



# Bearing Fruit

Implications of the 2010  
Reconciliation between Lutherans  
and Mennonites/Anabaptists



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

Report of the Lutheran World Federation Task Force  
to Follow Up the “Mennonite Action” at the LWF  
Eleventh Assembly in 2010



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Force to Follow Up the “Mennonite Action” at  
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# Preface

It is with great pleasure that I present to you the report of the Lutheran World Federation Task Force to Follow Up the “Mennonite Action” at the LWF Eleventh Assembly in 2010 (Task Force), which responds to promises made at the 2010 Eleventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). While building on communion-defining ecumenical affirmations, such as the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, the “Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of ‘Anabaptists,’” taken at the Eleventh Assembly, was a major step for the LWF. At that moment, this Lutheran world communion did three things: it “asked for forgiveness from God and from our Mennonite sisters and brothers;” prayed for “healing of memories and reconciliation;” and, last but not least, looked toward the future. As Lutherans, we “committed ourselves” to a series of processes and changes, whose unifying hope is the resolution that “this action of the LWF will bear fruit” in the life and teaching of our churches.<sup>1</sup>

The Task Force’s report is one part of the response to these commitments. The international Task Force, established in 2012, was composed of members from different parts of the LWF communion and a Mennonite representative, Prof. John Roth, Goshen College, USA. Special thanks are due to Dr Kathryn Johnson, a consultant to the Task Force, who was instrumental in finalizing this report. The Task Force met three times: in Tutzing (Germany), Goshen (USA), and Utrecht (the Netherlands) and explored how best to follow up on the commitments taken at the 2010 Assembly. In its report it not only describes but also suggests further steps. The Task Force would like to encourage the LWF member churches to take up this resource in their own settings, acknowledging that paths to a deeper relationship between Lutherans and Mennonites/Anabaptists will need to respond to the diverse contexts in which we live. It is fitting that this report comes to the LWF member churches on the threshold of the commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Reformation anniversary. As we prepare for the Twelfth Assembly and the 2017 commemorations, Lutherans are strengthened by the memory of the Eleventh Assembly, where the healing power of God’s Spirit to move through moments of repentance brought gratitude and hope. In moving toward reconciliation in one of the rela-

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<sup>1</sup> “Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of ‘Anabaptists,’” in *Give Us Today Our Daily Bread. Official Report. LWF Eleventh Assembly* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2010), 47–48.

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tionships wounded 500 years ago, we took new courage to approach the half-millennial anniversary in a way that advances the unity of the church and the healing of the world.

OKR Michael Martin



# Introduction

## **Lutheran–Mennonite reconciliation: thankfully receiving the Spirit’s gifts**

“*Veni, Creator Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!”—so the Church intensively prays for God’s guidance during times when it seeks healing and renewal. In Stuttgart, Germany, on 22 July 2010, as Lutherans and Mennonites engaged in a formal act of reconciliation, this was their prayer. Those present at that moment could not doubt that the Spirit of God was at work in their midst.

The occasion was the Eleventh Assembly of the LWF, the highest governing body for that international communion of churches, which embraces over ninety-five percent of the world’s Lutherans. Endorsing a dialogue process that had begun years before, the Assembly voted to ask for forgiveness from members of the Mennonite/Anabaptist tradition for wrongs going back to the beginnings of the Lutheran movement in the sixteenth century. Painful divisions between these two Christian families had persisted since their formative years. Now, as both approached their half-millennial anniversaries, the moment for moving toward reconciliation had finally come.

The action in 2010 began already thirty years earlier, when Lutherans were celebrating the Augsburg Confession’s (CA) 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary. With the memory of persecuting Anabaptists having largely faded from active awareness, they invited Mennonites to join the celebration in Augsburg—and were taken aback when Mennonites observed that it was difficult to celebrate a confession that condemned them. This encounter helped to spark substantive dialogues in France, Germany and the USA, which together helped to pave the way for a Lutheran–Mennonite International Study Commission (Study Commission) established by the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) and LWF in 2003. Lutherans had every reason to trust the process of bilateral theological dialogues: they had engaged in many such conversations and had, in 1999, succeeded with the Roman Catholic Church to reach a major agreement on a central quarrel of the Reformation, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. In this conversation with the Mennonites, however, it became apparent on both sides that ongoing theological differences could not be constructively examined until the wounds of the past were directly confronted. Thus, the Study Commission determined that its principal work would be to write a common history of the painful relations during the sixteenth

century—the first jointly-written history of this contentious era. As the study continued, it became clear that writing such a common history was itself an ecumenical act and thus already a contribution to reconciliation.

While the mutual accountability of this project brought precision to the narratives of both sides, the recognitions were particularly painful for Lutherans, since they alone had been the persecutors. To be sure, the careful study elucidated ways in which esteemed Lutheran leaders, including Martin Luther himself and Philip Melancthon, could have appealed to their own best theological insights to resist the endorsement of violent persecution. Yet, recognizing that they could have decided differently made all the sharper the acknowledgement that in fact they had not. Similarly, while the Study Commission lifted up the example of the often-overlooked reformer Johannes Brenz, a signatory of the Augsburg Confession who opposed execution on the ground that governments lack such authority in matters of faith, in the end, Brenz offered only limited consolation to the Lutheran members. If such opinions were in fact live options in sixteenth-century debates, then Luther and others cannot be excused simply as products of their own violence-stoked age, people who unfortunately lacked the advantage of a later concept of freedom of conscience. Lutheran members of the Study Commission, having laid out the inner complexities of their tradition, were left with the recognition that finally there was no adequate defense to be made of persecution. Their only course was to recommend an act of repentance to the LWF.

In the eyes of the Mennonites members, the costliness of this recognition by their devoted Lutheran counterparts made their recommendation all the more significant. While they had no comparable legacy of persecution to repent, they found themselves also drawn to recognize imperfections in their own tradition, with its own willingness to engage in harsh and uncharitable characterizations of theological opponents, including Lutherans. They joined with their Lutheran colleagues in longing for a future of repaired relationship.

Clearly, however, the imbalance of guilt meant that the initiative needed to come, first and principally, from the Lutheran side. Thus the LWF began to move toward a formal act of repentance—an action that has very little precedent in the history of relations between church bodies. For Lutherans alive today, with no personal participation in or individual memories of persecuting Anabaptists, the action involved some theological reflection in order to articulate their living relation to these persecutions. It was crucial to recognize that the continued authority of the Augsburg Confession brings its condemnations of Anabaptists into the present time. Even in parts of the world where contemporary Mennonite/Anabaptist communities are unknown and Lutheran churches were established long after the sixteenth century, those churches have received negative views of Anabaptists in the process

of their study of Lutheran history and confessions. Thus, the Study Commission argued that to affirm the Augsburg Confession in the twenty-first century requires addressing the persecution, which its condemnations have been seen to justify, and also to acknowledge the willingness of subsequent Lutheran generations to pass this legacy over in silence. When this proposal was put forward, there were wise voices within the Lutheran communion, drawing prominently on experiences from the anti-apartheid struggles and their aftermaths, who powerfully articulated the need for communities as well as individuals to recognize when they are in need of genuine repentance and forgiveness. When it came to the Eleventh Assembly at Stuttgart, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, explored the topic of forgiveness in his keynote address. He said that living by the receiving and extending of forgiveness, as expressed in the Lord's Prayer, is the rhythm of life, not only for Christians individually but for the church itself.

From such reflection came the language of the Assembly action, with its central petition for forgiveness "from God and from our Mennonite sisters and brothers":

When Lutherans today realize the history of Lutheran—Anabaptist relationships in the sixteenth century and beyond as it is presented in the report of the Lutheran—Mennonite International Study Commission, they are filled with a deep sense of regret and pain over the persecution of Anabaptists by Lutheran authorities and especially over the fact that Lutheran reformers theologically supported this persecution. Thus, The Lutheran World Federation, A Communion of Churches wishes to express publicly its deep regret and sorrow.

Trusting in God who in Jesus Christ was reconciling the world to himself, we ask for forgiveness—from God and from our Mennonite sisters and brothers—for the harm that our forebears in the sixteenth century committed to Anabaptists, for forgetting or ignoring this persecution in the intervening centuries, and for all inappropriate, misleading and hurtful portraits of Anabaptists and Mennonites made by Lutheran authors, in both popular and scholarly forms, to the present day.

We pray that God may grant to our communities a healing of our memories and reconciliation.<sup>2</sup>

While plans for adopting the resolution had followed the parliamentary protocol of other Assembly actions, at the actual moment it became clear that another course was demanded. LWF President Mark S. Hanson noted that the unique character of this motion seemed to require a posture of prayer—and then,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 47.

in an inspired impromptu gesture, he invited those present in the assembly hall to indicate their approval not by holding aloft a green card but rather by kneeling or standing. Turning to the ecumenical guests, he asked them also to join in this posture. He spoke first to the Reformed and Roman Catholic representatives, who joined Lutherans in the sixteenth-century persecutions, but then to all the others as well. He noted that Lutherans had first envisaged this act of reconciliation as one to be done “in the presence of” the entire Body of Christ—but it was now clear that such a healing act was also being offered “on behalf” of the whole Body. Thus, in a moment, only guests from the Mennonite World Conference remained seated, as those around them knelt or stood in prayer. “I never thought I would see this day,” one said later. “Beside me was an Anglican archbishop, kneeling in prayer for us.”

To that unforgettable moment another was to follow, this time from the Mennonite/Anabaptist side. This response, however, should not have been a surprise, for it also had been long prepared. When Lutherans had begun to plan an official action, Mennonites replied that they needed equally to ready their hearts. Accordingly, a year earlier the MWC had invited LWF General Secretary, Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, to describe the action to the MWC Assembly 15, in Asunción, Paraguay. Explaining the urgency for reconciliation imparted by the upcoming 500<sup>th</sup> Reformation anniversary in 2017, Noko linked the trust in God’s grace, which repentance presupposes, to the heart of the gospel message. He continued:

I have described the history of these condemnations as like the poison which a scorpion carries in its tail. We have not struck out with this poison for some time—but we still carry it with us in our system. We now are on a path which will lead us to expel this poison from our body, to allow us to live together with you, our sisters and brothers in Christ, in new ways. [...] When you meet for your next Assembly, we Lutherans hope to be with you in a new way. And in that new relationship our witness to God’s love for the world will be more fully manifest.<sup>3</sup>

MWC General Secretary, Dr Larry Miller, responded to Noko’s presentation:

We receive your commitment to rightly remember this shared history, and your vulnerability in taking steps to heal the fractured body of Christ in which we live together, as a gift from God.

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<sup>3</sup> *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*. Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation/The Mennonite World Conference, 2010), 7.

We are aware of the difficulty of the task. We are dealing with holy histories, yours and ours. We are dealing with our most basic self-understandings, yours and ours.

For you, the witness of the Augsburg Confession is foundational and authoritative, an essential shaper of your identity. For us, the witness of the Anabaptist martyrs is a living and vital story, retold in our global community of churches to build group identity.

How can you distance yourself from the condemnations and their consequences while still honoring your history and strengthening your identity? How can we distance ourselves from use of the martyr tradition which perpetuates a sense of victimization and marginalization—and your reaching out for forgiveness pushes us to do precisely that—how can we thus distance ourselves while still honoring our history and strengthening our identity?

Surely these things will happen best if we continue to walk together in the way of Jesus Christ, our Reconciler and the Source of our common history and identity.<sup>4</sup>

To take the next steps, the MWC determined that its officers would meet concurrently with the LWF Assembly in order to allow an immediate and authoritative response. While original plans imagined some exchange of formal documents between the LWF and the MWC, it had long been clear that this was an action for communities to experience and to know in prayer. In Stuttgart, MWC President Danisa Ndlovu, from Zimbabwe, conveyed the meaning of the occasion:

Today in this place, we together—Lutherans, Mennonites/Anabaptists, and other Christians—are living out a basic and essential meaning of church: binding and loosing; seeking and granting forgiveness; restoring and healing relationships in the body of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

He presented the LWF with a foot-washing tub made in an Amish community steeped in the costly practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. This gift honored a central practice in Anabaptist worship and recalled the text from John 13 to which its dedicatory plaque alludes: “From this time forward let us serve together our common Lord and Teacher.”

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7f.

<sup>5</sup> “Mennonite World Conference response to the Lutheran World Federation Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of Anabaptists,” in *Give Us Today Our Daily Bread*, op. cit. (note 1), 49.

On behalf of the MWC, Ndlovu also made clear that the Mennonites/Anabaptists not only wanted to extend the forgiveness that was asked but together with Lutherans to move forward together toward a common future. Thus, while the request for forgiveness was initiated on the Lutheran side, there were two sets of commitments made on 22 July 2010:<sup>6</sup>

**For the LWF:**

We commit ourselves:

To interpret the Lutheran Confessions in light of the jointly described history between Lutherans and Anabaptists;

To take care that this action of the LWF will bear fruit in the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions in the seminaries and other educational activities of our member churches;

To continue the exploration of unresolved issues between our two traditions, in particular baptism and relations of Christians and of the Church to the state, in an atmosphere of mutual openness and the willingness to learn from each other;

To affirm the present consensus, gained by the experience of our churches over the centuries, in repudiating the use of the state's power either to exclude or enforce particular religious beliefs; and to work towards upholding and maintaining freedom of religion and conscience in political orders and societies, and

To urge our international bodies, member churches, and in particular our congregations, to seek ways to continue and deepen relations with the Mennonite World Conference and with local Mennonite communities through common prayer and Bible study, shared humanitarian engagement, and common work for peace.

**For the MWC:**

We commit ourselves:

To promote interpretations of the Lutheran-Anabaptist story which take seriously the jointly described history found in the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission Report;

To take care that your initiative for reconciliation is known and honoured in Anabaptist-Mennonite teaching about Lutherans;

To continue with you deliberation on the unresolved issues between our two traditions, in a spirit of mutual vulnerability and openness to the movement of the Spirit;

To encourage our member churches, their local congregations, and their institutions to seek fuller relations and greater cooperation with Lutherans in service to the world.

The report of this Task Force has its origins in these mutual commitments. The need for a resource to help member churches fulfill the promises was raised immediately by an LWF Council member who became a member

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<sup>6</sup> For the LWF, *op. cit.* (note 1), 47f. For the MWC, Mennonite World Conference response..., in *ibid.*, 50.

of this Task Force. Inspired by the Assembly action to seek out the local Mennonite community when she returned to her home country, she inquired at the seminary of her small Asian church how they would implement the LWF commitment to teach differently about Anabaptists, especially to how they are described in the Augsburg Confession. To help such churches, pastors, seminaries and congregations, is a principal goal of this work.

This report assembles resources for understanding, teaching and continuing the work of the 2010 Assembly toward Lutheran–Mennonite reconciliation.

The first of the three chapters, “The Authority of the Lutheran Confessions in Light of the 2010 Stuttgart Action with the Mennonites: Resources for Interpreting and Teaching the Confessions,” responds to Assembly commitments regarding the confessions. The examination of the teachings from the Augsburg Confession concerning Anabaptists, compiled by Timothy J. Wengert, professor emeritus, are likely to be most helpful in academic settings. Everyone who reflects on their Lutheran identity benefits from engaging in the discussion on how best to interpret the confessions in light of their characterization of other Christians, which in the past have led us to commit errors for which we have repented, without having to set aside the authority of the confessions. Finally, the chapter proposes an explanatory approach interpreting the confessions, drawing on the Augsburg Confession and showing how the Mennonite action can be seen to honor rather than to undermine confessional authority. It ends with this strongly positive conclusion:

This means that by emphasizing the message of the gospel, witnessed to by Christians throughout the ages and experienced by all Christians as sheer mercy and consolation, the Augsburg Confession remains an ecumenical, catholic testimony for the entire church and an essential tool for Lutherans in ecumenical discussions. By interpreting the Augsburg Confession in this way, the LWF continues that very witness and enhances the very experience of Christ’s mercy to which the Augsburg Confession itself calls the church. In the entire sweep of ecumenical conversations, never before has one church or communion of churches asked another for forgiveness for the ways in which it has treated the other church. The Augsburg Confession itself and its confession of faith in God’s mercy in Christ assist in freeing Lutherans to take such actions as they did in 2010. These actions strengthen the Augsburg Confession’s authority, preserve it as a living confession of faith and help it to function, to borrow the dynamic words of the Solid Declaration, “as our creed for this age.”<sup>7</sup>

The second chapter, “Continuing the Conversation on Disputed Issues: Christians and the Civil Use of Lethal Force,” provides an example of

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<sup>7</sup> See p. 34 in this report

engaging the third Stuttgart commitment, “to continue the exploration of unresolved issues ... in an atmosphere of mutual openness and willingness to learn from each other.”<sup>8</sup> The heart of this chapter is a dialogue between a Lutheran from Germany and a Mennonite from the USA, both members of the Task Force. Building on what was said by the Study Commission, which is repeated here, this dialogue examines disagreements and convergences with regard to the civil state and the use of lethal force. The self-critical openness of both participants toward their own tradition and their mutual respect allow remaining differences to emerge with enhanced clarity and precision.

The third chapter, “Good Practices of Lutheran–Mennonite Cooperation and Reconciliation,” can spark hope, creativity and collaboration. While there are many examples of good practices in Lutheran–Mennonite cooperation around the world, this chapter lists some of those directly inspired by the Mennonite Action at the Stuttgart Assembly. One is a pioneering three-sided dialogue, which includes Roman Catholics, on baptism, the other subject identified for further study. Some of these witness to forms of collaboration that local communities can initiate.

In the appendices you will find the order of the reconciliation service in Stuttgart; some brief explanations on how to understand the Augsburg Confession’s passages on Anabaptists; and the letter sent by the MWC to Mennonite educational centers, encouraging them to take up and implement the commitments that Mennonites made in regard to Lutherans at the Eleventh Assembly.

The MWC also appointed a task force to follow up on its promises. One of its emphases was to increase awareness among Mennonites/Anabaptists of the actions taken by Lutherans (and others) to address the legacies of persecution. They decided, for example, to encourage the telling of Anabaptist history at historical interpretive centers, which help their own members to learn their stories and also to present these stories to a wide range of visitors. In consultation with both Mennonite and Lutheran scholars, MennoHof, a prominent such center in Indiana, USA, has undertaken to revise its historical exhibits in order to include not only the persecution of early Anabaptists but also recent movements towards reconciliation. The inauguration of these new perspectives will be celebrated by the local bishop from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, whose 2004 report on “Right Remembering in Anabaptist-Lutheran Relations” lifted up a crucial theme which helped pave the way to the Stuttgart action.

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<sup>8</sup> See p. 12 in this report.



In many ways, the 2010 reconciliation did not come out of nowhere. It could build on the extensive collaboration in service of Mennonites/Anabaptists and Lutherans around the world, existing theological dialogues and on the longing in many local settings for more, daily, personal changes in relationship. After 2010, however, Lutherans and members of the Anabaptist tradition are able to meet one another in new ways, with more intentionality, ecclesial engagement, mutual accountability and joy.

We can rejoice that the 2010 act of repentance has in many ways become part of the life of the LWF. For example, in *From Conflict to Communion, Lutheran-Catholic Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, the document produced with the Roman Catholic Church that has helped shape the approach to the 2017 Reformation anniversary, the Mennonite Action concludes the section on Lutheran repentance.<sup>9</sup> In a world in which peaceful reconciliation is both all too rare and deeply yearned for, this example of seeking healing for longstanding wrongs speaks easily even to those who do not know its history.

And so again we say, Come, Holy Spirit, come! *Veni, Creator Spiritus!*

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<sup>9</sup> *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity (Leipzig/Paderborn: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt GmbH/Bonifatius GmbH Druck-Buch-Verlag, 2013), 85, para 237.



# I. The Authority of the Lutheran Confessions in Light of the 2010 Stuttgart Action with the Mennonites

## Resources for teaching and interpreting the confessions

### Introduction

The LWF Assembly action in 2010 included these commitments:

to interpret the Lutheran Confessions in light of the jointly described history between Lutherans and Anabaptists  
to take care that this action of the LWF will bear fruit in the teaching of the Lutheran confessions in the seminaries and other educational activities of our member churches.<sup>10</sup>

The prominent references to the Lutheran confessions in these promises reflect a distinctive mark of the Lutheran tradition. Some churches regard their historical confessions of faith as useful benchmarks for past beliefs with no direct, continuing authority for believers in the present. Lutherans do not. Instead, from the time that the Augsburg Confession was read out aloud before Emperor Charles V on 25 June 1530, Lutherans have understood that both this particular moment of confessing and the content of this confession continue to guide and authorize their message and work. The LWF is a communion of churches whose theological unity arises significantly from agreement on the teachings of the Lutheran confessions, especially the Augsburg Confes-

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<sup>10</sup> Op. cit. (note 1), 47f.

sion.<sup>11</sup> While the confessions have not always functioned ideally as a strong and life-giving voice in the Lutheran churches, they continue to inspire and instruct the Lutheran witness in our time. Thus, it is an important task for Lutheran theologians, especially those interpreting the confessional writings in settings of education and formation, to give an account of the relation of the Mennonite Action to the Lutheran confessions.

By arguing that the condemnations of Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession were badly used and no longer apply and then by asking the MWC for forgiveness, the LWF has placed before itself and its member churches a challenge: to maintain and support the confessions' authority—especially as they define our life within this communion of churches—while, at the same time, demonstrating the proper limitations of these same confessions of faith. As *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ* states:

Because churches of the Lutheran World Federation continue to subscribe to these confessions and confess their faith today in light of these confessions, they must develop ways to negotiate these condemnations without undermining the authority of the confessions themselves at the same time.<sup>12</sup>  
*(This concern clearly resonates with current discussions centering on biblical hermeneutics.)*

Conversations with the MWC demanded that Lutherans recognize how their own confessions of faith were used in the past to persecute other Christians. By asking for forgiveness, the LWF demonstrated how a communion of churches functions: recognizing its own errors and clarifying its confession of the church's faith. The LWF also made clear that such confessions ought never be used in coercive ways. But the 2010 actions also continue to challenge Lutherans to develop ways to appropriate their own confessions of faith without undermining their authority. Thus, far from eroding the importance of the Augsburg Confession and other confessional documents, those actions now require Lutherans around the world to take seriously the historical context of the confessions and their past use and to develop new ways of reading them that invite both confession of faith and ecumenical conversation. Thus, the action at Stuttgart in 2010 can mark an important point in understanding the Lutheran confessions and their authority.

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<sup>11</sup> Because the Batak Church of Indonesia was accepted as a member of the LWF without directly accepting the Augsburg Confession, it is more proper to speak of the teachings of the Augsburg Confession rather than the Augsburg Confession itself. It is in that spirit that the following comments should be understood. For an in-depth look at the question of the authority of the Augsburg Confession, see p. 29ff in this report.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit. (note 3), 92.

This section provides resources to carry out the promises of Stuttgart concerning the confessions.

First, it examines the sixteenth-century context of the confessions with particular attention to the relations of Lutherans to Anabaptists. Since this is not the perspective from which the documents have most often been studied, the account provides information which will be new to many Lutherans; it draws upon the insights of *Healing Memories*, which was the first common narrative of the Reformation period told together by Lutherans and Anabaptists. Learning more about who Anabaptists were and are is itself an important step for Lutherans since there is an important asymmetry in how these two traditions have preserved their histories. While for Mennonites the specter of persecution has played an important role in their self-understanding to this day, the memory of the Lutheran persecution of Mennonites and their theological forebears has largely disappeared among Lutherans—a self-serving forgetfulness which the process of reconciliation helps to address. Then, with the historical setting in mind, specific condemnations of Anabaptists are described. Finally, a hermeneutic toward interpreting the confessions is proposed, drawing on the Augsburg Confession itself and showing how the Mennonite action can be seen to honor rather than to undermine confessional authority.

## **Remembering a history of religious violence in the sixteenth century and beyond**

For Lutherans, it is necessary first to acknowledge what most have forgotten: many, though not all, Lutheran reformers (including Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon) advocated the use of capital punishment against Anabaptists, sometimes even on the basis of allegiance to the Augsburg Confession. The action in Stuttgart marks a decisive rejection by Lutherans of such use of coercive force in religious matters. In order fully to claim the significance of this repudiation, Lutherans need to look again at their history of involvement with religious persecution.

### **Lutherans and Mennonites in the sixteenth century**

Most Lutherans have at least a passing knowledge of the role Martin Luther played in sparking a movement now called the Reformation. Beginning with the distribution of the 95 Theses, a critique of the sale of indulgences, what started as an academic debate over the nature of penance and the role of indulgences quickly became a struggle between Martin Luther, the University of Wittenberg's theologians and Luther's prince, the Elector

Frederick III, on the one side, and the Roman curia and its supporters on the other. When Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther in 1520 and the imperial diet of the Holy Roman Empire meeting in Worms declared him an outlaw in 1521, the reformer and his supporters moved on a trajectory that culminated in the presentation of their confession of faith at the imperial diet meeting in Augsburg on 25 June 1530. When their Roman opponents rejected this confession in their so-called *Confutation* of August 1530, the reformers and their people defied the emperor's edict by accepting this document, and churches of the Augsburg Confession began to emerge throughout northern Europe in the coming decades.

What far fewer Lutherans are aware of is that during the 1520s another Christian movement took shape that opposed not only the Roman church but also the reforms emanating from Wittenberg and Zurich, where the city preacher, Ulrich Zwingli, was initiating a reform similar to Luther's, from which the Reformed tradition (including Presbyterian, Union and certain kinds of Anglican churches, among others) arose. Their opponents often nicknamed these Christians Anabaptists (rebaptizers), although such groups understood that "baptisms" of infants were not baptisms at all but that only "believers' baptism," as it is now sometimes called, constituted genuine baptism. These small, scattered groups of Christians often held varying practices and beliefs, although their opponents often thought of them as simply "Anabaptists." Today, historians identify several different strands of Anabaptists that continue as churches in the present, and most of these groups now proudly identify with their Anabaptists roots and, despite the origins of the term, will even call themselves Anabaptists.

### **Sixteenth-century Anabaptists<sup>13</sup>**

Historians have identified three major strands of Anabaptism of the sixteenth century. The first group practicing believers' baptism arose in Zurich, Switzerland, and often called themselves Swiss Brethren. Among their founders were Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz and George Blaurock. Originally they were influenced by Ulrich Zwingli, the chief preacher and reformer of Zurich, and by his criticisms of a host of medieval practices, including rules for fasting, images in churches and the meaning of the Lord's Supper. From their own study of the Bible, they came to believe that their baptism as infants at the hands of priests in communion with

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<sup>13</sup> The follow description is based on *ibid.*, 28–41. There were, of course, also other Anabaptist groups then and now, but the groups described here continue to represent the most important traditions today.

the Roman Pope was no baptism at all and that teaching and personal confession of faith must precede any true baptism. On 21 January 1525, these men and their followers underwent baptism. The movement, based upon believers' baptism and a voluntary, disciplined church life coupled with a strict biblicism, spread from Zurich to outlying areas in the Swiss and German countryside. Among the early converts was the university-trained priest, Balthasar Hubmaier, who baptized nearly the entire population of Waldshut but also supported the Peasants' War of 1525—an unusual position, given many Anabaptists' pacifism and separation from secular government.

In January 1527, the first execution of the Anabaptist leader Felix Mantz was carried out in Zurich. In spring of the same year, representatives from these groups met in Schleithem and approved a series of articles, written by the former Benedictine prior, Michael Sattler. These "Schleithem Articles" depicted a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil, in which true Christians were called upon to separate themselves from greed, selfishness and violence and pledge allegiance to Jesus and his teachings of love, generosity and peace. Believers' baptism marked the "crossing over" to this new existence in a voluntary community, led by gentle shepherds, in which the swearing of oaths, a mainstay of late-medieval society, along with serving to rule or defend a community with force of arms, was rejected. The Roman church and its Reformation offshoots were all dismissed as in league with the world.

A second important strand of Anabaptists arose among the followers of Jacob Hutter in Moravia (now the Czech Republic) and hence called Hutterites. Hutter's leadership was preceded by that of Hans Hut, whose preaching in Nikolsburg, Moravia, brought him into conflict with Hubmaier and the local prince over the question of whether government officials could be Christians. Expelled from the city in the dead of winter 1527, Hut and about 200 followers began sharing their possessions, both to survive and to conform more closely to the Jerusalem community described in Acts. Under Hutter this renunciation of personal property and the sharing of goods became a defining mark of the community. After Hutter's execution in 1536, he was succeeded by Peter Riedemann, whose lengthy statement of Hutterite beliefs formed the theological foundation of the community.

Anabaptist ideas and practices also spread north into Germany and the Netherlands. Here an important early figure was Melchior Hoffman, an itinerant preacher, who first championed Luther's Reformation before being won over to Anabaptism while in Strasbourg. There he predicted that the world would end on Easter 1533. Although imprisoned at the time (he died behind bars ten years later), one of his disciples, Jan Matthijs, continued his apocalyptic preaching, especially in the city of Munster. In the wake of

the institution of believers' baptism and the takeover of the city council by Anabaptist supporters in 1534, Roman Catholic and evangelical princes laid siege to the city. When Matthijs was killed in a wild raid, Jan of Leiden, a twenty-four-year-old actor and follower of Matthijs, took control of the increasingly desperate city and declared himself "King of the New Israel and of the whole world." He claimed absolute authority and inaugurated public executions. After their defeat and bloody massacre in June 1535, many in Europe associated all Anabaptists with the so-called "Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster" and thus with fanatical preaching and sedition.

Nevertheless, in the wake of the Munster debacle, a new Anabaptist group (Mennonites) emerged, led by the former Roman Catholic priest, Menno Simons (1496–1561). Menno is credited with having brought to the movement of largely "uneducated peasants and disillusioned artisans ... a renewed commitment to Scripture, anchoring the distinctive themes of the radical reformation within the broader categories of orthodox Christianity."<sup>14</sup> By renouncing the unbridled apocalypticism of Hoffmann and others, Menno gathered groups dedicated to the Bible, to an ethic of suffering love and to a disciplined, visible church. The events in Munster also convinced him of the deadly danger in confusing Christian faith with governmental coercion. The true Christian way was one of peace within a properly disciplined community of believers.

### **Views of heresy and coercion in Lutheran circles**

At the onset of the Reformation in the 1520s, participants inherited several options regarding the use of force against heretics. The medieval church agreed that whereas the church could excommunicate heretics and blasphemers, only the state could punish them "with the sword." At the same time, certain people within the church (especially abbots and bishops) exercised offices in both realms as ecclesiastical and secular "lords" and thus often could both excommunicate and punish wayward believers. However, others, especially those under a vow (monks, nuns and friars), renounced the use of force completely. When the Emperor Charles V offered Luther safe passage to the Diet of Worms in 1521 and then honored it, this represented a continuation of the delicate balance between political power and theological dissent. When the Diet itself unanimously declared Luther an outlaw of the Empire, this, too, followed the expectations of the time, especially shaped by the condemnation

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 39.



(and execution) of Jan Hus, the Czech reformer, a century earlier at the Council of Constance.

These circumstances set the context within which the Lutheran and Anabaptist understandings of political power and religious conviction developed. In the mid-1520s, reformers often objected to the use of force against their followers by supporters of Rome. They separated the church's work of proclaiming the gospel (understood as the unmerited forgiveness of sins in Christ) from the coercive powers of the prince, established by God to maintain order in the world and restrain the wicked. Nevertheless, they did not reject the close relation between political authorities favorable to their cause and their pastors and theologians. At first, the reformers argued (especially in the wake of the Peasants' War of 1525) that political authorities always had the power to punish those who used religion as a cover for sedition and rebellion. At the same time, especially Luther argued that "Christian" princes did not have the right to resist higher political authorities.

Anabaptist groups, on the contrary, explored different approaches to governmental authority. While the leaders of what became the Swiss Brethren initially tried to convince the Zurich city council of the virtue of their cause, they and other groups influenced by them rejected oaths of allegiance and other ways that Christians could become entangled in supporting the government's coercive powers. During the Peasants' War, an Anabaptist leader such as Balthasar Hubmaier could support armed resistance and later, in 1535, the Anabaptists, who took over the city of Munster, made the establishment of a kingdom on earth through armed force a central part of their self-understanding. Nonetheless, the majority of Anabaptists, particularly the Swiss Brethren, the Hutterite and the Mennonite traditions, rejected these approaches to governmental authority. They insisted that, although government and good order were works of God, Christians could not become entangled in the affairs of state, given the state's commitment to the use of lethal force and Christ's command not to judge but rather to turn the other cheek.

With the appearance of these groups in the 1520s, Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon both wrote tracts that condemned what they understood as "Anabaptist teaching," although their statements sometimes reveal how little they understood this diverse movement at the time. Both defended the practice of infant baptism and rebuffed calls for Christians to share their property and to reject oath taking, where ownership of property and oaths were hallmarks of late-medieval society. While not always in agreement about the details of such counter-cultural behavior, Anabaptists believed that such practices contradicted Christ's commands in the Sermon on the Mount.

Some reformers and their princes labeled such positions seditious. When the imperial Diet of Speyer of 1529 condemned what it described as rebaptism and applied the ancient Roman imperial edicts against such practice to Anabaptists, new avenues for using violence against religious dissenters opened. First, Philip Melanchthon in 1529 and later other reformers, including Martin Luther, argued that, although princes could not establish or judge doctrine, they could punish public, heretical teaching because it was blasphemy. Indeed, the reformers believed that God would punish any society that tolerated such blasphemy and did not attempt to extirpate it from their midst. Political authorities could thus also use capital punishment against such teachers for blasphemy and not simply for sedition. This argument gained more traction following the rebellion in the city of Munster in 1535, when both Luther and Melanchthon jointly advised the Landgrave Philip of Hesse to use lethal force against Anabaptist leaders. As a result, Lutheran theologians supported the use of force against the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century, although always subject to the decisions of the princes, who were often more lenient than their theologians.

One exception to this trend was Johannes Brenz, reformer first in the south German city of Schwabisch Hall and later in the duchy of Wurttemberg. In 1528, he argued strongly against the use of capital punishment for Anabaptists found in evangelical (Lutheran) territories. “What point would there be in studying Scripture,” he wondered, “for the hangman would be the most learned doctor?” He insisted on a strict division between secular authority and the spiritual authority of the gospel.

Therefore, it is far by safest and surest for secular government to exercise its own office and let spiritual sins receive spiritual punishments. For it is much better and more preferable to tolerate a false faith four or ten times than to persecute the true faith only once.<sup>15</sup>

In 1530, the Augsburg Confession itself explicitly condemned certain “Anabaptist” teachings, especially those dealing with baptism (CA IX) and the relation of government to the Christian faith (CA XVI). Naming Anabaptists in that document had both theological importance (indicating that the emerging Lutheran church held views on these matters at odds with the Anabaptist tradition) and strategic significance, given that the reformers’ Roman opponents had tried to associate Luther’s followers with the Anabaptists and thus to place them, too, directly under the condemnations decreed in 1529 at the second Diet of Speyer.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 48

By the 1550s, “right doctrine” had become directly associated with acceptance of the Augsburg Confession. As a result, the Augsburg Confession, which most clearly shaped Lutheran identity, also became associated with violence against those who disagreed with it—especially heirs to the Anabaptist tradition. This is especially clear in a Lutheran document produced in 1557 (the *Prozess*), which charged Anabaptists not only with sedition but also with blasphemy—since denying baptism to infants jeopardized their eternal salvation.<sup>16</sup> While the final draft of the document limited capital punishment to seditious acts, the authors (citing Leviticus 24 as proof) wrote, “God has clearly and explicitly commanded temporal government that they should punish blasphemers in their own territory.”<sup>17</sup> This law was binding not only for Israel but part of natural law, they claimed.

For the temporal government should not only defend the bodies of their subjects, like a shepherd watches over oxen or sheep, but should also maintain outward discipline, and governments should bring order to the honor of God; they should punish and do away with public idolatry and blasphemy.<sup>18</sup>

When, in 1558, Duke Christopher of Wurttemberg issued a mandate against the Anabaptists based on the *Prozess*, he cited the Augsburg Confession itself as the standard for determining heresy. Of course, this did not prevent governmental authorities or theologians from accommodating the Anabaptists and, in time, direct persecution and capital punishment became a thing of the past, although of lasting importance for the self-understanding of Mennonites, while largely forgotten by their former persecutors.

## **From the Reformation to the present**

Many events contributed to the Lutheran movement toward rejection of religious coercion, which culminated in 2010. First, the “minority opinion” of Brenz and others never disappeared from Lutheran consciousness, so that in the seventeenth century theologians continued to argue whether and to what extent the government could punish its citizens for theological offenses.

By the eighteenth century, the rise of Pietism and the Enlightenment among Lutherans had reshaped their understanding of relations to other

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<sup>16</sup> Described in detail in *ibid.*, 64–72.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted from *Healing Memories*, op. cit. (note 3), 67.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–68.

Christians. Certain aspects of Lutheran Pietism had also influenced Mennonites and continue to influence parts of their tradition to this day, both positively (e.g., concern for mission work) and negatively (defining church as a collection of individuals). Moreover, as the state developed more tolerant attitudes toward religious dissent, Lutherans and Mennonites began to live side-by-side openly without recrimination. For instance, this occurred already in the eighteenth century in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, then one of the British colonies in North America and still today an important place where Lutheran and Anabaptist communities are to be found together.

Such rapprochement, however, should not be seen as a smooth process from persecution to toleration and acceptance. Indeed, in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some Lutheran theologians, especially in Germany, argued that, in addition to the traditional three God-given “estates” (household, government and church), to which Luther often referred in his writings, there was also a fourth, nationhood. This sphere of life demanded similar obedience and respect from Christians as God’s gift in the world. The events in Germany during World War II played a role in the changing view of state-sponsored violence in the name of religion and the uncritical acceptance of nationalism. The Confessing Church, unlike the “German Christians” (*Deutsche Christen*), rejected Nazi control of the churches, and the Barmen Declaration in particular dismissed the mixing of governmental power and Christian teaching. After the war, Lutheran theologians and historians began to scour the writings of Luther and Melancthon and engage in theological reflection in order to see if a different approach to political power could be developed that remained true to core Lutheran beliefs while more clearly rejecting the use of force in service of the gospel. In light of this reassessment, the steps taken at Stuttgart can be better understood.

An immediate need after the Stuttgart action was the careful examination of those articles in the Augsburg Confession in which condemnations of Anabaptists occur.

## **Anabaptists in the Lutheran confessions<sup>19</sup>**

Blanket statements such as “condemned are Anabaptists” raise important issues regarding the Augsburg Confession’s authority. Two preliminary questions arise:

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<sup>19</sup> Questions of the present status of sixteenth-century condemnations arise also for Lutherans in other ecumenical relations, notably with Roman Catholics and the Reformed. The relation between the condemnations and unilateral persecution has, however, given these questions distinctive importance in relation to the Anabaptists.

### **Were descriptions of Anabaptist teaching purposeful distortions?**

Although perspectives on truth and accuracy have changed somewhat over the centuries, we can say that the framers of the Augsburg Confession operated with the assumption that false or inaccurate claims in theological debates could easily lead to a blanket dismissal of their arguments. While not trying to falsify these condemnations, the drafters used the mentioning of Anabaptists (especially in CA V and XII)—a group already condemned by all parties at the 1529 Second Diet of Speyer—as a way of attacking their opponents in Augsburg—a kind of “guilt by association.” Moreover, although the Augsburg Confession uses the broadly inclusive term (“Anabaptists”), it is clear from the context that it refers only to those who hold true to the specific doctrine being condemned. The language of the Formula of Concord, first published in 1580, is more discerning and reflects the fact that the reformers’ successors realized the differences between various Anabaptist groups.<sup>20</sup>

### **How well were Anabaptist positions understood?**

Although the authors of the Formula of Concord seemed more cognizant of the variety of Anabaptist teachings and practices, things were not so clear to the drafters of the Augsburg Confession. At this point in their history, the various Anabaptist movements were not nearly as unified as they are today. Moreover, although some groups or individuals espoused believers’ baptism, they did not necessarily hold any other beliefs in common with those who formed the Swiss Brethren, the Hutterites or the Mennonites. Finally, for better or worse, the Lutheran reformers often confused the Anabaptists with certain revolutionaries from the Peasants’ War in 1525 and the revolt in Munster of 1534—1535. As a result, they tended to associate Anabaptism *per se* with sedition.

As both the national dialogues (in France, Germany and the USA) and the Study Commission discovered, several condemnations in the confessions simply did not accurately reflect the actual beliefs (then or now) of groups associated with Anabaptism. For a detailed description of those condemnations, which did and do not apply, see Appendix II.

Thus, with the exception of CA IX (on baptism) and CA XVI (on secular authority), the condemnations of Anabaptists in the other articles did not

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<sup>20</sup> “Formula of Concord,” Solid Declaration, Article XII, 27: “They hold other similar articles, but they are divided among themselves into many factions with one group holding more errors and another fewer,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 658.

accurately apply in the sixteenth century and certainly do not apply today. On these two issues important differences remain and require further dialogue between the two traditions.

### **Contemporary ways of understanding the language of condemnation**

What is the authority of condemnations? How can the Mennonite Action be seen in relation to the condemnations in the confessions?

Today, Lutherans give a variety of answers to this important interpretative concern: on the one hand, we recognize that condemnations have been a part of statements of faith, at least since the Council of Nicea in 325, where phrases of the Creed familiar to us from liturgical use (e.g., we believe in...) were originally followed by a series of anathemas (e.g., condemned are those who say,...). Similar condemnations may already be found in the New Testament (e.g., Gal 1:8–9; 1 Cor 16:22). Such condemnations may help to define more precisely the positive content of a particular teaching by clarifying those cases when belief in “X” means, at the same time, a rejection of that which is “not X.” Doing theology “by negation” can remind Christians that they are confessing a mystery, the whole truth of which is accessible to no one. Seen in this light, such condemnations may even aid ecumenical conversations, both by clarifying what a particular confession is saying and by allowing conversation partners, at whom the condemnation may originally have been aimed, to deny that they hold such a teaching.

On the other hand, condemnations have often restricted serious ecumenical conversations and, in situations where confessions of faith have become connected to governmental authorities, have been used coercively. Moreover, the blind application of condemnations to others can keep Christians from seeing their own “blind spots” and from recognizing the gifts others have to offer. It has sometimes been easy to move from rejecting a position perceived as being dangerous to condemning persons. In these circumstances, condemnations do not have the same authority as positive statements of doctrine and can actually do serious harm.

It is precisely this second set of circumstances that allowed the Eleventh Assembly to repudiate the condemnations of Anabaptists for the way in which they were used in the past. In any case, even in the Augsburg Confession itself, condemnations of doctrine never imply eternal condemnation of people in God’s eyes.

What is the intent of the condemnations? How can the Mennonite Action be understood in light of this proper intent?

Because of Lutheranism's commitment to distinguishing between Law and gospel and its focus not only on the definition of doctrine but also on the effect of God's Word, questions of the intent and effect of theological statements and confessions of faith remain a central aspect of our teaching. *The Book of Concord* defines the intent of the confessional documents: to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> This implies that a hermeneutical principle for properly reading these documents must always examine whether one's interpretation fosters that central intent. Seen in this light, the actions at Stuttgart (which themselves implicitly condemned the reformers' own behavior) rejected any use of these confessions that fosters violence. Thus, the witness to the gospel at Stuttgart simultaneously upheld the confessions' own witness and eliminated uses of the confessions that would distort that very witness. By asking the MWC for forgiveness for the way in which the condemnations of these divergences were used to persecute Anabaptists in the sixteenth century, the LWF insisted in no uncertain terms that doctrinal differences should never have been and could never again become an excuse for the coercive use of the Lutheran confessions.

## **Interpreting the authority of the Lutheran confessions in light of the action with the Mennonites**

Ecumenical discussions and decisions do not undermine the churches' self-understanding and identity but instead help them better to understand their own witness to the gospel in light of newfound convergences with other Christians. One necessary, initial step on the road to convergence involves setting aside condemnations of one side by the other, in order to clear the way to mutual conversations. The work of the Study Commission and the resultant decision by the LWF represent a fine example of this.

Such an act of reconciliation, however, brings with it two important questions for Lutherans. Given the decision at Stuttgart, how do we understand the authority of the Lutheran confessions and, especially, the teachings of the Augsburg Confession? In view of continuing, deep theological differences between Lutherans and Mennonites, how do we approach matters that still divide our churches?

The decision at Stuttgart did not simply repudiate the misuse of the Lutheran confessions; it also challenged Lutherans to define the authority of these confessions in ways that both support the gospel to which they witness and repudiate the use of violence among Christians to defend the

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the "Smalcald Articles," II. ii, in, *BC*, *ibid.*, 300–301, especially para. 5.

faith. These twin goals demand careful examination of those articles in the Augsburg Confession in which condemnations of Anabaptists occur.

## The view of authorities in the Augsburg Confession

When developing such an approach, Lutherans may turn for help to the confessions themselves, where they will find discussions on authorities other than the Bible and even the authority of the confessional writings themselves. One important resource comes in CA XX, where Philip Melancthon, the Augsburg Confession's chief drafter, discusses the various authorities for justification by faith alone.

CA XX has a special place in the document because, unlike most of the other first twenty-one articles, it was not based on articles from previous documents that the reformers brought with them to Augsburg.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Melancthon wrote it in Augsburg to answer a very particular challenge by the reformers' opponents, namely that the reformers forbade good works. At the very time the Saxon party entered Augsburg in April 1530, John Eck's wide-ranging attack on their theologians' teaching, *The 404 Articles*, was rolling off Augsburg's presses.<sup>23</sup> Among other things, Eck accused the reformers of forbidding good works, thus charging them with heresy and sedition.

Melancthon's response in CA XX, however, did not simply insist (as had CA VI) that good works were the necessary fruits of faith. Instead, it sharply rejected Eck's charges (CA XX. 1), stating "[o]ur people are falsely accused of prohibiting good works."<sup>24</sup> After rejecting the "childish, unnecessary works" of the opponents (listing such things as rosaries, monasticism, fasts and pilgrimages in paragraphs 3–7), he then outlined the reformers' teaching on faith (9–22) and good works (27–34), with an excursus on the nature of faith (23–26) and some concluding statements (35–40).

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<sup>22</sup> Among the documents that served as sources for the *Confessio Augustana* were the Schwabach and Marburg articles of 1529, the "Visitation Articles" for Saxony of 1528 and Martin Luther's *Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper*, which contained his own general confession of faith in the third section. The articles defending changes in practice among the Reformation churches (XXII–XXVIII) were largely based upon memoranda developed in 1530 during meetings at the Torgau castle and, hence, called the Torgau Articles. For translations of these documents, see Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (eds.), *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–82.

<sup>24</sup> "The Augsburg Confession" in *BC*, op. cit. (note 19), 53. Because it represents a fuller text, the Latin version will be used throughout this section. This sharpness was noted in the Roman response to the CA, the *Confutation*. See *Sources and Contexts*, op. cit. (note 22), 117.



In his description of justification by faith, Melanchthon begins with a definition of justification (CA XX, 9–10).

To begin with, they remind the churches that our works cannot reconcile God or merit grace and forgiveness of sins. Rather, we can obtain this only by faith, when we believe that we are received into grace on account of Christ, who alone has been appointed the mediator and atoning sacrifice through whom the Father is reconciled. Therefore, all who trust that they merit grace by works despise Christ's merit and grace and seek a way to God without Christ through human powers, since Christ has said about himself [Jn 14:6a] "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

This statement echoes the language of CA IV and V and, for the first time in the confessors' own words, refers to "faith alone" and "Christ alone."<sup>25</sup>

What aids the interpretation of the Augsburg Confession in the present context comes in the statements immediately following this definition. In short order, Melanchthon refers to three different authorities for this teaching: first, he reminds the reader that "this teaching concerning faith is treated in Paul everywhere."<sup>26</sup> Whereas CA IV had cited Romans 3–4, here he cites Ephesians 2:8–9. In the German version, Melanchthon stresses that Paul treats this teaching about faith "publicly and clearly."<sup>27</sup> For the reformers, citing Scripture is not a matter of secret or obscure doctrines but clear, explicit teaching.

Then he introduces references to the Church Fathers, referring to "many writings" of Augustine<sup>28</sup> and also to *Concerning the Calling of the Gentiles*<sup>29</sup> which he thought was written by Ambrose but was actually the work of Prosper of Aquitaine. The introduction of these authorities is particularly important here "[s]o that no one may quibble that we have contrived a new interpretation of Paul, this entire approach is supported by the testimonies of the Fathers [*testimonia Patrum*]."<sup>30</sup>

Lutherans of the sixteenth and the twenty-first century were and are not trying to manufacture novel teachings not supported by Scripture. Instead, we rely on the entire tradition of the church for help. This assistance helps to deflect the charge of novelty, especially noteworthy in our age, where

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<sup>25</sup> The term first appears in CA VI,3 (BC, 40) but in a citation of a pseudonymous interpretation of the Pauline epistles ascribed in the Middle Ages to Ambrose of Milan. In the sixteenth century, Erasmus of Rotterdam nicknamed the author Ambrosiaster.

<sup>26</sup> "The Augsburg Confession" in BC, op. cit. (note 19), 55.

<sup>27</sup> "Dise lere vom glauben ist offentlich und clar im Paulo an vieln orten gehandelt," in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> "The Augsburg Confession" in BC, op. cit. (note 19), 55. The German version explicitly mentions Augustine's book, *De spiritu et litera*, in op. cit. (note 27), 121.

<sup>29</sup> *De vocatione Gentium et alibi*, in op. cit. (note 27).

<sup>30</sup> CA XX, 12, in BC, op. cit. (note 19), 55.

the newness of an idea is seen as commending it. But help also comes in a very particular form, designated by the words “*testimonia Patrum*.”<sup>31</sup> The question regarding the authority of tradition was and remains hotly contested. The way in which Melanchthon denotes such authority as “testimonies” or “witnesses” clears the way to accept other authorities in the church and to place them in proper relation to Scripture and Christ.

To call the Church Fathers as witnesses to the truth of Scripture helps in two ways. It means that Christians are not in the business of concocting new teachings but, rather, of witnessing to the truth of Christ revealed in Scripture. Such witness is not restricted to the earliest centuries of the church. Indeed, sixteenth-century Lutherans argued that this kind of witness occurred throughout the ages, including such people as Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux and Johannes Tauler, among others, as such witnesses.<sup>32</sup> More importantly, they also included Martin Luther as such a witness, not just in later documents but even in paintings and woodcuts, depicting him as John the Baptist, pointing from Wittenberg’s pulpit to the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29).<sup>33</sup>

Alongside the Fathers’ witness, Melanchthon also invokes experience, not as a general category of thinking and feeling or an appeal to individualism, but specifically as the experience of receiving the comfort of the gospel of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Thus he writes:

Moreover, although this teaching is despised by those without experience, nevertheless devout and anxious consciences find by experience that it offers the greatest consolation. For consciences cannot be calmed by any work, but only by faith when they are certain that they have a God who has been reconciled on account of Christ. As Paul teaches in Romans 5[:1]: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God.” This whole teaching must be referred to that struggle of the terrified conscience, and it cannot be understood apart from that struggle. That is why those who are wicked and without experience judge it badly. For they imagine that Christian righteousness is nothing but civil and philosophical righteousness.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For the crucial role of this concept in Philip Melanchthon’s thought, see Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon* (Geneva: Droz, 1961).

<sup>32</sup> CA XX also cites an ancient hymn of the church to the Holy Spirit. In its later articles, the CA cites popes, canon law and even the medieval theologian, Nicholas of Cusa (CA XXII.8–12, in *BC*, op. cit. [note 19], 62).

<sup>33</sup> See the “Binding Summary,” 2 and 12-13, of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, in op. cit. (note 19), 527, 529.

<sup>34</sup> CA XX.15–18, in op. cit. (note 21), 55.

This third level of authority, already introduced by Martin Luther in his famous tract, “The Freedom of a Christian,”<sup>35</sup> also helps to understand how the Lutheran confessions function authoritatively by insisting that the center of Christian faith and experience is the comfort of the gospel of Christ alone. By noticing that Paul’s argument in Romans moved from defining the doctrine of justification by faith (Rom 3–4) to its effect (Rom 5:1), namely peace with God, Melancthon underscores that every teaching in the church be measured not simply by standards of truth but also by its fruits. To confess “Christ alone,” “grace alone” and “faith alone” results in “the greatest consolation” for “devout and anxious consciences.” This examination of the confessions thus provides perspectives from which their enduring authority can be freshly articulated.

### **The Augsburg Confession and the 2010 actions in Stuttgart**

When the LWF, as a communion of churches, rejected the misuse of the Augsburg Confession as grounds for the persecution of Anabaptists, while insisting on the continued efficacy of its confessions of faith, it expressed the very principles of authority imbedded in CA XX itself.

First, the LWF continues to insist that the center of Scripture clearly teaches that the grace and merit of Christ alone justify us by faith alone in his gracious promises. Because this is the heart of the Augsburg Confession, one may even judge everything in it according to that very center. The Lutheran persecution of Anabaptists, using this confession, does not abrogate its central authority, namely as a witness to the gracious Word of Christ’s death and resurrection for the salvation of the world.

Second, and closely related to this, the Augsburg Confession understands itself as a witness and testimony, pointing not to itself but to the Lamb of God. Because of this, Lutherans do best to restrict their use of this confession to this witness. Thus, when statements in the Augsburg Confession mistakenly condemn others, or when those condemnations and their later use point away from Christ and his mercy, then Lutherans today, in confessing the very faith to which the Augsburg Confession witnesses, must reorient it back to its fundamental purpose. Far from denigrating the authority of the Augsburg Confession, this reorientation actually undergirds it and contributes to its lively use among Lutherans today.

Third, these first two points already reveal the role experience plays in interpreting and teaching the Augsburg Confession and other Lutheran

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 343–44.

confessions of faith. The point of these documents is not simply to describe “right doctrine” but to attest to the comforting message of the gospel. Indeed, such attestation and experience of Christ’s consoling message marks every truly catholic, universal teaching of the church. For this reason, Philip Melanchthon concluded the first part of the Augsburg Confession with these words: “As can be seen, there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman church, insofar as we can tell from its writers.”<sup>36</sup>

This means that by emphasizing the message of the gospel, witnessed to by Christians throughout the ages and experienced by all Christians as sheer mercy and consolation, the Augsburg Confession remains an ecumenical, catholic testimony for the entire church and an essential tool for Lutherans in ecumenical discussions. By interpreting the Augsburg Confession in this way, the LWF continues that very witness and enhances the very experience of Christ’s mercy to which the Augsburg Confession itself calls the church. In the entire sweep of ecumenical conversations, never before has one church or communion of churches asked another for forgiveness for the ways in which it has treated the other church. The Augsburg Confession itself and its confession of faith in God’s mercy in Christ assist in freeing Lutherans to take such actions as they did in 2010. These actions strengthen the Augsburg Confession’s authority, preserve it as a living confession of faith and help it to function, to borrow the dynamic words of the Solid Declaration, “as our creed for this age.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “The Augsburg Confession” in *BC*, op. cit. (note 19), 59.

<sup>37</sup> See the “Binding Summary”, 5, of the Solid Declaration, in *BC*, op. cit. (note 19), 527.

## II. Continuing the Conversation on Unresolved Issues: Christians and the Civil Use of Lethal Force

In the conclusion of *Healing Memories*, the Study Commission looked with hope toward a future of continuing engagement:

Today, living in the forgiveness and reconciliation given by Christ, Mennonites and Lutherans may make observations and raise questions concerning the doctrine and life of the other community in a brotherly and sisterly way. Such conversations will assist each church in developing a self-critical attitude toward its own doctrine and practice.<sup>38</sup>

These conversations cannot be accomplished once and for all but must arise from current realities and diverse settings:

In a world that changes so rapidly, these questions [put by the two traditions to each other] are constantly evolving, so that both Lutherans and Mennonites must look for answers that are in line with the word of God, take into consideration the insights of their respective traditions, and take seriously the complexity of the world in which we live, act, suffer, and confess our faith in Christ.<sup>39</sup>

In the spirit of this invitation to conversation, two members of the Task Force agreed further to explore issues around civil authority and the use of lethal force.

The dialogue between them builds on the work of *Healing Memories*, and excerpts from that discussion are included here to introduce the conversation.

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<sup>38</sup> *Healing Memories*, op. cit. (note 3), 109.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

## The discussion of Christians and civil authority from *Healing Memories*<sup>40</sup>

CA XVI states:

Concerning civic affairs they [i.e., Lutherans] teach that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God and that Christians are permitted to hold civil office, to work in law courts, to decide matters by imperial and other existing laws, to impose just punishments, to wage just war, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to take an oath when required by magistrates, to take a wife, to be given in marriage. They condemn the Anabaptists who prohibit Christians from assuming such civil responsibilities.<sup>41</sup>

The article offers a list of teachings that the reformers accuse the Anabaptists of rejecting or denying. Here again, not all of the accusations applied to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. Only a few fringe Anabaptists, for example, rejected marriage. Most Anabaptists—along with the Mennonites today—emphasized the principle of mutual aid and the sharing of resources within the community, although they did not fully reject private property.

The most relevant issue raised by this article for the contemporary discussion is whether or not Christians could hold certain offices “without sin,” as it is worded in the German text.<sup>42</sup> The Lutheran point in this article is not that Christians will never be free from sin in the daily exercise of such offices but that participating in an office is not in itself a sin—so that an office bearer does not sin simply by virtue of carrying out the tasks associated with the office. The article notes five main areas of concern:

- a. Administrative offices of magistrates and princes
- b. Juridical tasks, including passing death sentences
- c. Execution of punishment
- d. Participation in wars and
- e. Taking oaths.<sup>43</sup>

On all of these points, both sixteenth-century Anabaptists and contemporary Mennonites would likely advocate teachings and practices that this article of the Augsburg Confession rejects.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 79–84.

<sup>41</sup> *BC*, op. cit. (note 19), Latin text, 49.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Questions around oaths, less troublesome for contemporary churches than the use of force, are dealt with in *Healing Memories*, op. cit. (note 3), 79.

On the general question of the Christian understanding of civil authority, both Anabaptists and Lutherans were challenged regarding how to interpret Christ's commandment to nonresistant love (e.g., "But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer" [Mt 5:39]) in light of Paul's apparent affirmation of the temporal sword of government ("For it [the governing authority] is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain!" [Rom. 13:4]). In interpreting these texts, Anabaptists and Lutherans draw quite different distinctions and arrive at quite different conclusions.

In an early summary of Anabaptist shared convictions called "The Brotherly Union of 1527" (sometimes referred to as "The Schleithem Confession"), Anabaptists in the Swiss and south German regions summarized their understandings of civil government in the following words:

The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the law, the sword is established over the wicked for punishment and for death.... But within the perfection of Christ only the ban is used for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh.<sup>44</sup>

Drawing heavily on the teachings and example of Christ, Article 6 of "The Brotherly Union" went on to reject: (1) the Christian's use of the sword ("Christ teaches and commands us to learn from Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart"); (2) Christians serving as judges ("Christ did not wish to decide or pass judgment between brother and brother. So should we also do"); and (3) Christians acting as magistrates ("Christ was to be made king, but He fled and did not discern the ordinance of His Father. Thus we should also do as He did"). For the Anabaptists, the contrast between the fallen world and the gathered community of Christian believers hinged on these points: "The worldly are armed with steel and armor, but Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and with the Word of God."<sup>45</sup>

Contrary to their contemporaries' fears, the Anabaptists did not call for resistance to government authority, even in the face of persecution. Since, in accordance with Romans 13, the temporal authorities were "an ordering" of God, they were prepared to obey these authorities as long as obedience was not inconsistent with the commands of Christ (like taking oaths, participating in wars, etc.). Thus, the Anabaptists were not anarchists who sought the destruction of the political order; indeed, they frequently tried to persuade magistrates that they were exemplary subjects in terms of their moral char-

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<sup>44</sup> Cited in *Healing Memories*, op. cit. (note 3), 80.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

acter. Yet, insofar as they questioned whether Christians could legitimately participate in civil society as soldiers, judges and magistrates, Anabaptists seemed to undermine the theological legitimacy of the political community. And the authorities (princes, magistrates and theologians) clearly perceived that the Anabaptist position called their own Christian faith into question.

According to their own understanding of civil authority, the Lutheran reformers appealed to three, interrelated distinctions. God is understood as reigning over the world in two ways. With the left hand, God preserves the world from falling into chaos through continuing creation, thereby using the Law and the temporal authorities to maintain order and restrain sin. With the other hand, God reigns over the world through the gospel, using the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. By these means, God the Holy Spirit creates faith and brings people into communion with God and with one another. This rule of the right hand is related to the human being insofar as they are called to have a relation to God; the rule of the left is directed to individual human beings insofar as they relate to other human beings, to the world and to themselves. Concerning those persons whose cooperation God uses, there is a third distinction: a person may act for themselves, or—as an office bearer—for others or on behalf of others.

These three distinctions, first employed by Luther but used more generally during the Lutheran Reformation, never function separately, as unfortunately has sometimes been understood. It is one God who reigns in a twofold way, and it is the believer who lives under God in both realms simultaneously. This also means that there is an inner connection between both ways of reigning. Luther frequently stresses this connection. Concerning the apparent conflict between Matthew 5:39 and Romans 13, Luther uses the third distinction stating that as a private person a Christian has to suffer what an evildoer does to them; however, as an office bearer, the Christian has to resist the evildoer.

Mennonites worry that this distinction may result in a refusal to follow Christ's example and words in every aspect of one's life or an inability to recognize the inherent evil in certain walks of life. Lutherans would argue that the Christian practices love in both cases, but that this love takes on a different shape depending on the situation: if a Christian as a private person is hurt by another, they may suffer this and forgive the evildoer; but if a Christian as a judge encounters an offender, the judge has to act on behalf of all and care for the victim. Thus the judge will sentence and punish the evildoer. The judge—as an office bearer, acting not on their own behalf but on behalf of others—practices love of the victim and ensures the peace of the community by resisting the evildoer, whereas the Christian as a private person would be expected to suffer damage from others and to forgive. Thus the question is whether Christian love can take on different shapes, perhaps, in the case of the judicial process, even the opposite shape from what appears to be loving.



Over the past five centuries, Mennonite and Lutheran understandings regarding civil government have changed in light of new circumstances in the state and society. Thus, Lutherans today would not simply repeat CA XVI. Mennonite thinking has also undergone changes that reflect the context of modern democracies. For example, some Mennonites have moved from a separatist understanding of political witness to a more engaged posture, expressed in active peacemaking, reconciliation, conflict resolution and peace education. Most Mennonites today assume that Christians can and should make an impact on the societies in which they live by working for a world with more justice and for the well-being of all people. Mennonites express political responsibility today in many different ways: in their professions; through the life and witness of the church; and, occasionally, by serving in various levels of political office. In all of this, Mennonites are prepared to work together with Christians of other denominations and with all people of good will.

Nevertheless, most Mennonites continue to define the limit of their involvement at the point of lethal force, whether this is within states (as members of the police force) or in conflicts between states (as members of the military). They believe taking the life of another human being to be contrary to the will of God. It violates the gift of life given by God to each person, is contrary to the teachings of Jesus and bears false witness to the triumph of the resurrection over the cross. Although many Mennonite attitudes have changed since the sixteenth century, most Mennonites still expect church members not to participate in acts of lethal violence or to support war in any active form, even if required to do so by their government. They do, however, have a calling to model reconciliation in their relations with others, to promote peace wherever possible and to offer material and spiritual support to victims of violence.

The “Shared Convictions,” accepted by the MWC General Council in 2006 include the following affirmations:

The spirit of Jesus empowers us to trust God in all areas of life so we become peacemakers who renounce violence, love our enemies, seek justice and share our possessions with those in need. (No. 5)

As a world-wide community of faith and life we transcend boundaries of nationality, race, class, gender and language and seek to live in the world without conforming to the powers of evil, witnessing to God’s grace by serving others, caring for creation and inviting all people to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (No. 7).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> [www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website\\_files/shared\\_convictions\\_en.pdf](http://www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/shared_convictions_en.pdf)

These two paragraphs express how Mennonites strive to live in the world, serving critically and constructively in its institutions, while also witnessing to God's grace in Jesus Christ who loved us while we were still enemies (Rom 5), calls us to love our enemies (Mt 5) and enables us, through the resurrection, to face death without fear.

This contemporary development of the Mennonite tradition opens new possibilities for encounters between Mennonites and Lutherans, especially since Lutherans have learned in and from their history. They have recognized that Luther's "doctrine of the two realms"—the two ways in which God rules the world—has often been misunderstood, as if both ways could be separated, so that Lutheran churches too easily adapted to the political and social world in which they lived. Too often they regarded the political and social structures of this world as God-given, not asking whether they should engage in contradicting them and contribute to changing them according to the will of God. Furthermore, princes, kings and other temporal authorities in Germany and other countries exercised oversight of the Lutheran churches in their lands, not only in external matters but also in matters of doctrine (*cura religionis*). This sometimes impeded these churches' distinctive Christian teaching and witness vis-à-vis governmental authority. Due to changes in the constitutional structure of many modern states regarding religious freedom, this kind of church government no longer exists in most countries.

Especially concerning the participation of Christians in wars, Lutherans have tried to draw consequences from the terrible wars of the last century and the beginning of this century. The character of wars, especially their destructive power, has changed in the course of the last centuries. This, in turn, has had consequences for debates over whether a Christian could serve as a soldier "without sin," and whether Luther's distinctions between the office that is good and right and the person who may use it in a bad way (and thus make it a bad thing) are still tenable. Weapons technology continues to change rapidly and wars now wreak such damage that Lutherans have found it necessary to revisit the question of a "just war." In addition, it has become clear that wars have their own "logic" and that they create devastating effects that no one foresees or intends. Thus, even if a war in defense of innocent people against a cruel aggressor may seem "justified," soldiers may still bear some guilt, independently of their personal misconduct.

Nevertheless, Lutherans would ask Mennonites about the ethical consequences of failing to render assistance in an emergency. For example, in their refusal to use lethal violence in defense of innocent people, do they not also become guilty for not offering help to those who desperately need it—especially if, according to all available knowledge, this is the only way to save hostages or other victims from being killed?

Today, Lutheran churches hold a wide variety of opinions, especially concerning the participation of Christians in wars. Some of them may be closer to Mennonite teaching, even though the rationale may be expressed differently. Thus, it is no longer possible for Lutherans to condemn other Christians outright for refusing to use lethal force, simply on the basis of CA XVI.

Different emphases (e.g., what is one position in Lutheran churches is the predominant position in Mennonite churches and regarded there as a matter of principle), thought structures, theological reasoning, use of the Bible, reference to Jesus Christ as example, etc., clearly still persist. Nonetheless, in this area it is no longer appropriate for Lutherans to express their church's relation to the doctrine of the other by using the word "condemnation," especially as that word was understood in the Augsburg Confession.

### **The conversation continued**

In this exchange, a Lutheran and a Mennonite dialogue partner pose each other questions that express long-standing reservations about the other's position. The two explore how, even in this important area of difference, the questions and the understanding of the other's position have changed since Reformation times. Furthermore, they examine how the remaining differences touch on deeply-held understandings of what discipleship demands. While speaking on the basis of the teachings of their own traditions, the conversation partners also speak personally, from their own understanding of call and commitment and their own contextual experience. Their example invites other Lutherans and Mennonites to engage in similarly searching conversations in their own settings. What, for example, might this discussion look like in a setting where both communities were living as vulnerable minorities under a hostile regime?

**Michael Martin (hereafter MM) (Lutheran):** We know that Lutherans and Mennonites/Anabaptists have often understood the Bible in different ways. It is important that we explore these interpretations together. Lutherans, for example, might ask Mennonites how they understand the many examples in the Bible of God's people using violence to carry out God's will.

**John Roth (hereafter JR) (Mennonite):** Yes, at various places in the Old Testament it appears that God sanctions—even demands—that the people of Israel use violence. One important example is the story of the Exodus; but the wars of conquest led by Joshua are also violent, sometimes extremely so. In most of these instances, however, success in these wars is clearly ascribed to God and explicitly not to human efforts. The victory song in

Exodus 15, for example, celebrates God's actions, not those of a human hero. The people don't need weapons, because it is God who fights for them. This is in sharp contrast to the societies around them who wanted the most advanced weapons and who celebrated their military heroes. As with the Israelites' demand for a king, war in the Old Testament is the secondary option—not God's first choice. The prophets' vision is always for a restoration of a peaceable kingdom, one known for its justice and mercy rather than military success.

Moreover, Christians recognize that the fullest expression of God's revelation to humanity is in the person of Jesus Christ. In the Messiah, Christians claim to have seen God's very character and Jesus never called on his followers to use lethal violence against their enemies. Indeed, his teachings and example consistently point us to an ethic of love for all human beings, even if it entails the sacrifice of our own life.

**JR:** Following that emphasis on the teachings of Jesus, a Mennonite would want to know how Lutherans today interpret the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

**MM:** Lutheran interpretations of this text vary greatly. We can go back to Luther who rejected the understanding that Jesus' teachings in this sermon only apply to Christians with a special calling to a more "perfect" form of Christian life such as monks or nuns. He taught that Jesus' teachings make us aware that we are sinners but do not provide new commandments for a Christian life. Some Lutheran interpretations look at this text in light of the doctrine of the two realms and Jesus' teaching distinctively interpreted for each one of the realms. In the private realm, one has to love one's neighbor and even one's enemy, and "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Mt 5:39). But if you have public responsibility, you have to punish the evildoer and to constrain those who are your enemies.

There are also Lutheran interpretations that insist that being salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5:13ff) implies not only promises but also duties. Moreover, the fact that Jesus didn't talk only to his disciples who were gathered around him, but to the whole crowd, the public (Mt 5:1), is crucial in order to understand and interpret Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Therefore, the teachings of Jesus are important for all people, not only for the true believers or a special group of chosen ones. Jesus' teaching is important for everyone, providing good rules for living together, understanding one another and working for a just world. Could this be a theme where Lutherans and Mennonites might find some common ground?

**MM:** Clearly we could together pursue biblical interpretation at great length. But our conversation needs to focus on our worries regarding our respective position on the use of force. Isn't Christian pacifism naive and unrealistic?

**JR:** Yes, the argument that Christian pacifism is "unrealistic" seems compelling. It appeals to our most basic instincts (self-defense); it accords well with common-sense notions of justice ("an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"); and it seems to be borne out by the weight of history (appeasing aggressors only encourages more evil). What is not clear in the argument, however—and it is a crucial missing piece—is how this seemingly logical and commonsensical response to violence can be squared with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, arguments for the "just war" were first made by Cicero, the Roman statesman, who lived a full century before Christ. Christ did not teach his disciples that loving enemies was a "strategy" that would always guarantee a positive "outcome," at least not in the short term. But he did teach that loving others, even in the face of persecution, pointed to a deeper reality than what the fallen world was able to comprehend—namely, that love is ultimately more powerful than hatred, and that in his resurrection Christ has already won the victory over the forces of sin and death. "For the message about the cross," writes the apostle Paul, "is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God....For God's foolishness is wiser than human's wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human's strength" (1 Cor1:18–25).

**JR:** From a Mennonite/Anabaptist point of view, naiveté isn't all on one side. Aren't claims regarding just war naive? Have Christians ever stopped their nations from going to war on the basis of these criteria?

**MM:** You are pointing to a real problem. The original intent was that the criteria for a just war confined war and violence. But it never quite worked as had been hoped. The concept of a just war became an apology for a war which was going to be fought in any case. Therefore, today many Lutherans repudiate the idea of a just war and replace it with the idea of a just peace.<sup>47</sup> In Germany, for example, this change was described in the 2007 peace memorandum "Live from God's Peace—Care for Just Peace."<sup>48</sup> The title aptly describes this new direction: all peace work is

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<sup>47</sup> See the LWF publication, Viggo Mortensen (ed.), *War, Confession and Conciliarity. What does "Just War" in the Augsburg Confession Mean Today?* (Hanover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> *Live from God's Peace—Care for Just Peace, A Memorandum of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany*, at [www.ekd.de/english/live\\_from\\_gods\\_peace.html](http://www.ekd.de/english/live_from_gods_peace.html).

based on the peace given by God, and the ethic of peace unfolds under the overall concept of “just peace.” For the first time, precedence was given to civil conflict resolution over military strategies and to prevention over (military) intervention.

According to this comprehensive understanding of peace, the primary focus is always the prevention of conflicts, whether they are social, economic or of any other nature. Such a global peace order would require the structural support of a world legal system, “an international order established on a basis of cooperation rather than world government.”<sup>49</sup> The UN and other multilateral organizations would play a key role in this ethic of peace. Moreover, the linking up of governmental and nongovernmental bodies is important for the creation of an effective peace work, since it is all about finding a peaceful solution to the biggest problems facing humankind. This sort of advocacy is a result of the churches’ conviction that there is no more place for a just war in modern international law.<sup>50</sup> Neither the right to self-defense nor a *ius ad bellum*, a state’s sovereign right to wage war, can be established as a legitimate institutional reaction to conflict. Generally speaking, the solving of conflict will be placed under the umbrella of the global legal order. A law has to be enforceable and in a constitutional state this leads us to the question regarding the use of force. In the end, the use of force may be authorized only as “a kind of international police action under the rules of the UN Charter.”<sup>51</sup> For such “police action”—e.g., conducted by UN blue helmets—the same general criteria of law preserving force will apply that render possible the exertion of the state’s monopoly of force: reason for permission, authorization and proportionality. With this kind of recognition, our churches have attempted to respond to the weaknesses in the execution of the just war teaching while recognizing a necessary police function, the need at times for the international community to act for the protection of those threatened by a situation of conflict.

**MM:** This discussion brings me to my key question. Do Christian pacifists suggest that we should look on passively when we encounter violence or genocide? Aren’t there circumstances where violence can only be stopped with coercion that is itself violent?

**JR:** Yes, sometimes Christian “pacifism” has been confused with “passivism”—a selfish disregard for the suffering of others. But, at their best, Christian pacifists have not only expressed their faith by saying “no”

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., para. 86.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., paras 98ff.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., para.104.

to violence, but also by saying “yes” to actions that promote the public good and actively to intervene on behalf of those who are suffering. Sometimes these actions have been relatively modest—a commitment to truth telling, for example, or to upholding just laws, or publically advocating in favor of those who are weak and vulnerable. At other times, it has taken the form of active service—sharing gifts of time, resources and talents with those in need. And still other times, defending those who are victims of violence has entailed suffering and even death. Christian pacifists do not pretend that they have the power to stop violence or genocide; but they also recognize their obligation to do all that is in their power—short of lethal violence—to bring an end to the suffering of others.

**JR:** Now to my own core question. If Christians use violence to stop violence, aren't we using the same methods that we condemn in our enemies? How does this witness to the Good News of the Gospel?

**MM:** Indeed, if Christians use violence to stop violence, this is a contradiction to Jesus' teaching, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). But is it always possible to avoid violence when acting for justice and peace? If you think about the tasks of the police, in some special cases there is no other option than to use violence against those who use violence themselves. This leads us to the question of whether it is permissible for a Christian to join the police force—and then to the important issue of who is allowed to use violence and when and how we can limit the use of violence against criminals in our everyday life.

Another observation I would like to make in response to your question is that only too often and much too early we call for the use of lethal force in conflicts between states and different factions. This is what we experienced for instance during the war in Afghanistan. The Taliban's power could not be eliminated by lethal force. Christians are called to become peacemakers between enemies, to overcome differences and conflicts without weapons and lethal force and we have to be aware that as Christians we need to give preference to nonviolent means of overcoming conflict.

But in very rare and special situations, if there is no other possibility, then I would say it is necessary—as a last resort—to help the victims of violence, even by using weapons and force. Nonetheless, if we are asked to send weapons to persecuted groups to defend themselves, we first have to assess if there are other possibilities to help those who are being hunted, imprisoned or threatened with death. For Christians the priority has to be to look for nonviolent interventions, help the persecuted without employing lethal force and to provide possibilities for them to live without killing others.

The main priority for Christians is to “overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21). But there is also a responsibility to protect victims, those who were attacked and threatened. Recently I worked with those whose lives were cruelly put at risk by the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, and I believe we cannot be idle in the face of their suffering. I cannot see a way that would protect the lives of the vulnerable entirely through negotiations and other peaceful means. I think we have a responsibility to help the victims of such horrible suffering—maybe also, in this special case, with lethal violence. We must leave room for such actions.

**MM:** How do Mennonites/ Anabaptists today regard the state, especially its role in promoting social welfare and civic order?

**JR:** In Romans 13, a classic text for understanding the Christian’s relation to the state, the apostle Paul offers both a general summary of the purpose of government and his specific counsel as to how followers of Christ should relate to those in political authority. What basic themes emerge in this passage? (1) All authority comes from God. To the degree that the authority of the state contributes to order in a world filled with people who are inclined to do wrong, the state serves a useful function, one that Christians should support. (2) Christians are to “be subordinate” to the state, giving the state what it is due. But the actual substance of the Christian obligation to the state is not described in any detail here. The passage does not call on Christians to give full support to everything and anything that the state might demand. (3) Christians should have rather limited expectations of the state or the political process. God has established governing authorities because there are forces of disorder in the world. These authorities serve a useful function of restraining evil and protecting good. Beyond this, however, Paul has little to say about the role of the state. (4) The larger context of Romans 13 is a vision of Shalom in which the church, not the state, is the primary focus of God’s activity in the world. And it is this body, the international community of believers who are committed to living in obedience to Jesus Christ, the source of our primary identity that claims our deepest allegiance. In Romans 12, immediately preceding his reflections on governing authorities, Paul instructs the Christians of Rome to a truly radical form of citizenship: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil,” he writes. “No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink” (Rom 12:17, 20). This is an ethic for the Christian and the gathered body of believers.

Pacifist Christians might legitimately call the state to live up to its own highest principles—fairness, the rule of law, just war principles in times of war and so on. But they do this as informed, concerned citizens, appealing to criteria recognized by all citizens, not as the special pleading of a Christian minority.



**JR:** What has changed in Lutheran theology since the sixteenth century that makes the idea of a Christian state—in which Christian rulers use their power to promote Christian doctrine—unthinkable for Lutherans today?

**MM:** It is highly significant that there has not only been a change in Lutheran theology but also a change in the self-understanding and self-interpretation of the state. Nowadays we don't have a Christian state that promotes a state church and refuses all other religions besides Christianity. Like others in our increasingly complicated interfaith settings, Lutherans have learned respectfully to live together with other religions as good neighbors. Furthermore, Lutherans recognize everybody, even nonbelievers, as the beloved children of God, who have a special dignity because they are all created in God's image. On the other hand, they recognize that preaching the gospel and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ cannot be combined with the powers of the state. The state has to be neutral towards religious affairs. And it is the task of the Christians and their congregations to promote Christian doctrine with love and empathy in word and deed.

**MM:** What are the biggest challenges in Mennonite/Anabaptist congregations today regarding these issues?

**JR:** The challenges for our congregations vary from country to country. In some settings—particularly those where Christians experience active persecution—the difficulty is to find strategies of survival while also praying that the hearts of their enemies be transformed by the love of Christ. In other settings, the challenges have more to do with integrating a commitment to peacemaking into the fabric of everyday life. This may include: resisting the subtle pressures of nationalism; pursuing habits of reconciliation in our homes and businesses; writing letters to our political representatives to support peaceful alternatives to conflicts; withholding a portion of our income tax in recognition of the fact that the military budget consumes an enormous portion of our national budget; contributing financially to causes promoting the peaceful reconciliation of conflicts; and modeling peacemaking in our families and congregations. However, as a recent survey of MWC congregations made clear, the biggest challenge facing all of our congregations is “the pervasive complexity in moving from what is desired and written on paper, to becoming a bedrock part of the life of the Christian life and community.”

**MM:** I am grateful for the things we can say together now in ways we were not able to in the sixteenth century.

We agree that Christians are called to strive for justice and peace in the societies in which they live, and there is much work to be done to

attain this. Our traditions have come to this common affirmation from different directions but it unites them now in many fields of activity. While Lutherans may not rule out the use of force in all cases, like Christian pacifists they see many occasions where war has been used in ways that they cannot support and they seek to be active before, during and after times of conflict to alleviate suffering. While not all Anabaptists have been actively engaged in the well-being of society at large, they have increasingly recognized the gifts of peacemaking. They bring and offer those gifts, even when there are aspects of the situation which they find troubling or incompatible with Christian discipleship. We Lutherans are grateful for these forms of collaboration. We are thankful also for the challenge which Anabaptists have brought to our thinking about just war and other uses of force; it has contributed to the changes experienced in our current thinking and practice.

**JR:** On our side also we give thanks for all the areas of common action that we have developed in recent years. Yet, we do not want to understate our remaining differences. For Christians in Mennonite/Anabaptist traditions the refusal to use lethal force, or to pursue forms of vocational life that might require such force, remains an important mark of following Christ. To use means incompatible with Jesus' teaching and example seems to us to put that discipleship at risk in ways that cannot simply be measured by outcomes. That is our major challenge which we would still want to put to Lutherans. You also take seriously the "theology of the cross"—but does not Jesus' way to the cross demand of us the suffering that can come from non-resistance to violent evil? This is a point I cannot relinquish—and our communities must continue to put these questions on the table when we talk with other Christians.

**MM:** We need to take this challenge seriously. But we also have a deep commitment that we would want to explore further with you. You speak of the need to accept suffering rather than to seek to overcome it by the use of lethal violence. Luther also speaks of the readiness to suffer for the sake of the gospel—and for Lutheran communities in hostile settings this teaching has been an important source of strength and nonviolent resistance. But what about others whose lives are threatened by this violence? Don't we have a responsibility for them and for the protection of a common life of security and peace—not only as citizens but also as Christians? This is a call on my own life, and the life of my church, from which I cannot turn away.

# III. Good Practices of Lutheran-Mennonite Cooperation and Reconciliation

Reconciliation does not only look at the past but, rather, it looks into a common future and the ways in which cooperation and mutual understanding can be further enhanced. In many places where Mennonites and Lutherans live together, they already recognized one another as Christian sisters and brothers prior to the Mennonite Action at the Eleventh Assembly through common service projects, joint worship services and eucharistic fellowship.

This action of reconciliation gave rise to new forms of cooperation and became a source of inspiration for further joint study, celebration, reconciliation services and joint diaconal projects. This chapter describes some of the processes and projects that were directly inspired by the Mennonite Action and have since then brought Lutherans and Mennonites closer together at the global and local levels. Hopefully these initiatives will serve as a source of inspiration for greater fellowship among Lutherans and Mennonites.

## Joint study processes

### **“Healing Memories, Reconciling in Christ: A Lutheran–Mennonite Study Guide for Congregations”**

In order to take seriously the commitments made at the Eleventh Assembly and to provide a solid foundation for nurturing the new relationship between Lutherans and Mennonites, reconciled through a common faith and commitment to Christ, the Mennonite Church Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada jointly prepared the study guide, “Healing Memories, Reconciling in Christ.” The study guide, published in 2010, is designed for use in their respective congregations.

The guide, prepared by Allen Jorgenson, Lutheran pastor and seminary professor, and Margaret Loewen Reimer, Mennonite editor and writer, describes the historical relationship between Lutherans and Mennonites in a way acceptable to both churches. It illustrates how the differences

between the two confessions arose and attempts to reconcile the misunderstandings. While prepared in Canada, the guide may well be suitable for use by congregations in other parts of the world.

Lutherans and Mennonites are encouraged together to work through the study guide wherever possible. Four one-hour sessions include material from the report of the Study Commission as well as questions, relevant Bible studies and prayers. Links to video clips are included.

The study guide outlines both churches' beginnings in the religious turmoil of the Reformation in Europe and uses this as a context for examining the condemnations against Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession of 1530. Participants are invited to look at how events and differing understandings of the Bible have shaped the Lutheran and Anabaptist confessions of faith and their attitudes toward other Christians. Furthermore, it explores the meaning of forgiveness and what its significance might be for both churches at the present time. It is carried by the conviction that facing the blight of separation and condemnation in our past in a spirit of repentance can help us more meaningfully to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the beginnings of Lutheran and Mennonite Reformations (1517 and 1525 respectively).

The material is available online at: [www.elcic.ca/Documents/Lutheran-MennoniteStudyGuidefinal\\_web.pdf](http://www.elcic.ca/Documents/Lutheran-MennoniteStudyGuidefinal_web.pdf)

### **Trilateral dialogue between Lutherans, Mennonites and Roman Catholics on Baptism**

*Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ* identified baptism as one of two major issues requiring further theological exploration between Lutherans and Mennonites. The same issue was raised in 2003 by the report of the bilateral dialogue between the MWC and the Catholic Church, *Called Together to be Peacemakers*. Thus, when the Pontifical Council approached the MWC to propose a dialogue on baptism, the MWC replied that this topic could be taken up by all three traditions together. The resulting international trilateral dialogue was an innovative process that was charged to continue on the path of increased mutual understanding and cooperation on which these communions have advanced in recent years by focusing on foundational matters concerning the understanding and practice of baptism.

The timeliness of the trilateral dialogue was further enhanced by the horizon of the two, above mentioned, upcoming half-millennial anniversaries. The church representatives commending the formation of such a dialogue body expressed the hope that, building on the progress toward healing of memories that had begun among their communions, the formation of

a trilateral dialogue process would also be able to address the ignorance, misunderstandings and stereotypes of one another that still persist in respective churches. According to the proposal for a trilateral dialogue, the aim of this dialogue was identified as “to help one another grow in faithfulness to Jesus Christ as we face the pastoral and missional challenge to the practice and understanding of baptism in our time.”<sup>52</sup>

The first meeting of the trilateral dialogue commission between Catholics, Lutherans and Mennonites was held in Rome, 10–14 December 2012. Since then, the dialogue commission has been discussing the overall theme “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church,” exploring different aspects of how baptism is being understood in the respective churches. Next to academic presentations, Bible studies on relevant Scripture passages were carried out at each dialogue group meeting.

The discussions have so far concentrated on theology and the practice of baptism, especially as entry into the Church and into a life of discipleship. The mutually enriching conversations have helped to identify convergences as well as still existing differences in the understanding of baptism. While Mennonites continue to stress the age of accountability for a baptismal candidate, Lutherans and Catholics argue for paedobaptism on the grounds of faith and the concept of original sin. All three traditions accept that God is the actor in baptism, which is also the basis on which Catholics and Lutherans practice paedobaptism. There is also unanimity about discipleship and holy living as a mark of Christian identity and a strong convergence on the understanding that Christian discipleship includes advocacy for social justice.

The report of the trilateral dialogue commission will be finalized in 2017, marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

## Joint diaconal projects

The Mennonite Action at the Eleventh Assembly has been an impulse for a number of joint Lutheran–Mennonite diaconal initiatives at the global and local levels. In the following, two examples of such cooperation will be presented; the first of them is an example of global cooperation and the second of a local initiative.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

## **Mennonite Support to Dadaab Refugee Camp**

In 2011, the Pennsylvania-based Mennonite Central Committee, a relief and development agency, pledged a contribution of USD 369,500 to the work of the LWF in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. This refugee camp is managed by the LWF on behalf of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and is home to almost half a million refugees fleeing war and famine in Somalia. Both Mennonites and Lutherans regarded this as a practical expression of the reconciliation that was celebrated in Stuttgart in 2010. Rev. Eberhard Hitzler, at the time director of the LWF Department for World Service, said that this contribution meant much more than just financial assistance for the LWF as it was a symbol and an expression of the beauty that grows out of reconciliation between Lutherans and Mennonites.

The Mennonite contribution included such practical items as mosquito nets but the major part of the support was designated for education, specifically capacity building projects. The Mennonites had decided to support the LWF's plan to conduct capacity training for 300 teachers (refugees) over a period of three years (2012–2014), each year targeting 100 learners. During the first year, 108 learners, 90 refugee teachers and 18 teachers from the host community, were reached—8 persons more than initially planned. The aim was to enable teachers to acquire better teaching skills, including the ability to develop curricula.

One of the teachers who participated in the program described his experience as follows:

My name is Abdi Jere. I am 26 years old. I teach in Iftin Primary School in Hagadera camp, I started teaching in 2009 after I attained grade C in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary School Education in 2008. I decided to teach in order to help my community and so to contribute back to the community.

I did not know much about teaching, except for imitating my former teachers. After one year of teaching without skills, I joined AVSI for a capacity building course which gave me basic teaching skills. I thank the LWF for giving me another opportunity to be trained. This course is superior to the capacity building I initially underwent. This one helps me to understand education issues better. For example, the aspects of educational psychology and particularly the concept of individual differences, makes me a better teacher. It gives me skills in understanding my pupils better. I handle my pupils depending on their level and capability. The teaching methodologies and classroom observations are wonderful and this has made me a better teacher. I no longer harass my pupils but support them to understand what they learn. All this is because of the child friendly methodologies that I have learnt through the LWF diploma

program. At the end of the course, I believe I will be one of the celebrated professional teachers from the camp.”<sup>53</sup>

## **Lutherans and Mennonites grow together: a joint garden project**

Sometimes growing fruits and vegetables together can help to grow more closely together as communities. A joint Lutheran–Mennonite garden project was initiated in Harleysville, PA., USA, by Mennonites and Lutherans. The initial impulse for this joint project came from the Lutheran pastor Steve Godsall-Myers from Advent Lutheran Church. He used to ride past a one-acre community garden on the grounds of Salford Mennonite Church, not far from the congregation where he was serving. Being impressed by this community garden and still having in mind the LWF Mennonite Action in Stuttgart, he was keen to establish a closer relationship with local Mennonite neighbors and to realize this reconciliation in his own context. Mutual trust was created between the two communities, and the Mennonites invited the Lutherans to join their garden project which had been brought to fruition six years earlier. The produce of the garden benefits those in need: local senior centers, a social service agency, a food pantry and soup kitchen and people living with hardship.

Every winter a garden fundraiser dinner is held at Salford to pay for seed and supplies. A team of volunteers from Salford Mennonite and Advent Lutheran church tend to the garden: they plant, weed, water and harvest. On Saturday mornings, the garden is open to neighbors and visitors from the community who can pick up a little produce for themselves, or help the garden team with their regular Saturday morning harvesting for distribution.<sup>54</sup>

Christine Gross of Salford Mennonite describes the cooperation as follows:

To this day, the people of Salford Mennonite and Advent Lutheran continue to forge friendships as we serve the same God, side by side, on our knees, as we cultivate our community garden. There is a deep sense of mission and calling as both congregations develop a respect and love for each other and our common neighbors. When people from both faith communities gather to serve and worship together, we are truly one in Jesus Christ. Each Thanksgiving Eve, the congregations join together for a joint service of gratefulness to

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<sup>53</sup> See also, “Mennonites Support Lutheran Efforts in Horn of Africa,” in *Anglican Journal* (July 16, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> See also Mark A. Staples, “Lutherans & Mennonites Grow Together. Garden Plants Seeds of Trust,” in *The Lutheran* (April 2013), at [www.salfordmc.org/church-garden.html](http://www.salfordmc.org/church-garden.html).

God for His goodness to us. During this service, members of both congregations are encouraged to share how the Spirit has been at work among them.

## **Joint celebrations and worship services**

Since formal dialogues between Lutherans and Mennonites commenced more than thirty years ago, many local Lutheran and Mennonite groups have extended ecumenical hospitality to each other through shared worship services. The reconciliation service at the Eleventh Assembly has given the impulse for many local or regional reconciliation services and celebrations.

### **Joint celebrations: tree planting**

#### **Mennonite tree planting and a joint symposium in Wittenberg**

The *Luthergarten* (Luther Garden)—an initiative of the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation, the LWF and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany—is a living memorial to commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. On the grounds of the former fortifications, 500 trees are being planted by Lutheran churches from all over the world and their ecumenical partners. These trees are a living and vital symbol of the optimism so clearly expressed in the saying ascribed to Luther, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” The garden bears witness to the fact that the reform movement, which started 500 years ago, is still alive today and has become a global citizen. At the same time, the trees symbolize the connectivity and solidarity among the different denominations today.

At the center of the garden, trees have been planted by the LWF’s main ecumenical partners in the form of a Luther rose. The first “ecumenical” trees were “adopted” by the Anglican Communion, the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church already prior to the Eleventh Assembly. The Mennonites did not participate in this first round because it was considered to be better to wait for the “fullness of time” in the Lutheran-Mennonite process of reconciliation after the Assembly. Finally, on 1 October 2011, the time had come. Larry Miller, at the time general secretary of the MWC, planted a red maple tree in a prominent position in the Luther Garden, right next to the LWF tree. Those two adjacent trees are an impressive symbol of the extent to which relations between Lutherans and Anabaptists have changed since the



Reformation. The trees are a visible reminder to all visitors to Wittenberg that both churches have gone through a process of healing memories and that they now live and work together fully reconciled. The second tree on behalf of the German Mennonites was planted by Frieder Boller, president of the Association of Mennonite Congregations in Germany.

The Mennonite tree planting in Wittenberg was accompanied by a Lutheran-Mennonite symposium on the topic, “Healing of Memories—Reconciliation in Christ,” which celebrated the reconciliation process and discussed new possibilities of cooperation in the future. In a joint lecture, Rainer Burkart and Michael Martin—a Mennonite and a Lutheran and both key figures in the German Mennonite–Lutheran dialogue—testified to their own ecumenical learning experience and embedded their own ecumenical journey in the history of persecution, pain and, finally, rapprochement between Lutheran and Mennonites in Germany. They highlighted the key points of the German and international dialogues between the two denominations. The discussions showed that while differences between the two churches (e.g., church-state-relations, peace ethics) remain, these can be discussed today in an atmosphere of mutual friendship, appreciation and fellowship.

The day ended with a eucharistic service at the historic *Stadtkirche* in Wittenberg, where Martin Luther used to preach. The service acknowledged the divisions and the pain of the past and pointed out that by turning to the center of Scripture—Christ—a real transformation can take place on both sides. The Lord’s Supper was celebrated according to the Mennonite tradition. The Presiding Bishop of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, Dr Johannes Friedrich, preached. Meditating on John’s account of Jesus washing his disciples feet, he said,

In Stuttgart we promised each other to journey together from now on, to accept each other more deeply and to serve each other because Christ has served us. In this mindset we came together today in Wittenberg. This morning the Mennonite World Conference planted a tree in the Luther Garden. This is so much more than a symbolic act. It is a sign that we are deeply committed to strengthen the ties between us and to make sure that our good intentions will be far more than just nice words. Rather, they have to be followed by deeds of love, because symbols can only unfold their power when they are grounded in reality. Otherwise symbolic actions would be utterly superfluous. Yet, we are convinced of their power and therefore it was a strong sign that Dania Ndlovu presented the president of the LWF last year with a bucket and a towel and reminded us of how Jesus washed the feet of his disciples before his passion.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Special thanks to OKR Dr Oliver Schuegraf for his report on the Mennonite tree planting and symposium held in Wittenberg.

### ***The planting of corresponding trees and festive events***

Each church that adopts a tree in Wittenberg is invited to plant a corresponding tree in a place of significance to them.

In light of the commitment to plant a tree on Mennonite soil for each tree planted by a Mennonite in the Luther Garden, the MWC and the Dutch Mennonites planted a tree at the Menno-rode conference center in connection with the recent Dutch Mennonite 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Another “Mennonite tree” was planted in Germany outside the *Mennokate* (Menno’s small cottage) in Bad Oldesloe, where Menno Simmons spent the last years of his life.

Tree plantings followed elsewhere in the world. On 10 April 2012, a river birch tree with three trunks but one root system was planted outside of the Mennonite offices in Elkhart, Indiana, home of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and offices of the Mennonite Church USA. It was noted that the one root system symbolized the roots we share in God’s love and grace, while the three trunks remind us that “as we grow in relationship we maintain our own identity even as Christ is always present with us as a third partner.” The ceremony was part of a daylong event that commemorated several decades of Lutheran–Mennonite dialogue and marked the reconciliation between two communions.

### **Reconciliation service in the church St Blasii in Zella-Mehlis in Germany**

The reconciliation service at the Eleventh Assembly of the LWF included the testimony of the Anabaptist martyr, Barbara Unger, who came from Zella-Mehlis in Germany. As a young mother of four she chose to be baptized in 1529. This was her “yes” to following Jesus and her “yes” to living with brothers and sisters in visible community, a community that wanted to incarnate the Body of Christ and where daily life demonstrated the practical effects of justice, non-violence and love of the neighbor. Barbara Unger was executed, with others, in Reinhardsbrunn, Thuringia, on 18 January 1530, barely eighteen months after her baptism. A further five Christians from Zella–Mehlis were executed together with Barbara Unger: Andreas and Katherina Kolb, Katharina König, Christoph Ortlep and Elsa Kuntz.

Almost 500 years later, on 18 March 2012, a joint Lutheran–Mennonite reconciliation service, inspired by the “Mennonite Action” in Stuttgart, was celebrated in the church St Blasii in Zella-Mehlis together with representatives of the Mennonite congregation in Bad Königshofen in the neighboring Bavaria. The Mennonites were happy to accept the

invitation, noting that although the way from Northern Bavaria to Thuringia is not a long one in terms of miles, it was a long one in terms of church history—leading through a barely known landscape, accompanied by ignorance and suspicion.<sup>56</sup>

The commemoration of local Anabaptist martyrs helped to bring the Lutheran-Mennonite reconciliation process closer to the local Lutheran congregation. On the one hand, it helped to shed some light on the dark sides of the Reformation that had been largely forgotten by Lutherans. Days before the actual reconciliation service, a public seminar had been held at the congregation that provided some historical background to the persecution of the Anabaptists by the Lutheran authorities.

On the other hand, the service of reconciliation and the Anabaptist witness opened the way to many more questions and reflections with regard to the situation today. In the words of Frieder Boller from the Association of Mennonite Assemblies in Germany:

The witness of Anabaptist and other martyrs challenges us today—in our post-Christian or non-Christian societies—to live as the Body of Christ. They point us to Jesus. He exhorts and encourages us to live in the community of God's shalom, to speak prophetically in this world, to be non-violent in our actions, to serve others and to bring about reconciliation.

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<sup>56</sup> See also: Hannelore Frank, *Demütig das Schweigen brechen*, 26. 03. 2012, in *Glaube+Heimat. Mitteldeutsche Kirchenzeitung*, [www.glaube-und-heimat.de/2012/03/26/demutig-das-schweigen-brechen/](http://www.glaube-und-heimat.de/2012/03/26/demutig-das-schweigen-brechen/); VELKD, *Heilung der Erinnerungen—Versöhnung in Christus. Lutheraner und Mennoniten auf dem Weg der Versöhnung*, Texte aus der VELKD, Nr. 163 (May 2012).



# Conclusion

## **Taking care that our actions may bear fruit**

The actions taken in 2010—both by the LWF and the MWC in response—elicited great joy in perceiving the Spirit of God to be at work toward reconciliation. The work of this Task Force has been to respond to the commitments made at that moment, providing both resources and examples for moving forward, in the conviction that this work of the Spirit has not finished with our churches.

## **On teaching the Lutheran confessions**

This report has provided three kinds of resources for interpreting the Augsburg Confession. There is both detailed examination of problematic texts from this document and an interpretative framework to see the living authority of the confessions of the Lutheran churches as strengthened—not only not undermined but actually made stronger for our time—by interpreting them in the light of repentance and reconciliation with the Mennonite/Anabaptist tradition. These resources can help, especially in teaching the confessions. Therefore, this report will be distributed not only to member churches but also to networks of theologians and theological institutions.

In addition there is the matter of how the Augsburg Confession is presented in its published and online forms. Already before 2010, the Hymnal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, Germany, had printed with the Augsburg Confession an annotation which concludes: “The doctrinal conversations between the different churches, which continue to this day, have resulted in a situation where these condemnations no longer reflect the current status of relations among churches and faith communities.” (See Appendix II.) Other churches might consider such a clarifying note, which could make explicit reference to the action of the Eleventh Assembly in notes to texts of the confessions that they make available online or in other ways.

## **On exploring unresolved issues**

The Study Commission producing *Healing Memories: Reconciled in Christ* identified two principal issues requiring theological reflection. Baptism had

obvious urgency in the lives of local communities, and so it was made the focus of the innovative three-way dialogue concerning baptism, which brings together not only Mennonites and Lutherans but also Roman Catholics.

This report contains a brief conversation between a Mennonite and a Lutheran on a particular aspect of the relationship of Christians and the church to civil power. While lacking the breadth and authority of a dialogue convened by international bodies, this conversation illustrates the possibilities for respectful engagement and honest, mutual admonition in the context of warm relationships. Conversations in different contexts would undoubtedly identify the common challenges in different ways. What would such an encounter look like, for example, between people living in contexts of religious oppression? What challenge and encouragement could they offer to one another?

### **On deepening relationships through common prayer and Bible study, shared humanitarian engagement, and common work for peace**

This report contains a number of examples to encourage such engagement at all levels in our communities. Since 2010, the hurting world's need for such shared work has become ever more pressing, demanding both a humanitarian response and all other dimensions of peacemaking. Sadly, working toward maintaining the freedom of religion and conscience in political orders and societies has become an increasingly urgent task and the Task Force seeks to remind our churches of their commitment to this dimension of reconciliation.

### **From 2010 to 2017 and beyond**

Events preceding the Mennonite Action of the 2010 LWF Assembly began with the celebration of the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. This led to the discovery of unhealed wounds in the relations of Lutherans to their Mennonite-Anabaptist sisters and brothers. Finding ways forward demanded resources from all aspects of life: from relationships forged in collaborative work, through rigorous historical and theological inquiry, worship and prayer. In the repentance offered and forgiveness extended, Lutherans and Mennonites acted from the heart of their Christian faith.

Now a cluster of anniversaries present themselves. In 2017 Lutherans will commemorate the beginnings of their movement of reformation—to be followed by a host of 500<sup>th</sup> anniversaries for all Christian families shaped

by the sixteenth century, including the Mennonites who celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2025. While the member churches of the LWF had addressed difficult and sinful aspects of their heritage before, notably in relation to anti-Jewish elements in their tradition, the experience of the Eleventh Assembly had a distinctive power in the clarity of the act of repentance and the immediacy of the Mennonite/Anabaptist response. Such an action proved an invaluable preparation for the spirit in which 2017 has been anticipated. Repentance for the shortcomings and even sinfulness of the sixteenth-century legacies do not compete with celebrating the power of “liberation by God’s grace”; rather, they emphasize that very grace and unleash that liberation.

Anniversaries point both to the past and to the future. They present opportunities for assessing one’s relation to the past. They also are occasions for new beginnings. In the relationship between Lutherans and Mennonites/Anabaptists both these aspects have been evident. Hard, even painful, work of re-evaluating the past has opened the way for new relationships. Trees of hope have been planted. Now is the time to take care that the fruits continue to be nurtured and harvested.





# Appendix I

## **Service of repentance at the LWF Eleventh Assembly in Stuttgart, 22 July 2010**

### **Martyr Ballad and Testimonies, English**

The Martyr Ballad will be sung in German; testimonies will be given in English, German and Spanish.

#### ***Anabaptist Martyr Ballad: Als Christus mit sein wahren Lehr***

1. On gathering his little flock around him,  
Christ said: "Carry the cross patiently, every day.
2. Loving followers, be of good courage at all times.  
Love nothing on earth more than me and follow my teachings.  
  
[3. The world will persecute, mock, and despise you.  
It will doggedly pursue you, and call you Satan possessed.]
4. When you are disparaged and scorned, and because of me persecuted  
and beaten,  
Rejoice, for your reward is awaiting you before God's throne.
5. Look at me; I am the Son of God.  
At all times I did what was right, and yet they killed me.
6. They said I had an evil spirit and called me a deceiver of people.  
The world resisted my message of truth, and it will resist you too.
7. But do not fear those that can only kill the body.  
Rather, fear the faithful God, who has condemned them.  
  
[8. God tests you like gold, lovingly because you are his children.  
And if you abide by God's teachings I will never forsake you.]

9. For I am yours and you are mine. So where I am, you will also be.  
And whoever molests you also violates me. Woe to them on Judgment Day!  
  
[10. Your misery, terror, fear, need and pain will be your great joy on that day!  
Your shame will turn into glorious praise and honor before the heavenly host.]
11. The Apostles accepted this and taught it to everyone,  
so that whoever wants to follow the Lord Jesus, should be prepared for this.
12. Christ, help your people to follow you faithfully,  
so that through Your bitter, painful death, we are saved from all distress.
13. Praise be to you O God, on Your throne and also to your beloved Son  
and the Holy Spirit,  
who will yet call many to His Kingdom.

*Words by Michael Sattler († 1527), Translation by Galen A. Peters and John R. Peters*

## **A. Testimonies: the costs of persecution and its legacies<sup>57</sup>**

### **Testimony 1: Frieder Boller, Chair, Association of Mennonite Assemblies in Germany**

Barbara Unger was a young mother of four children. With others, she chose to be baptized in 1529. That was her YES to following Jesus and her YES to living with brothers and sisters in visible community. They wanted to be a community incarnating the Body of Christ – where daily life demonstrated the practical effects of justice, non-violence and love of their neighbor.

She and the others who were baptized were prepared for what might come.

“Anyone who wants to be a proper Christian must leave behind all they possess and suffer persecution until death” they were warned.

No, martyrdom was neither sought nor glorified at the time. It was only lived and accepted as the unavoidable consequence of their witness. That was rooted in the confidence: “What can separate us from the love of Christ...” (Rom 8:35)

Barbara Unger was executed, with others, in Reinhardsbrunn, Thuringia, on 18 January 1530, barely 18 months after her baptism.

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<sup>57</sup> Op. cit. (note 1), 51ff.

There is plenty of documentation that those persecuted had already forgiven their tormentors. They did so in the spirit of the Lord's Prayer and that Jesus had prayed, "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing".

And yet the blood witnesses in those times also remind us of Jesus's words: "Look, I send you out like sheep among wolves." (Mt 10:16)

Today we see ourselves seriously confronted with the awkward question, What would I be ready to die for?

What are we willing to give up—for heaven's sake? What do we live and work for to the last?

The witness of Anabaptist and other martyrs challenges us today—in our post-Christian or non-Christian societies—to live as the Body of Christ. They point us to Jesus.

He exhorts and encourages us to live in the community of God's shalom, to speak prophetically in this world, to be non-violent in our actions, to serve others and to bring about reconciliation.

And not least to invite others to join us and accompany them as we follow Jesus together.

*Hymn 63: Senzenina – What have we done? (in Xhosa)*

## **Testimony 2: Theodor Dieter, Director, Institute for Ecumenical Research Strasbourg, and co-secretary of the Lutheran–Mennonite International Study Commission**

Lutherans today recognize and deeply regret that Luther and Melancthon theologically supported the persecution and even execution of Anabaptists—against their own earlier insight that conflicts of true and false doctrine had to be overcome by the word of God, not by the sword. Lutheran reformers accused Anabaptists of being seditious since they denied that Christians could hold an office of temporal authority, even though most of the Anabaptists strictly refused to use violence. Moreover, Lutheran reformers regarded the Anabaptist understanding of baptism, especially their refusal to baptize infants, as blasphemy, which had to be punished by capital punishment according to the 1000-year-old law of the Roman Empire. For this Lutherans appealed to the Mosaic Law, even though Martin Luther had formerly declared a direct appeal to the Old Testament to be theologically illegitimate. The reformers did not have a precise and differentiated perception of Anabaptists; nevertheless, they drew sharp consequences from their limited understanding of the movement. In defending the gospel, the reformers in this case chose strategies that contradicted this very gospel. Therefore Lutherans who continue to adhere to the foundational insights of Lutheran Reformation fittingly ask Mennonites

for forgiveness for the Reformers' misperception, misjudgment and misrepresentation of the Anabaptists and all the harm that originated from them.

*Hymn: Senzenina – What have we done? (in Xhosa)*

### **Testimony 3: Larry Miller, General Secretary, Mennonite World Conference, and co-secretary of the Lutheran–Mennonite International Study Commission**

From the beginning of the movement, as you have heard, Anabaptists interpreted their persecution as a confirmation of faithful Christian discipleship. Over the centuries and around the world, stories of faithful suffering became a vital shaper of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity.

In 1660 a Dutch Mennonite pastor compiled these accounts into this influential book, the *Martyrs Mirror*. Second only to Christ as example here is Dirk Willems. Imprisoned for his beliefs, Willems escaped and fled across an icy pond. A soldier chasing him fell through the ice and called out for help. Willems returned to rescue his drowning pursuer. His compassion allowed his recapture, and he was executed.

Yet even as we actively treasure these memories as models, we acknowledge that such remembering, through the centuries and into the present, has come with a price. In our conversations with you and others we have come to see the costs more clearly.

At times, our versions of martyr stories have reduced complex history to simple morality tales of good and evil, in which historical actors are either Christ-like or violent.

At times, we have remembered Lutheran reformers primarily for their arguments and actions against Anabaptists, thereby minimizing the broader theological contributions of these reformers to the Christian church and, indeed, to our own movement.

At times, we have claimed the martyr tradition as a badge of Christian superiority. We sometimes nurtured an identity rooted in victimization that could foster a sense of self-righteousness and arrogance, blinding us to the frailties and failures that are also deeply woven into our tradition.

We too are communities in need of healing and forgiveness. In this action between us there is, for Anabaptist-Mennonites also, the promise of release and renewal.

Lord, help us to remember rightly. Lord, inspire us to speak truthfully. Lord, enable us to walk humbly.

*Hymn: Senzenina – What have we done? (in Xhosa)*

## **B. Testimonies: seeds of reconciliation and peace**

### **Testimony 1: Eduardo Martínéz, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Colombia – IELCO**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

During the Regional Latin American and Caribbean LWF Pre-assembly we met with the Mennonite Church brothers and sisters in Colombia, and while we expressed our wish to ask them for forgiveness for the religious intolerance of Lutherans in the past, I realized the meaning of this act of reconciliation between churches in the context and situation we are living in our country.

Colombians have long suffered violence, largely due to the inability of many to tolerate ideological, political or religious differences.

The act of reconciliation of two churches which recognize the importance of healing wounds of the past in order to be able to live in peace in the present gives a message of vital importance to our society. In order to advance firmly in the construction of a sustainable peace, we need to reconcile ourselves departing from the recognition of the errors we have made as society in the past and in the present.

### **Testimony 2: Michael Martin, Director, Department “Ecumenical Affairs and Church Life,” Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Bavaria, Germany**

Mennonites and Lutherans held intensive conversations from 1989 to 1992. They came closer theologically and extended a mutual invitation to the Lord’s Supper. A further outcome of the dialogue was a statement by the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Germany (VELKD) that affirmed that the doctrinal condemnations of the Reformation period against the Anabaptists are not relevant to today’s Mennonite churches. They then confessed their guilt in two joint services, and asked for forgiveness—as we are doing here today in Stuttgart for our worldwide communion.

It was clear at the time that we could not simply alter the historical text of the Augsburg Confession of 1530. But the point was to state that the condemnations contained in the Augsburg Confession do not apply to today’s partners in dialogue.

This affected the inclusion of the Augsburg Confession when we were re-editing the hymnal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria. The introduction to it now reads: “Thanks to the doctrinal dialogues held between the different churches up until the present, the condemnations no longer reflect the current state of relations among the churches and faith communities.”

We do not intend to play down the historical wrongdoing. However, this interpretative comment on our *Augsburg Confession* is meant to reflect the change in relations between our churches. In face of the suffering of the past, we can now go our way together in reconciliation—praising God and testifying to God’s good message of peace, hope and love.

**Testimony 3: Susan C. Johnson, National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and Janet Plenert, Executive Secretary (Witness), Mennonite Church Canada, and Vice President of the Mennonite World Conference Executive Committee**

Janet:

When I heard Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko speak in front of 7000 Mennonites at our global Assembly in Paraguay last summer, I knew this would be an important agenda for both our churches in the coming years.

Last year a \$3000 surplus in a small rural Canadian Mennonite congregation resulted in an invitation to the local Lutheran congregation to plant a field of grain together. The project grew, and received matching funding, and 130,000 Canadian dollars were donated collaboratively to help the hungry in the world, to share daily bread.

Susan:

Our churches have worked together for many years through ecumenical forums in the areas of advocacy for peace and justice and in relief and development. Now we feel a call to deepen this relationship.

In anticipation of this day, we have begun joint work on a congregational resource to be used by both our church families. This will help us learn about our shared history and this apology, and most importantly, begin to forge new ways of collaboration as a reconciled part of the body of Christ.

Janet:

In Canada, we will host a series of regional events for joint study and worship. The first will be hosted by Conrad Grebel University and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary this November.

God is giving us a new heart and a new spirit.

Susan:

We are confident that we will be blessed, and we pray that we may be a blessing to others.

Thanks be to God!

# Appendix II

As Lutherans begin to read the Augsburg Confession in light of the Mennonite Action taken in 2010 at the Eleventh Assembly of the LWF in Stuttgart, Germany, it may be helpful to provide additional aids for such study. Each church within the LWF communion of churches will need to determine how best to do this. The suggestions that follow are not meant to obscure the chief intent of the original drafters or signers of the Augsburg Confession or to undermine its authority, but simply to help today's readers with their continued reflection, given the events that took place in Stuttgart. For further study, see the articles in this booklet and, in even more detail, *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ: Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission*.<sup>58</sup>

## Introduction to the Augsburg Confession<sup>59</sup>

The Augsburg Diet, convened by Emperor Charles V in 1530, was to bring about a resolution to the increasingly pressing religious issues; a division within the Church seemed well-nigh inevitable. At other diets held during the preceding years, the different theological positions had already become clear (cf. the Speyer protestation of 1529). The object had been to highlight diverging understandings on specific points of practical belief but, in the end, a comprehensive exposition of the faith was presented at the Diet of Augsburg. In a first section, this contains the chief tenets of doctrine and, in a second section, statements regarding the abolition among the Protestants of particular ecclesial practices.

Originally, by setting out the articles of the Augsburg Confession for the purpose of clarification, the reformers sought to reestablish common ground with the Catholic Church. In terms of its intention it is, therefore, an ecumenical confession. In point of fact, however, it became, in the course of events, the core creedal document of the Lutheran family of Protestant churches, and was not able to prevent schism.

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<sup>58</sup> *Healing Memories*, op. cit. (note 3).

<sup>59</sup> *Evangelisches Gesangbuch. Ausgabe für die Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirchen in Bayern und Thüringen* (Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Bayern; Evangelischer Presseverband für Bayern e.V), 1564–65.

The Augsburg Confession was drawn up by Philipp Melanchthon, in Latin and German. The two versions differ in a number of places; the German version is no verbatim translation of the Latin. Yet, they both express, each in its own way, the core elements of Protestant conviction as it had been formed by 1530. Later, Melanchthon's "Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 1537" was also included into the *Book of Concord*. A group of Protestant princes and imperial cities signed the *Confessio Augustana* (CA), which was presented to the Emperor on the occasion of the Diet. The Preface explicitly states the signatories' willingness to discuss the issues at stake and the Conclusion reiterates the confession's conformity with Scripture and with the creed of the early church.

The doctrinal condemnations found in the Augsburg Confession are rooted in the sixteenth century. Today, for the most part, they do not apply to the doctrines of the churches to which they refer. The doctrinal conversations between the different churches, which continue to this day, have resulted in a situation where these condemnations no longer reflect the current status of relations among churches and faith communities.

## Notes on the Augsburg Confession in light of the commitments made by the LWF at its Eleventh Assembly in Stuttgart 2010<sup>60</sup>

Text<sup>61</sup> (CA V, German): To obtain such faith, God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe. Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works.

**Comment:**<sup>62</sup> Throughout the Augsburg Confession, the term "Anabaptist" or, literally in the German, "Rebaptizer," refers to those contemporaries of Martin Luther who rejected infant baptism in favor of an adult, "believers' baptism." Most Anabaptists, however, adhered to the authority of the "external word of

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<sup>60</sup> Text by Timothy Wengert.

<sup>61</sup> All texts are from the "Augsburg Confession," in *BC*, op. cit. (note 19), 40–43, 45, 48–49. Unless there are substantial differences between the German and Latin texts, only the German will be used.

<sup>62</sup> A modification of the No. 48, in *ibid.*, 40.



the gospel,” as did Lutherans. Lutheran reformers did not distinguish clearly between Anabaptists and spiritualists, such as Sebastian Franck and Caspar Schwenckfeld, who in fact taught that one could receive the Holy Spirit without means. Thus, this article did not then apply to Anabaptists, strictly defined, and does not now apply to their heirs in the faith. Like several other condemnations of Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession, this one was as much designed to criticize the Lutherans’ opponents in Augsburg (“and others”) and to deflect their criticisms and misunderstandings of Lutheran positions as to condemn Anabaptists.

Text (CA IX, German): Concerning baptism it is taught that it is necessary, that grace is offered through it, and that one should also baptize children, who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him. Rejected, therefore, are the Anabaptists who teach that the baptism of children is not right.

Text (CA IX, Latin): Concerning baptism they [the Evangelical preachers] teach that it is necessary for salvation, that the grace of God is offered through baptism, and that children should be baptized. They are received into the grace of God when they are offered to God through baptism. They condemn the Anabaptists who disapprove of the baptism of children and assert that children are saved without baptism.

**Comment:** The German text accurately describes the continuing divide between the theological heirs of the Anabaptists and Lutherans. There have been some shifts in practice, so that some congregations that trace their roots to the Anabaptists no longer require believers’ baptism of new members who were baptized as children, but allow each individual to decide the validity of that action for themselves. While Lutherans have always accepted valid baptism of any person, regardless of age, a few Lutheran congregations now encourage delaying baptism where they fear that infant baptism has become more a social convention than a means of grace. The Mennonite Action in Stuttgart rejects condemnation in the Augsburg Confession of a specific group (“they condemn *the Anabaptists*”) and shifts these divisive matters to continuing ecumenical conversations over the nature of baptism itself. The question that is being explored is thus whether baptisms are chiefly signs of commitment to a Christian community and lifestyle or also “signs and testimonies of God’s will toward us, in order thereby to awaken and strengthen our faith.”<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the Stuttgart action rejects and repents of any persecution of other Christians on the basis of such differences in theology and practice.

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<sup>63</sup> CA XIII.1 (German), in *ibid.*, 46.

Text (CA XII, Latin): Concerning repentance they [the Evangelical preachers] teach that those who have fallen after baptism can receive forgiveness of sins whenever they are brought to repentance and that the church should impart absolution to those who return to repentance. Now, properly speaking, repentance consists of two parts: one is contrition or the terrors that strike the conscience when sin is recognized; the other is faith, which is brought to life by the gospel or absolution. This faith believes that sins are forgiven on account of Christ, consoles the consciences, and liberates it from terrors. Thereupon, good works, which are the fruit of repentance, should follow. They condemn both the Anabaptists, who deny that those who have once been justified can lose the Holy Spirit, and also those who contend that some may attain perfection in this life that they cannot sin.

**Comment:** Although the Lutheran reformers were familiar to some extent with the teachings of the Anabaptist Hans Denck (along with the spiritualist, Caspar Schwenckfeld), this by no means accurately characterizes the position of the vast majority of Anabaptists then or their heirs now, all of whom acknowledge that people indeed can fall away from God's grace after baptism.

Text (CA XVI, German): Concerning public order and secular government it is taught that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God and that Christians may without sin exercise political authority; be princes and judges, pass sentences and administer justice according to imperial and other existing laws; punish evildoers with the sword; wage just wars; serve as soldiers; buy and sell; take required oaths; possess property; be married, etc. Condemned here are the Anabaptists who teach that none of the things indicated above is Christian.

**Comment:** Even when it was first composed, the condemnation of Anabaptists in the German version was far too broad. The Latin reads, "They [the Evangelical teachers] condemn the Anabaptists who prohibit Christians from assuming such civil responsibilities." Most Anabaptists and their heirs teach that the order in the world, which may include things like peaceful relations among peoples, buying and selling, marriage and the like, is a gift of God for use in this world by Christians and non-Christians alike.<sup>64</sup> The question of Christian involvement directly in government and for promoting human rights and the rights of citizens, and in the coercion that such involvement implies, however, remains a matter of disagreement

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<sup>64</sup> Groups like the Hutterites, however, did practice a community of goods and services and thus rejected certain forms of individual property.

between Lutherans and the heirs of the Anabaptists. CA XXVII.55 indirectly criticizes the Anabaptist position stating, “Still others think that revenge is not right for Christians at all, even on the part of political authority.”<sup>65</sup> During the early stages in their history, many (though not all) Lutheran theologians used this involvement in government by Christians to justify the persecution of Anabaptists on religious grounds. When in 2010 LWF formally asked the MWC for forgiveness it rejected these actions and the theological arguments that supported them once and for all.

Text (CA XVII, German): It is also taught that our Lord Jesus Christ will return on the Last Day to judge, to raise all the dead, to give eternal life and eternal joy to those who believe and are elect, but to condemn the ungodly and the devils to hell and eternal punishment. Rejected, therefore, are the Anabaptists who teach that the devils and condemned human beings will not suffer eternal torture and torment.

A few Anabaptist teachers, including Hans Denck and Melchior Rinck, taught that everyone would be saved in the end.<sup>66</sup> However, this condemnation did not accurately characterize most Anabaptists of that time and does not correspond to the teaching of the heirs of the Anabaptists today.

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<sup>65</sup> *BC*, op. cit. (note 19), 90.

<sup>66</sup> See *BC*, 50 (note 19), 92. The Lutherans associated the Anabaptist view with the teaching of the third-century theologian, Origen of Alexandria, whose position was later condemned by the ancient church.



# Appendix III

A letter sent by the Mennonite World Conference to Mennonite colleges, universities, seminaries, information centers, and local/regional historical societies

January 6, 2014

To: Mennonite colleges, universities, seminaries, information centers, and local/regional historical societies.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Greetings in the name of the Prince of Peace – the Savior of the world who makes all things new and gives us new beginnings through his ministry of reconciliation.

In this season of new beginnings, as we recall the journey that the wise men from the East took to Jerusalem, I want to call your attention to another journey that the Mennonite World Conference has been traveling toward reconciliation and hope.

As you know, the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition was born nearly five centuries ago in the context of a painful church division – a division that included mutual condemnations and, in the case of many Anabaptists, the reality of imprisonment, torture and even execution. Even though our churches today have moved beyond these violent ways of relating to each other, memories of those conflicts have persisted in various forms. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession of Faith, for example, continues to “condemn” the Anabaptists; and some Anabaptist-Mennonites have kept alive a strong identity of themselves as a persecuted people.

In 2002—building on the work of earlier dialogues in France, Germany, and the United States—the Lutheran World Federation and Mennonite World Conference agreed to form an International Study Commission to review the theological differences that separated us in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and to explore possible paths toward reconciliation.

The Study Commission concluded that on several points—specifically our understandings of baptism, pacifism, and the Christian view of the state—important differences between our two churches still remain.

But the Study Commission also made remarkable progress in a journey towards reconciliation. At the heart of their work was an effort to retell

the history of our beginnings—as Lutherans and Anabaptists—in such a way that both sides could affirm. That commitment to “right remembering” resulted in a new account of the sixteenth-century Reformation called *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*.

At a worship service of reconciliation, held on July 22, 2010 as part of the LWF Eleventh Assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, representatives of the LWF formally asked for forgiveness for the violence against the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century and “for forgetting or ignoring this persecution in the intervening centuries . . .” Representatives of MWC responded by offering forgiveness and acknowledging our own role in perpetuating memories of hostility.

In response to the Lutheran action, MWC also made the following commitments:

We commit ourselves to promote interpretations of the Lutheran-Anabaptist story which take seriously the jointly described history found in the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission report;

We commit ourselves to take care that your initiative for reconciliation is known and honored in Anabaptist-Mennonite teaching about Lutherans.

We commit ourselves to continue with you in deliberation on the unresolved issues between our two traditions, in a spirit of mutual vulnerability and openness to the movement of the Spirit;

We commit ourselves to encourage our member churches, their local congregations, and their institutions to seek fuller relations and greater cooperation with Lutherans in service to the world.

Which brings us to the heart of our letter to you today.

As educators and historians, you play a crucial role in shaping the faith and identity of our global Anabaptist-Mennonite church. As you reflect on the ways in which you tell the story of Anabaptist history and relate to Lutherans in your setting today, we want to encourage you to take seriously this new reality in our relationship with the Lutheran church.

Here are four specific ways that you can do so:

**Take time to read and to share with your faculty/colleagues the document *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*.** The document is easily available in English, Spanish and French on the MWC Faith and Life Commission website at: [www.mwc-cmm.org/article/interchurch-dialogue](http://www.mwc-cmm.org/article/interchurch-dialogue)

**Actively review the way in which you are currently representing Lutherans** or the story of Anabaptist beginnings in your teaching. Might there be some things that you need to revise in light of these new understandings and commitments?

**Integrate this story of Mennonite-Lutheran reconciliation in your teaching.** In some ways, our history took a new turn in July, 2010 ... and this needs to become part of how we tell our story. (For a much fuller account of the reconciliation service—including the LWF Action and the Mennonite response—see: [www.lwf-assembly.org/experience/mennonite-action/](http://www.lwf-assembly.org/experience/mennonite-action/))

**Consider inviting representatives of a local Lutheran church or school for public conversations about *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*.** Use this material as an opportunity for building bridges with the broader Christian church. One very helpful resource to assist in these conversations can be found at: [www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/four-session\\_StudyGuide2010.pdf](http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/four-session_StudyGuide2010.pdf)

Thank you for your significant ministry within the larger Anabaptist-Mennonite community of churches, and the global body of Christ. And thank you for giving these suggestions your careful consideration in this New Year!

Blessings to you during this season of Epiphany,

Cesar Garcia

Alfred Neufeld

John Roth





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