesial lens, Alix Lozano's contribution tracks the movement of the Mennonite Church in Colombia toward a deeper embrace of their Anabaptist identity as a source for living out God's justice and peace. By contrast, Andi O. Santoso uses the genre of autobiography to approach the topic of Anabaptist identity, showing how "trauma-informed discipleship" can empower us to join God's work of reconciliation.

Along with our sincere thanks to the authors for their creative contributions to the portrait of Anabaptism at 500, a few other acknowledgments are in order. Among Mennonite Mission Network staff, Kayci Detweiler first raised the idea for this special edition. Wil LaVeist offered helpful suggestions about the contents and structure of the issue, while Jennifer Hayes and Caitlin Lanctot helped to move

the process along. Linda Shelly and Lynda Hollinger-Janzen helped to invite and relay the contributions of various authors. Hollinger-Janzen also coordinated the translation of Bercie Mundedi's essay from French, for which thanks is due to Rod Hollinger-Janzen. Thus, this publication — like the church it seeks to serve — is the fruit of many gifts working together.

Similarly, just as each voice is heard and yet presented together in these pages, so may we become ever more that which we are — a diverse chorus from many peoples, nations and languages, united in the praise of God's glory.

What is an Anabaptist Christian?

By Palmer Becker

Introduction

Christians with an Anabaptist perspective on faith and life have existed from the very beginning of the Christian era. Even today, in nearly every group of churches and perhaps in nearly every congregation, there are people who have understandings of the Christian faith similar to those held in the Anabaptist tradition. Anabaptist is a way of being Christian. Just as there are Anglican, Baptist and Lutheran Christians, so there are Anabaptist Christians.

“Anabaptist” is an invented name meaning “re-baptizers.” It was given to 16th-century Christians who saw little value in infant baptism and, therefore, baptized each other as adults upon confession of faith. These Anabaptist Christians were the forerunners of today’s Mennonite Christians and many others in the Free Church tradition.

Anabaptist/Mennonite Christians hold many beliefs in common with other believers. They believe in a personal three-in-one God who is both holy and gracious, in salvation by grace through repentance and faith, in the humanity and divinity of Jesus, in the inspiration and authority of Scripture, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the church as the body of Christ. But they often hold these convictions somewhat differently than others.

Anabaptists are sometimes identified as the left wing of the Protestant Reformation. They rose up in a time of social and economic upheaval and were intent on carrying further the reformation begun by Martin

Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. Christians of an Anabaptist perspective have throughout history placed strong emphasis on following Jesus in daily life, being covenanted with each other in Christ-centered community, and seeking to overcome conflict in nonviolent ways. Are you a Christian with an Anabaptist perspective?

The mainline reformers brought us to the clear understanding that salvation comes through faith by grace alone, but in many ways they limited themselves to the structures and thinking set in motion by Constantine and Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries. Mennonite Christians have sometimes also limited themselves by merely seeking to continue what was initiated by Menno Simons and the 16th-century Anabaptists. We can all learn from the various renewal movements what it meant to be a Christian at that time and in that culture. Ultimately, we all need to return to Jesus, the author and founder of our faith, to find the basis for what it means to be Christian in our time.

The problem of Christianity is not necessarily its many denominations, but rather the hesitancy of its parts to learn from each other. Anabaptist Christians have much to learn from Christians of other cultures and traditions in regard to such matters as the sovereignty and grace of God, the importance of the creeds, and patterns of participating in larger society. Christians of other backgrounds may also have much to learn from the Anabaptist tradition in areas such as following Jesus in daily life, interpreting the Scriptures from an ethical Christ-centered point of view, and giving primacy to the Lordship of Christ in everyday life.

The body of Christ is one with many parts. If a group within the body loses its unique gifts and insights, it will be like salt that has lost its saltiness. In his book, *Differentiate or Die*, Jack Trout says, “If an organization does not have something unique to offer, it will die.”¹ What life-giving insights do Anabaptist Christians have to offer, and what is there for them to receive?

While programs and goals may change, the unique core values that bring an organization into being are sometimes said to be “sacred” and should not be changed.² What are the “sacred” core values of Anabaptist Christians? This booklet will explain them in the form of three key statements. They are:

¹ Jack Trout, *Differentiate or Die* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000).

² See James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, “Building Your Company’s Vision,” *Harvard Business Review* 74, no. 5 (September-October 1996).

1. **Jesus is the center of our faith.**
2. **Community is the center of our lives.**
3. **Reconciliation is the center of our work.**

Being a Christian from an Anabaptist perspective is a combination of *believing* in Jesus, *belonging* to community, and *behaving* in a reconciling way.³ Some things for which Anabaptists lived and died are now accepted and taken for granted by most Christians. Other practices and teachings may still seem challenging or perplexing. But more and more people are finding Anabaptist understandings of faith and practice to be very helpful as they seek to follow Jesus faithfully in today's world.

The three principles developed in this booklet are a modern-day adaptation of *The Anabaptist Vision*, a well-known statement made in 1943 by Harold S. Bender, then president of the American Society of Church History.⁴ Bender explained that from his understanding of Scripture and Anabaptist history:

1. Christianity is *discipleship*. It is following Jesus in everyday life.
2. The church is a *brotherhood* or *family*. Members not only commit themselves to Christ, but also individually and voluntarily to each other.
3. Followers of Jesus have an *ethic of love and nonresistance*. As transformed persons, they seek to be reconcilers who reject involvement in violence and war.

These three core values had multiple beginnings. This booklet will describe how they developed in history, and suggest how they apply to today's world. It will then present them in contrasting statements with questions for discussion. I readily recognize that I have emphasized the positive contributions of the early Anabaptists and minimized the negatives. My purpose here is to give inquiring persons an opportunity to ask and respond to the question, "What does an ideal Anabaptist Christian look like?"

I wish to express special appreciation to Jeff Wright, former conference minister for the Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference, who sparked the imagination for this work. I am also grateful for a theologically diverse group of persons, including my brother-in-

³ This alliteration of values is adapted from Grace Davie by Alan Kreider in his book, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 1999), xiv–xvi.

⁴ Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944).

law, Theodore A. Weathers; my insightful wife, Ardys; plus Myron Augsburg; David Martin; John Roth; James Reimer; André Gingerich Stoner; Alan Kreider; Marlene Kropf; John Rempel; David Pfrimmer; Neal Blough; and James Krabill, who vigorously critiqued various drafts of this paper. I take full personal responsibility, however, for the final content of this booklet, recognizing that many Christians will find themselves somewhere between the positions that I attempt to describe here.

Core Value #1: Jesus is the center of our faith



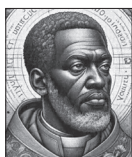
Jesus began his ministry in approximately 30 CE by gathering together a group of disciples. For three years these disciples lived, ate and worked together with Jesus. They observed how he cared for the poor, healed those who were ill, gave sight to the blind, forgave sinners, and taught the multitudes. During these years of ministry, and also in the days after his resurrection, Jesus became central to their faith and life. They came to *believe* in him as their Teacher, Savior and Lord in contrast to the teachers, saviors and masters of their time.

To be a Christian meant more to these early disciples than being a believer or worshiper. It meant being a Spirit-filled person who was obeying Jesus in daily life. Because of their commitment to Jesus and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, people noticed that they were being transformed to become Christ-like in their attitudes and lifestyles. If you had asked those first disciples, I believe they would have said with enthusiasm, *“Jesus Christ is the center of our faith!”*

For 250 years, the first Christians continued to experience the Spirit of Jesus in their midst. But then over the next centuries, so many changes were introduced to the Christian faith that it nearly became another religion.⁵ Two men, in particular, have become symbols for this shift. One was a politician. The other was a theologian.



Constantine, the politician,⁶ was the leader of the Roman Empire. As a result of having a spiritual experience in which he saw a vision of the cross, he stopped persecuting Christians and allowed Christianity to become a recognized religion of the Roman Empire. However, during his reign and afterward, people came to be judged more by the creed that they held rather than by the life that they lived.



Augustine, the theologian,⁷ came to importance some time later. He had a profound conversion experience and some would call him the greatest theologian of the Western church. But gradually, different

⁵ For a well-researched study of the changes to the process of incorporating new believers into church membership, see Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*.

⁶ For a biography of Constantine, see William Smith, ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, Vol. 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1974), 623-649.

⁷ For an outline of Augustine's life and theology, see Erwin Fahlbusch, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 159-165.

trends and perspectives emerged that were in contrast to the first disciples. Instead of focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus, the church shifted toward giving primary attention to the death of Christ. The Apostles' Creed, which came to prominence during this time, makes no mention of the teaching and ministry of Jesus. Instead of saying "*Jesus* is the center of our faith," the followers of Augustine tended to say, "*Christ's death* is the center of our faith."

Dramatic changes took place. While early Christians were a persecuted minority worshipping in secret, now they met in ornate buildings. While new converts in the first centuries underwent significant training, received adult baptism, and joined an alternative community, now infants were baptized and all citizens except Jews belonged to a church aligned with the government. Whereas the early church emphasized following Jesus, now the focus was on correct doctrine, elaborate ritual, and defending themselves against enemies. While members of the early church had shared their faith daily with their neighbors, now evangelism meant primarily extending the boundaries of the "Christian" empire. While the majority of early Christians had rejected military service, by the time of Augustine's death, only Christians were permitted in the Roman Army.

Between the years 1200 and 1500 CE, a variety of concerned persons and groups began to realize that there were serious inadequacies with widely accepted understandings of salvation and the church.

Martin Luther, a German monk, who was thoroughly schooled in Augustinian theology, was one of these reformers. Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss pastor, and John Calvin, a reformed theologian, were others. They came forward to introduce significant changes.



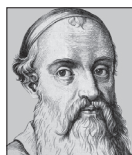
Luther was especially offended by the practices of priests and popes who offered forgiveness and deliverance from purgatory on the basis of works and by selling indulgences. On October 31, 1517, in an attempt to call for public debate, he nailed a list of 95 theses, or arguments, to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This act launched the Protestant Reformation.⁸

Luther and Zwingli affirmed the Scriptures as the sole authority for faith and practice, and insisted that salvation is by grace through faith alone. However, this salvation was largely understood to mean

⁸ John D. Roth, *Stories: How Mennonites Came to Be* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006). See chapter 2 for descriptions of the revolt, reform and renewal of the Reformation.

receiving eternal life. Some would call it soul salvation instead of whole salvation. While Christians were expected to respond in faithful service to God and neighbor, the church's teaching on following Jesus in daily life and of belonging to each other in community was not strongly emphasized.

Several students of Ulrich Zwingli, including Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz and George Blaurock, gathered regularly for Bible study in Zürich, Switzerland. Hans Hut, Hans Denck, Pilgram Marpeck and Jakob Hutter were on a similar pilgrimage in South Germany and Moravia. Somewhat later, **Menno Simons**, a former Catholic priest, taught and coordinated groups that were emerging in the Netherlands.⁹



These students of the Bible continued their studies of Jesus and the first disciples. Hebrews 12:2, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith,” became central for many. 1 Corinthians 3:11, “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ,” became the motto for Menno Simons. In time, the Sermon on the Mount, when empowered by the Holy Spirit, was seen as being normative for the Christian life.

While these first Anabaptist Christians affirmed the Apostles' Creed and much of what Luther and Zwingli were preaching, they wanted to go further. They preferred to talk about being “born again” rather than about being “justified by faith.” While salvation was indeed by the grace of God, they called for a more radical response of obedience on the part of believers. They insisted that salvation, made possible by Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, should lead to the transformation of a person's moral, social and economic life. Adult baptism became a sign that this salvation and transformation had taken place. If you had asked those first Anabaptist Christians, I believe they would have joined with the first disciples in saying “*Jesus Christ is the center of our faith!*”

What does this mean for us today? Christians from an Anabaptist perspective seek to apply their understanding of Jesus in three important ways:

1. Jesus is to be followed in daily life

Being a Christian means more than having a spiritual experience, affirm-

⁹ For further understanding on the various streams of Anabaptism, see C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997).

ing a creed, or being justified before God. To be a Christian means to follow Jesus in daily life. Christians from an Anabaptist perspective say, “Christianity is discipleship!” In German it is *Nachfolge Christi* or “following after Christ.” Hans Denck, an early Anabaptist, stated it clearly when he said, “No one can truly know Christ unless they follow after him in daily life, and no one can follow Christ in daily life unless they truly know him.”¹⁰

Salvation, in the Anabaptist tradition, means being transformed from an old way of life to a life that exemplifies the spirit and actions of Jesus. Salvation is not merely a change of God’s attitude toward us. It is a change in our attitudes and actions toward God, toward people, and toward the world. This change is made possible by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who empowers disciples to follow Jesus in daily life.

Many Christians, even after salvation, continue to see themselves as hopeless sinners, who are unable to live a victorious transformed life. Some say, “I’m not different. I am only forgiven.” Christians from an Anabaptist perspective disagree. They believe that the teachings and Spirit of Jesus make it possible for committed followers to be transformed and to overcome the powers of evil. They are encouraged to a radical following of Jesus in daily life.

2. The Bible is interpreted from a Christ-centered point of view

Many Christians have what might be called a “flat” Bible, which assumes that the words of God as understood by Moses in the Old Testament hold the same authority as the words of Jesus in the New Testament. When political or social issues such as war, capital punishment, or treatment of deviant people are encountered, those with a “flat” Bible often claim Old Testament texts as the basis for their belief and action, even when these texts differ from the teachings of Jesus.

Other Christians interpret the Scriptures from a dispensational point of view. To know God’s will, they must first know for which dispensation or period of time a passage was revealed. In this approach, obedience to the teachings of Jesus as found in the Sermon on the Mount is generally postponed until the kingdom age of Christ’s return.

¹⁰ For primary sources related to themes that were important to the Anabaptists, see Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981).

During the present time, Jesus receives worship, but not daily obedience.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective seek to interpret all Scripture from an ethical Christ-centered point of view. Jesus is seen as the fullest revelation of God and God's will, which means that sometimes the teachings of Jesus transcend previous teachings. Jesus himself said, "You have heard it said ... but I say to you ..." (Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38 and 43). Likewise, the writer of Hebrews declares, "In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son ... who is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being ..." (1:1-3). Missionary Peter Kehler once said, "If all the Scriptures do is introduce me to Jesus Christ, that is enough!"¹¹

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective affirm that all Scripture is inspired, but they are not strict literalists. They seek to hold the written word and the Spirit of Jesus in creative tension. All Scripture needs to be interpreted in the Spirit of Jesus. Followers of Jesus get into trouble when they either elevate *the written word* over the Spirit, or raise *the Spirit* above the word. Word and Spirit need to be held together.¹²

While Christians from an Anabaptist perspective see the Scriptures as the ultimate source of information, they see Jesus as the final authority for faith and life. He is Lord of Scripture and is normative for both personal and social ethics. No text is an authority other than in the way it is honestly related to the teaching and Spirit of Jesus. Thus, when Anabaptist-minded Christians face an ethical question, they go first to Jesus for their primary guidance and then to other Scriptures for further background and understanding. If two passages of Scripture seem to disagree, they let Jesus be the referee!

3. Jesus is accepted as both Savior and Lord

Many Christians affirm Jesus as their personal Savior from sin, but place less emphasis on following him as Lord in daily life. They look to Jesus as Savior from personal bad habits, but when they face larger social or political problems, they give their obedience to an employer, civic leader, military general or president. As a result, many Christians today are more obedient to the commands of earthly leaders than they are to those given by Jesus.

¹¹ Peter Kehler. He served in Taiwan, 1959-1975 and 1991-1993.

¹² See Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 23-24, 72-73, 140ff.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that government needs to be obeyed to the extent that Christian discipleship will allow. Government's purpose is to preserve life and create order in a secular world. Obedience to laws does not mean that we give blind obedience to whatever government commands. Since our highest loyalty always belongs to Jesus and the kingdom of God, we may on occasion need to disobey a government order because it is contrary to the teaching and spirit of Jesus. When there is a conflict between the ways of Jesus and the ways of Caesar, we say with the early disciples, "We must obey God rather than any human authority"¹³ (Acts 5:29).

In summary, Christians from an Anabaptist perspective are a *believing* people who seek to:

1. Follow Jesus in daily life.
2. Interpret the Scriptures in the Spirit of Jesus.
3. Promise their highest loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is at the center of their faith. Are you an Anabaptist Christian?

Core Value #2: Community is the center of our life

One of the first things that **Jesus** did when he began his ministry was to form a community. He invited Peter and Andrew and then James and John to join him. Soon, there were many followers from whom he chose 12 disciples. They learned, ate, traveled and served together until at Pentecost they became the core of a new society called the church. In Acts 2, we note that the first believers met day by day, not only in the Temple, but also in their homes where they ate with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of the people.

The New Testament church provided an alternate way of living to both the religious and political realities of that day. This way of life was taught and celebrated in the temple court and was discussed and applied in home groups.

By referring to his followers in family terms, it became evident



¹³ John H. Redekop, *Politics Under God* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007). See especially chapter 6, "What does God require of governments?"

that Jesus wanted his followers to not only *believe* in him, but also to have a strong sense of *belonging* to each other. Observers were amazed at what God did in and through these groups of early Christians. They had the gifts, insights and courage to continue doing what Jesus had begun to do while he was with them. If you would have asked those first followers of Jesus, I believe they would have said, “*Christ-centered community is the center of our life!*”

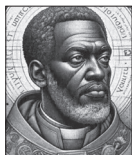
Instead of stressing the church as a family of brothers and sisters that met together for Bible study, sharing, prayer and worship, **Constantine** emphasized the church as an organization that met in large, impersonal sanctuaries. Wealthy men, who hitherto had resisted conversion, were willing to join a church that was associated with the emperor. Large numbers of people were baptized whether or not they were true followers of Jesus. As a result, instead of the church being in the world, “the world” came into the church.

With the encouragement and help of his mother, Constantine began building large churches in Rome and on the sites of Jesus’ birth and death. Soon, church buildings were erected in nearly every town. Instead of saying, “Christ-centered community is the center of our life,” Christians began to say, “A church building is in the center of our city.”

Augustine struggled hard to nurture a personal life of obedience in the context of a society that considered everyone to be a Christian. For him and his followers, it was impossible to distinguish between those who belonged to the body of Christ and those who did not. “The wheat and the weeds grow together,” he said.

Instead of experiencing the presence of Christ in community, Augustine emphasized experiencing the presence of God through the sacraments. A sacramental faith developed in which to be forgiven of original sin, one needed the ritual of baptism. To be forgiven of ongoing sin, believers needed the mass. As centuries passed, the understanding developed that to be released from purgatory, one needed to pray to the saints, give money to poor people, and buy grants from the pope.

Over time, the idea of belonging to Christ and to each other in close-knit community was largely lost. Those who wanted to follow Jesus obediently and to experience close community chose to become monks and nuns who lived in monasteries and convents. This gave the impression that following Jesus in daily life and living relationally in Christ-centered community was impossible for common people.

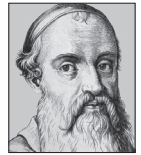


Martin Luther and other reformers originally intended to reform the church to its biblical basis. They separated themselves from Rome, and in their preaching of the Bible, they began emphasizing the priesthood of all believers. Many followers of Luther and Zwingli also became eager to free themselves from the cruel feudal systems of the time. When some peasants took up arms to challenge the unjust practices of the feudal lords and princes, Luther and Zwingli, in the interest of maintaining order, sided with the rulers. While they admonished rulers of their responsibilities toward the poor, they unintentionally forged a new alliance between church and state. In the process, they lost the confidence of many peasants.



Luther and Zwingli were prevented by the Peasants' War and other political circumstances from implementing many of their intended reforms. They continued with the basic structures of Constantine and the theology of Augustine, retained the state church as the polity of the church, the sanctuary as the structure of the church, infant baptism as the introductory rite into the church, the use of the sword by government as the tool for discipline, and the private interpretation of a flat Bible as the primary way of knowing God's will.

Early Anabaptists, including **Menno Simons**, were disappointed with the incompleteness of the Reformation. They did not want to merely *reform* the church back to the structures set in motion by Constantine and the theology of Augustine. They wanted to *restore* the church to its original New Testament pattern and form. They believed that the church needed to be an independent and alternate society in the world.



Due to persecution, early Anabaptists, like the first believers in the early church, were forced to meet in secret for Bible study, sharing, prayer and worship. In homes and secret settings, they often experienced Christ in their midst. As new believers placed their faith in Jesus Christ and pledged to follow him in daily life, they were baptized and received into a specific congregation where they had a strong sense of belonging.

These small groups had a powerful witness in their communities. After a study of 62 doctoral dissertations on Anabaptist beginnings and thought, Pastor Takashi Yamada, a scholar from Japan, came to believe that "the uniqueness of both the Early Church and the early

Anabaptists was that they met in small groups where they confronted each other and made each other strong enough to confront the world.”¹⁴

Anabaptist Christians spoke repeatedly of the power to live differently. They expected a “saintly life” from all their members and especially from their leaders. Rather than merely being free of guilt, they described faithful Christians as those who were living Spirit-filled, ethical lives. Those who stopped following Jesus in daily life or persisted in non-Christ-like living were excommunicated from the body of Christ.

The Anabaptists saw the church as being composed of transformed believers who were committed to Jesus and each other in covenant communities. Both Protestant and Catholic leaders viewed this as a threat to the established church. As a result, they imprisoned and severely persecuted many Anabaptists. More than 4,000 were drowned, beheaded, or burned at the stake as martyrs for their faith.¹⁵

Much diversity was evident among these early Anabaptists. Some were overly concerned about the end times. Others reverted to using violence. A group in the city of Münster, Germany, went so far as to replace the elected city council with 12 elders who declared themselves to be the New Israel, introduced polygamy, and took up arms in self-defense. This action by a fringe Anabaptist group placed a negative reputation upon Anabaptist and Mennonite Christians that has in some circles persisted until the present time.

The early Anabaptists’ strong sense of belonging to Jesus and their loyal support of each other helped them to live devoted ethical lives in the context of a hostile world. If you would have asked them, I believe they would have said with the first disciples, “*Christ-centered community is the center of our life!*”

In today’s world, Christians with an Anabaptist perspective understand and practice Christ-centered community in three distinct ways:

1. Forgiveness is essential for community

Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. He prayed fervently that we would be one with each other even as he is one with the Father. A warm sense of community and all the benefits pertaining to it emerge when members of the body of Christ are com-

¹⁴ This quote is taken from a personal conversation at a Mennonite World Conference meeting in Wichita, Kansas, 1978.

¹⁵ See Roth, *Stories: How Mennonites Came to Be*, chapter 4.

mitted to asking each other for forgiveness. Confession and forgiveness remove the barriers that prevent fellowship with God and with each other. Anabaptist Christians believe that forgiveness is essential for creating and nurturing community.

The central problem of humanity is not the lack of finances, the lack of education or the lack of power. The central problem is that we offend each other. From the very beginning of time, human beings, both as individuals and as groups, have offended God and each other through their attitudes and actions. The result has been broken relationships with God, with each other, with our inner selves and with the whole earth.

The turning point in resolving an offense usually comes when one party sincerely repents and asks for forgiveness. Unfortunately, in the non-Christian world, attempts are made to forget without forgiving. Often, denial and defensiveness take the place of honest confession and forgiveness.

2. The Scriptures are interpreted in community

Many Christians limit themselves to the private study of Scriptures and then proclaim to others what they have personally understood them to say. When individuals limit themselves to such private interpretation, they often arrive at and proclaim confusing and false understandings of Scripture.

Other Christians see trained pastors, priests and instructors as being the only ones who are capable of properly interpreting the Scriptures. As a result, lay people often neglect personal study and application.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that the Scriptures need to be studied both privately and in the context of a Spirit-guided community where fellow believers give and receive counsel. Generally, community members who come together in small groups, classes and conferences in the Spirit of Christ can best determine what a Scripture is saying to them about a particular situation.

3. Community is experienced in face-to-face groups

The church has sometimes been described as a two-winged bird. One wing represents the larger worshiping community where vertical relationships with our transcendent, holy God are emphasized. The other wing represents small face-to-face groups where close horizontal relationships are emphasized.¹⁶ Both wings are needed.

¹⁶ William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century* (Houston, TX: Touch Outreach Ministries, 1998), 25-26.

Some aspects of Christian living happen best in relational groups of 12 or fewer people. This is often true as we give and receive counsel, discern gifts for mission, and have fun and fellowship. Healthy congregations are structured for community. They are often networks of small groups. Some would go so far as to say that the small group is the basic unit of the church.¹⁷

In summary, Christians from an Anabaptist perspective experience *Christ-centered community as the center of their life*. They tend to see:

1. Forgiveness as being essential for community.
2. Dialogue and group discernment as necessary for the interpretation of Scripture.
3. Small face-to-face groups as central to the life of the church.

Believing in Jesus, *belonging* to the church, and *behaving* in a new way become real in the context of community.¹⁸

Are you an Anabaptist-minded Christian?

Core Value #3: Reconciliation is the center of our work



God sent his Son, **Jesus**, as the solution to the problem of sin. Jesus came to reconcile all those who would respond to God and to each other. He addressed brokenness and injustice of all kinds, and trained a group of followers who became ambassadors of reconciliation.

Jesus outlined specific steps for reconciliation within the faith community as recorded in Matthew 18:15-20. Offended persons and groups are to go to each other one-to-one to seek a solution to the presenting problem. If the injustice or offense remains unresolved, further steps are to be taken enlisting more community members.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples that peace and justice come through seeking first the kingdom, repenting of wrong, and treating people as they themselves would like to be treated.

¹⁷ For more on the theology and practice of small groups, see Palmer Becker, *Called to Care* and *Called to Equip* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

¹⁸ See Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, xiv-xvi.

“Don’t just love those who love you,” Jesus said. “Even the pagans do that much! Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-48). Jesus meant what he said and he meant it for us! Being a follower of Jesus means *behaving* in a new way.

At the end of his ministry, Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21). “Go into all the world and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-20). As a result, the early disciples went throughout the known world preaching, teaching and practicing a new way of life so that people everywhere might be reconciled to God and to each other.

One of the greatest challenges facing early Christians was the racial, religious and cultural conflict between Jews and Gentiles. After seeing people from diverse backgrounds being filled with the Spirit and coming into the family of God, the Apostles agreed that it was through faith in Christ, not laws and rituals, that people from different backgrounds would become one body and develop a culture of peace.

For the first several hundred years, followers of Jesus refused to engage in military combat. They understood that they were under orders to love their enemies, not kill them. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,” said the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18. If you would have asked the first Christians, I believe they would have said, *“Reconciling people to God and to each other is the center of our work!”*

When **Constantine** began to merge church and state, major changes came to the church. Jesus had said, “My kingdom is not of this world,” yet Constantine was a king. Over time, the difference between the voluntary kingdom ruled by Jesus and the kingdom ruled by the emperor became blurred. The clear convictions of the early Christians were compromised. Within the church some became rich and others became poor. Christians became persecutors. The former peacemakers went to war. Instead of spending their energies on evangelism, peacemaking and ministry, enormous amounts of energy were given to constructing great cathedrals in nearly every province of Europe. Constructing these buildings became the center of their work.

Augustine was very concerned about personal moral issues such as drunkenness, covetousness, gambling and adultery, but his teaching and practice related to peace and justice were severely restricted in a church



closely linked to the empire. Instead of seeking reconciliation with enemies, Augustine came to believe that the Christian faith needed to be defended against them. A “just war” theory developed, which permitted Christians, in certain situations, to participate in violence and war. This approach to war has remained the position of many Christian traditions.

Luther, Zwingli and Calvin did much that was good. Luther developed the idea of the “community chest,” and Calvin sought to influence society to live by Christian principles. However, they, like Augustine, emphasized personal forgiveness and obedience to the Ten Commandments, but provided less specific teaching and practice related to transforming grace, evangelism and peacemaking.

Early Anabaptist Christians under the leadership of **Menno Simons** and others struggled to find common understandings on how to live as the body of Christ in the world. They came to believe that due to the work of the Holy Spirit and their commitment to each other, followers of Jesus could become Christ-like and *behave* in a Christ-like way.

Early Anabaptists often assembled in homes and small group settings where they sensed the Spirit’s presence and studied the Scriptures as a basis for giving each other counsel on how to live. Anabaptists wanted the Scriptures to be their only “weapon.” In their studies they emphasized economic sharing, peace with God, peace with each other, and peace with their enemies.

The Anabaptist movement was in some ways the charismatic or Holy Spirit movement of the Reformation era.¹⁹ Anabaptist leaders spoke more about the transforming power of the Holy Spirit than did the other reformers. They believed that the Holy Spirit empowered them for discipleship, evangelism, peacemaking, and living the simple life.

The Anabaptist movement was also the evangelistic movement of the 16th century. With persistence and passion, key leaders – at the cost of their lives – went throughout Europe seeking to reconcile people to God and to each other.²⁰ By the thousands, people came to a personal relationship with Jesus, and joined the Anabaptist fellowships that were springing up throughout much of Europe.

In addition, Anabaptists also played key roles in promoting the cause of social justice in their day. Many local groups within the move-

¹⁹ Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), chapter 4, “The Age of the Spirit.”

²⁰ Hyoun Min Kim, *Sixteenth-Century Anabaptist Evangelism* (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2002).

ment were known for their economic sharing and their emphasis on treating people justly. Their leaders and followers addressed many of the economic and social concerns being raised by peasants who were revolting against the dictatorial nature of the feudal system. Small fellowships functioned as alternative societies to both the Empire and the feudal system. It was inconceivable that genuine followers of Jesus, who had been transformed by the Spirit of God and baptized into the one body of Christ, would cling to surplus goods or wealth when they saw fellow members in need.²¹

Through the study of Scripture and an unwavering commitment to following Jesus in everyday life, Anabaptist Christians came to believe that it was wrong to participate in war. Like the early disciples, they refused to join the military even though Muslim Turks were attempting to invade Europe. Rather than fighting back against their enemies, Anabaptists chose to follow the example of Jesus, who “did not retaliate when people hurled their insults at him and made no threats when he suffered” (1 Peter 2:23).

If you would have asked them, I believe that Menno Simons and most early Anabaptist Christians would have joined the first disciples in saying, “*Reconciling people to God and to each other is the center of our work!*”

What does this mean for us today? Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that:

1. We are to help reconcile people to God

Just as God took the initiative in Jesus Christ to reconcile us to himself and to each other, so God is asking us to take the initiative to do our part in reconciling others to him in our Jerusalems, Judeas, Samarias, and broader worlds. God has given us the ministry of reconciliation!

Present-day Christians from an Anabaptist perspective are commissioned to make disciples, to baptize them, and to instruct them in all that Jesus lived and taught. They want their acquaintances to *believe* in Jesus, to *belong* to a Christ-centered community, and to *behave* in a transformed way.

When seekers “surrender as much of themselves as they can to as much of Christ as they can understand,” they are born again.²² They

²¹ For a contemporary application of how discipleship relates to issues of justice and social action, see Ronald J. Sider, *I Am Not a Social Activist* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008).

²² Samuel Shoemaker, *How to Become a Christian* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 71.

are given a new start in life. They have new values and Holy Spirit empowerment to live those values.

Being reconciled to God leads to transformed living. Jesus changes the thinking, the friendships and the behaviors of those who accept him. They become transformed mentally, emotionally, physically, socially and politically. This places them in stark contrast to the world.

2. We are to help reconcile people to each other

Reconciling people not only to God but also to each other is at the center of our work. This may mean exploring the cause of a conflict and helping the parties to reconcile that conflict through careful listening, honest confession, unselfish forgiving, and appropriate restitution.

Forgiveness removes the walls of offense that exist not only between us and God, but also between us and others in the church. Eating the Lord's Supper together becomes a fellowship experience made possible by the forgiveness that we have received from God and each other.

Christians are to be a blessing to people of all backgrounds, genders and convictions. When we encounter individuals or groups in conflict with one another, we are to "think reconciliation" rather than judgment. But we cannot help others to go farther than we ourselves have gone. Even as we seek to help others to be reconciled, we must keep growing in our own understanding of how we need to be changed.

3. We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world

Evangelism and peacemaking are brought together in the concept of reconciliation. While some Christians say that evangelism is at the center of our work and others place peacemaking there, it might be best to say that "*reconciliation is the center of our work!*" The purposes of God are "to reconcile to himself all things through Christ" (Colossians 1:19).

It is due to their view of salvation as transformation that today's Anabaptist Christians refuse to be involved in war. Modern warfare trains soldiers to lie, to hate and to destroy. Transformed people do not do such things.

Peacemaking is not the same as appeasement. As transformed followers of Jesus, we are to "fight" evil and injustice as vigorously or more than anyone else, but we need to "fight" differently. We are challenged to say with the Apostle Paul, "... though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

History and experience indicate that violence generally leads to more violence. Violence can only be reduced by nonviolence and by correcting the injustices that motivate it. At all times and in all situations, we are called to imitate the example and spirit of Jesus. Jesus used words, caregiving and nonviolent action, not guns and bombs, to reconcile conflict and to draw people into God's family. Our attitude "should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

Reconciliation is hard work. It calls us to be willing to give our lives so that people in our world can be reconciled to God, to each other, and even to their enemies. But there is no greater joy than to live a reconciled life and to bring others into a reconciled relationship with God and each other.

In summary, Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe they are called to:

1. Help reconcile people to God.
2. Help reconcile people to each other.
3. Serve as God's ambassadors of reconciliation in the world.

Reconciliation is at the center of their work. Are you an Anabaptist Christian?

Conclusion

What are we to think of the Anabaptist understanding of the Christian faith? What can we learn from it? One hundred years ago, Professor Rufus M. Jones claimed that "the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, which are so essential to democracy, are derived from the Anabaptist movement of the Reformation period. These courageous leaders clearly enunciated these principles and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice."²³

Do the following statements summarize your understandings of the Christian faith? If they do, you are a Christian from an Anabaptist perspective!

²³ Quoted in Guy F. Hershberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 29-30. This volume also includes a wealth of essays on the rise and theology of Anabaptism.

Jesus is the center of my faith.

- ☐ I fix my eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of my faith.
- ☐ I interpret the Scriptures from an ethical Christocentric point of view.
- ☐ I see Christianity as discipleship, and seek to follow Jesus in daily life.

Community is the center of my life.

- ☐ I believe forgiveness makes community possible.
- ☐ I study the Scriptures with others to discern their applications for our time.
- ☐ I affirm that face-to-face groups are essential to a healthy church.

Reconciliation is the center of my work.

- ☐ I am called to help reconcile people to God through faith in Jesus.
- ☐ I believe that reconciliation includes both evangelism and peacemaking.
- ☐ I reject all forms of injustice and violence, and encourage peaceful alternatives to war and other conflicts.

Perspectives and questions for discussion

Core Value #1: Jesus is the center of our faith

Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.
(Hebrews 12:2)

Many Christians emphasize:	Anabaptist Christians emphasize:
1. Christ's death Many Christians focus primarily on the holiness of God and the need for personal salvation. They emphasize "Christ came to die" and focus less on the life, teachings and empowering Spirit of Jesus. Christianity is primarily forgiveness.	1. Christ's life Anabaptist Christians affirm the holiness and forgiving grace of God, but emphasize that "Jesus came to live." His death resulted in part from the way he lived. Jesus as Risen Lord empowers us to follow him in life. Christianity is primarily discipleship.
Do you agree with the statement, "Christianity is discipleship?"	
2. A "flat" Bible Many Christians tend to see the Scriptures, rather than Jesus, as their final authority. Guidance for daily living comes from various Scriptures that seem to fit the situation. All decisions do not need to coincide with the teachings and Spirit of Jesus.	2. A "Christ-centered" Bible Anabaptists affirm that while all Scripture is inspired, Jesus is the fullest revelation of God and the final authority for decision-making. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament, and is the norm for both personal and social ethics.
Explain the difference between a "flat" and a "Christ-centered" Bible.	
3. Government as final authority Many Christians believe that since government leaders are ordained of God, they must be obeyed even if their demands are contrary to the teachings of Jesus or the dictates of conscience.	3. Jesus as final authority Anabaptists recognize that government is ordained of God to preserve life and maintain order in a secular world. However, the demands of government shall not overrule the Lordship of Jesus.
What does it mean for you to say, "Jesus is Lord?"	

Core Value #2:
Community is the center of our lives

*Every day ...
they broke bread in their homes
and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,
praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.
(Acts 2:46-47)*

Many Christians emphasize:	Anabaptist Christians emphasize:
1. Vertical forgiveness Many Christians focus more on vertical forgiveness from God than on horizontal forgiveness from each other. Forgiveness is seen as a means for receiving individual salvation and eternal life.	1. Horizontal forgiveness Christians need both vertical forgiveness from God and horizontal forgiveness from each other. Forgiveness builds community and is a means to peaceful relationships with each other.
How does forgiveness contribute to community?	
2. Individual interpretation Many Christians seek to interpret the Scriptures out of their own understanding and experience. On the other hand, some rely almost totally on trained teachers or pastors to interpret the Scripture for them.	2. Corporate interpretation Anabaptists believe that individual study of Scripture must be combined with group study. Group members commit themselves to giving and receiving counsel from others in the Spirit of Jesus.
In what ways do you study the Bible together in your church?	
3. Meet in sanctuaries Many Christians tend to think of the worshiping congregation as the basic unit of the church. Often, the church is seen as a structure, an organization, or as a Sunday morning performance.	3. Meet in small groups Anabaptist Christians tend to see the church as a family. Healthy churches are often organized as networks of small groups in which members fellowship, study, share and pray together.
If small face-to-face groups are basic to the life of a healthy church, how might they become a greater reality in your congregation?	

Core Value #3: Reconciliation is the center of our work

*All this is from God, who reconciled us
to himself through Christ
and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.
(2 Corinthians 5:18)*

Many Christians emphasize:	Anabaptist Christians emphasize:
1. Justification by faith Many Christians primarily emphasize the holiness of God and the need to be justified through faith in the sacrificial work of Christ. Conversion means being forgiven for sin and destined for heaven.	1. Transformation of life Anabaptist Christians tend to emphasize the loving/nurturing nature of God. They desire to be transformed by the Spirit to become Christ-like in attitude and action. Conversion means being reconciled to God and empowered to live like Jesus in daily life.
Both natures of God are equally important. Which nature do you emphasize?	
2. Personal salvation Many Christians tend to think of reconciliation in personal terms. Peacemaking and social action are add-ons rather than essential to the gospel.	2. Reconciled living Anabaptists tend to think of reconciliation in both personal and social terms. Evangelism and peacemaking come together in the term reconciliation.
What are the steps for mediation as outlined in Matthew 18?	
3. Military service Many Christians obey authority even if it requires actions contrary to the teachings of Jesus and conscience. Some believe in "redemptive violence" and the just war theory. When the government asks them to perform military service, they accept to do so.	3. Alternative service Anabaptists obey authority insofar as obedience to Christ will allow. They will refuse orders to participate in violence. Correcting injustices and being reconciled to enemies are important. Alternatives to military service that seek to resolve conflict are strongly encouraged.
What are some peacemaking alternatives to military service?	

Anabaptist Voices

Sharing the life of Jesus with others

By **Fernando Pérez Ventura**

Translated by Linda Shelly



In commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism, Palmer Becker's three theses of Anabaptism — “Jesus is the center of our faith,” “community is the center of our lives” and “reconciliation is the center of our work” — can be used as a guide to describe how Anabaptism continues to be an important alternative amid our religious and social contexts today.

These principles of the Anabaptist identity are still relevant in today's world, marked by violence, poverty, inequality, alienation and social polarization. They also offer an ethical and spiritual perspective that brings security, hope and certainty.

Is Jesus still the center of our faith today?

Jesus' message in the gospels can be helpful in dealing with today's wars and political and social polarizations. Jesus highlighted the importance of love and compassion in his teachings. He encouraged his followers to embody these qualities and extend them to everyone, regardless of their background, social status or beliefs. In fact, Jesus' message of love goes beyond human relationships, for he also emphasized love for God, oneself and creation (Luke 10:27). Throughout his ministry, Jesus emphasized the importance of loving one another. He taught that love should guide all actions and be the foundation of all relationships.

He famously proclaimed, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34 NRSV).

Faith invites us to question and seek answers to our questions. This conviction and certainty are not dependent on concepts but on the very person of Jesus. In many places today, faith is centered on the miraculous acts of God and doctrinal concepts, while neglecting the very person of Jesus. Faith, when it is centered on the person of Jesus, penetrates to the marrow, confronting those thoughts and feelings that can distort our walk. Indeed, only in his person does faith strengthen us and make us aware of who Jesus is in our lives, so that nothing distracts us from our responsibility as his disciples. Having this faith, we can understand that the person of Jesus will sustain us in our walk, no matter what.

We must ask ourselves today, is Jesus the center of our faith? Or is it worship? The temple? The pastor? Theology? If Anabaptists declare that “Jesus is the center of our faith,” we are declaring a life experience with him every day!

Is community really the center of our life today?

We cannot continue to live with the illusion that Anabaptist faith communities routinely live a communal life and project that we are doing our best as followers of Jesus. This is a tremendous self-deception. The renewal of the community is necessary. How many young people attend our churches on Sundays? Or how many young people are committed to faith in the person of Jesus? The question is not whether we are working with young people. Nor is it to think that, if some young people participate in a faith community, they do not have conflicts in their meetings. The situation is that faith communities have lost social and religious relevance today.

The concept of community comes from the Greek word *koinonia*, and its meaning can shed light on the opportunities we have to be and make community. *Koinonia* not only means community or having things in common but also having personal relationships among all the members of the community, even if they have different economic, social and educational levels. Other Greek words that have the same root, for example, are *koine*, “common” or “ordinary,” and *koitē*, “deep knowledge between people.” In this context, the community of faith is the space of deep and ordinary knowledge among all the participants

in the community. It is not only about attending the meeting to sing but also about the need to relate to one another, to know one another, to help one another, to support one another. It is important not only to read the Bible or fulfill a liturgical program but also to encounter brothers and sisters who present themselves before God to learn how to follow Jesus where he has placed us, whether at work, in school, in neighborhoods, at church or at home.

Reconciliation is the heart of our work or mission

Reconciliation is a central theme for Anabaptism, and it is critical to connect it to current challenges. Here are some ideas for connecting the issues:

The mission of reconciliation can be applied in mediation and conflict resolution efforts at the global level. Anabaptists can actively participate in peace and reconciliation initiatives in conflict zones. Reconciliation is also crucial in addressing social polarization. We can promote forgiveness and understanding between different groups and help heal deep divisions in society. Reconciliation can offer an alternative to violence, promoting dialogue, empathy and understanding.

Reconciliation is not only an end in itself but a means to achieve God's mission in the world. Anabaptist mission can be understood as the restoration of the relationship between God, human beings and creation. Anabaptism can offer a holistic perspective, emphasizing the interconnectedness of creation and the need to care for the earth and its resources, with restorative justice, compassion and love.

Giving ourselves to the transforming power of Christ

By **Bercie Mundedi**

Translated by Rod Hollinger-Janzen



We cannot speak about the importance of being an Anabaptist Christian without speaking briefly about what an Anabaptist Christian is.

Anabaptist Christian is the name given to a Christian movement that emerged in the early 16th century, having grown from leaders of the Radical Reformation. An Anabaptist is someone who has been rebaptized. Sixteenth century Anabaptists promoted a second baptism — at the time, infants were routinely baptized — because they believed that only adults could make the choice to follow Jesus, not infants. Anabaptist belief is based on Jesus, who is the center of our faith; community, which is the center of our lives; and reconciliation, which is the center of our mission. Truly, it is here that we see the importance of being Anabaptist, so that we may teach the principles and values of Anabaptism to others. Our common goal is to be transformed into the image of Christ.

Today, and in general, the world is characterized by injustice, hatred, tribalism, violence and other forms of abuse against others. Our Christian communities are not free from these abuses. Facing this reality, it is important to be an Anabaptist Christian, because we are responsible to fully play our role, which is nothing less than to demonstrate a way of life modeled by Jesus Christ in our daily lives.

We are called to follow through on the responsibilities of a conscientious Christian by:

1. Proclaiming the good news of Christ.

This is a mission mandate, which consists not only of proclaiming the good news of Christ but also forming and instructing people toward transformation in the image of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). Our teachings must be centered on Christ, because he is the foundation of our very existence and our lives. Teachings centered on Christ allow people to commit themselves and be transformed, thus overcoming the power of evil. They are encouraged to radically follow Jesus in their daily lives. In Christ, we receive salvation, leading to a change in our behaviors, our private lives and our collective life. This is important, in a world where even preachers say, “Do what I say, but don’t do what I do!” Let’s teach everything, while being a model for others to follow. Also, when Jesus orders us to make disciples, this doesn’t mean just calling on those who are already converted! Making disciples means that we abandon our identity, our security and our being to the lordship of Christ. This kind of consecration is not limited to an outer conformity or a religion; it must touch our inner being. Mission must also take account of everything that a nation does and what that nation is, including the deepest parts of its culture.

2. Defending Anabaptist Christian faith in our generation.

It is legitimate and necessary to defend the faith, because in every epoch, Christianity has been exposed to attack. The word “defense” is not employed here in a negative way. It simply means taking account that, whatever system someone is referring to, the system is in contact with people of that period and needs to provide satisfactory responses to the questions asked of it. It’s important to create spaces for discussion regarding the errors present in one’s era that are opposed to Christ. But so often, we limit ourselves to condemning the errors. It is important for Anabaptists to be influencers for the spirit of listening in the world today, to be men and women who resolve problems and provide solutions. This spirit of attentive listening must begin in families, churches and all communities of people to stop the hemorrhaging of this age, including violence of all kinds and other abuses among humans. Defending the faith in a conscientious and reflective manner must take place with the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit,

who can free people from demonic slavery. The presence of the Holy Spirit does not take away our responsibility as Anabaptist Christian parents, pastors, evangelists or teachers. It's important to defend our faith while maintaining a clear conscience. We do that by knowing who we are and how to resolve the problems of our day with love.

Congolese values

In addition to these Anabaptist emphases, I would like to share some values that Congolese peoples embody, which shape how we practice our faith, and which the world desperately needs.

First, we have a profound sense of community and mutual care. People often live with the conviction that they belong to a large family. This community spirit implies the following elements:

- The sense of belonging
- Group cohesion
- Good relationships with others
- Collective actions for everyone's well-being.

These elements favor a network of support, through which individuals take care of one another, generally share hospitality and carry one another's burdens. This kind of connectivity can inspire other people to build strong communities across the world.

Second, we have a vibrant faith in God. Even if this faith is not always founded on Jesus Christ, many Congolese believe deeply that "all life is life," and comes from God. "All life is life" means that life, at whatever stage one is in, whether in misery and poverty, or in prosperity and abundance, is a gift from God and evokes gratitude and hope in God. This faith gives us resilience and helps us overcome life's challenges. This is why they say in Lingala, *ekosimba kaka*, "It will be alright." This is also a reminder to others, to pursue the goal of peace through their own spiritual beliefs.

Third, we have an appreciation for music and dance, which celebrates life in all its forms. Whether at a time of struggle or joy, music and dance are integral parts of Congolese culture. Music and dance permit a person to express emotions, tell stories and gather people. This celebration of life, through art, encourages people to embrace creativity and joy, even amid difficulties. This is a joy that comes from giving oneself, instead of from pleasure based in egotism, which seeks personal satisfaction that leads to an empty feeling.

In learning to join with others and focus on others' needs, we find the most satisfaction in God, who fulfills our every need (John 15:11).

"A church founded on Christ": Six markers of Anabaptism in Ethiopia¹

By Henok T. Mekonin



The Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), “a church founded on Christ,” began as a church with 10 people’s water-baptisms in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1951.² MKC now consists of 1,400 congregations and 922 church-planting centers, comprising 450,793 baptized members, 63,586 believers under instruction in preparation for baptism and 247,091 not-yet-baptized children — totaling a faith community of 761,470. The MKC head office in Addis Ababa gives general oversight to 53 regional offices and administers special programs in collaboration with the regions. All these programs reflect MKC’s Anabaptist roots. The various ministries also illustrate how mission is integral to MKC’s identity with its integration of evangelism and social activism. The church continually demonstrates this commitment by focusing on the following six markers.

¹ An earlier version of this essay was published as Henok T. Mekonin, “Anabaptism in Ethiopia: Six markers of the Meserete Kristos Church.” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 84-89. Used by permission of the Vision publishers.

² Desalegn Abebe Ejo and Kebede Bekere, “Ensuring Sustainable Church Growth by Implementing Tailored Strategies.” *Anabaptist Witness* 11, no. 1 (April 2024): 86.

First and foremost, MKC is **a teaching church**, emphasizing the authority of the Bible. Among the charismatic evangelical denominations in Ethiopia, MKC is known for its emphasis on teaching and discipleship. Since its inception, MKC has held a high view of the authority of the Bible and teaching. The founding missionaries did not carry that teaching emphasis at first; rather, Emperor Haile Selassie granted them access to the country on the condition that they focus on modernizing it through various humanitarian efforts.³ When the missionaries recognized the need for young Ethiopians to have access to education, they ensured that the Bible was included in the curriculum, as they trained medical assistants for their hospital work.⁴ Later, they established the Nazareth Bible Academy as a full boarding high school, to train leaders for the church. They felt that any educated Christian must have a good knowledge of the Bible. When the missionaries left the country, the founding Ethiopian leaders of the church felt a strong conviction to emphasize teaching and discipleship. Even during the darkest days of Marxist persecution, when all those institutions were lost, secret home cell churches were nourished by carefully prepared lesson guides to facilitate Bible study. Since 1994, MKC has been developing the Meserete Kristos College as its national school, which now offers baccalaureate and diploma programs in Bible and Christian ministry. Further, the regional offices have launched local Bible institutes, offering Bible and ministry training to hundreds of local leaders on weekends. Curricula and qualifications for teachers are monitored by the Meserete Kristos College in Bishoftu, Ethiopia, which grants the diploma.

Second, MKC is **a witnessing church**. It sees the Great Commission as its primary calling. Its Evangelism and Missions Department encourages congregations to reach out and establish “daughter” congregations. There are also “tentmaker” church planters, who are supported by the head office, along with numerous international “tentmakers” in other countries. And yet all members of the church have the authority to preach the gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons. One of the major factors contributing to the growth of the church is its complete

³ Henok T. Mekonin, “A Sense of Pride and Suspicion: Ethiopia’s Habitus and Its Impact on Interactions with Foreigners,” *Anabaptist Historians* (blog), April 27, 2023. <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2023/04/27/a-sense-of-pride-and-suspicion-ethiopia-habitus-and-its-impact-on-interactions-with-foreigners/>.

⁴ Chester Lehman Wenger and Sara Jane (Weaver) Wenger, *Bearing Fruit: A Collection of Memories as Told to and Shaped by Deborah Anna Good and Betty Wenger Good-White* (self-published, 2017), 117.

reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit in the day-to-day activities of hundreds of churches across the country. This has led to a high number of people coming to Christ, being filled with the Holy Spirit and leading completely transformed lives. This all-encompassing, ethical transformation of believers is the key factor in attracting others to the gospel. There is a strong conviction that everyone should preach the gospel to their neighbors, under the motto of “Agenda 28/19,” taken from Matthew 28:19. Further strategies are employed, such as limiting the maximum number of baptized members in each local church to 1,000. Once a community has reached this number, it divides into two, thus creating another congregation. Each local church has an outreach center, with the goal of increasing its numbers annually by 10%.⁵

Third, MKC is **a giving church**. Although MKC is in one of the poorest countries in the world, all members are expected to tithe to their local church office. Beyond the tithe, members bring offerings to the worship services on Sundays. With most members being students or young people with little means, the church’s income is still small. Nevertheless, with the annual income from all tithes and offerings, the churches support 4,482 full-time ministers — pastors, evangelists, missionaries and teachers — and 1,282 support staff. Money from tithes and offerings also contributes to administrative expenses and building or improving church facilities. Of the ministers who are supported, 386 are missionaries or church planters. The church supports church planters’ salaries 75% the first year, 50% the second year and 25% the third year. It is assumed that the emerging congregation should be able to carry the full responsibility to support its leaders thereafter.

Fourth, MKC is **a compassionate church**. This work is facilitated through MKC’s Development Commission, which operates as a semi-autonomous branch of the head office. It administers over 65 projects related to poverty alleviation, famine relief, food security, child and youth development, HIV-AIDS, conflict management and peacebuilding. Administering the successful completion of these projects requires the employment of 393 personnel, with an annual budget of millions of US dollars, supplied by Ethiopian believers and international non-government agencies.

Fifth, MKC is **a church that visits those in prison**. This ministry

⁵ Ejo and Bekere, “Ensuring Sustainable Church Growth,” 91.

began in 1993, when prisoners at Jimma read MKC's magazine, *Miskir* (Witness), and wrote to MKC for help. Today, this ministry is present in 33 of the nation's 134 prisons. The prison ministry follows a holistic approach, meeting spiritual and humanitarian needs. The ministry has placed full-time ministers in prisons to evangelize, teach, counsel, lead Bible studies, give discipleship training and lead the congregations that have formed inside the prison walls. In some prisons, the ministry even builds latrines, dormitories for women and their dependent children, and chapels for worship. It also establishes kindergartens for the children who live with their incarcerated mothers. In some of the prisons, more than half of those incarcerated are now committed Christians! The ministry's goal is to bring transformation in the lives of prisoners, mentally, spiritually, ethically, physically and socially. It hopes to see those incarcerated become upstanding citizens, who promote peace and justice in their communities, reducing and preventing crime in Ethiopia. To do so, it gives a practical education to all prisoners in areas such as work ethics, government and citizenship responsibilities, human rights, mental health, children's physical and mental development, parenting, HIV-AIDS awareness and prevention, peace, justice and reconciliation, and forgiveness, as alternatives to revenge killing.

Finally, MKC is a **peacemaking church**. MKC's holistic concept of ministry emphasizes reconciliation between individuals and God, among individuals, and within a society torn by conflict. Soon after the establishment of the church, MKC leaders became aware of the fragility of unity and the potential disaster that conflict can bring to an otherwise healthy church. They established a peace ministry to make the denomination's leadership aware of the centrality and importance of living together in peace and harmony, viewing conflict as a potentially positive growth-factor, and learning the techniques of conflict transformation. Since that time, the peace office has been preparing training manuals for peace committee membership, conflict transformation and peace building, restorative justice, stress and trauma healing, and HIV-AIDS. The Meserete Kristos College is also contributing to the promotion of peacemaking by offering a peace minor with its Bachelor of Arts in Bible and Christian ministries. Along with these peacemaking efforts, the church's commitments to compassion and prison ministries have positioned MKC uniquely in Ethiopia — not only earning the trust of many faith traditions and

the Ethiopian government but also earning the title of ‘peace church.’ The integration of the various ministries within MKC has helped the church view peace work and evangelism not as separate endeavors, but as inseparable aspects that go hand in hand.⁶

MKC, deeply rooted in Anabaptist values, emerged in response to various religious and political factors in Ethiopia. Its influences, such as Pentecostalism, evangelicalism and Anabaptism, are reflected in the community’s hybrid nature. For MKC, Anabaptism is a part of the broader evangelical movement in Ethiopia. MKC’s leaders and members exhibit a high level of ecumenical involvement. Congregations often invite preachers from other denominations to speak on Sundays, or they join together for area conferences or other gatherings. The six markers of MKC mentioned above illustrate how the church’s work is deeply embedded in its identity, emphasizing prayer, teaching and a complete reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit. This is what present-day evangelical Anabaptism looks like in the Ethiopian context.

⁶ Henok T. Mekonin, “Prayer, Evangelism, and Justice Entwined: Meserete Kristos Church’s Holistic Approach in Ethiopia.” *Anabaptist Witness* 11, no. 1 (April 2024): 174.

On becoming a peace church: Anabaptism in Colombia

By Alix Lozano

Translated by Andrew G. Suderman



What is an Anabaptist/Mennonite church perspective on the vocation of peace, and how does this vocation respond to the signs of the times around the world — the resurgence of violence, which plagues our world in the form of wars, harassment, abuse, rape, migration, discrimination, genocide, feminicide and poverty? Latin America and the Caribbean are no strangers to these realities. What is the task of the church, and what is its prophetic role in an environment such as Latin America and the Caribbean? What is its commitment to making visible and including the contributions of women as protagonists in the history of faith, thus providing a balance in the historical memory of humanity?

In today's world, peace is proclaimed, and peace is demanded. And the church, whose calling and vocation is peace, has sometimes remained silent or argued positions that contradict it, thus distorting the gospel of peace.

Several years ago, at a time of internal displacement in Colombia, due to the resurgence of the armed conflict, one of our pastors came to my office at the Mennonite seminary and said, "I am tired of being told to welcome the displaced in my church. I don't think the church should be involved in that. The church has to dedicate itself to preaching spiritual things and helping people's souls."

In Colombia, in the 1990s, no one wanted to talk about peace.

The churches were oblivious to the conflict. Christian churches dedicated themselves to closing themselves off in their own temples and theologies, silencing their prophetic voices in the face of perpetrators and/or systems. But when their pastors were killed and displaced, their churches burned and displaced, they opened their eyes and understood that violence had arrived at their doors and that peace was the way out.

The Mennonite church will celebrate 77 years of presence in Colombia this year. For almost four decades, it experienced all the richness that comes with being a peace church, but it was a church without an Anabaptist/Mennonite identity. Pedro Stucky, pastor of one of the Mennonite churches in Colombia said, “Growing up, we heard nothing of the principles and beliefs dear to Anabaptist hearts: church as community, discipleship, nonviolence, congregational discernment of Scripture, separation of church and state.”

But in the 1990s, faced with the resurgence of armed conflict and various forms of violence, the church began a process of inquiry about its work in that context, who we were and what it meant to be Mennonite in that violent reality. “Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s, there was an explosion of interest in rediscovering our Anabaptist roots, in understanding what the implications were for our church life in Latin America and in being living witnesses in our poor and conflict-ridden societies. Finally, around 1985, we decided to stop accepting so many proposals and invitations that distracted us from our own identity and to concentrate on cultivating Anabaptist perspectives.”¹

Being a peace church is a process that never ends. According to John Driver, “Being peace churches requires constant attention — an authentic experience of peace, coupled with intense communal reflection on the action of the God of peace among us — in order to be able to articulate, with integrity, a biblical theology of peace. Otherwise, peace becomes nothing more than a mere ideology.”²

What does it mean to be a peace church?

The gospel, in the biblical story, is a gospel of peace. Both Peter and Paul refer extensively to this gospel. According to Peter, the God who “shows no partiality” and delights in “anyone who ... does what is

¹ Peter Stucky, “The Formation of an Anabaptist identity in the Mennonite Church in Colombia: 1985-2024,” unpublished article.

² John Driver, *A Biblical Theology of Peace* (C.D. Guatemala: Ediciones SEMILLA, 2003), 122.

right ... sent [a message] to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:34-36 NRSV). Christ is our peace (Ephesians 2:13-17). In Ephesians 2, Paul concludes that the primary goal of Jesus' saving mission is to create a new humanity, living in peace.³ This Christological claim — that Christ himself is our peace — has pastoral and ecclesial implications for a peace church.

Being a church dedicated to the way of peace means that our task is to form disciples and followers of Jesus. It is important, therefore, to recognize that this means forming a lifestyle rather than a method. As Hans Denck, an early Anabaptist leader said, "No one can truly know Christ unless he follows him in his life, and no one can follow him unless he has first known him."⁴ This requires training.

Being a peace church requires a spirituality of peace, based on our experiences of the Spirit. Arnold Snyder writes, "For the early Anabaptists their pneumatology was the sine qua non of the movement. Moreover, their life of discipleship in the way of salvation was based on the regenerating activity of the Holy Spirit, who made this discipleship possible. ... The emergence of Anabaptism as a movement of ecclesial restoration would not have occurred without the conviction and the pneumatological impulse that grounded its most visible characteristics."⁵ And this includes, above all, nonviolence, as part of discipleship.

Being a church of peace requires a call to reconciliation, in which all people find space and acceptance. As 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 says: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

Being a peace church requires a conversion to caring for creation and the environment. Ecological conversion leads us to take a new look at life, considering the generosity of the Creator, who gave us the earth and who reminds us of the joyful sobriety of sharing. This conversion must be understood in an integral way, as a transformation of the relationships we have with our brothers and sisters, other living beings, creation in its rich variety and the Creator who is the origin of

³ Driver, *Biblical Theology*, 123.

⁴ Hans Denck, "The Contention that Scripture Says," *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1981), 85.

⁵ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 379.

all life. From this emerges deep motivation and a new way of living in our common home, of meeting each other in our own diversity, of celebrating and respecting the life received and shared (Genesis 2:15).

Being a peace church requires seeing injustices and different forms of violence within our communities. There is an ecclesiological/ethical urgency in the context of people who suffer any kind of abuse within the church. The kingdom ethic in Matthew 5:13-16 reminds us that we are called to be “salt and light. As salt, our task is to preserve both the individual good and the common good . . . And as light, our task is to reveal darkness, not to hide it. We are not to be a part of the silence that favors the darkness, nor be complicit in it. Rather, we are to expose it, unmask it and denounce it . . .”⁶ It is necessary that our communities become safe spaces for human relations.

Unless we base the whole life of the church on the gospel of peace, our activism on behalf of some “peace concern” will have little impact. As Driver says, “Biblical peace must be decisive in all aspects of congregational life.”⁷

Final Thoughts

Being a church whose vocation is peace, whose Christologies are centered on the Jesus of peace, requires that our ecclesiological and pastoral concepts, experiences, and practices be revised to make peace central. The challenge in our faith communities is to incarnate the gospel of peace. The awakening of our vocation for peace is an invitation to rethink and reformulate our ecclesiologies, leading to formative experiences of peace, which also challenge those who are new to the communities.

The gospel of peace can hardly be taught through an exclusively cognitive or intellectual process. This vision and experience is best captured through observation, participation and imitation.

Every type of activity within the church should be characterized by biblical justice and peace. This includes healthy boundaries in the face of violence, injustice and abuse against vulnerable people, such as women and children, as peace is also about dismantling sexual violence.

Anabaptism remains not only the vision but also the action that illuminates the ecclesial/pastoral/ethical work of every Anabaptist/Mennonite person in the world.

⁶ Alix Lozano, “Healthy Boundaries in Power Dynamics and Sexuality in the Church,” in *Women: 20 Years of Paving the Way between Dreams and Hopes, Missio Dei #32* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2023), 21.

⁷ Driver, *Biblical Theology*, 134.

Journeying with Jesus from trauma to transformation

By Andi O. Santoso



In *What is an Anabaptist Christian?* Palmer Becker says, “Being a Christian from an Anabaptist perspective is a combination of believing in Jesus, belonging to community, and behaving in a reconciling way.”¹

What does it mean to be an Anabaptist Christian in my context? I grew up in a Reformed church in Indonesia. When I was about 12 years old, my family moved to the city of Kudus, where we joined the *Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia* (GKMI) Kudus church — a member of Mennonite World Conference. As a young adult, I committed to following Jesus and was sprinkled with water once again. In 1995, I went to a Youth Bible Camp in Lawang, East Java, and I rededicated my life to following Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Since then, I have been learning to follow Jesus wholeheartedly wherever I go. During my university years, I joined an ecumenical fellowship, where I became friends with many people from various denominations. The desire to follow Jesus took me beyond graduation from a computerized accounting program to entering seminary in January 2000.

In 2000, I joined Youth Evangelism Service, a discipleship program

¹ Palmer Becker, *What is an Anabaptist Christian?* *Missio Dei* #18 (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2010), 3.

of Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM), through which I trained for three months in the U.S. and six months in Indonesia. This provided foundational spiritual formation for me in Anabaptist discipleship, community and service, and it was my first experience with cross-cultural mission. During that time, some of my questions were: How can I share the gospel with others, especially with people who have never heard it? Do I have to go to another nation to become a missionary? I ended up joining *Pekabaran Injil dan Pelayanan Kasih* (Evangelism and Charity, PIPKA), a mission board of the GKMI Synod, as a church planter and local pastor in GKMI Koinonia Surabaya, from 2003 to 2014.

During my years as a local pastor, I started to learn more about Anabaptist peace theology, through my encounter with theologians like Dr. David Shenk from EMM, who authored many books on Christian-Muslim relations; Rev. Paulus Widjaja, co-author of *A Culture of Peace*; and Rev. Paulus Hartono, the founder of Mennonite Diakonia Service (MDS, now *Muria Damai Sentosa*). Learning from these mentors, I experienced authentic relationships as a disciple of Christ. In 2014, I moved to Semarang and served the GKMI Synod. I encountered church conflicts and inter-religious conflicts, especially the tension caused by the use of religion for political agendas. I started to learn about conflict transformation, peacebuilding and the importance of reconciliation, in practical ways. I was involved in an Interfaith Grassroots Network (PELITA) in Semarang.

From this engagement, I started to ask, what is the biblical and theological basis for mission based on love, peace, respect and harmony with others? How can we relate these concepts to the reality of cultural differences? How does Christian mission and witness relate to dialogue with people of other religious beliefs and spiritualities? Thus, I believe that, as Anabaptist Christians, we should embody how Jesus lived his earthly life as a connector, bridge builder or peacemaker, being able to make genuine and authentic relationships wherever he went, with people from various cultures and backgrounds. For me, this is the most important aspect of following Jesus: building authentic relationships is the center of our discipleship.

In August 2019, after my time leading the GKMI Synod, I enrolled in Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, in Elkhart, Indiana. Before this time, I never thought that I had experienced trauma. But I realized that, when I was a child, I had had a traumatic experience. I was slapped in the face by my Sunday school teacher. This happened at a Bible trivia

event, in front of all my friends. I was ashamed and angry, and I went back home and cried. Until I got married and became a father of two daughters, I never had any desire to teach Sunday school, because I was still carrying unaddressed trauma. Another of my traumas was the racial discrimination that I had experienced as a Chinese Indonesian.² Why do I tell this story? I believe it is important to talk about trauma in all areas of life, because it affects our discipleship and our spiritual formation. I believe hurt people hurt others, and healed people heal others.

Through trauma-informed discipleship and building authentic relationships, we can begin to tell our painful memories and transform them into stories of healing, liberation and reconciliation. In *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care*, Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger says, “Unacknowledged and unhealed trauma often leads to further violence, either against oneself or against others, and thus to more trauma. With knowledgeable intervention and wise support, however, trauma can be healed and may even become a catalyst for growth and transformation, the turning point of a life, a sign and symbol of God’s goodness and care.”³ To honor the legacy of our Anabaptist Mennonite forebears, we must begin by telling the truth about our history. This involves a willingness to confront uncomfortable realities and to recognize the impact of our actions on others. It requires us to move beyond the narrative of victimhood and to understand the complexities of our past. By understanding our biases and traumas, we can heal and become “wounded healers,” who have moved from brokenness to wholeness, from being victims to becoming survivors. While challenging, this pathway is essential for true transformation. Likewise, it leads toward solidarity with the oppressed, the marginalized, the victimized, the colonized. As Biophysicist Peter Levine says, “trauma unites the world.”⁴ To our brothers and sisters who are struggling for liberation in Gaza, Ukraine, Syria or the many lands where Indigenous Peoples are striving for dignity and justice, we can say, “You are not alone; I am struggling with you.”

² I wrote about this journey in Andi O. Santoso, *The Wounded Peacebuilder: Toward Healing the Trauma of Racial Discrimination through Storytelling* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu, 2024), <https://www.lulu.com/shop/andi-santoso/the-wounded-peacebuilder/ebook/product-v8459yj.html?q=the+wounded+peacebuilder&page=1&pageSize=4>.

³ Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 2.

⁴ Peter A. Levine, “Foreword” in Marianne Bentzen, *Neuroaffective Meditation: A Practical Guide to Lifelong Brain Development, Emotional Growth, and Healing Trauma* (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 2022), 17, <https://www.everand.com/read/543414570/Neuroaffective-Meditation-A-Practical-Guide-to-Lifelong-Brain-Development-Emotional-Growth-and-Healing-Trauma#>.

Years ago, before moving to the U.S., I returned to my school and church in Nusukan, Solo, where I faced childhood trauma. I discovered that my Sunday school teacher had passed away, leaving me unable to thank him for his teachings about God and the Bible. However, I have forgiven him. Shalom-making is an ongoing journey which leads to a new life of peace, justice, love and mercy. As peacebuilders, we must collaborate with the God of peace to heal from our past traumas and restore our shattered relationships. This journey leads us to the garden of peace, where relationships are renewed. As we commemorate 500 years of Anabaptist-Mennonite history, let us embrace repentance and renewal. By acknowledging past challenges and pledging to help create a future of justice and compassion, we honor our ancestors' legacy. This is a call to action, urging us to live our faith with integrity and purpose, facing future challenges together, as a global community. Let us share our vulnerabilities and difficult histories with peace and grace, becoming channels of reconciliation.

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Contributors

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Fernando Pérez Ventura has been a pastor for over 35 years in Mexico City, Mexico. Since 2016, he has served as a coordinator for the *Comunidad de Instituciones Teológicas Anabautistas* (CITA, Community of Anabaptist Theological Institutions). He holds degrees in Bible, from the *Instituto Evangélico de México*; international relations, from the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM); and in biblical sciences, from the *Comunidad Teológica de México*. He and his wife, Rebeca González, have two children and two grandchildren.

Notes

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*Available in Spanish.

What is an Anabaptist Christian?

Anabaptism at 500 edition

People in many parts of the world have become disillusioned with institutional, politically-compromised forms of Christianity. And as this occurs, there is increased interest in learning more about Anabaptism and other Free Church traditions that have called for a radical return to New Testament faith.

In this booklet, Palmer Becker, a lifelong Mennonite pastor and educator, attempts to summarize Anabaptist understandings in three key statements, namely that: (1) *Jesus* is the center of our faith; (2) *Community* is the center of our lives; and (3) *Reconciliation* is the center of our work.

By contrasting these affirmations with divergent views held within the broader Christian family, Becker challenges readers to take a new look at Jesus, to engage more fully in building the body of Christ, and to embrace more passionately the reconciling work of God in the world.

This special edition of Becker's influential text includes five essays from Anabaptist Christians from Africa, Asia and Latin America, testifying to the growth, diversity, and vitality of Anabaptist Christianity after 500 years.



Palmer Becker received his training from Goshen College, Mennonite Biblical Seminary (now Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary), Regent College, and Fuller Theological Seminary. He has spent a lifetime serving the church as a pastor, church planter, missionary, conference executive, author and educator. Becker has led many workshops on small groups, served as director of the Hesston College Pastoral Ministries Program, and most recently traveled extensively on

teaching assignments to various international locations. He and his wife, Ardys, live in Kitchener, Ontario. They are the parents of four grown children.

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