

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

Celebrating the beginning of Anabaptism

EVERY YEAR on the Sunday closest to Jan. 21, Mennonite World Conference (MWC) invites its 107 member churches to join in a celebration of World Fellowship Sunday. The worship themes vary from year to year, but the rationale for the timing of the event has remained constant—on Jan. 21, 1525, a small group of earnest Christians in Zurich, Switzerland, participated in a baptismal service that launched the renewal movement we know today as Anabaptism.

Yet even though the baptisms in 1525 were profoundly important, many groups associated with Anabaptism can also identify other important beginning points. The Amish, for example, trace their origins to a renewal movement around Jacob Amman in 1693. The Hutterites first practiced community of goods in 1528 and did not adopt their name from Jacob Hutter until several years later. In the late 19th century, several German Mennonites promoted 1561, the death date of Menno Simons, as “one of the most important days of our church fellowship.” Meanwhile, another group vigorously opposed all such commemorations, insisting that the only appropriate marker for Anabaptist-Mennonite beginnings was Easter Sunday or Pentecost.

When we shift our attention to the global church, the question of beginnings becomes even more complicated. Did the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition in Java begin with the arrival of missionaries Pieter and Johanna Jansz in 1852 or with the indigenization of the

church under the leadership of Tunggol Wulung a decade later? Did the Meserte Kristos Church of Ethiopia begin in 1945 with the first Mennonite missionaries from eastern Pennsylvania, with a powerful renewal movement called Heavenly Sunshine in 1962 or with the decision by Ethiopian church leaders in 1965 to identify their church as “Christ the Foundation”?

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Over the past century, most Mennonites of European descent have come to regard the Jan. 21, 1525, date as almost sacrosanct; yet this event became the focus of historical veneration only relatively recently, when Mennonite leaders from seven countries gathered in Switzerland in 1925 to coordinate relief efforts for Mennonite refugees in South Russia. Celebrating the 400th year anniversary of the first baptisms in Zurich helped assuage the skepticism within their member churches about ecumenical collaboration.

In the coming decade, Mennonites around the world will have the opportunity to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement. In 2015, following conversations with member churches and ecumenical

partners, the MWC Executive Committee approved a 10-year series of events called “Renewal 2027.” Beginning in 2017, MWC has planned an annual celebration in various parts of the world, highlighting especially the ways the Anabaptist tradition has found expression in the context where the event is being hosted.

Plans are also well underway for a significant celebration in Europe in 2025, organized in conjunction with a meeting of the MWC General Council and the assembly of European Mennonite Churches, that will include input from ecumenical partners, European Mennonite and Baptist historical societies, and the local Swiss Mennonite church. So, the baptisms of Jan. 21, 1525, will indeed be a significant date to commemorate.

But MWC’s commemorations will conclude at its 18th global assembly, likely to be held somewhere on the African continent in 2027. Doing so is a powerful reminder that the Mennonite tradition is not locked in its 16th-century European origins. We are part of a global movement, ever renewing, that is both rooted in the past—be that Jerusalem, Zurich or Semarang, Indonesia—and oriented to the future.



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