

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

Church, state and politics

ON MAY 11, representatives of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), along with members of the Reformed Church of the Canton Zurich, will gather in Zurich, Switzerland, for a symposium on “Church, State and Politics: Collaboration or Contradiction?” The gathering is a commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Ulrich Zwingli to the city, initially as Zurich’s main Catholic priest.

In 1523, working closely with the city council, Zwingli orchestrated a formal break with the Catholic church. For the next seven years—until his death on the battlefield—Zwingli guided the Reformation in the city of Zurich. For members of the Reformed tradition, he stands at the beginning of a rich theological tradition that today includes churches as diverse as Presbyterians, Primitive Baptists, United Church of Christ and the Protestant Reformed Churches of America.

For descendants of the Anabaptist movement, however, Zwingli triggers more complex memories. On the one hand, the early Anabaptists owed an enormous debt to Zwingli and the Reformation movement as it unfolded in Zurich. Many of them began their work as close friends of Zwingli, eagerly participating in the Bible studies he organized. But their friendship quickly ran aground on a debate over the extent of the reforms and the role of the city council in determining the affairs of the church.

When his disciples introduced

the practice of adult baptism, calling into question the millennial-old union of church and state, Zwingli called on the repressive authority of the city council to resist the Anabaptist radicals. Today, a plaque alongside the Limmat River commemorates the execution by drowning of Felix Manz, one of Zwingli’s closest associates, for his participation in the Anabaptist movement.

What have we learned in the past 500 years?

Now, 500 years later, the context has changed dramatically. For some time, Swiss Reformed politicians and church leaders alike have begun to call into question the idea of a “state church,” particularly as Swiss society has become increasingly secular. So it is no accident that representatives of the Reformed church choose the topic of “church and state” as the primary focus of their 2019 commemorations. The tension posed by the conference subtitle—“collaboration or contradiction?”—is framed as a genuine question.

Furthermore, in sharp contrast to the mood in Zwingli’s time, leaders of the Reformed church have invited representatives of the Swiss Mennonite church and Mennonite World Conference to participate in the symposium. At the Sunday worship service immediately following the event, those same leaders will announce

the beginning of a formal dialogue between the WCRC and MWC that may result in an act of reconciliation, perhaps in time for the Anabaptist-Mennonite commemorations of the first adult baptisms, which will take place in Zurich in 2025.

In contrast to an earlier MWC dialogue with Lutherans, the interactions will likely not focus primarily on history. Instead, the question is whether the global heirs of our two traditions—Reformed and Mennonite—can be more deliberate in joining their efforts in mission, service and peacemaking in various settings around the world.

The Reformed Church is asking fundamental questions about old assumptions regarding the relationship between church, state and politics. As the next presidential campaign heats up in the United States, Mennonites here must face our own assumptions regarding church and state. Today, our relation to the state is far more complicated, far messier, than the language of the early Anabaptists might suggest.

What have we learned in the past 500 years? What counsel, if any, would we have to offer the Reformed Church as it seeks new understandings on church, state and politics?



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