

How to Commemorate a Division? Reflections on the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation and its Relevance for the Global Anabaptist- Mennonite Church Today

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Abstract: 2017 marks the culmination of a decade-long series of events commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. The commemorations have sparked a lively debate about both the meaning of the Reformation and how it should be celebrated. This essay explores those controversies with a particular focus on the relationship of the Anabaptist movement to the Reformation, especially the question of how contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites should commemorate their own beginnings. The article offers a series of principles for “right remembering” and concludes with a description of Mennonite World Conference’s anticipated ten-year series of commemorative events. These events, known as “Renewal 2027,” serve as an illustrative test case for exploring these issues.

On July 22, 2010, delegates at the 11th Lutheran World Fellowship (LWF) Assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, addressed an unusual item of business. Five years earlier, representatives of the LWF initiated a series of dialogues with a small group of theologians and historians representing the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). The conversations focused on the “condemnations” of the Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, which remains the authoritative statement of faith for nearly 72 million Lutherans around the world today. Although most contemporary Lutherans were likely unaware of the condemnations in the Augsburg Confession—and even fewer would have associated the Anabaptists named there with modern-day Mennonites—groups in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have actively cultivated the memory of their Anabaptist spiritual forebears who were imprisoned, tortured, and executed at the time of the Reformation. For them, the suffering endured by the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century is an ongoing source of inspiration and identity.¹

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1. Cf. John D. Roth, “The Complex Legacy of the *Martyr’s Mirror* among Mennonites in North America,” *MQR* 87 (July 2013), 277-316.

Building on previous conversations in France, Germany, and the United States, the LWF-MWC International Study Commission that convened to discuss the condemnations concluded their work in 2009. Their report, "Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ,"² detailed the contentious relations between Lutherans and Anabaptists as both groups emerged amid the turmoil of the sixteenth-century Reformation, taking particular note of theological arguments that Lutheran reformers like Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon made to justify the suppression of the Anabaptists. The report also reflected theologically on the condemnations of the Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession, and it concluded by calling both traditions to "move beyond the condemnations" to a new relationship of forgiveness and reconciliation.³

The "Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of Anabaptists," brought to the LWF delegate assembly on July 22, 2010, expressed repentance for "past wrongdoings" and for the ways in which Lutherans "subsequently forgot or ignored this persecution and have continued to describe Anabaptists in misleading and damaging ways."⁴ It also included a commitment to interpret Lutheran Confessions in light of this history of persecution, as well as a commitment to ongoing dialogue and cooperation between Lutherans and Mennonites. In a moving gesture of humility, LWF delegates voted unanimously to approve the resolution by collectively kneeling.⁵ "Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," recalled Kathryn Johnson, LWF assistant general secretary for ecumenical affairs, "we moved in a remarkable fashion from repentance to reconciliation. No one who was present in that hall that day doubted that the Holy Spirit had been at work."⁶

2. *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ. Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission* (Geneva and Strasbourg: The Lutheran World Federation / The Mennonite World Conference, 2010).—www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/oea-lutheran-mennonites-web-en.pdf (accessed Oct. 10, 2016).

3. *Ibid.*, 102.

4. The "Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of "Anabaptists" was approved by the Council of the Lutheran World Federation in Chavannes de Bogis (Geneva) in October 2009 and adopted at the VIIth Plenary Session of the LWF Eleventh Assembly on July 22, 2010.—Report of the Eleventh LWF Assembly, Stuttgart, Germany, 47-48.—www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/LWF-Eleventh-Assembly-Report-EN.pdf (accessed Nov. 18, 2016).

5. In response, Danisa Ndlovu, president of MWC, acknowledged the burden of responsibility that those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition shared in the broken relationships, and concluded by presenting LWF general secretary Mark Hanson with a wooden foot-washing tub as a symbol of reconciliation and mutual service.—Danisa Ndlovu, "Mennonite World Conference Response to the Lutheran World Federation Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of Anabaptists."—*Ibid.*, 49-50.

6. www.mennoniteusa.org/news/lutherans-and-mennonites-celebrate-a-covenant-of-peace/ (accessed Nov. 18, 2016).

For many lay Mennonites and Lutherans the service of repentance and reconciliation in Stuttgart went unnoticed. But for others, it raised basic questions of memory and identity. How do Christians—divided by 500 years of theological differences and sustained memories of persecution—move forward in a new spirit of reconciliation?⁷ How does this new status change the way each group tells their story, particularly their formative “creation narratives”—the heroic stories of group beginnings that sustain collective identity? That challenge comes into particular focus in 2017 as Protestants around the world prepare to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, a commemoration symbolically tied to October 31, 1517, when, according to popular legend, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses against the sale of indulgences to the church door at Wittenberg, thereby unleashing forces of change that altered the course of church history.⁸

This essay seeks to open up that conversation for those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition by addressing three closely related themes: the broad debate over the meaning of the Reformation generated by the current celebrations of its 500-year anniversary; the complex historical relationship of the Anabaptist movement to the Reformation; and finally, the question of how contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites should commemorate their own beginnings against the backdrop of the Reformation celebrations and the service of reconciliation with the LWF at Stuttgart in 2010. The article concludes with a description of MWC’s anticipated ten-year series of commemorative events known as “Renewal 2027” as an illustrative test case for exploring these issues.

THE REFORMATION AND ITS CONTESTED LEGACY

Memory, of course, is inseparable from interpretation; every historical narrative is an argument. So it should not be surprising that descriptions of the Reformation have been embedded in controversy from the very beginning. The term “Protestant,” for example, emerged out of a contentious debate at the Imperial Diet of Speyer in 1529 when Emperor Charles V revoked an earlier ruling granting princes and Imperial Cities

7. Similar questions emerged following a five-year ecumenical dialogue between MWC and the Pontifical Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1998-2003), the results of which appeared as “Called Together to Be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference,” in *Mennonites in Dialogue: Official Reports from International and National Ecumenical Encounters, 1975-2012*, ed. Fernando Enns and Jonathan Seiling (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 19-114. Unlike the conversations with the Lutherans, however, the Catholic dialogue did not lead to a formal statement of apology.

8. Many modern historians, including the renowned Luther biographer, Martin Brecht, have raised doubts about whether or not Luther actually nailed his theses to the church door.—Cf. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985). It is clear that he sent them to his superiors on October 31, 1517.

in the Holy Roman Empire the right to determine their own religious beliefs. In response, princes sympathetic to Luther's evangelical critique wrote a "Letter of Protestation," arguing that secular authorities had no jurisdiction over matters of faith. The emperor refused to accept the letter, but the designation of the evangelical reformers as "protestants" endured. Widespread acceptance of the term "Reformation" conceals similar tensions, since the word implies a necessary and positive response to fundamental problems in the Catholic Church. From the perspective of Catholic apologists, however, Luther was not a "reformer" but a dangerous heretic whose impassioned rhetoric sparked the Peasants' War of 1525, challenged the authority of papacy, and led to the splintering of the Body of Christ. Nevertheless, by the middle of the seventeenth century—in part as a consequence of Lutheran sermons during the centennial year celebrations of 1617—the term "Reformation" had firmly established itself in the historiography of the sixteenth century.⁹

Within the emerging Protestant tradition, commemorative events recalling, for example, the birth or death of Martin Luther, or celebrating his posting of the 95 Theses, served as occasions for creating, consolidating, and popularizing Protestant identity.¹⁰ This was especially significant in the territories of the Holy Roman Empire, where confessional divisions were frequently the pretense for the so-called Religious Wars of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. By 1817—the 300th anniversary of Luther's 95 Theses—a basic narrative of the Reformation had crystallized and become firmly entrenched in Lutheran textbooks, sermons, confirmation manuals, theological faculties, and the popular culture of many Protestant countries. Though the narrative had many variations, the classic version of the story included at least four basic components.

First, the Reformation was inseparable from the dramatic figure of *Martin Luther*, the Augustinian monk who was its foremost theologian, inspirational strategist, and chief polemicist. In this telling of the story, Luther's 95 theses against the sale of indulgences, nailed to the church door at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, was an epochal event, marking the beginning of the "modern" era.¹¹ Those bold hammer strokes at

9. For a useful summary of Reformation historiography see C. Scott Dixon, *Contesting the Reformation* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 8-33.

10. For an insightful analysis of the Luther centenaries, beginning in 1617, and the evolution of popular perceptions of the Reformation, see Thomas Albert Howard, *Remembering the Reformation: An Inquiry into the Meanings of Protestantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

11. The most influential proponent of this idea that Luther's reforms marked the beginning of "modernity" was the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1840), but the idea was further developed by Emanuel Hirsch in his *Der Reich-Gottes-Begriff des neueren europäische Denkens* (Göttingen:

Wittenberg were soon followed by a series of programmatic treatises in 1520 that called for fundamental theological, social, and political reforms. When the emperor and the assembled secular and temporal authorities of the Holy Roman Empire challenged Luther to recant these writings at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he courageously defended the liberty of the religious conscience with words that have echoed throughout history: "Here I stand. I cannot go against the dictates of my conscience, so help me God!" Though other reformers like Philip Melancthon, Martin Bucer, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin also played a role in the Reformation drama, Luther embodied the genius of the movement—it was Luther who set the terms of the debate and Luther's writings that became the standard against which other expressions of the Reformation and, indeed, Protestant orthodoxy itself, must be measured.¹²

Second, the Reformation was, above all, a *theological event*. Sometime in 1516 Luther's personal quest to find peace in the face of an angry and just God led to a theological "breakthrough." While preparing a commentary on the book of Romans, Luther suddenly read the words "the just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17) in a new light. The pursuit of external works, he came to realize, whether defined by the Ten Commandments of Moses or the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus, could lead humans only to condemnation. Salvation came at God's initiative "by grace alone." Grace was a gift, pure and free—a gratuitous act, initiated by God, with no conditions whatsoever. This theological insight of "law and gospel"—along with the slogans of "Scripture alone," "grace alone," and "faith alone"—was the genius of the Reformation and, subsequently, the foundation for Lutheran hermeneutics, ethics, and homiletics; indeed, it established the framework for addressing virtually every theological question that a Christian could encounter. The theological movements that emerged around the figures of Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland or John Calvin in France were largely derivative of Luther's insights.

Third, the narrative that had coalesced in the popular imagination by the nineteenth century regarded the Reformation as a uniquely *German phenomenon*, a key component in the larger formation of Germany's national identity. In his monumental *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der*

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921), and found its way into many Western Civilization textbooks.

12. For one small recent example of this perspective see the following message that recently arrived as an e-mail message: "Nearly 500 years ago, a small-town priest disrupted an entire religious, economic and political landscape. The founder of our faith tradition, Martin Luther, believed in a living, daring confidence in God's grace – and the rest is history." Online appeal for ELCA Vision for Mission. — www.community.elca.org/email-viewonwebpage.aspx?erid=21507896&trid=f8ecf031-e21a-4484-8ecf-120cbc05f42a (accessed Oct. 26, 2016).

Reformation / German History in the Age of the Reformation (1839-1847), the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke described the Reformation not only as the beginning of modernity, but also an essential step in the long process by which the modern German state came into existence. In uniting territorial princes and Imperial cities against the meddlesome intrusions of a distant pope, Luther was, in a real sense, the father of the German nation.¹³

Finally, the legacy of the Reformation in the Western tradition could be traced in the principle of religious liberty, especially the *freedom of the individual conscience*. Luther, after all, had insisted on the right and responsibility of the individual to interpret Scripture according to the dictates of his or her conscience. The individual conscience, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, was the source of judgment and authority. Moreover, Luther rejected the spiritual distinction between the laity and clergy. All believers, he argued, were equally Christian; all were equally priests (the priesthood of believers). These principles, according to the standard narrative, became the foundation for religious toleration in the Western tradition.¹⁴

To be sure, the historiography of the Reformation has undergone a significant transformation in the last fifty years. Few contemporary academic historians—including most Lutheran scholars—would today identify Martin Luther as the “father” of the Reformation, and many would question whether October 31, 1517, marked the “beginning” of the movement. Virtually all scholars now speak of the “reformations” of the sixteenth century, rather than “the Reformation,” readily acknowledging the diversity of reforming impulses that spanned national borders and took many different expressions, including peasant revolutionaries, Anabaptist radicals, and quietist Spiritualists. Historians today recognize that theology is always shaped, in part at least, by larger political, economic, social, and cultural currents. And many would dispute the claim that the principles of toleration or religious liberty can be traced directly to the Protestant Reformation.¹⁵

13. For a helpful summary of the way in which Luther commemorations became instrumentalized for political purposes in the rise of German nationalism, see Jan Herman Brinks, “Luther and the German State,” *The Heythrop Journal* 39 (Jan. 1992), 1-17.

14. An official “Luther 2017” brochure titled “2013: Reformation und Toleranz” included the following claim: “According to the understanding of the reformers, faith and conscience are fundamentally free. To be sure, Luther’s calls for nonviolent exchanges of ideas were not always heeded. . . . Nevertheless the modern concepts of toleration and the freedom of conscience were essential outcomes of the Reformation.”—www.luther2017.de/fileadmin/luther2017/material/105x180_luther_themenflyer_2013.pdf (accessed Nov. 18, 2016).

15. Bernd Moeller was an early voice in the reintegration of Luther and the Reformation into a wider social and political context, but these approaches are now commonplace among contemporary historians of the Reformation. For a collection of historiographical essays that

Nevertheless, “identity narratives,” once established, are hard to challenge, especially in the context of celebrative public events such commemorations. So it should not be surprising that the approach of the 500-year anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, seen against the backdrop of previous centenary celebrations and a significant shift in historical interpretations, would spark vigorous public debate. In the early 2000s, representatives from the German government, along with leaders of the German Evangelical Church (EKD) and several scholars, convened to develop a ten-year plan to celebrate the Reformation—moving from 2008, commemorating the year that Luther arrived in Wittenberg, to 2017, when he posted the 95 Theses—called “Luther 2017: 500 Years of the Reformation.”¹⁶ Each year of the so-called “Luther decade” (*Lutherdekade*) was to feature a distinct legacy of the Reformation (e.g., education, freedom, music, tolerance, politics, art, etc.), culminating in October of 2017 with a massive celebration at Wittenberg.

Almost immediately the announcement of the plan triggered a storm of controversy, particularly within academic circles. Some critics challenged the impulse of the organizers to reduce the complexity of the Reformation to a series of simplistic, self-congratulatory themes, suggesting that Luther and the Protestant Reformation were somehow the wellspring of German education, freedom, music, toleration, and art. Others have been offended by the crassly commercial aspects of the celebration—a proliferation of kitsch products like Luther bobble-head dolls, Luther bonbons, and Luther garden trolls—that reduced Luther to a marketable name brand.¹⁷ Many others spoke out against the designation of the celebrations as “Luther 2017” or the “Luther decade,” arguing that the obsession with Luther perpetuated naïve understandings of the Reformation, was offensive to the heirs of Reformed Protestantism,

helpfully trace this transformation see *Palgrave Advances in the European Reformations*, ed. Alec Ryrie (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

16. For an overview of the remarkably complex organizational structure of “Luther 2017” that brings together the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, the German government, and experts in a wide variety of fields, see www.luther2017.de/en/organisation/. According to the website, the “Luther Decade” is led “by jointly attended boards (Board of trustees and the Steering Committee). Two agencies at Wittenberg are responsible for the performance and act as contact persons. A scientific board as well as work groups, focusing on the themes ‘Exhibitions,’ ‘Music,’ ‘Tourism and Public Relations,’ and ‘School and Education’ accompany the Decade with regards to content.”

17. See, for example, Friedrich Schorlemmer, “Lutherzwerge sind aufmarschiert. Oder: Aufmerksamkeitsorgie für Massenkitsch. Eine empörte Reaktion nach Eröffnung des Spektakels, von dem angeblich 98% begeistert sind,” *Die Zeit*, Aug. 19, 2010, 5. The German National Tourist Bureau was also very quick to seize on the commercial opportunities of the events, promising visitors “barrier free travel, an excellent tourism infrastructure and transport links by road and rail to all . . . Luther sites.”—www.germany.travel/en/specials/luther/luther.html (accessed Oct. 26, 2016).

and encouraged an unhealthy German nationalism.¹⁸ In 2011, the debate about the meaning and contemporary relevance of the Reformation culminated in a special issue of the highly-regarded journal *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* that bore the title: “Clueless in the Face of the Reformation Celebrations of 2017?”¹⁹

Perhaps the sharpest criticisms of the initial “Luther 2017” plans came from Lutheran and Catholic ecumenists who feared that the “Luther Decade” would reinforce antagonistic caricatures of the Catholic Church, thereby undoing fifty years of intense ecumenical conversations that have been going forward since Vatican II. In 1999, Catholics and Lutherans celebrated their ecumenical efforts with the “Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith,” a statement that affirmed significant points of agreement on the central theological debate of the sixteenth century—the doctrine of justification.²⁰ Now it seemed that the fragile consensus would be set back by Lutheran filiopietists and crass popularizers who had no reservations about celebrating a church division.

In response to those concerns, organizers of “Luther 2017” agreed to use the term “commemoration” rather than “celebration.” More significantly, a Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity convened for high-level discussions that began with “a discerning, self-critical look at ourselves, not only in our history, but also today.”²¹ In 2013, the Commission on Unity issued a small book—*From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*—that explicitly acknowledged the ecumenical gains of the late twentieth century, and took a first step toward writing a common history of the Reformation. The report concluded with “five ecumenical imperatives” for the future.²² The text seems to have played an important role in making

18. One response to these concerns from the academic community was the creation of REFO500, another multiyear initiative to commemorate the Reformation by networking universities, research institutes, and scholars to promote conferences and exhibits. The goal of the project is to create an “international platform for knowledge, expertise, ideas, products and events, specializing in the 500 year legacy of the Reformation.” Significantly, the organizers of REFO500 are located in the Netherlands and identify more strongly with the Reformed tradition. See their website at: <http://www.refo500.nl/> (accessed Oct. 26, 2016).

19. Katharina Greschat and Heinrich Holze, “Ratlos vor dem Reformationsjubiläum 2017?” *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 28 (2011), 9-13.

20. The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2000). Originally published as *Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Otto Lembeck / Paderborn: Bonifatius-Verlag, 1999).

21. *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017: Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt; Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2013), 7.

22. *Ibid.*, 87-89.

possible a joint Catholic-Lutheran worship service at Lund, Sweden, on Oct. 31, 2016, with Pope Francis I in attendance.

By their very nature public commemorations simplify the past in order to speak to a broader public; as such, they are often ill-suited to the careful distinctions and qualifying footnotes of the academy. In 2009, Thomas Kauffmann, a noted Lutheran historian and vigorous critic of “Luther 2017,” offered the following definition of the Reformation:

By Reformation I understand the processes of transformation to which the church was subjected in both urban and territorial contexts and which were undertaken as both a conscious act of demarcation against the Church of Rome and as an open break with canon law, which was its legal foundation. These processes, which are partly initiated, partly accompanied by private, but more often public acts of communication (in particular, so-called broadsheet pamphleteering), are intrinsically tied to political, legal, and military conflicts that took place at various levels in towns and territories of the Holy Roman Empire, as well as in Europe at large.²³

Although historians will welcome the precision of Kauffman’s summary, commemoration organizers might be forgiven for failing to capture its full nuance in their public events. In this sense, the controversy generated by “Luther 2017: 500 Years of the Reformation” has largely been healthy. To the extent that the “Luther Decade” sparked new debates about the legacy of the Reformation, elevated public awareness of Protestant-Catholic ecumenism, or prompted fresh conversations about the role of religion in a society facing the challenge of integrating a new wave of immigrants, criticism surrounding the commemoration has had a positive outcome.

Still, from the perspective of an outsider—a Mennonite historian looking on the Reformation through the lens of the Anabaptist-Mennonite experience—the critique of “Luther 2017” has not gone far enough. Three themes in particular merit further reflection, especially as Anabaptist-Mennonite groups consider how they will participate in commemorations of the sixteenth-century reform movements from the perspective of their own tradition.

The Reformation’s “Unintended Consequences”

From the outset, the organizers of “Luther 2017” assumed that the impact of the Reformation on the Christian church, the Western tradition—and, by extension, the world—has been far-reaching and

23. Thomas Kauffman, *Geschichte der Reformation* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2009), 22.

positive. Yet those assumptions, entirely understandable within the context of a commemoration, merit closer examination. In his recent magisterial survey of the legacy of the Reformation, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, historian Brad Gregory has reframed the conversation in a fundamental way.²⁴

In six painstakingly detailed essays Gregory traces the unfolding secularization of modern Western culture since the late Middle Ages. At the heart of his argument is the Protestant Reformation, and particularly the question of authority. Luther's principle of "Scripture alone" and his rejection of tradition not only challenged the authority of the pope and the institutional church; it also opened the door to a multiplicity of other readings of Scripture, including ones that Luther found abhorrent. Within a few short years after Luther's break with the Church of Rome, other reformers—including Andreas Karlstadt, Thomas Müntzer, Ulrich Zwingli, and a host of Anabaptists—also claimed the right to interpret Scripture according to the dictates of their own conscience. What began as a reform movement within the Catholic Church quickly devolved into a host of competing, and even contradictory, understandings of the Gospel. The ensuing incommensurability of competing claims to biblical truth brought Christian princes into deadly combat with each other in the exceedingly destructive Wars of Religion, and ultimately encouraged the rising authority of the state over a divided church, along with the privatization of faith, the subordination of theology to science within the university system, the splintering of the Body of Christ into a confusing welter of competing denominations, and the widespread agnosticism or outright atheism that seems to characterize public culture in the West today.

In the centuries following the Reformation religious institutions became subject to the authority of the state; politics was reduced to the bare mechanics of power; faith claims were banished from the public square; belief and morality were relativized; and the good life came to be defined almost exclusively in terms of material acquisition (what Gregory calls "the goods life"). Though he acknowledges that the roots of secularization preceded the sixteenth century, Gregory argues that the characteristic qualities of modernity—its fragmentation and hyperpluralism, the incoherency of contemporary moral claims, and our inability to respond to the "Big Questions" of meaning, purpose, and destiny in life—were all unintended consequences of the Protestant Reformation. In his telling of the story the decisive forces in the course of modern Western history have been the rise of the modern nation-state, the

24. Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

dominance of Enlightenment rationalism, and the triumph of consumer capitalism. In this scenario the significance of the Reformation was primarily its role in accelerating and magnifying a transformation already underway moving in the direction of secularization.

Gregory's argument raises fundamental questions about the Reformation and its legacy that go far beyond the critiques historians have raised thus far about "Luther 2017"—indeed, it calls into question the very premise of the commemoration itself.

b. Globalization of the Christian Church

Although Gregory's argument triggered a widespread and sustained debate in academic circles, it seems to have had little discernible impact on the conversations around "Luther 2017." In a similar way, organizers of the "Luther Decade" do not seem to have given serious attention to another significant question regarding the Reformation—namely, how the globalization of Christianity in the course of the twentieth century compels us to reconsider the standard narratives of church history.

As historians like Philip Jenkins, Lamin Sanneh, Mark Noll, and others have amply documented, a fundamental demographic transformation has taken place in the global Christian church during the course of the twentieth century, so that the center of gravity that once was clearly anchored in Europe and North America has now shifted decisively to Africa, Asia, and Latin America—regions sometimes described collectively as the Global South.²⁵ In 1917 an estimated 89 percent of all Protestant Christians lived in Europe or the United States; today, a century later, that number is closer to 25 percent; and it will likely continue to shrink.²⁶ At roughly the same time, the number of Christians in Africa rose from 10 million in 1900 to 493 million in 2010; in Asia the Christian population went from 22 million to 352 million during the past century; and in Latin America from 62 million to 544 million.²⁷

This transformation is not only about a demographic realignment of the Christian tradition; it also has profound consequences for how we tell the story of church history. Today, the primary actors in the drama of global Christianity are groups who have no particular connection to the

25. The literature on global Christianity is vast and growing rapidly. For a basic introduction see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering The West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993); and Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009).

26. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3.

27. Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 56-57.

Reformation. Thus, of the roughly 2.4 billion Christians in the world, approximately half are Catholics. Another 300 million or so are members of various Orthodox churches. And neither of the two fastest-growing groups in the global church—namely, Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, whose adherents number around 650 million, and African Independent Churches (AICs) with some 84 million members—identify in any particular way with the events of sixteenth-century Europe. In the meantime, those groups most closely associated with the Reformation—so-called “mainline Protestants”—are facing precipitous losses in their membership, particularly in Europe and North America.

The consequences of this demographic revolution for the current debate regarding the legacy of the Reformation have not yet been fully appreciated. What does it mean for the organizers of “Luther 2017”—for whom the centrality of Protestantism in the history of Christianity is seemingly beyond dispute—that the vast majority of Christians in the world today inhabit theological worlds far removed from the mainstream of Western universities and the dominant narratives of church history textbooks in which the Reformation looms so large? For most Christians in the Global South, the central theological issues of the sixteenth-century reformers—debates over the freedom of the will, for example, or justification by faith, or the sovereignty of God—are far less significant than the biblical themes of poverty and healing, or the living reality of the Holy Spirit, or Christ’s call in the Great Commission to share the gospel. For the majority of Christians in the global church, the standard Reformation categories that most European and North American seminaries take for granted are simply not the most relevant points of theological departure.

Indeed, if the Reformation is to be relevant to the global church at all, it may mean that commemorations of the event will need to give significantly more attention to those sixteenth-century groups who have traditionally been relegated to margins of the story: the dissenters, radicals, spiritualists, and heretics. Like the Radical Reformation dissenters, for example, African Independent Churches often emerge as lay-initiated movements of self-proclaimed pastors and prophets who challenge traditional sources of ecclesial authority, ignore political boundaries, and threaten the social status quo. Like the sixteenth-century Spiritualists, Pentecostal-Charismatics in the global church tend to emphasize the central role of the Holy Spirit, frequently expressed in ways that defy systematization or the formulations of doctrinal orthodoxy. Like their Radical Reformation counterparts, the growing edges of the global church today have a tendency to fragmentation and division. At times, they practice a biblical hermeneutic open to apocalyptic themes, attuned to the realities of the poor, the young, the disenfranchised, and women.

And for many of them, persecution is a likely, even inevitable, consequence of their faith.

Calling attention to this broader perspective does not mean that church members in the Global South—or those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition—should ignore the events commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. After all, “right remembering” is a central theme of the biblical narrative—an expression of the good news of the gospel. The Protestant Reformation has bequeathed many gifts to the global Christian church. It should not, and will not, be forgotten in the history of the church. But the emergence of global Christianity is not just an interesting development somewhere on the periphery. It represents a profound transformation of the Christian faith that calls for a fundamental reorientation of our understanding of church history, including the traditional narrative of the Protestant Reformation.

c. Reconciliation and the Reformation Narrative

Finally, although the organizers of “Luther 2017” have shown great sensitivity in regards to their ecumenical relations with Roman Catholics, relatively little attention has been given to the service of reconciliation with Anabaptist-Mennonites that took place at the LWF assembly in Stuttgart in 2010.²⁸ In the years following the assembly, the LWF appointed a “Task Force on the Mennonite Action,” whose work resulted in a small book that included several theological essays and a survey of local Mennonite-Lutheran collaborations since 2010.²⁹ Yet little in the public celebrations would suggest that the shared narrative of the early history of the Reformation that formed the basis for the service of reconciliation at Stuttgart in 2010 has registered in a meaningful way among organizers of “Luther 2017” or among Lutheran historians.³⁰ The

28. It also appears that no Anabaptist-Mennonite or Free Church representatives were included in the circle of planners.—Cf. Stefan Rhein, “Die Vorbereitungen zum Reformationsjubiläum 2017. Ein Werkstattbericht,” *Berliner Theologischer Zeitschrift* 28 (2011), 44-61.

29. *Bearing Fruit: Implications of the 2010 Reconciliation between Lutherans and Mennonites/Anabaptists. Report of the Lutheran World Federation Task Force to Follow Up the “Mennonite Action” at the LWF Eleventh Assembly in 2010* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, forthcoming). At the church-wide assembly of the ELCA at New Orleans on Aug. 11, 2016, Martin Junge, general secretary of the LWF, noted that the path forward in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue was helped by the process leading to reconciliation with Mennonites. So the MWC-LWF path to reconciliation has not gone completely unnoticed.

30. One possible exception is a project called “Die Reformation radikalisieren” [Radicalizing Reformation], seemingly a grassroots initiative of theologians from a variety of traditions who are calling attention to the radical social, economic, and political dimensions the Reformation might have for today. A convening group has issued 94 theses focused on the themes of liberation and issued at least one collection of essays in English and German, *Befreiung von Gewalt zum Leben in Frieden / Liberation from Violence for Life in Peace*,

2013 theme of “Luther 2017,” for example, was “Reformation and Tolerance,” seemingly an ideal context for elevating the insights of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission into the public eye in order to wrestle openly with the painful history of intolerance that sixteenth-century reformers like Luther and Melancthon actively supported. Instead, the 2013 commemoration events seem to have focused almost exclusively on the positive role of the Reformation in promoting religious toleration. The central theme of the following year—“Justification and Freedom. 500 Years of the Reformation”—might have also lent itself to a public engagement regarding the limits of religious freedom in the sixteenth century.³¹ But here again there seems to have been virtually no mention of the Anabaptists in the official publications from those events.³²

Despite significant gestures of hospitality and friendship on the part of numerous individual Lutherans, the basic directions of “Luther 2017” suggest that traditional perceptions of the Anabaptists continue to run deep—at best, they are mentioned as marginal figures, outside the history of the Reformation proper; at worst, they are invisible.³³

None of these critiques render the enormous energy and creativity that has gone into “Luther 2017: 500 Years of the Reformation”—the scores of conferences, books, concerts, public lectures, and exhibits that have shaped the contours of this anniversary—a failure. Indeed, insofar as the controversies swirling around the anniversary events have, in some small way, replicated the urgency of the Reformation debates themselves, the commemorations have served a crucial function of engaging scholars and

ed. Ulrich Duchrow and Craig Nesson (Berlin: Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2015). The collection contains essays by three Mennonites: Jaime Adrián Prieto Valladares, Antonio González Fernández, and Karl Koop.

31. Cf. “Rechtfertigung und Freiheit”—www.ekd.de/EKD-Texte/2014_rechtfertigung_und_freiheit.html. For a sharp critique of these claims on behalf of the Lutheran tradition, see Martin Rothkegel, “Reformation, Nonkonformismus, Freiheit: Freikirchlich Anmerkungen zum allzu deutsche Lutherjubiläum 2017,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Gemeinde* 21 (2016), 157-173.

32. It appears that the Reformed Church in Switzerland has been more open to including the free churches in their planning for a celebration focused on 2019, the beginning of Ulrich Zwingli’s preaching activities in Zurich. See, for example, Hanspeter Jecker, “Gedanken zum Internationalen Kongress zum Reformationsjubiläum in Zürich,” in *500 Jahre Reformation: Bedeutung und Herausforderungen*, ed. Petra Bosse-Huber, et al. (Zurich: Theologische Verlag Zürich, 2014), 377-382.

33. Andrea Strübind, a Baptist church historian who has published widely on Anabaptist history, is one of the fiercest Free Church critics of “Luther 2017.” See, for example, “Erbe und Ärgernis. Was gibt es für Kirchen aus täuferischen und nonkonformistischen Traditionen anlässlich des Reformationsjubiläums 2017 zu feiern?” in *Luther und der Reformation aus freikirchlicher Sicht*, ed. Volker Spangenberg (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Uni Press, 2013), 71-88, and “Heilung und Erinnerungen: Chancen und Risiken im ökumenischen Prozess,” *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts* 6 (2015), 111-118.

lay people alike in meaningful conversations about religious themes. For contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites groups, “Luther 2017” also helpfully serves as an inspiration—and caution—as they prepare to celebrate their own commemorative events focused on the beginnings of the Anabaptist tradition. So what is it that Anabaptist-Mennonite groups should learn from all this?

COMMEMORATING ANABAPTIST BEGINNINGS?: A HISTORICAL INTERLUDE

In May of 1859, August Heinrich Neufeld, pastor of the Ibersheim Mennonite congregation in Rhine-Hesse, published an essay in the *Mennonitische Blätter* in which he called on “every Mennonite congregation in the Old World and the New” to begin planning for “one of the most important days in our church fellowship”—namely, the 300th anniversary of the death of Menno Simons on January 13, 1861.³⁴ Neufeld, with the full support of the paper’s editor, Jakob Mannhardt, hoped that a public celebration of the man who had lent his name to the Mennonite tradition would encourage a scattered and divided church to develop a stronger sense of shared purpose and identity.³⁵ So he was deeply disappointed that his proposal to commemorate Menno Simons would be the source of a long and contentious debate.

As historian Wolfgang Froese has suggested, the debate over the commemoration of Menno’s death revealed deep tensions among European Mennonites that ran along cultural, educational, and theological fault lines.³⁶ Like Neufeld and Mannhardt, virtually all of the church leaders who supported the proposal were salaried pastors who had been educated at seminaries deeply influenced by Protestant theology. These pastors actively promoted a “free evangelical understanding of our confession,” in contrast to inherited forms of Mennonite traditionalism, which they regarded as dry, legalistic, and self-satisfied. The desire by these self-conscious “evangelical Christians” to commemorate Menno was part of a larger effort to cultivate a Mennonite identity that was firmly rooted in the Reformation, in which Menno deserved a place alongside Luther and Calvin, even if he might have been

34. *Mennonitische Blätter* 6 (May 1859), 19.

35. Only five years earlier, Jakob Mannhardt, a pastor of the Danzig Mennonite church, had established the *Mennonitische Blätter* with a very similar goal in mind. In the opening issue, Mannhardt expressed the hope that the paper would bring deeper sense of fellowship among Mennonites scattered throughout Europe, representing a range of cultures and theological orientations.—*Mennonitische Blätter* 1 (1854), 2.

36. Wolfgang Froese, “‘. . . ein würdiges und bleibendes Denkmal zu setzen’: Eine Diskussion in den *Mennonitischen Blättern* über die Feier des Menno-Simons-Gedenkjahres 1861,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 53 (1996), 62-81.

a “lesser light.”³⁷ They were determined to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Anabaptist tradition by anchoring their church’s origins firmly within the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The challenge they faced in making the case was daunting. After all, virtually all of the heroes of the Reformation—including Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, Calvin, and Bullinger—had clearly identified the Anabaptists as seditious, wild-eyed fanatics (*Schwärmer*). In both the popular imagination and the emerging historiography of the Reformation, the Anabaptists were indelibly associated with Thomas Müntzer, the fiery leader of the Peasants’ War of 1525, and with the violent debacle of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster ten years later. Indeed, well into the twentieth century, a standard church history textbook referred to them as “the deformation of the Reformation.”³⁸

In response, heirs of the Anabaptist tradition, especially in the Netherlands and north Germany, strenuously sought to persuade princes and city councils of the fundamental orthodoxy of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition—Mennonites were biblical-grounded, moral, earnest Protestant Christians, who contributed to the public good through their practical skills and disciplined lives. Thus, for example, in 1664 T. T. van Sittert, a Mennonite elder from Amsterdam, published “An Apology for the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition” in which he assured his readers that Mennonites were not a new religion, nor did they have anything to do with the Anabaptist Kingdom at Münster. Indeed, he argued, all of their distinctive theological convictions had derived from Luther’s own early teachings.³⁹ Mennonite pastors educated at the Dutch Mennonite Seminary in Amsterdam since the middle of the eighteenth century framed their theological identity within the categories of the Protestant Reformation. Leonhard Weydmann, pastor at the Monsheim congregation and one of the first seminary-trained and salaried Mennonite ministers in Rhine Hesse, is a good case in point. In 1817, the Lutheran and Reformed churches in the region had celebrated the Reformation centenary by setting aside several centuries of enmity and merging their two confessions in the Protestant Union of 1818. In this

37. *Mennonitische Blätter* 7 (1860), 17.

38. The phrase comes from Johann Kurtz, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte für Studierende*, 9th ed. (Leipzig: Neumann, 1885), 148ff. For similar assessments, see also Karl Holl, “Luther und die Schwärmer,” (1922) in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1948), 1:420-467.

39. For the full text of the document, see John C. Wenger, ed. and trans. “T. T. van Sittert’s Apology for the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition, 1664,” *MQR* 49 (Jan. 1975), 5-21. The essay appeared in German as an appendix to a larger collection of texts that included the Dordrecht Confession of 1632 and several prayers by Leenaerdt Clock. Van Sittert’s “Apology” was widely reprinted, appearing in many editions of the *Christliches Gemüths-Gespräch* and in over forty editions of the prayer book *Ernsthafte Christenpflicht* published in North America.

context of warm ecumenism, Weydmann announced his intention to compose a new catechism for Mennonites in the region. The traditional catechism, he wrote to a friend in 1833, was “outmoded” in its restrictions on such matters as exogenous marriage and divorce, as well as in its practice of church discipline.⁴⁰ In the interests of devising a catechism better suited to the realities of the day, Weydmann drew heavily on the counsel of Protestant (*evangelisch*) clergymen from several neighboring villages. In his revised catechism the differences separating Mennonites from Protestants nearly disappeared altogether.⁴¹ Weydmann retained passing references to the traditional Mennonite themes of nonresistance and adult baptism, but he clearly identified these principles as options for individual discernment, not as a test of church membership. The fundamental organizing category of Weydmann’s new catechism was the doctrine of grace, with a strong emphasis on the atonement. Teachings on moral regeneration had virtually disappeared, whereas instructions regarding the nature of the church had become generically Protestant. In subsequent years, Weydmann’s contacts in local Protestant circles intensified. In the 1830s and 1840s he aggressively promoted the Protestant mission movement, encouraging young Mennonite men to attend evangelical mission training schools in Basel and Barmen; and in 1850 Weydmann published a glowing biography of Luther entitled *Luther: Ein Charakter- und Spiegelbild für unsere Zeit*.⁴²

By the time of Neufeld’s proposal in 1859 to commemorate Menno’s death, Mennonites in Weydmann’s circle were undergoing a fundamental reorientation in terms of their relations with the broader Protestant world: they borrowed heavily from Protestant hymnody; they designed their church houses on Protestant models; they read deeply in Protestant devotional literature; and some young people began attending Protestant and mission institutes.⁴³

40. Cf. John D. Roth, “Context, Conflict and Community: South German Mennonites at the Threshold of Modernity, 1750-1850,” in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, ed. Susan and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press US, 2000), 120-144.

41. The catechism, which appeared in 1836, was titled *Christliche Lehre, zunächst zum Gebrauch der Taufgesinnten in Deutschland*.

42. Leonhard Weydmann, *Luther: Ein Charakter- und Spiegelbild für unsere Zeit* (Hamburg and Gotha: Friedrich und Andreas Perthes, 1850). This publication was preceded by two similarly-oriented texts: *Über die neuesten Erscheinungen in der protestantischen Kirche* (Frankfurt am Main: P.H. Guilhauman, 1829) and *Die Fragen unserer bewegten Zeit im Lichte des Evangeliums und mit beständiger Rücksicht auf die Urtheile der Reformatoren betrachtet* (Frankfurt a.M.: Heinrich Ludwig Brönnner, 1834).

43. This impulse to join Anabaptism to the Reformation and the Protestant tradition was carried forward in the twentieth century among North American church leaders as well. Thus, for example, key leaders in the Old Mennonite Church such as Daniel Kauffman and J. C. Wenger frequently described Anabaptists in doctrinal language that defined them as orthodox Protestants with the addition of a few Mennonite distinctives such as

Neufeld and his peers saw the commemorations of Menno as an opportunity to challenge the long tradition of Reformation historiography that had denounced and excluded the Anabaptists from Protestant Christianity. Celebrating Menno was a way of emulating a Protestant tradition by elevating a great hero of the faith, while also underscoring the Protestant orthodoxy of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology.

The church leaders who opposed the commemoration were not hostile to the theology of Menno Simons or to the preservation of his memory. But they were deeply uneasy about an orchestrated public commemoration along the lines of the Reformation centenaries or other Protestant celebrations of anniversary events. In part, their discomfort reflected a deeply rooted tradition of humility that resisted the notion of elevating any single individual in such a prominent way. Followers of Christ, they argued, witnessed to the world through the testimony of their lives, not ceremonies that brought honor to human beings. A commemoration of Menno Simons, along the lines being proposed by Neufeld and the other seminary-trained ministers, was simply copying a current fashion in the state church. One correspondent, Christian Schmutz, a minister from Baden, described the proposal as “an imitation of national and state church festivals and the urge to erect monuments,” rejecting it as “an inappropriate elevation of human accomplishments that pays homage to the spirit of the age.”⁴⁴ For Schmutz and other lay pastors, the promotion of such an event was a measure of how far Mennonites had fallen from the witness of Menno himself.

Behind these reservations was an alternative vision regarding the origins of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. The true founder of the Mennonite tradition, they were convinced, was not Menno, but Christ alone, since he is the one who first lived and taught these principles. Menno himself, they argued, would be the first to insist upon this.⁴⁵ Neufeld and Mannhardt, with their formal theological training and desire to assimilate into the cultural and political mainstream, were trying to define Anabaptist identity according to the terms of the Protestant Reformation. Schmutz and his supporters, by contrast, were far less troubled by a sectarian identity, rooted in a separatist view of the church that was accustomed to hostility and marginalization by the dominant culture. They consciously identified with a long tradition of dissenters that

nonconformity and nonresistance. Influential Mennonite historians such as C. Henry Smith and Harold Bender made similar arguments, describing Anabaptists as the most faithful representatives of Luther's original Reformation vision, untainted by Luther's pragmatic capitulation to state authority at the time of the Peasants' War in 1525.

44. *Mennonitische Blätter* 7 (1860), 52.

45. *Ibid.*

could be traced all the way back to the apostolic church and to Christ himself.

Behind this self-understanding was an alternative narrative of their history. The opening entries in the Hutterite *Chronicle*, for example, began with an account of God separating light from darkness at Creation, followed by a brief history of God's people in the Old Testament who demonstrated their faithfulness by resisting accommodation to the culture around them. Then followed an account of Christ on the road to the cross, brief histories of the martyrs of the early church, and several accounts of martyrs in the Middle Ages. Luther and Zwingli may have challenged the pope, but they both "baptized infants and rejected the true baptism of Christ." Moreover, "Luther and Zwingli defended their teaching with the sword, as they had learned from the antichrist, their father and chief, knowing well that Christian knighthood is not of the flesh but is mighty before God to destroy all human attacks."⁴⁶ Then follows the story of the first Anabaptist baptisms in Zurich in 1525, which was met immediately with persecution by Zwingli and other reformers. The long record of Hutterite history that follows envisions its Anabaptist community as a separatist tradition, whose origins were not in the Reformation but in the story of Creation itself.

The *Martyrs Mirror*, a highly-influential martyrology that emerged out of the Dutch Anabaptist tradition, follows a very similar logic.⁴⁷ The 1660 edition, compiled by the Dutch pastor Thieleman van Braght, begins with an account of John's baptism of Christ as the exemplary model for adult baptism, and then moves to Christ's humiliation and crucifixion as the inevitable consequence of a life modeled on Christ's teachings. The narrative then recounts, often in great detail, a long list of Christian martyrs who also suffered throughout the history of the Christian church for holding firm to the principles of believer's baptism and nonresistance in accordance with the teachings and example of Christ. The Anabaptists, who do not appear until nearly midway through the massive compendium of martyrs, are understood to be in full continuity with a drama that began with Jesus. The *Martyrs Mirror* scarcely mentions Luther, Zwingli, and the other reformers—they are minor characters in the larger story of God's witness to the world carried forward in history through the testimony of suffering by a faithful minority.⁴⁸

46. Hutterian Brethren, *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* (Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Pub. House, 1987), 42-43.

47. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater, or, Martyrs' Mirror*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm, 15th ed. (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1987).

48. One version of this effort to distinguish the Anabaptist movement from its Reformation context was a move among some Mennonite historians in the 1970s and 1980s to define the Anabaptists as "neither Catholic nor Protestant." The goal was to establish a

The debate that unfolded in the pages of the *Mennonitische Blätter* in the early 1860s captures well the enduring tensions at stake in the contemporary conversations among Anabaptist-Mennonites about how—or whether—they should participate in the broader commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Largely excluded from the dominant history of the Reformation as marginal, seditious, irrelevant, dissenters, or heretics, those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition since then have struggled to agree on how Anabaptism fits into the larger Christian story. Are the Anabaptists rightful heirs of the Reformation—perhaps even the “fulfillment” of the reforms that Luther introduced? Should they, like Neufeld and Mannhardt, insist on a more visible place in the Reformation commemorations today by challenging and critiquing the continued impulse to marginalize or ignore the dissenters? Or should the focus of Christian identity be exclusively on Christ, not reformers of sixteenth century be they Luther, Zwingli, Sattler, Marpeck, or Menno? Are these commemorative events diversions from a deeper and truer identity that is rooted in the radical call of Jesus in continuity with a long tradition of Christian faithfulness?

PRINCIPLES FOR ANABAPTIST-MENNONITE COMMEMORATIONS TODAY

As with the debates surrounding the “Luther Decade,” the controversy among European Mennonites in 1860 regarding the commemoration of Menno’s death is a reminder that public celebrations of historical events are inevitably complex, and often contested. But complexity and controversy are not a sufficient reason to engage in historical amnesia or to discount the 2000 years of history that stands between Anabaptist-Mennonites today and the early church of the apostles, including the Reformation. Throughout Scripture the people of God are repeatedly admonished to *remember*—to step back from the ordinary events of daily life to recall “the mighty works of God” in their past. Sometimes these acts of memory took tangible form. Thus, for example, following a victory over the Philistines, Samuel built a pile of stones—an Ebenezer, or “the stone of help”—as a tangible reminder to later generations of the Lord’s power and protection (I Samuel 7). Likewise, when the Children of Israel crossed the Jordon River, Joshua set up twelve stones to commemorate God’s miraculous intervention. “In the future,” Joshua instructed his followers, “when your descendants ask their parents, ‘What do these stones mean?’”

theological identity that was genuinely distinct, a “third way” between Catholicism and Protestantism that was not dependent on theological frameworks of either group. See, for example, Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, Ont.: Conrad Press, 1973).

they should tell the story of God's miraculous intervention on their behalf (Joshua 4:20).

Historical memory is central to the church's identity and witness. When members of the Jewish Sanhedrin asked the apostle Stephen to give an account of his faith, he responded not with a doctrinal statement, but rather with a long narrative of God's saving actions in Jewish history. Rituals of remembering in the biblical tradition are both an expression of worship and a form of renewal; collective acts of memory help to form the church's identity, reminding members of their highest ideals and equipping them to resist easy conformity to the status quo.

In this sense, Anabaptist-Mennonites today are compelled to acknowledge the events of the Reformation era that were formative to their identity. The real challenge for those in the Christian tradition, as theologian Miroslav Volf has argued, is not *whether* Anabaptist-Mennonites should commemorate events in their past, but rather *how* they will remember—what form those commemorations should take. In his *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, Volf notes that a commitment to “right remembering” recognizes the possibility of remembering “wrongly” or “badly”—commemorations can, of course, become a form of idolatry in which a group worships itself instead of the Creator. But the possibility of remembering “wrongly” should never be a reason to avoid reflection on the past.⁴⁹

Building on the work of Volf and others, several principles of “right remembering” may be especially relevant in the coming years for Anabaptist-Mennonite groups who wish to join in the commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and Anabaptist beginnings. I offer the principles that follow not as a static template, but as a framework for a much needed conversation about public rituals of memory.

“Right Remembering” as Confession

In the first place, “right remembering” in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition suggests that public commemorations should be occasions for confession. For Christians, confession has two quite distinct meanings. The first—as in a “confession of faith”—recognizes that at key moments in a tradition individuals or groups have given witness to their faith in a

49. Although Volf has written extensively on this subject, his most accessible work is *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). He addresses “right remembering” explicitly in his *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), esp. 39-128. See also Jeremy M. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (London: T&T Clark, 2011). I explore similar themes in John D. Roth, “Forgiveness and the Healing of Memories: An Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42 (Fall 2007), 573-588.

particular way that merits special attention. This can take the form of a written document; or, as is often the case in the Anabaptist tradition, confession can find expression in the form of exemplary lives, perseverance in the face of suffering, or even the witness of martyrdom. “Right remembering” of these groups or individuals honors the faithful witness of those who have gone before; commemorations publicly express a desire to live today in ways that are consistent with those earlier confessions of faith.

At the same time, however, “right remembering” should also remind us of a second meaning of “confession”—namely, an open acknowledgement of the church’s limitations, distortions, and failures, even in the stories of those same Anabaptists whose lives we may regard as exemplary. From the very beginning of the movement, Anabaptist leaders consistently fell short of the standards of Christian discipleship they themselves proclaimed. Leaders among the early movement of communitarian Anabaptists in Moravia, for example, were deeply divided by mutual accusations of greed and by intense struggles for personal power.⁵⁰ Apocalyptic expectations fostered by some Anabaptist leaders led several groups to engage in highly eccentric, and sometimes violent, behavior.⁵¹ And virtually all of the distinctive theological emphases of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement were haunted by troubling shadow sides—theological blind spots or deficits that often went unacknowledged.⁵² If a commemoration is to “rightly remember” the past, it must not only celebrate the heroic and exemplary actions of its early leaders, but also confess the clay feet—the excesses and moral failures—of those same leaders.⁵³

“Right Remembering” Includes More than One Story

In a similar way, “right remembering” means that Anabaptist-Mennonite commemorations must acknowledge the multiplicity of stories that make up the past. Public, celebrative events intended to inspire a

51. Cf. Werner O. Packull, *Rereading Anabaptist Beginnings* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1991).

52. I name some of these theological blind spots in John D. Roth, “Anabaptism and Evangelicalism Revisited: Healing a Contentious Relationship?” in *The Activist Impulse: Essays on the Intersection of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, ed. Jared S. Burkholder and David C. Cramer (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2012), esp. 58-65.

53. This point is made explicitly in a reflection paper by the MWC Faith and Life Commission called “The Anabaptist Tradition.”—Consensus #13, Minute 13-d-I in “Minutes of the MWC EC,” (St. Chrischona, Switzerland), May 19-20, 2012, document 2 in the docket of the EC meeting in Akron, Pa., May 22-29, 2013. The text appears as “The ‘Anabaptist Tradition’—Reclaiming its Gifts, Heeding its Weaknesses,” document 3.2 in the *MWC Reference Notebook, 2015-2021*.

broad audience nearly always gravitate toward a single, simple, heroic narrative that imparts a clear moral lesson. It is much more difficult to acknowledge multiple narratives of competing voices whose convictions are conflicted, complex, and nuanced. But if, for example, Anabaptist-Mennonite commemorations tell the story of the first adult baptisms in Zurich, Switzerland, on January 21, 1525, only as a narrative of stalwart, biblically-inspired Christians—motivated exclusively by the plain words of Jesus in Scripture and put to death simply because of their desire to follow Jesus—then they have not remembered rightly. Commemorations of Anabaptist beginnings often emphasize a sharp sense of opposition of what came before, highlighting the radical break with the past. Yet hidden within the Anabaptist movement are deep debts to the Catholic tradition, which shaped the spiritual formation of all of the early leaders, as well the formative influence of the early Protestant reformers. Moreover, there are multiple ways of describing what happened after the first Anabaptist baptisms in January of 1525. In the months that followed, for example, no Anabaptist leader had a clear understanding of exactly how baptism was related to emerging understandings of the church; early Anabaptists were not united in their position on the sword; and they had sharply different perspectives on how the principle of “separation from the world” should find expression in daily life.⁵⁴

One consequence of this multiplicity of stories for planners of contemporary commemorations is the question of which date to memorialize. In 1925, European Mennonite church leaders gathered in Basel to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the first baptisms.⁵⁵ But 1525 is only one of several plausible dates. Dutch Mennonites, for example, might just as plausibly look to 1536 when Menno left the priesthood and assumed a new role as the influential leader of a persecuted movement. 1527 marked the consolidation of a new theological identity around the Schleithem Confession; but it also was the year of a crucial mission conference in Augsburg—later known as the Martyrs Synod—that gave new impetus to the growth of the movement. The Hutterites might focus on 1528, marking the emergence of the first group explicitly committed to community of goods; or to 1533 when their namesake, Jacob Hutter, assumed leadership of the community at Aupsitz. Commemorative dates

54. For one account of the complexity of the years immediately following the first baptisms in 1525, see Arnold C. Snyder, “The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism, 1520-1530,” *MQR* 80 (Oct. 2006), 501-646. For an overview of the evolving historiography of Anabaptism see John D. Roth, “Recent Currents in the Historiography of the Radical Reformation,” *Church History* 71 (Sept. 2002), 523-535.

55. Cf. *Bericht über die 400 jährige Jubiläumsfeier der Mennoniten oder Taufgesinnten* (Karlsruhe: Verlag Bibelheim Thomashof, 1925); and Emil Händiges, *Seid eurer Väter wert! Ein Gedenkblatt zum 400-jährigen Jubiläum der Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten am 25 Januar 1525* (Ludwigshafen: Konferenz d. Südd. Mennoniten, 1925).

are always symbolic—they mark the importance of a particular story. But in so doing they can also obscure the significance of other stories.

“Right Remembering” is Attentive to Ecumenical Relationships

Easily overlooked in the various celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is the fact that the birth of a new group nearly always implies a division in the Body of Christ. The fact that today there are something like 43,000 different Christian denominations around the world is largely a result of forces unleashed by the Reformation. Seen from this perspective, celebrations of the particular identity of Anabaptist-Mennonite groups can reinforce the assumption that the broken and divided body of Christ is normal—the inevitable collateral damage of the quest for Christian faithfulness. Anabaptist-Mennonite groups committed to “right remembering” should acknowledge that the justification of Anabaptist beginnings in the sixteenth century has underwritten a long pattern of subsequent divisions resulting in dozens of competing groups within the Anabaptist tradition as well as a host of related denominations such as the Brethren in Christ, the Church of the Brethren, the Missionary church, and various Baptists and Holiness groups who also claim a lineage to the Radical Reformation. Wherever possible, commemorations of Anabaptist beginnings should proceed collaboratively, with the possibility that a shared focus on the past might lead participating groups to reconcile their differences.

In a similar way, during the past several decades, Mennonite World Conference, representing more than 100 groups around the world, has engaged in a series of formal ecumenical dialogues with representatives from the Reformed, Lutheran, and Catholic traditions, their former sixteenth-century antagonists.⁵⁶ In each instance, those dialogues identified points of shared theological conviction as well as shared ministries in local settings around the world. In the case of the Lutherans, the conversations culminated in a service of reconciliation in which representatives of the Lutheran World Federation asked forgiveness for the actions of their forebears against the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century and for their continuing negative portrayals of Anabaptists and Mennonites. MWC leaders, in turn, committed themselves to promote a more balanced interpretation of the Lutheran-Anabaptist story, to continued conversation on the issues of baptism and the Christian witness to the state, and to encourage member churches to seek greater

56. Cf. the reports of these dialogues in *Mennonites in Dialogue: Official Reports from International and National Ecumenical Encounters, 1975-2012*, ed. Fernando Enns and Jonathan Seiling (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

cooperation with Lutherans in service to the world.⁵⁷ These conversations and commitments with ecumenical partners should be explicitly recognized in Anabaptist-Mennonite celebrations. Commemorations of Anabaptist beginnings will remember the past “rightly” only if they also acknowledge Anabaptist complicity in the division of the church and, wherever possible, celebrate the gifts of their former enemies, some of which remain visible—albeit often unnoticed and unattributed—in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

“Right Remembering” is Oriented to the Global Church

Compared with other groups emerging out of the Reformation, the descendants of the Anabaptist movement represent a small minority within the Christian church. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were only 225,000 baptized Anabaptist-Mennonites in the world, virtually all of them residing in Europe (150,000) or North America (73,000).⁵⁸ During the second half of the twentieth century, however, this began to change. Indeed, from the perspective of a 500-year-old tradition, the demographic transformation that has taken place in the Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship during the past fifty years is nothing short of phenomenal.

By 1978, the Anabaptist family had grown to 610,000 members—95,000 in Europe; a sharp increase from 73,000 to 315,000 in North America; and even more dramatic growth in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (moving from 3,000 to 200,000). Today, the shift in the church’s center of gravity from North to South continues to accelerate. In 2015, Mennonite World Conference identified nearly 2.1 million baptized Anabaptists in 227 organized bodies, living in nearly 90 countries. Of these, only around 64,000 live in Europe and some 680,000 in North America; and the rest—well over a million—are part of the global Anabaptist fellowship.⁵⁹ In 2002, members of the Meserete Kristos church of Ethiopia surpassed the number of Mennonites in the U.S. to become the largest group, with the Anabaptist groups in the Congo not far behind. Currently, the Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church Canada, and their Mennonite Brethren North American counterparts—groups that have long pictured themselves as the organizational, financial, and intellectual centers of the

57. “Mennonite World Conference Response to the Lutheran World Federation Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of Anabaptists.”—Report of the Eleventh LWF Assembly, Stuttgart, Germany, 49-50. www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/LWF-Eleventh-Assembly-Report-EN.pdf (accessed Nov. 18, 2016).

58. Cf. Wilbert Shenk, “Mission and Service and the Globalization of North American Mennonites,” *MQR* 70 (Jan. 1996), 8.

59. Cf. www.mwc-cmm.org/article/world-directory (accessed Nov. 21, 2016).

Anabaptist tradition—constitute barely 6 percent of the global Anabaptist fellowship.

Commemorations that celebrate the beginning of the Anabaptist movement will have to ask new questions about the meaning of these global realities. Living traditions are always contextualized in particular cultures—this is no less true of the Anabaptists and their descendants in Europe and North America than it is in Mennonite churches today in India, South Korea, Guatemala, or Malawi. The global reality of the Anabaptist-Mennonite church offers commemoration planners a unique opportunity to engage in fresh thinking: How, for example, does the global nature of the Anabaptist-Mennonite church today challenge or expand definitions of the word “Anabaptist”? What new expressions is the ancient tension between gospel and culture taking among the heirs of the Anabaptist tradition in settings like the Congo, or Indonesia, or Taiwan, or Colombia? How would we need to narrate the story of Anabaptist beginnings differently if we assumed from the outset that the trajectory of that story was moving in the direction of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church?

“Right Remembering” Should Lead to Renewal

Finally, commemorations committed to the principle of “right remembering” should create the possibility for renewal. Custodians of collective memory can face a powerful temptation to present the past in the glowing hues of nostalgia or to reify a “golden age” as an anxious reaction against the forces of change. The Old Testament prophets frequently appealed to the past in their admonitions to the Children of Israel; but they did so always with a view to the present, reminding their people of their own deepest commitments that had gone out of focus. Public acts of memory should inspire younger generations to reflect critically on the institutions they have inherited, to challenge the accepted habits from the past, and to listen afresh to the stirring of the Spirit that is continually “making all things new.” Commemorations should help a scattered and forgetful people find renewal through the gift of “remembering.”

A TEST CASE: MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE
AND “RENEWAL 2027”

These principles of “right remembering” — helpfully illuminated by the debates surrounding the commemoration of Menno’s death in the 1860s and now, more recently, the controversy related to the Luther Decade in Germany—may provide a useful framework for Anabaptist-Mennonite church leaders who wish to celebrate the upcoming 500th-year

anniversaries associated with the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement. Currently, the most significant initiative underway is a ten-year series of events recently announced by Mennonite World Conference called “Renewal 2027.” Although the plan is still in its infancy, “Renewal 2027” offers a useful test case for the principles of “right remembering” and may serve as a helpful focal point for a churchwide debate about memory and identity in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

Mennonite World Conference first addressed the question of a commemoration of Anabaptist beginnings that might coincide with the Reformation 2017 celebrations in May of 2013 in response to a question posed by the MWC Faith and Life Commission: “In light of the LWF action of requesting forgiveness of Anabaptists, [how should] MWC celebrate the 2017 500th anniversary of the Lutheran reformation?”⁶⁰ In the discussion that followed, members of the Executive Committee clarified that any MWC-related commemorative events would need to be framed within a global context and would need to be attentive to ecumenical relationships. The conversation further noted three specific expectations: 1) that there be a recognition of the many stories that are part of the Anabaptist tradition; 2) that the focus of commemorative events be on a “living, dynamic story” that has “a future orientation,” not just on the past; and 3) that MWC be ready to participate in the Reformation celebrations of other Christian traditions, on the assumption that other groups would also be invited to participate in its own celebrations. Assuming that the baptisms of 1525 would be the appropriate symbol to anchor a commemoration in 2025, the Executive Committee noted that 2025 also marked the 100th anniversary of the founding of MWC. The conversation concluded with a call for the creation of a “task force” to reflect further on these questions and to develop a more specific proposal for MWC’s celebration of its centenary as well as the 500th anniversary of Anabaptist beginnings.⁶¹

It took two years for the task force to convene. But on May 26-27, 2015, a small group of historians and theologians, convened by the MWC Faith and Life Commission, met in Hamburg, Germany, to make initial recommendations regarding MWC’s role in a possible commemoration. Conscious of the controversies surrounding “Luther 2017,” the recommendations they formulated reflected a tone of caution.⁶² They

60. Cf. Minute 12 in “Minutes of the MWC EC,” (Akron, Pa.), May 23-28, 2013.

61. Minute 12 in “Minutes of the MWC EC,” (Akron, Pa.), May 23-28, 2013, included as document 2 in the docket of the EC meeting in Bogotá, Columbia (May 13-17, 2014).

62. The minutes of that gathering framed the challenges of the commemoration in the form of questions: “how can we celebrate an anniversary without constantly pointing to the Anabaptists as the ‘correct’ response to the Reformation questions?; how can we incorporate the questions and perspectives of young people?; how can we celebrate with a good blend

began with the premise that any MWC-sponsored commemoration “needs to be attentive to our new ecumenical relationships and to the global reality of our fellowship (e.g., how are the issues of the sixteenth century relevant to the international church of the 21st century?).” They also recommended that the focus of the commemoration be explicitly on the renewal of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition (“a chance to reflect on the deep movements of renewal and reform that gave birth to the Protestant and Anabaptist traditions. . .”), proposing that the “title for the events be RENEWAL 2025 [or 2027], rather than something like ANABAPTIST 2025.”⁶³ Third, the task force suggested a ten-year series of events, moving from region to region, each focused on a theme relevant to that region and held in conjunction with regularly scheduled MWC meetings or the MWC general assemblies of 2021 and 2027. Finally, the group recommended that the commemorations include a particular focus on the first baptisms with an event in Switzerland in 2025, but that the decade-long series of events would culminate in 2027 at the 18th MWC global assembly, possibly held in Africa, home to the largest and most dynamic contemporary expressions of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement. 2027 also marks the 500th anniversary of the Schleitheim Confession—with its strong emphasis on a visible, disciplined church, separated from the world—as well as the first mission conference of the fledgling Anabaptist movement, known as the Martyrs Synod. Thus, the two events commemorated in 2027 would bring into juxtaposition a tension running throughout the Anabaptist tradition between separation from the world (the Schleitheim Confession) and aggressive outreach to the world in mission (the Martyrs Synod), while also calling attention to a symbolic shift from 2025 in Zurich (commemorating the first baptisms 500 years earlier) to the 2027 MWC global assembly in Africa (celebrating the global church today).⁶⁴

of self-criticism and self-confidence?; what themes from the Reformation era are truly relevant today (e.g. migration; violence; majority/minority)?; how do we appropriately include “Anabaptist-related” communities so that we do not speak presumptuously on behalf of the whole tradition? What is the role of trauma in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, history and present?”

63. John D. Roth, “Summary of MWC Reformation Commemoration Planning Meeting,” letter to César García and the MWC Executive Committee, May 28, 2015. — files of the author.

64. The task force report concluded by summarizing several outcomes that would determine whether or not the commemorations had been a success, including: e.g., improvement in intra-Anabaptist and inter-church relations; a renewed self-understanding of the Anabaptist movement that engaged young people in North and South; a stronger global faith witness within the larger Body of Christ; and a strengthened sense of collective memory and identity. Cf. “Kurzprotokoll/Gesprächsnotizen of the MWC Reformation Commemoration Preparatory Meeting,” Missionsakademie, Hamburg, Germany, May 26-27, 2015. — files of the author.

Several months later, the MWC Executive Committee approved the report;⁶⁵ and at a meeting in Curitiba, Brazil, in the fall of 2015, MWC officers formally requested that John D. Roth, secretary of the MWC Faith and Life Commission, “coordinate the creation of the required infrastructure that will facilitate the work and planning [of the project].”⁶⁶ The final plan, approved by the Executive Committee in February 2016, carried forward the recommendations of the task force with the proposal that the 10-year series of commemorative events be identified as “Renewal 2027.” The plan listed six specific goals:

- a. to encourage and strengthen our global faith witness through theological/historical teaching and discussion focused on the Reformation and Anabaptist beginnings;
- b. to renew/deepen our understanding of Christian faithfulness as shaped by the Anabaptist movement;
- c. to promote “right remembering” through a focus on local church history within the larger context of the history of the Anabaptist (and Christian) tradition;
- d. to nurture a deeper sense of connection among member churches within MWC through a focus on our shared theology and history;
- e. to improve ecumenical [inter-church] relations, using these events as an opportunity to highlight ecumenical conversations where appropriate;
- f. to strengthen a sense of collective identity and witness with Anabaptist groups beyond MWC members.⁶⁷

65. Consensus #21 (Minute 17.3) of the MWC EC meeting (Harrisburg, Pa), July 13-15, 20, 2015. The proposal appeared in the docket as Doc. 12.

66. Opportunities to present these basic themes and hear broader input at a workshop on the theme of commemorations at the MWC assembly in Harrisburg in July of 2015 and again at an informal gathering of mostly European historians following a meeting of the German Mennonite Historical Society in Münster, Germany. Cf. “Informal meeting to discuss Commemoration 2025,” Sept. 27, 2015, Haus Mariengrund, Münster, Germany.—files of the author. The meeting began with Alfred Neufeld, chair of the MWC Faith and Life Commission, giving a summary of the key themes already developed (i.e., ten-year plan; strong emphasis on renewal, ecumenical sensitivity, and connections to the global church). Most of the conversation focused on possible commemorative events in Europe, organized by local historical societies, with particular attentive to the Aussiedler communities. The group concluded that the European engagement would likely focus on 2025.

67. The report continued: “All of this assumes that local or regional historical societies (particularly in Europe and the U.S.) might also be planning their events that will be commemorating the Reformation and Anabaptist beginnings. We encourage, celebrate, and bless these initiatives; we do not see them as being in “competition” with what we are doing. . . . We could imagine a series of events in Europe held between 2025-2036 [Menno’s conversion]. The steering committee, however, would end its work with the 2027 MWC Assembly.” The Executive Committee also appointed a small steering committee, chaired by Alfred Neufeld of Paraguay, to chart the general direction of Renewal 2027 with the understanding that the program of each of the annual regional events would be planned by

Since then, MWC has announced that the inaugural event of the "Renewal 2027" celebrations will take place on February 12, 2017, in Augsburg, Germany in the form of a one-day conference, titled "Transformed by the Word: Anabaptist Interpretations of Scripture." According to conference organizers, the event will focus on the centrality of the Bible in both the Protestant Reformation and in the global Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition today. In addition, the program will feature ecumenical guests reflecting on distinctive patterns of biblical interpretation in their own traditions; a panel of young people from around the world who will share their interpretation of a biblical text (the Great Commission in Matthew 28); and representatives from the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church offering a vision for the renewal of the church in their settings. A second event, focused on the Holy Spirit, is scheduled to take place in Kisumu, Kenya, in the spring of 2018 with planning carried out by a local committee.

Whether MWC's "Renewal 2027" fulfills the goals it has set for itself remains to be seen. Clearly, however, organizers of the commemoration have pursued that task with a high degree of awareness about the complexity of memory in public celebrations.

CONCLUSION

On October 31, 2016, Pope Francis joined with leaders of the Lutheran World Federation and representatives of Christian denominations from around the world in Lund, Sweden, in a historic service commemorating the Reformation. Coming exactly one year before the official conclusion of the "Luther Decade" in 2017, the gathering symbolized a new era of Catholic-Protestant ecumenical relations. To be sure, Protestants are still not welcome to receive the elements in Catholic Mass; women in the Catholic tradition are still barred from ordination to the priesthood; and exactly where those believers in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition fit within this growing rapprochement of former sixteenth-century antagonists remains an open question. Nevertheless, the event suggests that 500 years after the Reformation, Christian churches are still capable of reform.

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation poses a unique opportunity and challenge to all Christians, but perhaps particularly those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition whose relationship to the Reformation is so deeply conflicted. MWC's "Renewal 2027" will be an important experiment in "right remembering," worthy of observation and critique

a local committee.— Doc. 26 of the docket of the MWC Executive Committee (Semarang, Indonesia), Feb.13-18, 2016.

in the coming decade as a global church seeks to be renewed through the discipline of memory. What from the sixteenth-century beginnings of the Anabaptist movement should be retrieved? What should be confessed and released? How will historians reimagine the Anabaptist-Mennonite story in light of the commitments made at Stuttgart in 2010, or in view of a family of faith that is truly global in character? What new expressions of faithfulness will emerge out of encounters among the churches in the Global South? How will the churches in the North experience the mystery of *ecclesia semper reformanda*—the church always being reformed?

Those questions, and a dozen more, can only be answered in time, as Anabaptist-Mennonite Christians in very different cultural settings respond to the challenges of their day with humility and courage, always recognizing that, though the power of the Holy Spirit, assumptions from the past can be transformed; new forms of reconciliation are possible.

