

Three R's of our common discipleship

Rejoicing in recent relations
between Lutherans and Mennonites

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We have delighted in the ripples! During my recent years with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), we found ourselves repeatedly and joyfully surprised by the expanding circles of new relationship following our 2010 action toward reconciliation with churches of the Anabaptist family. How could this action speak so powerfully to people in so many contexts? I believe it is simply because this act draws its strength from the heart of the gospel—from God's gracious will that we should be healed and united.

For Lutherans and Mennonites to tell our story together, in a spirit of mutual accountability, is itself both a healing act and a constructive resource for the future.

“We must think anew about our next steps; this action can change our churches more than we have imagined.” This message was brought home from the 2009 Mennonite

World Conference Assembly in Asunción, Paraguay, by Dr. Ishmael Noko, then LWF general secretary. He had told the assembly that the LWF, representing about 95 percent of the world's 75 million Lutherans, intended to ask forgiveness for the legacy of our having persecuted Anabaptists in Reformation times.

The response was simply overwhelming! Until that moment this action was seen primarily as a matter of ecumenical affairs—important, to be sure, in addressing historical wrongs and inviting improved relations, but much less than the renewal God's Spirit continues to offer us from these events. This renewal invites us at all levels—from world and national bodies to local communities and individuals—to walk more closely with each other, as together we follow Christ.

By our own international assembly in 2010, the LWF saw more clearly what we were about. Because this act was offered for the healing of the entire body of Christ, the “Mennonite Action” was

scheduled when other Christian bodies would be most fully represented. As these guests joined Lutheran participants in kneeling or standing, this resolution was affirmed:

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 forbears 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.

In this act, three healing streams flowed together: right remembering, repentance, and reconciliation.

1. Right remembering

Lutherans' flawed remembering began this process. In 1980, Lutherans invited Anabaptists to an ecumenical celebration of the 450th birthday of the Augsburg Confession—without being mindful of that document's condemnations of Anabaptists.

Already in 2004, US Lutherans and Mennonites took up the task of remembering rightly, and an international Joint Study Commission continued it. Their report provides the first shared history of the Reformation era's painful events. To tell our story together, in a spirit of mutual accountability, is itself both a healing act and a constructive resource for the future.

It had been Lutherans' flawed remembering that began this process. In 1980, Lutherans invited Anabaptists to an ecumenical celebration of the 450th birthday of their honored Augsburg Confession—without being mindful of that document's condemnations of Anabaptists. This began a sorrowful and costly process for Lutherans—both to

acknowledge the continuing power that memories of persecution have for Anabaptists today and also to make a place for this persecuting in our own memories. Even with all mitigations

allowed, it is undeniably true that the emerging Lutheran movement's most treasured teachers defended persecution, even unto death. Moreover, their condemnations have continued in Lutheran teachings about Anabaptists ever since. But fundamental trust in God's grace, which allows and compels us to look searchingly at ourselves, is one of the fruits of God's working in our lives. We know this power individually—but it is amazing to see it at work also for global communities.

2. Repentance

Honest remembering leads to another gift: repentance. For Lutherans, it became clear that the only faithful response was to ask forgiveness “from God and from our Mennonite sisters and brothers.” The petition is first to God. So it must always be: sin is first against the One who gives us life. But also we wanted to be

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clear that we asked forgiveness from our own need to repent; we were not intending to create an obligation for Mennonites to rush in with forgiveness. Those experienced in pastoral care were especially concerned about this “second burden” which asking forgiveness can impose on those who have borne a wrong.

But that understandable hesitancy is not at all what happened! We were in relationship with Mennonites who were ahead of us in forgiving, even as we came to repentance.

Here again we see a familiar shape of discipleship: as the parable of the prodigal son shows us and the cross makes clear, our repentance is made possible “before the fact” by God's mercy. We know God is ever more eager to show mercy than we to ask it. But grace comes to us not only in God's own forgiving but also when others meet repentance with gracious forgiveness. And in the Mennonite response we met just such long-prepared grace.

It was “grace upon grace” that we experienced not only forgiveness but repentance also in our Mennonite sisters and brothers. In the service of repentance at the LWF Assembly, I had to insist that the subject of the verb “repent” would each time be “we Lutherans”! We needed to emphasize that the guilt of violent

persecution lay on our side. But our Mennonite partners insisted that they also needed to repent, if not for exchanging violence, then for unloving and sometimes misleading ways of teaching about Lutherans—which, as for us, had both persistent internal consequences and implications for Christian unity. This spirit of repentance was expressed in a prayer offered by the assembled Mennonite participants this spring at the new Mennonite Church USA offices in Elkhart, Indiana, as a tree was planted to honor growth in Lutheran-Mennonite relations: “As Mennonite Christians, help us enter deeply into a place of transformation. Release us from clinging to a sense of being victims and from a false pride that keeps us too often separate and of small faith.”

3. Reconciliation

In this prayer we are moving to the third R—to reconciliation. Already at our LWF Assembly, this was the note sounded by the Mennonite World Conference in its response. They spoke of new

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freedom when the restraints of unresolved memories of persecution are at last broken by forgiving. Giving thanks that “today you have heard and honored our story,” the MWC officers gave us a footwashing tub and prayed that, following “our Lord and Teacher Jesus Christ,” we would “serve one another from this time forth.”

The ripples of this reconciliation keep spreading, reaching places distant from the wounds of sixteenth-century Europe. Our world has so many cycles of sadness, sin, and

destruction. But in this process of reconciliation we see that grace-filled actions also have spiraling effects, offering hope and healing even beyond the communities in which they began. Two examples:

The LWF manages the city-sized camp in Dadaab, Kenya, which houses refugees from the hunger in Somalia. While there is wide collaboration, the LWF is responsible for the peacemaking operation of security within the camp—calling out and equipping from among the residents themselves unarmed leaders for conflict resolution. When Mennonite Central Committee joined as an

additional partner, there was great joy. As the operation's director said, "It is a symbol and an expression of the beauty that grows out of reconciliation between Lutherans and Mennonites. It makes us free to serve the neighbor and contributes to a wider reconciliation."

Already in 2010, the upcoming action was resonating deeply in Colombia. In the midst of a culture of rampant violence, here was a different path. Two years later, when the LWF governing body met in Bogotá, eight leaders of separate Anabaptist-Mennonite communities attended. They have made a commitment to seek reconciliation among themselves, and they requested that the local Lutheran church accompany them in this process.

For my own life, the blessings that come as we open ourselves to one another's gifts have been rich. Last April I spoke about Lutheran-Mennonite relations at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. Framed on a wall was a 1533 statement of Menno Simons—beloved to my hosts but new to me:

True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant.

It clothes the naked.

It feeds the hungry.

It comforts the sorrowful.

It shelters the destitute.

It serves those that harm it.

It binds up that which is wounded.

It has become all things to all people.

These affirmations, I thought, could easily be made by any Lutheran—with perhaps one exception. We have been less likely to stitch into our samplers words like "It serves those that harm it." Yet now, in our deepening relationship, we Lutherans can attend to the wisdom of those who make this pattern of service central to their discipleship. How, I now ask myself, can Anabaptist witnesses help us Lutherans better to be formed as Christians who are prepared to offer forgiveness and to be active peacemakers?

At the same time, we Lutherans can rejoice if our trust in God's forgiving grace has helped to bring gifts of release and reconciliation to those we have wronged. In this exchange there is so much hope that we can be emboldened to explore more roads

to other reconciliations, strengthened by all the gifts of the Spirit that have been shed abroad in all our communities. May God, who has given us the ministry of reconciliation, give us wisdom and courage to draw strength from one another for these next steps.

Web resources

A study resource designed for congregational use prepared jointly by Mennonite Church Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada: <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre/ResourceView/2/12978>.

The 2004 statement from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Mennonite Church USA, "Right Remembering in Anabaptist-Lutheran Relations": <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Presiding-Bishop/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Bilateral-Conversations/Lutheran-Mennonite-Church-USA.aspx>.

The report of the Lutheran–Mennonite International Study Commission "Healing of Memories: Reconciled in Christ": http://www.lwf-assembly.org/uploads/media/Report_Lutheran-Mennonite_Study_Commission.pdf or from the Mennonite World Conference.

About the author

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