

Anabaptists commemorate 500 years with study Bible

January 22, 2025

(RNS)—Anabaptists around the world are commemorating 500 years since their founders performed the first adult baptisms outside Zürich and kicked off the Radical Reformation.

The Anabaptist tradition included Mennonites, Amish, Church of the Brethren, Hutterites and other small Christian groups—and significantly influenced Baptists.

The Anabaptist movement has long been defined by its belief in the separation of the church from the state, that it should be a voluntary decision to join the church and, for many, a commitment to nonviolence.

In North America, the top event is the Jan. 21 release of a new study Bible that incorporates the insight of almost 600 lay groups, but throughout the coming months, Anabaptists around the world will commemorate the anniversary with worship services, music, lectures and more.

Those events will culminate on May 29 with a daylong event hosted by the Mennonite World Conference in Zürich, which will feature workshops, concerts, a panel discussion, historical walking tours and an ecumenical worship service.

That event reflects the movement's history in the area. In January 1525, a group of young people, some of whom later became the movement's first martyrs, met in the home of Anna Manz to baptize each other in defiance of the local government.

Originally a negative label applied by outsiders, Anabaptist meant

“rebaptizer,” as the group rejected the infant baptisms of other traditions.

Confessional and ecumenical commemoration



John Roth

John Roth, a professor emeritus of history at Goshen College who is also coordinating global and North American 500th anniversary events, told RNS the 450th anniversary was “a little bit simplistic” in its focus on a few key individuals and Zürich.

In contrast, Roth said, this commemoration would be “much more nuanced, much more, I would say, humble, less nostalgic, more confessional and more ecumenical in its approach.”

In Costa Rica, members of all 25 churches will be celebrating a special worship service the weekend after the anniversary, with cultural performances and a presentation of Mennonite history in Costa Rica, as well as global Anabaptist history.

Cindy Alpízar Alpízar, pastor of Jesucristo es el Señor (“Jesus Christ is the

Lord”) Church in Heredia, Costa Rica, who recently taught a course on Anabaptist history for pastors, said, “We are pointing out that radical following of Jesus, no matter what it costs.”

“To be pacifists is not only nonviolence and abstaining from violence, but instead to work for peace and above all the centrality of Jesus,” Alpízar said.

Churches throughout the United States will be marking the anniversary with their own events over the next months, including sermon series, hymn sings and historical presentations.

Bluffton University in Ohio will hold an extensive calendar of events through the spring including a film festival, various guest lectures, a Bible school, a theater performance, an exhibit of historic Anabaptist Bibles and two concerts.

Roth explained that, in a moment when “there are so many reasons not to hope for the future,” the Anabaptist tradition is “ready to let go of effectiveness,” believing in doing the right thing as “God’s world is moving toward a meaningful conclusion.”

Study Bible designed to be read in community

Many North American Anabaptists began remembering the 500th anniversary in late 2022 and early 2023 by participating in one of the 597 Bible study groups for the Anabaptist Community Bible.

In 18 different Anabaptist faith groups, six to 10 people met to discuss a passage from the Old Testament, the New Testament and part of a Psalm, using a study guide that was available in English, German, Spanish, French, Amharic and Bahasa Indonesian.

The new study Bible features those reflections, in addition to insights from Bible scholars, as well as historians highlighting 16th-century Anabaptist writing.

“Central to our understanding of how the Bible should be read is that it’s read in community,” said Roth, project director of MennoMedia’s Anabaptism at 500 project. The project also will be releasing two devotionals, a photo storybook and three children’s books over the coming months, all products of a process that began in 2020.

MennoMedia is the publishing company of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA, but the company’s new Bible also incorporates study groups from more conservative Anabaptist communities, including Old Order Amish, LMC, Evana and the Mennonite Brethren, Roth told the *Christian Century*.

In order to be accessible to a wide variety of communities, including immigrant Anabaptist congregations, the Anabaptist Community Bible uses the Common English Bible translation. The study Bible also features 40 art pieces in linocut or woodcut styles.

The Anabaptist Community Bible was scheduled to be released at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind., a hub for Mennonite life in the Midwest, with a worship service and fellowship time including the opportunity to take photos with a cutout of Menno Simons, a key 16th-century Anabaptist leader, holding the Anabaptist Community Bible.

Over the weekend, Alpízar kicked off a 90-hour livestream Bible read-a-thon featuring readers from 42 countries and many different languages. She also contributed a chapter to a devotional on the woman at the well.

“The word (of God) has a fundamental role in our congregations,” Alpízar, who takes a variety of national and regional leadership roles in the Costa Rican church, said of the importance of celebrating the anniversary with

the read-a-thon. She emphasized that reading in many languages “speaks to the gospel, that it is without borders.”

Study process encourages questions

Multiple leaders praised the Bible study process that was used in the groups, which asked readers to reflect on what the passage taught them about God, about human beings, what Jesus might have to say about the passage, how they might live differently based on the passage and what questions the passage inspired.



Gerald Mast

Gerald Mast, a professor of communication at Bluffton University, said the students in his religious communication class were very enthusiastic about their experiences participating in the study group.

“Those are interesting questions,” Mast said. “And they are questions that are not about closing down the conversation the way that I think the Bible is often used in some Christian circles.”

Mast said the space to grapple with the text “got a lot of people interested in my congregation in Bible study who maybe wouldn’t have otherwise

been interested in Bible study,” adding that a fellow member who’d said he wasn’t “a Bible-reading kind of guy” said he was “having a hard time putting (the Anabaptist Community Bible) down.”

“This process is something that we can keep using,” said Deron Bergstresser, part of the pastoral team at Waterford Mennonite Church in Goshen, where four groups met. “I think it’s a really clear and open-ended and really accessible way for people to read the Bible together in a group.”

Michelle Burkholder, associate pastor at Hyattsville Mennonite Church in Maryland, read the passages assigned to the congregation’s adults with youth in grades six through 12.

“One of the gifts of an Anabaptist approach to encountering Scripture is that everyone is invited into that experience, including kids and youth,” they said, explaining that the youth “asked some really hard questions of the text and of the nature of God represented in the text.”

The text is “a giant puzzle that we are all invited to join in, to grapple with, to listen deeply, to test and try on different angles and perspectives and to boldly challenge or affirm what we encounter,” Burkholder said.

Bergstresser said he was using the anniversary to reflect on the history of Anabaptist resistance to and independence from the state and to continue to encourage his congregation “to take Jesus seriously” as compassionate and as a healer.

Mast, who led the process for creating the early Anabaptist marginal notes for the Anabaptist Community Bible, said he wanted to make sure the Bible represented some of the “rich body of testimony that is now available in English after about a century of translation work and archive work.”

For Mast, the early Anabaptists’ emphasis on love has been an important theme to reflect on with this anniversary.

But he emphasized the importance of commemorating the entire 500 years of Anabaptist history, including the more recent globalization of the movement, where the largest groups are now in Africa.

“Much of the energy and newness and creativity of thinking is coming from the (Global) South,” he said.

One lesson Roth learned from the way Lutherans had celebrated their 500th anniversary was their decision after the anniversary events had begun to switch the language from “celebration” to “commemoration” after Catholics said, “We’ve had 50 years of ecumenical conversation trying to put the pieces back together, and you’re celebrating this division.”

“I’m aware that the birth of every group, which is worthy to be celebrated, is also a church division,” Roth said. “We should acknowledge that in some way, even as we identify the distinctive gifts that this tradition has brought forward.”