



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION



Healing Memories

Implications of the Reconciliation
between Lutherans and Mennonites



HEALING MEMORIES

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECONCILIATION
BETWEEN LUTHERANS AND MENNONITES

LWF STUDIES 2016/2



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FOREWORD

Anniversaries and jubilees offer us the opportunity to reflect on the past and to contemplate the future. At times, looking back at history will reveal serious wrongdoings and, painful as these revelations may be, facing up to and recognizing wrongdoings often have a truly healing impact.

The Lutheran–Mennonite reconciliation process received its first impulse from the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980. Mennonites had been invited to take part in the Lutheran celebrations, but had had some reservations since the Augsburg Confession includes several paragraphs that explicitly condemn Anabaptists, whom the Mennonites regard as their forebears in faith.

The situation in 1980 was the catalyst for a series of national and international dialogues, the major outcome of which was the report of the Lutheran–Mennonite International Study Commission, “Healing Memories–Reconciling in Christ.” The report eventually resulted in the Lutheran World Federation’s repentance before God and the Mennonite sisters and brothers for the violence that has been perpetrated, the persecution as well as the continued misrepresentation. The so-called “Mennonite Action” was a landmark moment at the 2010 Eleventh Assembly of the LWF in Stuttgart, Germany. The Mennonites accepted the LWF’s apology and both church families committed themselves to ensure that the act of reconciliation would bear fruit among Lutherans and Mennonites alike.

Since the act of reconciliation at Stuttgart, Lutherans and Mennonites have seen the dialogue bear rich fruit: new international dialogues and contacts have been initiated and local Lutheran and Mennonite communities have been transformed as they have come closer together in order to learn from one another. Invitations have been extended to participate at global gatherings, such as assemblies and council meetings, and the cooperation in service to the suffering neighbor has increased.

Following the Eleventh Assembly, the LWF formed a Task Force to follow up on the commitments made by the Assembly. In 2016, the Task Force presented its report, “Bearing Fruit—Implications of the 2010 Reconciliation between Lutherans and Anabaptist–Mennonites,” to the Council of the LWF, where it was received and commended for study.

We continue to rejoice over the power of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation and the way in which these transform people, communities and our communions at large. We thank God for the sustained reception of the reconciliation between Mennonites and Lutherans at a local level and

with gratitude receive the report, “Bearing Fruit,” which provides the impetus for deeper mutual understanding and joyful support in God’s mission.

The present publication brings together both above-mentioned reports: “Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ” and “Bearing Fruit—Implications of the 2010 Reconciliation between Lutherans and Anabaptist-Mennonites.” We commend this book for study and further dialogue within and among our communities and global communions.

Martin Junge
General Secretary
The Lutheran World Federation

César García
General Secretary
Mennonite World Conference

HEALING MEMORIES:
RECONCILING IN CHRIST

REPORT OF THE LUTHERAN-MENNONITE
INTERNATIONAL STUDY COMMISSION

**THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION
THE MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE**

2010

PREFACE

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

One of the great privileges of a General Secretary is to commend to our churches resources which can strengthen them in the lives to which they are called. It is our deep pleasure to call your attention in this volume to important work which opens the way to a new climate of relations between Anabaptist-Mennonites and Lutherans, developments in which we believe the Spirit of God is at work.

Too often, the apostolic exhortation to the Ephesians seems to reproach us for ways in which we have fallen short. The loving unity which the Spirit gives—a unity marked by humility, gentleness, patience, and peace—often seems far in front of us, far removed from the life of the communities we know. But in this report you will hear from those who have made “every effort” to renew bonds of peace between our two traditions. To receive it is an act of hope.

Between Lutherans and Anabaptist-Mennonites, the parting of ways has a particularly painful history. For half a millennium’s time, we have been separated not only by theological disagreements from the sixteenth century but also by the legacies of violence from that formative period. On the Lutheran side, there had been both persecution and theological justification for these violent actions. While Anabaptists did not return this persecution, they also have carried burdens from that era in their memories of what they had suffered. In recent years, it became clear that the time was right for initiatives of reconciliation. Already our communities were collaborating to relieve suffering in many places around the world. The upcoming half-millennial anniversaries of the Reformation invited efforts to address wounds remaining from that time. It was, then, in a spirit of hopefulness that our two world bodies in 2002 established the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission, whose work is reported here.

This commission’s work provides an excellent example of the ways in which international dialogues can build upon and continue efforts begun in local and regional settings. In the Introduction, the commission describes this earlier work and relates its own progress in understanding the task before it. The surprises which commission members experienced as they overcame mutual misconceptions will be shared by many readers as well. It was a significant advance when the dialogue realized that remaining theological

differences between our two traditions could not be honestly and fruitfully explored until the legacy of the persecutions was faced directly. It is the outstanding contribution of this commission to provide for the churches of both our families this valuable resource for addressing this difficult subject.

The commission discovered that there was no common narrative of the crucial events of the sixteenth century. For the first time, and in an attractive and accessible way, they have presented for us this shared history. To look at the past together in this way is itself an act of reconciliation. We expect that this work will find wide usefulness in our seminaries and other educational settings, as well as in our churches around the world. While it is demanding and sometimes uncomfortable to read, the story is also deeply engaging. It speaks directly to the minds and hearts of all those who care for the Church's history and for its present life in Christ.

The story explored here is not simple. There are many nuances and complications which reward careful attention. Lutherans, for example, can take comfort in the theological insights which Martin Luther could have drawn upon to resist policies of persecution; they can take note that Lutherans were not the only or even, in terms of numbers executed, the most deadly of the sixteenth century persecutors of Anabaptists. But as the report shows, finally all ameliorations and exculpations fail: the only adequate response is repentance. Mennonites and other Anabaptist-related churches too came to this study with a spirit of honest self-assessment of a non-persecuting but still highly imperfect tradition, and at the end they propose steps on their side toward new relationship. Throughout, this report demonstrates how the search for reconciliation can be served by rigorous historical and theological study. Having begun its work by taking up the desire of our churches to address divisive legacies from the past, this commission now returns to these churches concrete recommendations toward a future of greater unity.

We are, then, most pleased with the outcome of this report. For both of us, the hope for healing between our traditions is deeply personal. This is particularly so for Ishmael Noko who grew up in present-day Zimbabwe as the child of a mother from the tradition of the Anabaptists; her relatives from the Brethren in Christ church are part of his family and part of the Mennonite World Conference communion of churches. For him the memories of their separation at the Lord's Supper are still vivid. We welcome this report for its consequences for individuals and families who have known the costs of division.

Indeed, reception of this report will be good for Mennonites and Lutherans around the world. Even before its publication, its recommendations have been greeted with approval and heart-felt enthusiasm on both sides. At the Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Paraguay in July 2009, Ishmael Noko received an emotional standing ovation as he described Lutheran sorrow and regret at their history and their intention to seek forgiveness:

We take these steps as we Lutherans are approaching a milestone anniversary: in 2017, we will observe “500 years of Reformation.” It is important we bring to this observance not only celebration of the fresh insights into the gospel which arose from this movement but also a spirit of honesty and repentance, a commitment to the continuing reformation of our tradition and of the whole Church. It is in this spirit that we hope to move forward on this issue of the heritage of our condemnations.

I have described the history of these condemnations as like the poison which a scorpion carries in its tail. We have not struck out with this poison for some time—but we still carry it with us in our system. We now are on a path which will lead us to expel this poison from our body, to allow us to live together with you, our sisters and brothers in Christ, in new ways.

Yesterday your General Council gave us great encouragement that you would walk with us on this way to healing. When you meet for your next Assembly, we Lutherans hope to be with you in a new way. And in that new relationship our witness to God’s love for the world will be more fully manifest.

In turn, Larry Miller also received warm thanks and a standing ovation in October 2009, as the Lutheran World Federation Council voted unanimously to recommend that the 2010 Assembly ask forgiveness “of God and of our Mennonite brothers and sisters” for the wrongs of the persecution and its legacies “up until the present day.” He said:

We receive your commitment to rightly remember this shared history, and your vulnerability in taking steps to heal the fractured body of Christ in which we live together, as a gift from God.

We are aware of the difficulty of the task. We are dealing with holy histories, yours and ours. We are dealing with our most basic self-understandings, yours and ours. For you, the witness of the Augsburg Confession is foundational and authoritative, an essential shaper of your identity. For us, the witness of the Anabaptist martyrs is a living and vital story, retold in our global community of churches to build group identity.

How can you distance yourself from the condemnations and their consequences while still honoring your history and strengthening your identity? How can we distance ourselves from use of the martyr tradition which perpetuates a sense of victimization and marginalization—and your reaching out for forgiveness pushes us to do precisely that—how can we thus distance ourselves while still honoring our history and strengthening our identity?

Surely these things will happen best if we continue to walk together in the way of Jesus Christ, our Reconciler and the Source of our common history and identity.

In both Strasbourg and Geneva, in the offices of our international bodies, we have already received numerous inquiries about the forthcoming ac-

tion and many requests for this report. We know that around the world our churches are waiting to reach out to one another, to learn about each other and to call upon the Spirit to strengthen anew the bonds of peace. This will indeed be good for both our traditions.

But this is good not for Anabaptist-related Christians and Lutherans alone. The pain of our separation has been borne not only by us; it is a wound for the whole Body of Christ. Similarly, reconciliation between Lutherans and Anabaptist-Mennonites is healing for the entire Body. To address this wrong not with rationalization but with repentance and to seek forgiveness rather than forgetfulness is to respond from the heart of our Christian faith. It is to trust in God's grace and not in our own strength. While in ecumenical relations it is often appropriate to seek forms of consensus or an exchange of gifts, in this distinctive relationship action must come first on the Lutheran side, and begin with repentance. The prayer for forgiveness cannot be an easy or trivial one. We Lutherans believe that in these prayers and in our commitments to transform our teaching about and relationships with Anabaptists, we are acting on behalf of healing for the entire Church. But action must come also from the Anabaptist-Mennonite side. We Anabaptist-related Christians believe that when we respond in genuine humility with forgiveness, with recognition of our own multiple failures in the body of Christ, and with commitments to transform our teaching about and relationships with Lutherans, we strengthen the bonds of unity among all Christians.

But this is good not for the Church alone. Instances of coercive violence, overt and hidden, lie all around us in this hurting world. No religious tradition has been entirely free from the temptation to rely on its insidious appearance of efficacy and inevitability. While our two traditions have been shaped by distinct views of legitimate uses of power—differences which we must continue to explore, as this report explains—we share commitments to seek God's help in working together for the good of all God has made. If we help strengthen one another in this work and witness, it is good for all God's creation.

It is, then, in hopefulness that we commend this report to your careful attention—to your reading, reflection, discussion, and prayer. But even more we commend our churches to new lives with one another. It is our hope that at every level—global, national, and local—Anabaptist-Mennonites and Lutherans now will seek one another out in new ways, that we will see in one another our sisters and brothers, called together to enjoy “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Ishmael Noko
General Secretary
The Lutheran World Federation

Larry Miller
General Secretary
Mennonite World Conference

PART I

INTRODUCTION

In 1980, when Lutheran churches celebrated the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, representatives of Mennonite churches were invited to participate in the ecumenical festivities marking the event. The Mennonites, however, aware that the Augsburg Confession explicitly condemned the Anabaptists and their teachings, wondered whether or how they could celebrate their own condemnation, since they regarded the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century as their spiritual forebears. Most Lutherans, on the other hand, had little awareness of the condemnations of Anabaptists, their persecution and marginalization, or of the ongoing memories of this painful history still alive among Mennonites today. Lutheran leaders were deeply moved by the Mennonite response, recognizing more clearly than ever before certain Lutheran failures in the Reformation. Expressing this new awareness, the Executive Committee of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) adopted a “Statement on the Confessio Augustana” at its meeting in Augsburg on July 11, 1980, that included the following words:

It is with sorrow that we recognize the fact that the specific condemnations of the Confession against certain opinions that were held at the time of the Reformation have caused pain and suffering for some. We realize that some of these opinions are no longer held in the same way in those churches, and we express our hope that the remaining differences may be overcome. We worship Jesus Christ who liberates and call on our member churches to celebrate our common Lutheran heritage with a spirit both of gratitude and penitence.¹

This growing awareness of the condemnations against the Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession and the consequences of the doctrinal conflicts with them led to official dialogues between Mennonites and Lutherans at the national level in France (1981-1984), Germany (1989-1992), and the United States (2001-2004). Since the Augsburg Confession is one bond that unites the Lutheran churches within the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the LWF found it appropriate to enter into a dialogue at the international level with the Mennonite World Conference. The results of that dialogue,

¹ LWF Report Series No. 10 (August 1982), 69-70.

undertaken by the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission from 2005 to 2008, are summarized in this report.

ORIGIN AND MANDATE OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDY COMMISSION

In July 1984, aware of both the awkward situation during the 1980 anniversary celebration and the French national dialogue to be concluded later in the year, the Lutheran World Federation expressed a desire for dialogue with Mennonites at the international level. During its global Assembly in Budapest, Hungary, the LWF sent a greeting to the Mennonite World Conference. Gathered a few days later at its own world assembly in Strasbourg, France, the MWC publicly received and read the message. Among other things, the LWF greeting noted that in spite “of our theological differences concerning holy baptism, we wish to express our willingness to overcome the condemnations of the past, and, through a process of dialogue, to find ways of recognizing each other freely as sisters and brothers in the one body of Christ.”

In the late 1990s, LWF and MWC leaders together considered the question of an appropriate process for that dialogue to move forward.² The project to establish an international study commission took shape and received approval in 2002. Its outline emerged in a meeting convened on April 11 at the LWF-related Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, where LWF and MWC representatives together focused particularly on the results of the national dialogues. Sven Oppegaard, at the time LWF Assistant General Secretary for Ecumenical Affairs, then took the lead—in consultation with Larry Miller, General Secretary of the MWC—to develop a proposal. Several months later, the MWC Executive Committee (meeting in July, in Karlsruhe, Germany) and the LWF Standing Committee for Ecumenical Affairs (meeting in September, in Wittenberg, Germany) passed a joint recommendation to:

Approve the establishment of an international study commission with the following mandate: Drawing upon the results of previous national dialogues in Germany,

² General Secretaries Ishmael Noko (LWF) and Larry Miller (MWC) informally discussed the possibility at the October 1998 meeting of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions (CS/CWC), with Noko reiterating the interest the LWF had expressed already in 1984. In August 1999 the MWC Executive Committee went on record in favor of international Lutheran-Mennonite conversations. In December 1999, during the special millennium gathering of the CS/CWC in Jerusalem, Noko, Miller and MWC president Mesach Kristya agreed in principle to proceed with an international Lutheran-Mennonite encounter, pending approval of a specific project by the two communions at the appropriate decision-making levels.

France, and the United States, the commission shall: a) Consider whether condemnations of Anabaptists articulated by the Augsburg Confession (1530) apply to Mennonite World Conference member churches and related churches, and b) Submit a report of the commission's conclusions to the governing bodies of the Mennonite World Conference and the Lutheran World Federation for further action and with a view toward a possible official statement.

STUDY COMMISSION MEMBERS

In keeping with the mandate of the Study Commission, the LWF and MWC appointed historians or theologians representing each of the three national dialogues as members of the dialogue group. In addition, both bodies invited two African theologians to the group in order to better include the voices of the Global South. Additionally, the LWF and MWC each appointed chairpersons and staff to the commission.³

The Study Commission met annually for one week, from 2005 through 2008, at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg (France). Each year prayer united and strengthened the commission and commission participants. Every meeting began and ended with worship led by members of the delegations. Sharing meals twice each day fostered close personal friendships among members of the commission and deepened a sense of enduring Christian communion.

³ Mennonite members of the commission were Prof. Dr Claude Baecher (Hegenheim, France), Ms Hellen Biseko Bradburn (Arusha, Tanzania), Rev. Rainer Burkart (Neuwied, Germany), and Prof. Dr John Roth (Goshen, Indiana, USA). Burkart (MWC Faith and Life Commission Secretary) served as Mennonite co-chair and Dr Larry Miller (MWC, General Secretary, Strasbourg, France) as co-secretary for the duration of the work of the commission. Lutheran members of the commission were initially Prof. Dr Gottfried Seebass (Heidelberg, Germany), Bishop Litsiesi M. Dube (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe), Prof. Dr Annie Noblesse-Rocher (Strasbourg), and Prof. Dr Timothy J. Wengert (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA). Prof. Dr Theodor Dieter (Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg) served as Lutheran consultant; Prof. Dr Marc Lienhard (Strasbourg) joined the commission in 2007. Seebass served as Lutheran co-chair of the commission until forced to resign for health reasons in 2006. Wengert then assumed the role. Rev. Sven Oppegaard was co-secretary for the commission until he left his LWF post in December 2006. Theodor Dieter then served as co-secretary. The Study Commission wishes to express its deep gratitude for Prof. Seebass, who passed away on September 7, 2008, both for his leadership of the Commission and for his valuable contributions to its work. An outstanding scholar and church historian, Seebass edited many Anabaptist sources and published several significant studies on Anabaptist theology and Lutheran attitudes towards Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. May he now see what he believed in!

THE COMMISSION AND ITS THEMES

The commission met for the first time from June 27 to July 1, 2005. At that session, Lutheran and Mennonite commission members presented, interpreted and discussed in detail the reports of the French, German, and American national dialogues. A careful analysis of those reports—helpfully summarized in a systematic inventory of the content prepared by the commission staff—highlighted differences among the three reports concerning their outcomes, their approaches and their emphases. Even though it was not possible simply to summarize their results and offer them on an international level, the commission nonetheless drew on the reports of the national dialogues and regarded them as valuable material for pursuing its goals.⁴ The commission especially appreciated that these reports emerged out of a process of discussion and affirmation and played an important role in improving the relations between Mennonites and Lutherans on both a national and a local level.

The commission then concentrated on major papers from the Lutheran and Mennonite sides that dealt with “The Condemnations of Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession and the Book of Concord: Their Historical Meaning, Purpose, and Effect.” Participants concluded that a common assessment of the condemnations in the Lutheran confessions would require substantial work on the following seven problems:

1. What exactly was the teaching condemned by the Lutherans?
2. Was the condemned teaching actually affirmed by Anabaptist groups at the time, or are the references to Anabaptists incorrect?
3. Are there implicit condemnations of Lutheran teachings and practices in Anabaptist writings?
4. Is the teaching condemned in the Lutheran confessions also rejected today by Lutherans—and must this be so?
5. What is the position of Anabaptists today regarding the teaching that was condemned by the Lutherans?
6. What can both sides state together today concerning the teaching at issue?

⁴ Indeed, the American report, referring back to the French and German reports, explicitly called for further studies. This is what the Study Commission understood as its task.

7. In what specific ways did the condemnations, or their misuse, contribute to the unjust persecution of Anabaptists?

The second meeting of the international study commission took place June 5-9, 2006. Since the term “Anabaptist” (= “rebaptizer”) was imposed on the movement in the sixteenth century by its opponents as a derogatory label—and since leaders of the movement initially rejected the term, arguing that that were not “re-baptizing” but baptizing correctly for the first time—Lutherans were surprised that the Mennonite World Conference calls itself “a community of Anabaptist-related churches.” The Mennonites explained how they see their tradition as linked to Reformation-era Anabaptists. Over the past century, Mennonites in Europe and North America have developed a renewed and growing awareness of the spiritual heritage of their Anabaptist forebears, finding there a source of inspiration, orientation, and renewal. Mennonites often have summarized Anabaptist teaching in three essential points: that true faith must be expressed in daily discipleship; that the church is a visible, disciplined community; and that love—including love of enemy—is the basis of Christian ethics. Even though Mennonites had not been unaware of Anabaptists in previous centuries, what was new in the second half of the twentieth century was the self-conscious, systematic appeal to “Anabaptism” for the purposes of identity and renewal.

Today, the term “Anabaptist” seems to serve several purposes: it functions as an umbrella term to describe a general cluster of groups descended from the radical reformation; it serves as an explicit critique of certain practices and teachings within the contemporary Mennonite church; and it has become a useful reference to a cluster of theological convictions that transcend narrow denominational or national identities. Mennonite participants in the study commission emphasized that there is no full consensus among Mennonites regarding the precise theological meaning of “Anabaptism” or exactly how those meanings relate to modern-day Mennonites. The commission therefore affirmed once again that dealing with the condemnations required a careful and precise examination of both historical and contemporary Mennonite (and Lutheran) understanding.

The commission then focused systematically on each condemnation within their historical and theological contexts. The analysis confirmed one conclusion of the national dialogue reports, namely that most of the condemnations in the Augsburg Confession (CA) applied neither to contemporary Mennonites nor to their Anabaptist forebears in the faith.⁵ However, members of the bilateral panel paid particular attention to the condemna-

⁵ See Part Three.

tion regarding baptism (CA IX)⁶ and the condemnation regarding civic affairs (CA XVI), after agreeing that these two articles deal with matters of continuing significant theological difference between the two churches.

In the course of the common work, it turned out that the history of persecution and marginalization of Anabaptists consistently intervened in theological analysis and discussion of these controversial themes. Thus the commission decided to write a joint history of Anabaptist and Lutheran relations in the sixteenth century, paying particular attention to issues about which Lutherans and Anabaptists have disagreed in the past.

The commission met for the third time from June 18-22, 2007. At that meeting the panel reviewed the "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Condemnations of the Anabaptists" (adopted November 11-13, 2006) as well as the response of the Mennonite Church USA (April 2007). It also examined "'Called Together to be Peacemakers': Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Mennonite World Conference (1998-2003)," with a view to its relevance for Lutheran-Mennonite dialogue.⁷

The commission received an extensive draft of a joint historical account of "Lutheran Reformers and the Condemnations of the Anabaptists." This draft gained more and more significance as the discussions of the commission continued. It represents a significant first attempt to tell together the history of the relations between Anabaptists and Lutherans in the sixteenth century, to describe what Anabaptists suffered from Lutheran authorities, and to analyze how Lutheran theologians argued in this matter. The commission felt it would be especially important for Lutherans to learn more about what happened to the Anabaptists, the spiritual forebears of the Mennonites, and for Mennonites to see that this history is now being told jointly by Mennonites and Lutherans.

The commission also continued to study the historical context of the condemnations in CA IX and XVI and their meaning in 1530. It identified and described social and ecclesial changes that influenced their respective

⁶ This report refers to individual articles of the Augsburg Confession (CA) using Roman numerals.

⁷ The 2006 Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, together with the 2004 Report of the ELCA-Mennonite Church USA Liaison Committee, "Right Remembering in Anabaptist-Lutheran Relations," can be found at www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Bilateral-Conversations/Lutheran-Mennonite.aspx. The Mennonite letter of response is found at www.mennoniteusa.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=9ptCMKotmQQ%3d&tabid=1336. "Called Together to be Peacemakers" is found at www.mwc-cmm.org/en/files/Catho-Menno/Report%20cathomenno%20Final%20ENG%20-%20PDF.pdf.