

Rhizome

Updates from the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism

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GOSHEN COLLEGE
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF GLOBAL ANABAPTISM

Global Anabaptist Profile Enters Data Collection Stage

The global Anabaptist church has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past 30 years, growing from some 600,000 members in 1980 to nearly 1.7 million today.

Such growth is exciting, but it also poses challenges for cooperation and relationship on a global scale. Mennonite World Conference has worked hard to facilitate global exchanges, but member churches are still in the process of getting to know each other.

To this end Mennonite World Conference and the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism have collaborated to design and implement a survey that will provide a snapshot of this large ecclesial body

and bring its diverse member groups into conversation on questions of faith and practice.

Upon its completion, the survey should provide church leaders not only with basic demographic



Global Anabaptist Profile participants listen during a work session. From left are César Montenegro of Guatemala, Diego Martínez of Colombia, Andrea Moya of Ecuador, Alfonso Cabaña of Paraguay and Tiago Lemes of Brazil. — Photo by John D. Roth/Goshen College

Structured around the Mennonite World Conference “Shared Convictions,” the Global Anabaptist Profile will gather both qualitative and quantitative data.

information, but also detailed information on how believers live out their commitment to be followers of Jesus Christ.

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Bearing Witness Project Solicits Stories

Over three hundred years after it was first published, *Martyrs Mirror* remains the most comprehensive historical compilation of Anabaptist martyrdom.

As the Anabaptist global community has grown in both size and diversity, however, there has been no further formal collection of stories of costly discipleship to Jesus.

“Bearing Witness,” a collaborative project supported by the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism, hopes to serve as a collection point for stories of faithful Christian (continued on page 3)

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Editorial: Rhizome Growth by John D. Roth



Aspen trees.

John D. Roth is the director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism.

Ever since the beginning of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism (ISGA) some three years ago, I have been thinking about rhizomes. Rhizomes are plants that propagate by sending out a profusion of roots horizontally just beneath the surface of the soil.

Occasionally, these roots develop nodes that send sprouts up in unpredictable, sometimes far-flung places; but underground those sprouts are joined in a complex interconnected web that defies clear mapping on an organizational chart. Aspen trees are rhizomes, as are tiger lilies, ginger, bamboo and some species of ferns.

What makes rhizomes so fascinating is that the visible plants are connected in invisible ways. Thus, the Pando colony of aspens in Utah consists of nearly 50,000 trees extending over 100 acres; yet beneath the soil it is a single living organism. In fact, scientists have determined that damage done to trees in one part of the grove is “sensed” by trees at a far distance.

All metaphors have their limits, of course. But when I think of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church, the rhizome plant seems like a useful image.

Mennonite World Conference (MWC) is a “rhizomic” organization. Its unity con-

sists of a profusion of interconnections, which are difficult to map and not always visible, but real nonetheless. Ideally, those relationships are structured horizontally rather than in a hierarchical fashion. And when one part of the organism suffers, that pain is felt throughout the whole system.

Thank you for the various ways that you have already expressed your support for the ISGA ... for being part of this effort to “promote rhizome growth” in the Body of Christ. Please keep the work of the ISGA in your prayers. And if you believe in this vision, we would welcome your financial support as well!

The mission of the ISGA is to “promote rhizome growth.” Over the past three years we have developed four initiatives that attempt to do this:

- 1. The Global Anabaptist Wiki** (www.anabaptistwiki.org): a site where every group can post information about itself in the language of choice—with space for pictures, articles, curriculum, and other resources, thereby forming a user-generated global archives.
- 2. The MWC Global Anabaptist Profile:** a survey of faith and practices (along with basic demographical information) of 25 selected groups, based on the MWC “Shared Convictions” and supported by a series of interviews. The project, to be completed by the summer of 2015, will be the first systematic study of MWC member churches.
- 3. The “Bearing Witness” stories project** (www.martyrstories.org): a collaborative effort (with participation from at least five different Anabaptist traditions) to gather stories of faithful witness to Christ in the face of persecution and suffering. The project might be thought of as a “Martyrs Mirror for the 21st Century.”
- 4. Texts in Translation series:** an effort to translate selected historical and theological writings by Mennonites outside of Europe and North America into English, in recognition of the careful, creative reflection on matters of faith and identity that is happening around the world ... and that these texts have the potential to challenge and renew the church in North America.

Bearing Witness Solicits Stories, cont.

discipleship in the face of suffering and adversity, in the spirit of *Martyrs Mirror*.

In the interest of developing a framework for the Bearing Witness project, some forty people representing six different Anabaptist-Mennonite groups met at Goshen (Ind.) College for a consultation in August of 2012.

The group, composed of participants from nine different



International participants gathered at the 2012 “Bearing Witness” consultation.
— Photo by Kaeli Evans.

countries, concluded that the project should not necessarily focus on martyrdom, but rather on nonresistant discipleship both within and beyond the Anabaptist tradition.

In addition, they affirmed an emphasis on the reasons why individuals and churches suffer for their faith, rather than on the suffering itself.

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Global Anabaptist Profile, cont.

The quantitative portion of the survey will especially focus on the beliefs and practices (including worship, ritual, forms of witness, etc.) of MWC members.

In addition to these core categories, some individual church groups have added questions that are specific to their particular contexts. Finally, oral interviews with church members from selected congregations will provide a unique narrative perspective.

Twenty-five groups were randomly selected to participate in the study, with proportionate representation from the five geographic regions of MWC. Church leaders from each group have appointed a Research Associate to conduct the survey with a representative sample of congregations.

Research Associates met together on July 29-August 2, 2013, to receive basic training in research methods and to critique and revise the survey.

Depending on the context, Research Associates will face an array of logistical challenges, everything from reaching remote congregations to translating theological terms into culturally appropriate usage.

Despite these challenges, MWC anticipates that the data gathered has the potential to inform global, regional, and local mission and priorities. Church leaders in participating groups can use the data to shape their agendas, but the information will also be made available to MWC

administrative bodies, commissions, and regional counsels.

Following completion of the survey, Research Associates and church leaders will have a consultation—currently planned to coincide with MWC Assembly 16 in July 2015—to discuss the results of their particular group. In addition, the oral interviews that Research Associates conduct with pastors and lay members will be saved in a digital library.

No matter how it is accessed, the data made available by the survey should help to deepen the Anabaptist identity of MWC member churches and encourage them to greater faithfulness in their particular contexts.

Introducing New Staff at the ISGA

Before joining the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism, I was working as a historian with the Anabaptist churches in Colombia, South America.

In a course with Mennonite Brethren church members in Bogotá last May, we talked about the religious opposition Mennonite Brethren believers encountered throughout the 1950s in Colombia, including bans on evangelism and worship, harassment, threats of violence, and closure of the Mennonite Brethren-operated clinic and schools.

In this context of persecution early believers boldly identified corporate worship, Bible study, evangelism, and holistic mission as central to their belief and practice.

“Well, those are Anabaptist practices!” the class observed with excitement at the end of the first period.

Although those first Colombian MB communities embodied many of the same values we now identify as Anabaptist, it is only in recent years that Mennonite Brethren in Colombia have begun to self-identify as

such. To some the term has even been a confusing and foreign label.

The response of class participants that night and of church members in a myriad of other spaces shared with the Colombian churches have convinced me that church history is essential to regional denominational vitality and identity.

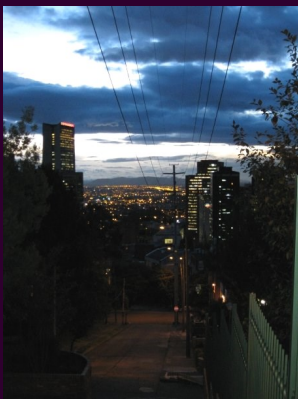
Yet history is also a critical ingredient of global church relationships. When local church communities can see the connections their faith story has to the story

of churches in different contexts, new relationships and new vision is possible.

Imagine if others could hear the stories of those first believers in Colombia!

The initiatives of the ISGA are broader than history alone, but they all promote the kind of interconnectedness and reflection that give life to our global church communion. What stories do you have to share and what stories are you willing to hear?

Elizabeth Miller joined the ISGA in December 2013 as Administrative Assistant.



Bogotá, Colombia.

Bearing Witness Solicits Stories, cont.

This nuance discourages the glorification of suffering by underscoring instead the faith and community that enable individual acts of nonresistant discipleship.

A year later, the steering committee of the “Bearing Witness” project convened to give concrete direction to the next phases of the project.

The early stages of story collection have already begun via existing networks and personal invitation. As the project gains momentum, however, churches worldwide will have the opportunity to contribute stories from their own histories and contexts.

Stories will be shared through a variety of formats, some of which will

be determined as the project unfolds.

Some stories will initially appear on the “Bearing Witness” website (www.martyrstories.org), which is currently in development. The project is also supporting a number of creative individual initiatives and book projects that relate to the mission of “Bearing Witness.”