

Chapel Service, September 9, 2004
Eastern Mennonite Seminary and EMU Master of Arts in Counseling
Harrisonburg, VA

This Is A Day Of New Beginnings:
Windows on the 2004 Reformed/Anabaptist Day of Reconciliation

Gathering

Call to Worship: Psalm 133:1-3; Matthew 5:23-24
Opening Hymn: HWB #29: Like the Murmur of the Dove's Song
Welcome and Opening Prayer

Encountering God in the Story of Brokenness and Reconciliation

I. Setting the Stage

HWB #640: This Is a Day of New Beginnings, vv. 1, 2 (unison)
Opening Reflections on the June 26 Day of Reconciliation

II. Remembering the Past

HWB #438: I Sing with Exaltation, v. 1
Readers' Theater: The Rift: Disputation of October 1523
Readers' Theater: The Execution of Felix Manz, January 1527
Silence // HWB #438: I Sing with Exaltation, v. 4 // Silence

III. Offering Confession and Extending Forgiveness

HWB #137: Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive, vv. 1, 4 (unison)
Statement of Regret, Reformed Church of Zurich
Response, Swiss Mennonite Conference

IV. Offering Restitution and Extending Grace

HWB #366: God of Grace and God of Glory, vv. 1, 4
Inauguration of the Memorial Plaque, Reformed Church of Zurich
Response, Swiss Mennonite Conference

V. Celebrating Reconciliation

HWB #640: This Is a Day of New Beginnings, vv. 3, 4 (unison)
Stories of Reconciliation
Closing Reflections

Going Out in the Blessing of God

Closing Hymn: HWB #433: Go, My Children, vv. 1, 4
Ritual of Benediction

Worship Leader: Wendy Miller
Reflections: Dorothy Jean Weaver
Readers: Nate Yoder, Dorothy Jean Weaver
Readers' Theater: Brenda Benner, Aram DiGennaro, Hunter Hess, Nan Kanagy, Mark Schloneger
Song Leader and Pianist: Kris Shank Zehr Chanter (Voice of Felix Manz): Jonathan Bowman

I. Setting the Stage

Opening Reflections on the June 26 Day of Reconciliation

Dorothy Jean Weaver:

It was clearly an offer too good to turn down. The invitation came directly from Peter Dettwiler, the program organizer. And it arrived as a handwritten note scribbled at the bottom of the annual Christmas letter from Peter and his wife Helen:

“In 2004 on June 26th we are planning a conference in Zurich together with the Swiss [Mennonites] and the Mennonite World Conference, with the topic, ‘The [Ana]Baptists and the Reformation.’ Will you come, too, and stay with us at our home?!”

It was a tantalizing question! I knew nothing about the meeting of which Peter spoke. But Peter and Helen are long-term acquaintances and dear friends of mine, folks I have known ever since 1981-82, when I was a graduate student on a one-year fellowship in Berne, Switzerland. In those days Peter was a Reformed pastor in Thusis in Eastern Switzerland, serving his first parish. Now he works in the ecumenical office of the Reformed Church in the Canton of Zurich. And it was from this office that the formal invitation finally arrived. It didn't take me long to accept.

But even as I accepted Peter's invitation, I marveled at the ironies. This day was organized as a Day of Reconciliation between the Reformed Church in Canton Zurich (whose ancestors persecuted the early Anabaptists) and Mennonites from around the world (whose genealogical and spiritual ancestors were those same persecuted Anabaptists).

But I, a North American Mennonite, had received this invitation *not because I was just a Mennonite who might be interested, but because I was a good friend of the Swiss Reformed conference organizer, a good friend who just happened to be Mennonite!* Here the drawing card was not *reconciliation* but rather *reunion*, after long years without a visit! In fact in our 20+-year friendship Peter and Helen and I had never spent much if any time focusing on our theological differences, let alone concerning ourselves with matters of religious persecution 450 years old.

But clearly there was something significant at stake with this Zurich gathering. Well beyond the personal level there were in fact genuine reasons for this Day of Reconciliation

II. Remembering the Past

Dorothy Jean Weaver:

During the morning session of the conference we spent time looking back at the causes of division between the Swiss Reformers and the early Anabaptists

Readers Theater

Reading voices required here are: Narrator, Ulrich Zwingli, Conrad Grebel, Simon Stumpf, Reader. A singing voice will chant the Latin prayer of Felix Manz from the back of the room.

Narrator: The Swiss Brethren are credited with first baptizing adults in what became the defining mark of Anabaptism. Many of these first Swiss Brethren Anabaptists had actually been students and disciples of Ulrich Zwingli, the leading reformed preacher in the city of Zurich. These erstwhile disciples of Zwingli had become increasingly frustrated in their sense that he was compromising the very call to a radical discipleship which they had learned from him.

[Zwingli rises from his seat in the audience and moves to the podium as the narrator continues/concludes this reading]

Listen in on a debate regarding the mass or Lord's Supper held before the city council in October 1523. Zwingli presides.

Zwingli: I have heard the complaint that people are saying that the mass and the monks' orders come from the devil. In my attacks upon these institutions I have likely incited certain crude persons in our city to twist my words into such accusations. I do apologize for fueling such baser passions.

It is clear that this assembly, this church gathering here, has come to agreement that celebrating the mass as a sacrifice is indeed unscriptural. Having come to this agreement, let us proceed to our discussion of purgatory.

Grebel: *[Standing].* Master Ulrich, before we proceed, I would request that as we are gathered here, instruction be given to the priests to discontinue their saying of the mass. Let us have instruction on how to carry out the reformed Communion which we have agreed is the scriptural practice.

Zwingli: My Lords in the Council will decide how to proceed from here with the mass.

Stumpf: Master Ulrich, you have no authority to place the decision in the hands of My Lords, for the decision is already made: the Spirit of God decides!

Zwingli: That is right. I shall likewise preach and act against it if they decide otherwise. I do not place the decision in their hands. Hereafter they will deliberate as to the way in which that may be done most appropriately and without disturbance.

[Zwingli returns to his seat—the narrator continues]

Narrator: Shortly after this disputation, parents in the countryside went beyond questioning the mass to withholding their infants from baptism. Following another disputation in January 1525, the council reaffirmed infant baptism, ordered expulsion for parents who did not have their babies baptized, and prohibited independent Bible study groups. It was then that the radicals made the break by actually baptizing each other as adults. To squelch such defiance, the city council mandated the registration of baptisms, marriage in church buildings, and attendance at church services. Although further debates aimed at persuasion, coercion followed quickly: prison, fines, torture, banishment, and capital punishment.

[The reader rises from her seat in the audience and moves to the podium as the narrator concludes this reading]

It is Felix Manz who is remembered as the first of many Anabaptist martyrs.

Reader: *[Although this reader is not identified as being Manz's mother, it is intended that in the reading the audience's attention be drawn to the mother.]*

Manz was brought out of the Wellenberg prison and led to the fish market, where the death sentence was pronounced. At the butcher shop he was forced to enter a boat, in which the executioner and a pastor were standing. The pastor urged him to repent of his Anabaptist beliefs. It is reported that on this painful route he encountered his mother and his brother, who encouraged him to remain steadfast. It is said that his mother continued to shout her encouragement to her son. Then he was brought with the boat to a platform by a fisherman's hut where he was bound. And as the executioner set about his work, the story goes that Felix Manz sang with a loud voice *[Latin words chanted from the back of the room]*, 'In Manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum; *[Reader, in English]* Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit!'

Then the executioner pulled him with ropes from the platform of the fisherman's hut down into the icy water of the Limmat.

Moment of silence

[Credit to Philippe Daetwyler, Nate Yoder, and Dorothy Jean Weaver for the composite text of the Readers Theater. Text based on Anabaptist sources and an account from Heinrich Bullinger.]

III. Offering Confession and Extending Forgiveness

Dorothy Jean Weaver:

At 4:15 PM we joined together in a festive worship service. We listened to Scripture, we sang, we prayed. Larry Miller, Executive Secretary of the Mennonite World Conference, preached a beautiful sermon of reconciliation from the high pulpit. And there were statements offered . . . powerfully moving statements.

A Statement of Regret by the Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich

The Reformed Churches and the Anabaptist movement are all essentially branches on one and the same bough of the great Christian tree. Both are offspring of the Reformation. Right from the start however they went their separate ways, so that a tragic rift ran through the Zurich Reformation, painful traces of which are discernable to this day. Executions, persecution and expulsions were carried out to eliminate the Anabaptist movement. Yet it has survived and is still flourishing today. The descendants of those early Anabaptists are a living testimony to this.

The persecuted do not forget their history; the persecutors by contrast would prefer to do so. We—representatives of the Reformed State Church of the Canton of Zurich—acknowledge that our church has largely suppressed the story of the persecution of the Anabaptists.

We confess that that persecution was, according to our present conviction, a betrayal of the Gospel and that our Reformed forefathers were in error on this issue.

We affirm that the judgment against the Anabaptists in the second Helvetian Confession, which discards the teaching of the Anabaptists as unbiblical and refuses any communion with them, is no longer valid for us and that it is now our earnest desire to discover and strengthen our common ties.

We acknowledge the faithful of the Anabaptist tradition as our sisters and brothers and their churches as part of the body of Christ, whose diverse members are united through the Spirit of God.

We honor the radical approach of the Anabaptist movement to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world as a free community of committed believers putting into practice the message of the Sermon on the Mount.

It is time to accept the history of the Anabaptist movement as part of our own, to learn from the Anabaptist tradition and to strengthen our mutual testimony through dialogue.

[Statement excerpted from longer document.]

Statement of Response from the Swiss Mennonite Conference

Dear members of the Reformed Church of Zurich, our brothers and sisters in Christ

We are very touched to have been invited to prepare and live out this day with you. Already in 1925 and in 1952, other international Mennonite representatives were officially welcomed here in this place which represents a very significant moment at the beginning of our history. Though issuing from the same source in the Reformation, Anabaptism has been marked by the breaking off and rejection of the accents of a radical theology and the “following” of Christ. Persecution, in Zurich and in other places, provoked the scattering of the Anabaptists in many other countries where our way of understanding were lived out and tested in many different situations.

....

History may designate us as victims, and could cause us to find satisfaction in that. However, we here among you today, descendants of those Anabaptists persecuted in the past, no longer view ourselves as victims. We do not ask for material reparation for the past: that would seem to us to be contrary to the Spirit of the Gospel. But the fact that you recognize the difficult points of your history in relation to ours helps us to see ourselves—and to meet you—differently. We receive your confession in the spirit of forgiveness.

....

The 26th of June 2004 will remain an important step forward on the road of reconciliation. The plaque that will be unveiled today in this city of Zurich attests that actions have been taken with determination. We are deeply moved by your words and your deeds and we want to express our gratitude. Dear brothers and sisters of the Reformed Church of Zurich, may God bless you and give you his grace and his peace!

[Statement excerpted from longer document]

IV. Offering Restitution and Extending Grace

Dorothy Jean Weaver:

Just after the evening meal that we shared together we gathered on the bank of the Limmat River, roughly at the location where Felix Manz was drowned, for the unveiling of the Felix Manz Memorial Plaque. Here as well moving statements were exchanged.

**Inauguration of the Memorial Plaque to the Anabaptist Martyrs of Zurich
Statement by Ruedi Reich, President of the Reformed Church of Zurich**

Dear sisters and brothers,

We commemorate here our brothers in Christ who were cruelly tortured and executed for their faith during the Reformation. The Reformation in Zurich regarded itself as a rediscovery of the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ. For this, the members of the newly forming protestant Church were also ready to give up their lives.

We are therefore all the more ashamed and pained that the Reformed Church should have become a persecutor. In the Zurich of the Reformation, our brothers and sisters in the faith of Anabaptist convictions were persecuted, tortured and cruelly executed in a combined action by Church and State.

We acknowledge this historic sin and, from today's point of view, consider it a betrayal of the Gospel. Before God and before you, we point to this dark side of the Reformation, and we ask God and you, dear brothers and sisters of the Mennonite faith, to forgive us.

We are grateful for the fellowship with the Mennonites in the past and today. In the midst of a violent world, we wish to work together for peace, reconciliation and justice. May this reconciliation with each other give us the strength to work together commissioned by Jesus Christ as agents of reconciliation, in small things and in great ones.

For this, we ask God's blessing with all our heart.

Response by Thomas Gyger, President of the Swiss Mennonite Conference

Mr. City Councilor, dear members of the Reformed Church, our brothers and sisters in Christ

Though the persecution of the Anabaptists was an outright injustice, we realize that what first motivated the authorities in the 16th century was to maintain public order. In a society where the Church and the State were united in a single “Christianity,” we understand that when our ancestors rebaptized adults who wished to be converted, they were considered a serious threat.

By inaugurating this stone in the exact same place where Felix Manz and his friends received the baptism of blood, and by reaffirming in a lasting form that your predecessors were wrong in the way they treated these dissidents, you are again acting in order to re-establish justice. Your predecessors acted by necessity; you, however, act freely, without being forced to.

In the name of my Mennonite brothers and sisters coming from different horizons, I would like to express my gratitude to the authorities of the city of Zurich, as well as to those of the Reformed church of the Canton of Zurich. For some of us, this plaque represents a way of perpetuating the memory of our past and, we hope, the dialogue; others see in it the strong sign of an important event that tomorrow will be over, but that we will refer to in order to testify of our reconciliation.

Today, Zurich has become a prosperous and flourishing city where rebaptisms should no long disturb the public order. However, what would this city be without divine grace and generations of men and women filled with the word of God, and with Judaeo-Christian values? At one time divided, we want today, in the midst of our society, to join our voices to yours, dear Reformed friends, in order to repeat together the message of Him who touches and transforms hearts, who is none other than Jesus Christ, our Lord.

V. Celebrating Reconciliation

Stories of Reconciliation

Dorothy Jean Weaver:

What is the face of reconciliation? Let me offer you a few glimpses:

The face of reconciliation is the face of *hospitality*. Those of us who attended this conference from North America, who were descendants of the 16th-century Anabaptists, were all there because we had been invited by the Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich; and we were their honored guests. Some of the group, and I obviously among them, were people who experienced hospitality in homes, receiving lodging and food in the homes of our Swiss Reformed hosts, a beautiful symbol of reconciliation.

The face of reconciliation is the face of *breaking bread*. No, we did not celebrate the Eucharist together. We did not share the Lord's Supper as a group. But we did break bread. We broke bread on two special occasions. At noon and in the evening we had shared meals at a beautiful public park called the Lindenhof, which is high on a hill overlooking the Limmat River. This is the face of reconciliation.

The face of reconciliation is the face of *worship*. As I indicated earlier, we listened to Scripture together, we prayed together, we sang together. And we sang songs that came from both of our traditions. And we sang one song that I was left to believe might have been written specifically for that day. I didn't ask. But from the text it sounded as if it might have been written just for us. We heard the words of Larry Miller, the Executive Secretary of the Mennonite World Conference, as he preached from the high pulpit of the Grossmuenster, the church that had been Zwingli's church. And he preached a powerful sermon of reconciliation, in which he helped us to look at the gifts and the challenges of our two traditions and where that leads us into the future.

The face of reconciliation is the face of *sacred moments*. And there were those sacred moments. Some of those sacred moments were the statements that you have heard shared with you just in these last moments here. There were gifts, brought by Mennonites, which were offered to the Reformed people there. And there were letters read. One letter in particular was read because the persons who wrote the letter could not be present, but wanted to send their greetings to this meeting. It comes from the Old Order Amish Churches of the USA. And it was such a wonderful, gift-filled letter that I want to share a piece of that with you:

From the Old Order Amish Churches of the USA to the Reformed Church of Zurich:

Heartfelt friendly greetings in Jesus Christ, the Savior's name with best wishes in both time and eternity. . . .

We believe the descendants of the Reformed Church are not accountable for any actions their forefathers took against the Anabaptists. Far be it from us to request reconciliation. History teaches us that a church is made stronger by persecution. The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church. We wonder if there would be any Amish, Mennonite, or Hutterite churches today if there had not been any persecution. Christ forbids us to hold ill feelings toward the descendants of any oppressors, whether they are Reformed, Catholic, Jew or heathen. We hold this to be the general feeling of the Amish in the USA, consisting of over 1,000 churches, and averaging 25 to 30 families each. . . .

Please accept this humble writing in good faith. We hold no ill feelings and plead forbearance for any grievance we may have caused.

God bless you and yours. **[Statement excerpted from longer document]**

The face of reconciliation . . .

Closing Reflections

Dorothy Jean Weaver:

Just a few closing reflections on what we experienced in that day. I found this day to be a profound experience of release and reconciliation for the groups involved. And it was a genuine God-moment. As was stated earlier in one of the Reformed statements, the persecuted don't forget their history and the persecutors would prefer to forget theirs. This was truly a day of new beginnings for both of us.

For those of us who identify with the story of the persecution of the Anabaptists, who have known that story ever since we were children . . . we now live with a history and a story that has a new ending, a new ending that transforms that history and that story.

And what I found perhaps even more poignant was that we, we as Anabaptists, who identify the Sermon on the Mount as our guiding text in our personal lives and our church lives, we experienced there in Zurich the call to reconciliation, Jesus' call to reconciliation, as found in Matthew 5. We found that call being demonstrated *for us, in front of us, towards us, with grace and with dignity and with joy* by our Reformed brothers and sisters. We received an enormous gift. *And we can also learn. We can learn from our Reformed brothers and sisters how to live out the Sermon on the Mount.*

And secondly, we as Anabaptists were there as well to offer grace to our Reformed brothers and sisters, to relieve them of the burden of the history that they have carried ever since the Reformation, the history that says, "We are the ones that persecuted the Anabaptists." Now in this experience of encounter and reconciliation, we have been able, mutually, to give and receive confession and forgiveness. It was a gift for all of us.

I'd like to close with a few brief sentences that I received just yesterday from Peter Dettwiler, the planner of this conference. He had no idea I was actually going to pick these sentences out of his e-mail. But I found these sentences so touching and poignant that I thought they would be the words with which to conclude our reflections here this morning. He said,

Monday afternoon we had an evaluation meeting with the representatives of the Swiss Mennonite Conference. We have become friends. It was a good meeting. The work will go on.

Thanks be to God!