

# Becoming unbound

André Gingerich Stoner

**T**he stories of Anabaptist martyrs are at the heart of Mennonite identity. I am increasingly convinced that the way these stories have been told has distorted our vision and misshaped our understanding of discipleship. Recent steps of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation with Lutheran brothers and sisters open possibilities for Mennonites to move beyond a victim mentality, find healing, and more fully become who God intends us to be.

## The impact of the martyr experience on Mennonite identity

My first formal involvement in interchurch work was on a Mennonite Central Committee assignment in Europe in the mid-1980s. As I was pondering the hesitation of Mennonites to become members of ecumenical bodies, a colleague repeated a comment which he attributed to John Howard Yoder. “You have to remember,” he said, “the first case of ecumenical cooperation was the

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persecution of Anabaptists.” This trenchant observation might in fact hold truth. But beyond that, what strikes me today is how deeply I embraced and even celebrated this story line. It affirmed a posture I had imbibed as a congenital Swiss-German Mennonite.

Even if hardly a person cracks open the *Martyrs Mirror* these days, the martyr experience is part of the Mennonite creation myth.<sup>1</sup> The Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society

web-site observes that “historically for Amish and Mennonites, the *Martyrs Mirror* has been the most important book next to the Bible.” *Martyrs Mirror* continues on the MennoMedia bestseller list. In some more conservative branches of the Mennonite family, it is a common wedding gift. *Martyrs Mirror* etchings—like that of Dirk Willems returning to rescue his pursuer, who had fallen

through the ice—hang on the walls of Mennonite churches and homes. At some Mennonite youth gatherings, children play “persecution,” with Catholics and others identified as our tormentors.

I fear that the dominant narrative about Anabaptist martyrdom is “That’s what those people did to us.” We need to be careful not to make generalizations too quickly for all Mennonites, but the martyr stories have seared into the psyches—especially of those of us of Dutch, Swiss, or German descent—a sense of being persecuted victims. This perception shapes us in profound ways which often remain hidden to us.

The martyr legacy has affected us in multiple ways. We have long assumed a separatist posture. Persecution banned our Ana-

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baptist ancestors to villages above a certain elevation in the Swiss Jura Mountains or led to emigration and settlement in Russian colonies or out-of-the-way Kansas towns.

Organizationally we have generally maintained a careful distance from interchurch associations. In only a handful of places across the globe, for example, have Mennonites become members of national church councils. In the United States, it was a significant new chapter when delegates at the 2007 San Jose convention voted for Mennonite Church USA to become a full participant in Christian

Churches Together and signaled our desire to be in relationship with the broader body of Christ.

Theologically we have often maintained something of a separatist mentality. We describe commitments like discipleship, peace, and community as “Mennonite distinctives” which we own, rather than as a natural part of a Jesus-centered life. We are surprised, and skeptical, when we discover these commitments in other Christian traditions. In an over-against posture, we may neglect or resist important themes such as grace, the role of the Spirit, or cultural fluency for communicating the gospel.

We have long recognized the links between strictures on Anabaptist preaching and teaching and a Mennonite quietism. We have come to claim this reservation about sharing our faith as a virtue which values “the walk” more than “the talk.”

A victim mentality can also lead to a strange combination of self-righteousness and low self-esteem. Sometimes Mennonites can't quite imagine others being good enough to live up to our standards, while at the same time we can't quite imagine that we are interesting enough for anyone else to want to hang out with

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us. We can engage in service, and even extend hospitality, but it's hard for someone to become part of the family.

This sense of being a victim seems especially incongruous in a North American context where many of us have become affluent and carry white privilege and power. Despite the evidence, because of the martyr legacy we may still feel like victims. Iris de León–Hartshorn, director of transformative peacemaking for Mennonite Church USA, has worked on anti-racism within the Menno-

nite context for years. She has come to the conclusion that this victim mentality is a major barrier to making progress in this area, because it makes it difficult for white Mennonites to understand and be honest about the power and privilege we have.

These are just some of the repercussions of the martyr legacy and the victim mentality which we carry. Other implications wait to be uncovered. At the same time, it should be underscored and repeated that there are many beautiful, creative, powerful, life-giving dimensions to Mennonite theology, practice, and culture.

### **Chosen trauma and group identity**

How is it possible, we might ask, that events that happened nearly five hundred years ago and that none of us experienced personally can still have such a powerful grip on us? Perhaps an analogy can help. If a child is traumatized and never does the deep and hard work of healing, he may still act out of that hurt decades later.

The same is true for a community of people. If as a people we don't do the hard work of forgiveness and letting go, we continue to act out of a sense of being victims. Other experiences remind us of that original trauma and reinforce it. Stories of a great uncle who was tarred and feathered for refusing to buy war bonds underscore the original trauma. Further, the way we tell our

martyr stories can also retraumatize us and nurture an ongoing sense of being victims.

From her studies in peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University, Iris de León–Hartshorn draws on the work of Vamik Volkan, a political psychologist, who emphasizes the role of “chosen glories” and “chosen trauma” in group identity. Chosen glories are events in the group’s memory, such as a victorious battle or a famous leader, that bolster the group’s self-esteem. But chosen glories are not as powerful in group identity as chosen traumas. When a group suffers severe loss of people, prestige, or land, the extreme humiliation keeps the group from successfully mourning its losses, and they are passed on from generation to generation in myriad ways.

Using more the framework of generational sin and spiritual warfare, Janet Keller Richards in her book *Unlocking Our Inheritance: Spiritual Keys to Recovering the Treasures of Anabaptism*<sup>2</sup> examines strengths of the Anabaptist tradition as well as strongholds that have roots in the martyr experience and that still bind. Some themes she highlights include a “spiritual introversion” and an inability to witness, a pattern of rejecting and dividing from others, bitterness toward authority and a false peace of silence toward one another that doesn’t deal well with conflict. She advocates a process of individual and corporate repentance and cleansing.

### **Telling the martyr stories in new ways**

A critical step in breaking the negative grip of the martyr stories is telling them in new ways. The witness of the martyrs is important, and we should tell these stories. But if we continue to tell their stories to show “that’s what those people did to us,” it only reinforces our false victim mentality. Rather we should tell these stories as examples of what it means to follow Jesus and let ourselves be challenged by them. To help us keep that focus I propose that whenever we tell an Anabaptist martyr story, let’s pair it with a martyr story from a different tradition. Next to the etching of Dirk Willems, let’s hang a picture of Oscar Romero or Jean Donovan (Catholics), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Lutheran), Martin Luther King, Jr. (Baptist), or any of a multitude of martyrs from other Christian groups.

In the past two decades, a new chapter is opening up for Mennonites. Reformed, Catholics, and Lutherans who once condemned and persecuted Anabaptists have sought out Mennonites for dialogue and reconciliation. These developments were unthinkable a little more than a generation ago. I believe this is one of the powerful things God is doing in our day. The most profound steps have been taken by Lutherans. Acts of repentance and forgiveness are preparing the way for Mennonites to let go of a victim mentality that has scarred and bound us for so long.

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Formal statements and gestures at national and international levels<sup>3</sup> are being followed by local Lutheran-Mennonite conversations, worship services, and celebrations. These events can help us as a people move into the new place God has prepared for us.

This past April, for example, Mennonites and Lutherans gathered in Elkhart, Indiana, for a full day of lectures, worship, meals, conversation, and a tree dedication. This gathering included area pastors, bishops, conference ministers, and local lay leaders—Lutheran and Mennonite.

During an evening lecture, Kathryn Johnson, who had served as staff for the Lutheran World Federation, recounted the events of the historic gathering during the LWF assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2010. Much prayerful and profound preparation had taken place for an anticipated LWF vote asking forgiveness from Mennonites.

Bishop Mark Hanson, who was presiding, sensed that something other than a voice vote or a show of hands was called for. In the course of the gathering he found himself inviting all the Lutherans who wanted to affirm a request for forgiveness to kneel at their seats. Mennonites present were deeply stirred as hundreds of Lutherans knelt around them. On behalf of the broader Mennonite family, representatives of Mennonite World Conference extended words and gestures of forgiveness and reconciliation. A deep healing was beginning.

As Kathryn recounted this story in Elkhart, those of us present were also deeply stirred. Let us continue our hard work of letting

go of the victim mentality, both as a community of faith and at a personal level. As we hear and accept the invitation to be unbound, may we more fully become the people God intends us to be.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The *Martyrs Mirror*, written by Thieleman J. van Braght and first published in Dutch in 1660, includes stories, testimonies, and etchings of Christian martyrs, especially Anabaptists. The full title of the book is *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660*.

<sup>2</sup>Copyright 2005 by the Anabaptist Reconciliation Planning Committee. To purchase books or to contact the author, write [unlockingourinheritance@earthlink.net](mailto:unlockingourinheritance@earthlink.net).

<sup>3</sup>For information about national and international dialogues see <http://mennoniteusa.org/executive-board/interchurch-relations/relationships/bilateral-relationships/> or <http://www.mwc-cmm.org/index.php/initiatives/interchurch-dialogue>.

## About the author

André Gingerich Stoner is director of interchurch relations and holistic witness for Mennonite Church USA. He previously served sixteen years as pastor of missions at Kern Road Mennonite Church in South Bend, Indiana, and on two ecumenical peace assignments in Europe with Mennonite Central Committee. He and his wife, Cathy, have four children. Together with several other households they live as intentional neighbors in South Bend's near northwest neighborhood. Much of the substance of this article was first shared April 14, 2012, in a joint presentation with Iris de León-Hartshorn to a meeting of Mennonite Church USA Executive Board, the Constituency Leaders Council (including conference ministers), and several churchwide agency boards. An abbreviated version appeared in a Church to Church column, "Our Victim Mentality," in *Mennonite World Review*, May 28, 2012.