

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

How will history judge us?

IN JANUARY 1711, Johann Ludwig Runckel, a Dutch diplomat and member of the Reformed Church, found himself in the middle of intense negotiations with the city council of Bern. At the time, Swiss authorities in the canton of Bern were promoting a resolute campaign to eradicate the Anabaptists, or Swiss Brethren, from the region. Anyone who joined the movement had, by definition, renounced their Swiss citizenship and become an illegal alien. In the fall of 1710, Bernese authorities were determined to purge the region of Swiss Brethren once and for all.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Mennonites looked on these developments with horror. Although they spoke a different language from the Swiss Brethren, had different theological perspectives, shared few family connections and had no compelling reason to extend their help, Dutch Mennonite leaders and congregations rallied to their support.

Besides raising emergency relief funds, Mennonites in the Netherlands appealed to Runckel, the Dutch ambassador to Switzerland, to assist them in their cause. In his letters to the Bernese city council, Runckel described the plight of the Swiss Brethren: They had been fined, imprisoned and tortured, forced into slave labor, their property confiscated. Worst of all, many had been deported, “forcibly separated from their wives, fathers, mothers and children.”

In the end, no political

compromise was forthcoming. In July 1711 a ragtag group of Swiss Brethren and Amish—including children, newborn babies, the sick and the elderly—were forcibly loaded onto four boats in Bern. By early August, the flotilla, joined by another boat in Neuchatel, reached Amsterdam, where 346 impoverished and frightened refugees disembarked.

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The story of the Swiss Brethren emigration is noteworthy but not that unusual in the long sweep of Anabaptist-Mennonite history. Repeatedly in our past, large groups of believers have left the familiarity of their homeland to seek refuge elsewhere. Sometimes they were forced to leave for religious reasons; but just as often Mennonite immigrants were following larger patterns of economic migration, seeking land, jobs and new opportunities.

Today, nearly 70 million people are displaced from their homes, with more than 25 million fleeing to other countries as refugees. Within the global fellowship of Mennonite World Conference, virtually all our churches have been affected by this phenomenon—as refugees, immigrants or hosts in countries where the newcomers have landed.

To cite only a handful of examples, small Mennonite churches in Ecuador are

reaching out to Colombian refugees; in Texas, Mennonites have welcomed hundreds of newly arrived migrants; foreign miners in Zimbabwe are seeking community in Brethren in Christ churches; and Mennonites throughout Europe have organized support for refugees from Syria and elsewhere.

On April 6, 2019, as part of the MWC Executive Committee meetings in Costa Rica, Mennonites in Central America will gather close to San José to celebrate Renewal 2027. The focus of the daylong event in 2019 is “Justice on the Journey: Migration and the Anabaptist-Mennonite Story,” with presenters from around the globe reflecting on the theme of migration. What have we learned from history? What is our current reality? What might we learn from each other as we search for the best ways to respond to migration in our distinctive contexts?

Amid the intensity of the current political debates regarding immigration policy, we would do well to be attentive to our history.

As citizens in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, we are faced almost daily with questions related to immigration. What should our response be? How will history judge us?



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