

Rhizome

Updates from the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism

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ISGA hosts Believers' Church Conference

More than 150 people representing nearly a dozen different denominational traditions gathered on the campus of Goshen College, September 14-16, to participate in "Word, Spirit, and the Renewal of the Church," the 18th Believers' Church conference since the series began in 1967.

The conference, co-sponsored by ISGA, [Goshen College](#), and the [Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary](#), focused on the legacy of the Protestant Reformation for groups associated with the Anabaptist, or Radical Reformation, tradition. It also was an occasion for worship, wide-ranging conversations, and discussion regarding the useful-

ness of the term "Believers' Church" and the future of the series.

After the opening Thursday evening worship service of scripture and song, Joel Carpenter, director of the [Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity](#) at Calvin College, reminded listeners in the Friday morning plenary session of the profound changes in the landscape of Christianity since the Reformation. Carpenter highlighted

the demographic explosion of Christianity in Asia, Africa and Latin America as well as the rapid growth of mission-oriented immigrant churches in North America. The challenge for those Christians whose identity is oriented to the Reformation, Carpenter argued, is to rethink basic assumptions about theology in light of the "gifts majority world Christians bring to the Christian faith."

On Friday evening, the renowned public theologian, Miroslav Volf, challenged the audience to recover insights on humility and joy from the "young Luther." The modern sense of Self, Volf argued, is based on a precarious notion of competition and self-achievement, one that encourages a sense of joyless inadequacy, failure, and depression. Luther's understanding of humility, (cont. on pg. 2)

The 18th Believers' Church Conference

Word, Spirit, and the Renewal of the Church:

Believers' Church, Ecumenical and Global Perspectives



Musa Mumbula of Bethany Theological Seminary, talks with Leonard Gross of Goshen

Let the Children Come to Me

The Bearing Witness Stories Project eagerly awaits the publication of a new spiritual development resource for families. The forthcoming study guide, *Let the Children Come to Me*, includes twelve separate units, each focused on a particular Anabaptist faith practice. The practices come to life through stories from sixteenth-century Anabaptism and modern global Anabaptist churches.

Each unit explores Anabaptist faith practices through scripture readings, prayers, family questions and detailed activity suggestions.

Many of the contemporary stories come from Bearing Witness's own collection. The book's authors, Lisa Weaver Dyck and Elizabeth Miller, hope the resource will help families connect their own faith with early Anabaptist history and with global Mennonites in the present, as well as deepen spiritual practices within the home. Suggestions are included to adapt the resource for use in Sunday Schools, children's workshops, or camp retreats.

scribed as "a self-destructive apostasy." In this context, she asked, what parts of the Anabaptist tradition are good news today? "The agency of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential," Bedford said, "if we are to be transformed by the way of Jesus, whose narrow gate challenges the toxic forms of Christianity in the culture today, and opens into a wideness that embraces those who are most vulnerable."

In a concluding worship service, Thomas, reminded listeners that moral and spiritual leadership "always has a cost." Followers of Jesus, he continued, never know what is going to be required. "If you are following Jesus, God is asking for your deepest 'yes,' even if it calls for more than what you think you are able to give."

"The agency of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential if we are to be transformed by the way of Jesus."

Conference participants also gathered for a plenary discussion on the future of the Believers' Church Conference series. According to John D. Roth, ISGA director and one of the

conference organizers, by 2008, the series had nearly died out. "One goal of this conference was to explore whether there was sufficient interest among this particular group of churches to hold additional conferences in the future." In the discussion session, participants acknowledged the limitations of the term "Believers' Church," but affirmed their interest in the continuation of the conferences, setting the next dates for 2019 (Washington, DC) and 2021 (Amsterdam).

"If you are following Jesus, God is calling for your deepest 'yes,' even if it calls for more than what you think you are able to give."

Believers' Church (cont.)

in which existence itself is recognized as a gift from God, enables the Christian to recover their true Self and to "rejoice with those who rejoice." Volf's lecture, part of the Yoder Public Affairs lectureship, drew an audience of nearly 400 people.

Panel sessions throughout the conference featured 75 papers focused on thematic topics such as "The Bible and the Reformation(s)," "The Holy Spirit in the Mission of the Church," and "Ecumenism and

the Believers' Churches Today." Sarah Ann Bixler, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary who organized a panel session on "Martyr Narratives in Anabaptist Faith Formation," was one of the numerous

younger scholars attending the gathering. "As an emerging scholar," she noted, "it was very meaningful for me to be part of the conference, to learn from a variety of Anabaptist perspectives and to have many fruitful conversations."

The final two plenary speakers—Nancy Bedford, professor of applied theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and Frank Thomas, professor of homiletics at Christian Theological Seminary—both opened their remarks with references to recent racial discord in St. Louis and Charlottesville. The Christian legacy of the Reformation, Bedford argued, has been hijacked in North America by "toxic whiteness," which she de-



Miroslav Volf

Renewal 2027!

The second celebration in a 10-year series of events commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement will be held this spring in Kisumu, Kenya.

Anabaptist-Mennonite speakers from around the world will reflect on the theme “The Holy Spirit transforming us,” exploring how Anabaptist-Mennonites have understood the Spirit in the past and how the global church is enlivened by the Holy Spirit today. Attendees will have the opportunity to participate in worship, singing, discussion, and fellowship throughout the day.



The upcoming conference will take place on April 21 in conjunction with the meetings of the Mennonite World Conference General Council, Networks, and Commissions. Last February, in Augsburg, Germany, the first event in this series was held on the theme of [Anabaptist-Mennonite approaches to Scripture](#), both past and present.

This 10-year series is organized by Mennonite World Conference and managed by ISGA director, John D. Roth. For more information on Renewal 2027 visit the MWC website at www.mwc-cmm.org/renewal2027.

The goals of Renewal 2027 include the following points:

1. to encourage and strengthen the global faith witness of MWC through theological/historical teaching and discussion focused on the Reformation and Anabaptist beginnings;
2. to renew and deepen our understanding of Christian faithfulness as shaped by the Anabaptist movement;
3. to promote "right remembering" through a focus on local church history within the larger context of the history of the Anabaptist (and Christian) tradition;

Renewal Renovación Renouveau

4. to nurture a deeper sense of connection among member churches within MWC through a focus on our shared theology and history;
5. to improve ecumenical [inter-church] relations, using these events as an opportunity to highlight ecumenical conversations where appropriate;
6. to strengthen a sense of collective identity and witness with Anabaptist groups beyond MWC members.



How to Commemorate a Division?

ISGA director, John D. Roth wrestled with this question in his recent article in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* “How to Commemorate a Division? Reflections on the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation and its Relevance for the Global Anabaptist-Mennonite Church Today.”

This conversation has sparked further reflections, including responses by MWC general secretary César Garcia and MWC president J. Nelson Kraybill, among many others in *Mennonite Life* available at www.ml.bethelks.edu

Explore these articles and other perspectives on the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism.

John Roth, [“How to Commemorate a Division.”](#) *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Jan. 2017.

César Garcia, [“Renewal 2027: A Contextual and Global Commemoration.”](#) *Mennonite Life*. July, 2017.

J. Nelson Kraybill, [“Common Story Shapes a People.”](#) *Mennonite Life*. July, 2017.

HEALING FROM WAR IN COLOMBIA

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

“My name is Maria Vargas. No . . . my name was Maria Vargas. My real name—the name given me at baptism that I am trying to use now—is Teresa Alonso.” Teresa is one of several thousand former guerilla soldiers associated with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, who recently agreed to turn in their weapons and begin the difficult journey of reintegration into Colombian civil society.

For more than 50 years, Colombia has been wracked by civil warfare, fueled by internal conflicts over land, wealth, religion and political power, whose roots go all the way back to the 16th century, when the region was colonized by Spain. For decades, hopes for land reform, an equitable judiciary system and a true constitutional democracy have been undermined by the brutal reality of violence—inflicted by both the government and paramilitary revolutionaries. Nearly 8 million people, mostly villagers, have been displaced by the conflict, and three generations now carry with them searing memories of traumatic violence.

In the summer of 2016, after five years of arduous negotiations, a peace settlement persuaded members of the FARC to disarm and begin the transition to civilian life. Although Colombian citizens later voted against the peace agreement by the narrowest of margins, efforts at reconciliation continue to move forward slowly.

In Colombia, as in many other settings all around the world, the postwar challenges of restoring peace are enormous.

How do large numbers of soldiers who have been trained to kill take on new identities as productive citizens? How do traumatized people—who have suffered or inflicted atrocities—return to the routines of normal life? These questions are as old as Homer’s *Odyssey*. They were the primary focus of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the 1990s. They were the motivation behind Michael Sharp’s courageous work in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And they continue to haunt societies around the world, in the global North as well as the South.

At a recent gathering of global church leaders in the Colombian capital of Bogotá, a former FARC military commander identified a significant dimension of the challenge—acknowledging moral wrong-doing. With remarkable candor, he named specific atrocities for which the FARC was responsible. He described meeting a person face-to-face who had suffered deeply while in FARC captivity. “I would have rather faced the barrel of gun,” he said, “than to sit across the table, look her in the eyes, and hear her describe the horror that she suffered—knowing we were responsible.”

For decades, Mennonite Central Committee has supported various organizations in Colombia who have been working quietly and creatively for peace in

that war-torn country, often at the grassroots level. In the Chocó region, which has been deeply impacted by the violence, several Mennonite Brethren congregations have helped local farmers alternatives to growing coca for cocaine. In other settings, Colombian Mennonites have advocated for refugees, provided microloans to support small businesses, and even taken an active role in the peace negotiations. But they know that long after the war has ended, the challenge of peace-making remains.

What would it mean for our congregations—here in North America and in all of our Mennonite World Conference churches—to accept more fully the responsibility of walking alongside “morally-wounded” people seeking to be reintegrated into society? How might we encourage the many Teresas in our communities, newly returned from the trauma of war, to move into a new identity, helping them remember their real names, the names given to them at baptism.

A version of this editorial was originally published in the October 2017 issue of [The Mennonite](#).

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