Anabaptism at 500:
Looking Back and Looking Forward Through an Ecumenical Lens

A Joint Message from Members of the Anglican-Mennonite Dialogue in Canada

In 2017, the ecclesial world was taken up into a complicated process of trying to appropriately mark the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's publication of the 95 Theses and the symbolic beginning of the Lutheran Reformation in central Europe. On the one hand, many Christians look to this moment in Church history as a time of significant renewal – a movement of the Holy Spirit leading to recovery of the heart of the Gospel in the face of forces that had allowed it to become distorted or obscured. On the other, it also led to a major rupture in the bonds of unity between Christians, and kicked off waves of suspicion, hostility, and violence that still reverberate even today. If fodder for polemical fights are what we are looking for, there is ample ammunition that can be thrown at one side or the other. But what about for those who are seeking to view the past through an ecumenical lens? Is the Lutheran Reformation an event to celebrate? A thing to lament? Or something somewhere in between? In the end, 'commemoration' was the terminology that rose to the fore, which feels about right.

The year 2025 provides us with another quincentennial occasion to ask these kinds of hard questions, this time in connection with start of the so-called Anabaptist Reformation beginning in 1525 in Switzerland. In this case, figures such as Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and others, took issue with perceived inconsistencies in the policies of another reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, over the extent to which the civil authorities should be allowed to be involved in determining matters of theology and Church practice. The action to publicly (re)baptize themselves and their followers as adult believers against the decree of the Canton of Zurich against this serves as another symbolic point in Church history. The various Christian communities which have derived particular inspiration from the Anabaptist movement since that time – Amish, Hutterites, Mennonites, Church of the Brethren, etc. – have continued to express this unique charism of fidelity to Jesus as they have come to be planted in new contexts all over the world. And yet, while some have interpreted these events as examples of great conviction and courage in the name of true faith and Gospel freedom, others have decried it as a radical choice for disorder and schism which did harm to the witness of the Church. Here too, then, the word commemoration seems most able to capture the appropriately nuanced sentiment that seems to be required.

Based on their origins and early history, the Anglican and Mennonite traditions might be understood to be as far apart from one another in their assessment of the church-state issue in the Radical Reformation as it is possible to be. For that reason, it could be assumed that an Anglican-Mennonite ecumenical dialogue would find great difficulty in being able to speak together about Anabaptism at 500. And yet, we, as members of the Anglican-Mennonite Dialogue in Canada, feel inspired, both by our love for one another, and by our desire to walk together as disciples of Jesus in our context today, to find a way to

say something meaningful about this commemoration together. We do so by drawing on the ecumenical methodology that we have chosen to follow to undergird our conversations and our work: i.e., that of Receptive Ecumenism.

For the first few decades of its existence (especially the 1940s through 80s), the modern ecumenical movement was dominated by an approach to the task which can be described as Consensus Ecumenism. From this perspective, the problem that keeps Christians apart is their distinct doctrinal differences, and the way to heal the rifts in the Church lies in achieving a satisfactory agreement on those historically controverted issues. Consensus Ecumenism, therefore, begins in the past, and takes the characteristic – perhaps even necessarily somewhat caricatured – features of divided expressions of Church as defining of the terms of the relationship at present. Paradoxically, it can even unintentionally serve to reinforce those differences by expending so much effort into defining them.

Receptive Ecumenism, by contrast, has a different starting point. Rather than looking at the historical differences and working to overcome them through a convergence of doctrinal articulations, it begins by looking at where the communities descended from these traditions find themselves now, giving thanks for the other's present gifts, and imagining how they might bring some needed balance and healing to one's own present ecclesial wounds if they were able to be shared together. The emphasis in the Receptive model is much more on what could be in the future.

Keeping this methodology in mind is instructive for those who seek to engage the 500th anniversary of the origins of Swiss Anabaptism from the perspective of an ecumenical worldview. It allows Anglicans and Mennonites to avoid getting caught up in either mythologizing or adjudicating between heroes and villains, winners and losers, right and wrong. Instead, we give can God great thanks together for the ways that the Anabaptist movement has borne unique witness and continues to serve as a special sign and instrument of God's grace, justice, and peace in the world. We can grieve together the way that our forbearers inabilities to listen to or understand one another, exacerbated by both political motivations and human weakness, led to disdain, estrangement, and even persecution between fellow disciples of Christ. And perhaps most importantly, we can ask each other honestly what we need to receive from one another now as we seek to become faithful followers of the Jesus Way together again, both today and tomorrow.

It is in this future-oriented posture which we share this joint message as Mennonites and Anglicans in dialogue in 2025. Anniversaries are a perfect opportunity for thinking not about the past but about the future; what we want to bring with us into that future, and what we must leave behind; what we hope for in the future, and how to prepare ourselves to live into it even now. As two churches with very different stories to this point, including how we came to be present in these lands we know as Canada today, we are both seeking to rediscover what we are called to at the end of the eras of Christendom and colonialism. We are seeking to learn how to be more peripheral or marginal voices alongside many others in public discourse, but also how to foster prophetic and transformative discipleship in a

complicated spiritual age. There is no doubt that we have much to learn from one another, and that we will need each other greatly in whatever lies ahead in the next 500 years.

Anglican Church of Canada

Elin Goulden (Co-Chair)
Vincent Solomon (ACIP Member)
Chris Bishopp (ELCIC Member)
Charlie Scromeda
Bram Pearce
Ryan Turnbull
Scott Sharman (Staff)

Mennonite Church Canada

Sarah Kathleen Johnson (Co-Chair)
Irma Fast Dueck
Michael Pahl
Neill von Gunten
Edith von Gunten
Caleb Kowalko
Doug Klassen (Staff)