

The Anabaptist *Martyrs Mirror* in the Past and For Today

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I. Dirk Willems at the Vatican



I want to begin by reflecting on this image.¹ The two main people depicted are Pope Benedict XVI and Nancy Heisey, who at the time was the president of Mennonite World Conference (MWC). In the background is a Vatican official. This picture was taken in 2007 on the occasion of an official visit by a MWC delegation to the Vatican. While the delegation met mainly with members of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, they also had an audience with the pope at which he was presented with a gift—an icon of the Anabaptist martyr Dirk Willems.

But what does this picture represent? Mennonites are the spiritual descendants of the 16th century Anabaptists who broke away from the Catholic Church. This encounter was a very rare meeting between the highest levels of two communions separated from each other. It was made possible by many years of informal exchange, encounter and dialogue, and several years of formal dialogue, culminating in the 2003 document “Called Together to Be Peacemakers.”²

It is worth noting that the highest representative of the Catholic Church is male, cleric, and celibate, while the Mennonite representative is female, lay, and married. Very different ecclesiologies are thus embodied by these leaders. On the surface, this might seem like a polite but banal encounter –

¹ Source: Servizio Fotografico de l’Osservatore Romano, Citta del Vaticano, 2007.

² “Called Together to Be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Mennonite World Conference, 1998–2003,” in *Growth in Agreement III*, ed. Jeffrey Gros, Thomas F. Best, and Lorelei F. Fuchs (Geneva: WCC, 2007), 206-266. Available online in English, Dutch, French, German and Spanish: www.bridgefolk.net/theology/dialogue/.

friendly words and the presentation of a gift. However, I see an underlying dynamism which challenges both Catholics and Mennonites, and provides a point of departure for what I want to say today.

The Mennonites chose to present the pope with an image of Dirk Willems, perhaps the most well-known and highly regarded of all Anabaptist martyrs. Dirk had been arrested for the crime of rebaptism and imprisoned at Asperen, in Holland, 1569. He escaped from prison and crossed a frozen lake. His jailer pursued him but fell through the ice. Dirk returned to pull the man to safety, was rearrested, and later executed. The story is of course premised on persecution for a particular belief and practice—believers baptism—which Dirk believed was biblical. The story also embodies strongly held Anabaptist and Mennonite values of nonresistance, service, and love of enemy. In giving this image to the pope, Mennonites suggested that these are gifts we have to share with all Christians.

But could the pope regard Dirk as a martyr? After all, he was arrested and ultimately executed by Catholic authorities for the religious crime of rebaptism. By his actions and public statements Dirk had declared that Catholic baptism of infants (the baptism shared by Pope Benedict) was no baptism at all. The account in the *Martyrs Mirror* (hereafter MM) of Dirk's story includes heated polemics against the "papists." What were we Mennonites doing by asking Catholics to regard Dirk's life and death is a witness, a witness even to the spiritual descendants of his persecutors?³

Furthermore, how would Dirk himself regard this exchange? Could he recognize himself in the icon? He might be puzzled, or horrified. Anabaptists, together with other reformers, generally rejected icons as idolatry. Yet, we have asked those from churches that do venerate icons, especially the Orthodox, to "write" icons of Anabaptist figures.⁴ Even as we claim Dirk's story, we adapt it and transform it according to our present spiritual convictions. This points to an insight about martyrs and saints, official or unofficial, in our many traditions. We believe that God's Spirit was at work in their lives of holiness, and gives witness to Christ through their lives. We also believe that God's Spirit is active in the present, perhaps in unexpected ways, shaping our memory of them so that they may instruct and inspire and draw us all closer to Jesus Christ.



³ Nancy Heisey herself reflects on this event in "Remembering Dirk Willems: Memory and History in the Future of Ecumenical Relationships," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47 (2012): 355-356.

⁴ Written by iconographer Jivko Donkov. Image source: Mennonite Church USA Archives online.

II. Historical context: the persecutions

The Anabaptists were a diverse group of individuals and communities that were united by a common conviction about believers baptism.⁵ The first such baptisms occurred in Zurich in 1525, often regarded as the beginning of the movement, even though this reforming impulse arose in several locations. These individuals believed that the reforms of Luther, and especially of Zwingli, did not encompass all that a biblical view of the church and the Christian life entailed. Anabaptists held a high view of the authority of Scripture, a deep conviction about the integration of inner conviction and outer action, and a commitment to a life of discipleship characterized by following the teachings and example of Jesus, in the context of a committed and mutually accountable congregation of believers. The Anabaptists also believed that church life should be free from the coercive interference of the ruling authorities. Christians should not participate in some functions of government or in armed forces.

The Anabaptists themselves asserted that their infant baptisms were not valid baptisms at all, so what appeared to be a rebaptism was a first, true baptism. The name Anabaptist was given by opponents who charged that these second baptisms were illegal—capital crimes in fact. Thus, a water baptism was linked with the recognition that a further baptism, the baptism of blood or martyrdom, may follow. In fact, baptism of blood came to denote a life in which one has died to self and lives in Christ, or “walks in the resurrection,” regardless of whether one experiences persecution directly.

The name Mennonite, from Menno Simons, a key Dutch pastor and leader, came to apply to many of these Anabaptist groups. Mennonites lived in the Netherlands, in the Alsace, in South Germany and Switzerland. Due to persecution, many Dutch Mennonites migrated east to Prussia, then Ukraine, and then to North America. Many of the Alsatian and Swiss Mennonites came directly to Canada and the US in the 18th and 19th centuries. Due to mission efforts in the 20th century, there are now more Mennonites in the Global South than Europe and North America, especially in countries such as Congo, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and India.

III. Historical context: *Martyrs Mirror*

In the 16th century, about half of the 5000 people killed for their faith in Western Europe, were Anabaptists.⁶ As a small, disparate, yet highly committed group, it is not surprising that Anabaptists preserved and repeated stories about the witness of those put to death because of their faith. As Brad Gregory put it, “Singing more and publishing less than Protestants, they celebrated their memory in

⁵ Whether this constitutes the “core” of the Anabaptist movement is contested by historians. I am following my colleague C. Arnold Snyder in proposing believers baptism as the essential criterion. See *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 16.

⁶ Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 160.

distinctive ways, consistent with their ecclesiological views and generally less educated following.”⁷ It was as hymns that the first stories and especially the testimony of the martyrs, and the beliefs for which they died, were preserved and repeated in contexts of worship. The *Ausbund*, which is still the primary hymn book of the Amish today, contains dozens of hymns written by or about martyrs, and generally reflects an ethos of a suffering church. Narrative accounts also circulated, and these were collected and published in the 16th and early 17th centuries. In the 17th century, various Dutch Mennonite leaders collected and expanded their martyrology, the culmination of which was the 1660 publication of *Martyrs Mirror*, edited by Thieleman van Bracht.⁸

The full title—*The Bloody Theatre, 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 year A.D. 1660*—is worth considering for a moment. First of all, the image of “bloody theatre” draws attention to the spectacle of public deaths. It evokes a connection with the earliest Christian martyrs, put to death in Roman arenas for refusing to offer worship to the emperor. Indeed MM includes the stories of these early martyrs as it claims continuity between their suffering for Christ, and the witness of the Anabaptist martyrs. The theatre image draws attention to the public nature of the witness of many martyrs – disputes, trials, last words, death itself, and sometimes miracles associated with execution.⁹

The mirror image further invites “reflection.” Hearers and readers are invited to see themselves, and examine their lives, in comparison with the martyrs. This is a powerful appeal to the conscience. Perhaps the call is to see ourselves not as we are, but as we ought to be.¹⁰ Indeed, challenge and admonition were central to van Bracht’s motivation for collecting martyr accounts as he did. Late 17th century Dutch Mennonites were not persecuted, but tolerated. Many were successful merchants who had become very wealthy. Van Bracht warned that an era of prosperity presented a greater spiritual danger than the time of persecution when the lines between good and evil are more sharply drawn. In times of luxury Satan is hidden and thus all the more dangerous. Van Bracht compiled and arranged his volume in order to bring about a spiritual renewal – a zeal for Christ in the spirit of the martyrs. There is, therefore, in MM an element of nostalgia for a past in which harsh circumstances most clearly separate the true Christians from the false ones.

⁷ Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 197.

⁸ Translated by Joseph Sohm, 3rd edition, 18th printing (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994).

⁹ See Gerald J. Biesecker-Mast, “‘Bloody Theatre’ and Christian Discipleship,” *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, October 2001, 1–10.

¹⁰ See James W. Lowry, “The *Martyrs Mirror*: A Mirror of Nonresistance,” *Mennonite Life* 45, no. 3 (September 1990): 36–44.

MM is structured in three basic parts. The first is an introduction in which van Bracht explains his intentions and outlines the content that follows. He uses the opportunity to remind or teach his readers about Anabaptist convictions, and reproduces a number of confessions of faith used by Dutch Mennonites. I will note that what appears to be a mere inventory of fairly similar statements of faith in fact had an ecumenical purpose. There had been many church splits among the Mennonites, and many of these groups developed their own martyrologies. These martyrologies sanctified the differences between Mennonite groups, as well as the differences between Mennonites and the wider world. By placing many confessions together and linking them as he did, van Bracht aimed to persuade his Mennonite readers of the essential similarity of all the “baptism-minded” Christians, rooted in a commitment to biblical faith and a shared history of suffering, and to thereby overcome these particular church divisions.

The second part recounts a thread of true Christianity through the first 15 centuries after Christ, and prepares the reader to view the Anabaptists as the continuation of the faithful remnant. It offers an account of the often hidden but continuous true church through history, characterized by believers baptism and suffering for the faith. Thus, the stories of the martyrs of the first centuries are included, but also of medieval voices critical of infant baptisms, individuals burned as heretics whose beliefs van Bracht judged to be biblical, early reformers such as Wycliffe and Hus, as well those associated with the Lollards, Waldensians, and Albigensians. It should be clear that van Bracht shares Augustine’s dictum that it is not the manner of the death but the cause that makes a martyr.

The third section includes the accounts of over 1000 16th and early 17th century Anabaptist martyrs. Some are very brief notices. Others appear to be eyewitness reports and thus are more narrative in structure. There are transcripts of disputations, trials, and many, many letters and hymns written from prison. By its 1683 edition, the MM included illustrations by the Dutch etcher and engraver Jan Luyken. These illustrations have surely contributed to the rhetorical and spiritual impact of the book, which remains a living book for religious communities, unlike some other Reformation-era martyrologies.¹¹ These images were not likely used within formal church or worship settings, but in homes and other catechetical settings. Though some early Dutch Mennonites opposed all visual arts as unbiblical, it may be due to some measure of their integration into Dutch society that these kinds of images became acceptable, even as they were deployed to persuade Mennonites to be wary of such integration. I draw attention to five themes in the accounts and images of Anabaptist martyrs.

1. MM establishes essential Anabaptist doctrines and asserts their legitimacy. The confessions of faith in part one are “fleshed out” by the stories in part three. Contemporary Mennonite theologian Tripp York commends this kind of witness as instructive for the church today: “Visible performances of

¹¹ Sarah Covington, “Jan Luyken, the *Martyrs Mirror*, and the Iconography of Suffering,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85 (2011): 441-476.

Christianity have a way of narrating our claims better than our best words.”¹² I have already noted many of these themes already, with believers baptism being primary. Anabaptists were generally anti-clerical and anti-sacramental as well. What emerges in MM testimony is a picture of a thoroughly biblical people engaged in a hostile world. In many cases quite uneducated individuals cite appropriate texts in response to their interrogators, or string together biblical passages, stories and allusions in order to comfort those who would remain after their deaths. The interweaving of biblical texts, and martyred lives, presents an integrated appeal to readers to remain true to *this particular* story of faithfulness.

2. The MM demonstrates the posture of *Gelassenheit*. Often translated as yieldedness, *Gelassenheit* was crucial to late medieval mysticism, and especially Benedictine spirituality, in which several key Anabaptist leaders were formed. It entailed radical obedience and trust in the will of God, but if it was in the first instance an inner disposition, it had always to manifest in outer actions. As martyrs are tortured and led to their deaths, they are portrayed as steadfast, but also as human. They are not generally portrayed as superhuman or heroic. The etchings, for example, do not show “grand speechifying,” but rather very human shock, agony, exhaustion, in meekness and humility.¹³

Wrote one soon-to-be martyr from prison: “we must deny ourselves; that is, we must forsake our own will, and surrender ourselves wholly to Jesus Christ, so that according to the words of the apostle, we live no more unto ourselves, but unto Jesus Christ, who died for us... [we] are to consider that Christ Jesus himself did not do His own will, but the will of His Father who sent Him.”¹⁴

3. MM portrays conformity to Christ in all things. Matt 10:24 (and parallels) are frequently quoted in letters of martyrs and testimony of witnesses. “A disciple is not greater than his master.” Suffering ought to be an expected part of the Christian life, and this was one reason why Anabaptists believed only adults could make the baptismal commitment to follow Christ. And several images in the MM bear unmistakable similarities to classic renditions of the crucifixion of Christ.

But conformity to Christ referred not only to suffering, but to following his teachings and example, and its exemplification of “love of enemies” gives the Dirk Willems story and especially the illustration particular resonance. Dirk escaped from prison, indicating that suffering and death were not to be actively sought out, even if they could be expected. Yet, following the example of Christ, he turned immediately to the service of another.

4. Eschatology. The martyrs are oriented by a particular kind of future hope. Most immediately, they express faith that they will be soon dwelling in their heavenly home, and on this basis, encourage onlookers. One tells her children, “If you do what I write you, you shall see me again in great glory, and

¹² Tripp York, *The Purple Crown: The Politics of Martyrdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008), 97.

¹³ Covington, “Jan Luyken,” 470.

¹⁴ Walter of Stoelwijk, 1541, in Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 164.

you shall be as kings and queens.”¹⁵ At the same time a high proportion of martyrs draw attention to God’s judgment and wrath on their persecutors as enemies of God. This might be surprising to contemporary readers who know of Anabaptist nonresistance. Yet, it is consistent with their belief in the basic hostility of the world to Christ in the present age, yet of God’s ultimate victory in the age to come.

5. The MM is addressed to those who are charged with preserving a memory of faithfulness. The need to memorialize suffering for the sake faith, for the sake of times of future persecution and especially for times of toleration and prosperity, stands behind martyrology itself, but is also highlighted by the text and the images. One of the most famous stories is of Maeyken Wens, represented with an almost comical image of her children rooting around in her ashes. An Anabaptist in Antwerp, she was arrested, resisted entreaties to recant, and was sentence to burning. Her tongue was screwed to the top of her mouth to prevent her from giving any verbal testimony during her death by fire. During her imprisonment, she spoke to her children, depicted here, encouraging them to take care of each other and to follow Jesus. “Believe not what men say, but obey that which the New Testament commands you, and ask God teach you His will.”¹⁶ Though silenced at the stake, her voice is preserved by texts written and preserved. Her children later combed through the ashes and preserved the tongue screw, a “relic” still in the hands of Dutch Mennonites.

IV. The function of MM in communities of faith

I have already discussed van Bracht’s stated purpose in compiling MM and commending it for the spiritual renewal of Dutch Mennonites. Yet, another motive has been identified, though not yet researched in depth. In the context of the Dutch struggle against the rule of Catholic Spain, the anti-Catholicism of the MM served to highlight a commonality between Mennonites and wider Dutch society, and helped establish Mennonite respectability.¹⁷ I note this not to detract from the witness of the martyrs but to turn our attention to the fact that contemporary communities appropriate martyrologies for various ends.

As I consider how the MM functions among contemporary “progressive” or “assimilated” Mennonites, especially in Canada and the US, I must immediately note that there is no single, simple answer. Casual references to MM in denominational publications will sometimes note that historically, the MM was the “second most important book” in Mennonite homes, after the Bible. I’m not aware of research that corroborates this. However, this does appear to be the case for Old Order Mennonite and

¹⁵ MM, 977.

¹⁶ MM, 982.

¹⁷ For example, in Robert Krieder, “A *Martyrs Mirror* Invitation,” *Mennonite Life* 45, no. 3 (September 1990), 8; and James C. Juhnke, “Shaping Religious Community Through Martyr Memories,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73 (1999): 549.

Amish houses.¹⁸ Amish worship services use the *Ausbund* hymnal; Amish sermons often include illustrations drawn from MM that emphasize obedience, suffering and nonconformity.¹⁹

However, in my own “progressive” or “assimilated” Mennonite context, MM ranges from serving as sign of cultural or ethnic identity, to being a spiritual resource, to being an emblem of a rigidity in faith that ought to be left behind, to being unknown. The book itself is a cultural artifact, one that my own peers might have received from grandparents on the occasion of graduation from high school, university, or at baptism, though unlike the Bible, there would be very little expectation that any part of it be read. The Dirk Willems image and story are especially familiar, and versions have it have been used in hundreds of Sunday school materials, bulletin covers, denominational publications, Mennonite websites, and even on the label of a (failed) beer brewed by Mennonites.²⁰ It has been dramatized in a play that presents a complex, even sympathetic portrait of the jailer, while exploring Dirk’s conscience as well.²¹

In the earliest years of the Anabaptist movement, a martyr mentality fostered bold preaching and missionary engagement. Years of persecution resulted in a withdrawal from society into somewhat insular communities, for understandable reasons. The beliefs and practices for which the martyrs died had to be preserved, and when threats arose migration was the most common response. Because of these patterns of separation and migration, “Mennonite” came to denote a cultural or ethnic identity in addition to, or even apart from, faith identity.

For some, their Mennonite heritage and identity is important, even if the Christian faith is not. The MM may serve to locate them within their particular cultural and ethnic history. Given its role as an artifact of the emergence of distinct Anabaptist communities, it has become a source of creative engagement with cultural and familial identity.

A recent publication entitled *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* consists of poems, stories, essays and images inspired by the MM, many of which were contributed by writers in their 20s and 30s. The dynamic of speaking and silence, evident in the Maeyken Wens story to which the title refers, reverberates for many contemporary Mennonites. For some, the martyr stories speak to them, and are an encouragement and sign of strength. For others, the stories are an enormous burden, and silence their own voices. Stephanie Krehbiel writes about how her sense of the martyr legacy took on new meaning in

¹⁸ Richard A. Stevick, *Growing up Amish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 7.

¹⁹ Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 102-103.

²⁰ Hundreds of uses of the image and story are documented in David Luthy, *Dirk Willems: His Noble Deed Lives On* (Alymer, ON: Pathway Publishers, 2011).

²¹ James C. Juhnke, *Dirk’s Exodus: A Historical Drama*, in *Four Class Acts: Kansas Theatre*, ed. R. J. Buckman and R. N. Lawson (Topeka, KS: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 1992), 85-183. Important articles on the reception and use of the MM in Mennonite communities include James C. Juhnke, “Shaping Religious Community Through Martyr Memories,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73 (1999): 546-556; and Julia Spicher Kasdorf, “Mightier than the Sword: *Martyrs Mirror* in the New World,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 44-70.

the months after the attacks of September 11, 2001. As suspicion and violence came to fall on American Muslims, the victimization that the martyr stories represented became deeply unsettling to her. “I resented how the martyrs were taught to me, as heroes whose gory demises should somehow fortify me against evil.”²² Martyrs appeared to be world-denying, actively seeking death; and their memory used to strengthen an “us against them” kind of mentality. These stories are not what we need, she writes, “I need stories that give me hope. I also need stories that offer me agency, the power to act and to create change.”²³

One Mennonite writer, Melvin Goering, argues that the martyr stories exhibit a lack of openness to outsiders, rigid ideas of right and wrong, and an absolute commitment to purity that is socially and psychologically damaging to contemporary Mennonites. The reality is that many Mennonites are well-educated, professional, culturally engaged and politically active – Mennonites live in a different world than did the martyrs.²⁴ Yet, this critique elicits a response from Gerald Mast, for whom the offensiveness of the MM to our sensibilities may be a sign of “its prophetic worth to us.”²⁵

Poet and educator Julia Spicher Kasdorf writes about her experience of childhood sexual abuse by an elderly neighbour, and how she viewed it through the lens of the martyrs’ sacrifice. “Well, that was not so bad. It was only my body,”²⁶ she recalls saying to herself. But as she later reflects on the ways the martyr legacy may instill silence, she also discovers that the martyr legacy was a means of survival. Through her own practice of writing, she came to see the martyrs as “men and women who spoke with their words and with their bodies, who refused to hold their tongues or keep the peace.”²⁷ The collection of writings in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* gives voice to ways martyr memories resonate in an otherwise quite assimilated people, and resurface as individuals make sense of a variety of common and uncommon experiences, from the attempted suicide of a mother’s teenage daughter to practical decisions about how to live simply in an age of consumerism.

My own family history, on my father’s side, includes the trauma experienced by the German-speaking Mennonites in the Ukraine during the Russian Revolution, the pillaging by bandits, Stalinist purges and collectivization, and the vicissitudes of World War 2. Many who experienced this history refer to those who were killed as martyrs, even though this is contested by others who say that Mennonites were targeted much more for their wealth, often at the expense of Ukrainian peasants, than

²² Stephanie Krehbiel, “Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior,” in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror*, ed. Kristen Eve Beachy (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 137.

²³ Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 142.

²⁴ Melvin Goering, “Dying to be Pure: The Martyr Story,” *Mennonite Life* 47, no. 4 (December 1992): 9-15.

²⁵ Gerald J. Mast, “How the *Martyrs Mirror* Helped Saved Me: A Response to Krehbiel and Goering,” *Mennonite Life*, 61, no. 4 (December 2006), online.

²⁶ Julia Spicher Kasdorf, “Writing Like a Mennonite,” in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, 167.

²⁷ Kasdorf, “Writing Like a Mennonite,” 182.

for their particular faith.²⁸ Needless to say, MM has profoundly shaped the collective imagination of Mennonites.

One finds home-made devotional videos of MM stories on YouTube. Many Mennonite scholars and leaders make use of the MM for exhortative and catechetical purposes. While the MM as a book is most popular as an artifact and may not be widely read, there is a consistent sense that martyr stories are a resource for contemporary spiritual and ethical life. Indeed, several theologians and church leaders argue for a more active retrieval of the story of the martyrs as a means of encouraging radical discipleship, and the Mennonite witness around the world.²⁹ A travelling museum exhibition of the MM shared with van Bracht an interest in fostering spiritual renewal.³⁰

A young Mennonite from Philadelphia, Cruz Cordero, has written and performed a rap called “Onward Martyrdom,” drawing on the stories of the martyrs to encourage young people to not only commit to Christ but to embrace radical nonviolent discipleship and active peacemaking. “It’s time to get fanatical with this gift that God gives; if this love is in you, then you would do what Dirk did; Dirk Willems, that is, a true servant, who worked his faith out, by putting his life on the line. What was Dirk thinking? It was Christ on his mind. What was Dirk drinking? It was a special kind of wine.”³¹ In his rap, Cordero connects 16th century Anabaptists, contemporary peacemakers in the gang context of inner city Philadelphia, and the heroes of the Meserete Kristos church, an Anabaptist movement in Ethiopia that experienced tremendous persecution in the 1980s and 90s, and also tremendous growth.

While the MM has sometimes been used to highlight the Swiss and Dutch origins of Anabaptism, and suggest that “real” Mennonites share a historical connection to the story that begins in the MM, many Mennonites in the global south have spoken about how, through faith and suffering, that story has become

²⁸ See Aron A. Toews, *Mennonite Martyrs: People Who Suffered for their Faith, 1920-1940* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1990); original: *Mennonitische Märtyrer* I (Winnipeg, 1949), II (North Clearbrook, 1954); and Cornelius Krahn, “Martyrs (Russia),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1957), accessed June 25, 2013, www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M37859.html. See also Walter Sawatsky, “Dying for What Faith? Martyrologies to Inspire and Heal or to Foster Christian Division?” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 71-86.

²⁹ There are too many such articles and resources to list here. A small sample follows. Gerald and Carrie Mast have developed a peace curriculum for children based on the MM: <http://martyrstock.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/teaching-peace-with-martyrs-mirror.docx>. See also Alan Kreider, “‘The Servant is not Greater Than His Master’: Anabaptists and the Suffering Church,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58 (1984): 5–29; idem, “The Relevance of the Martyrs Mirror for Our Time,” *Mennonite Life* 45, no. 3 (September 1990): 9-17; Joseph Liechty, “Staying Mennonite: Why Martyrs Still Matter,” *Mennonite Life* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2007): online; Gerald Biesecker-Mast, “*The Da Vinci Code, Martyrs Mirror* and the Faithful church,” *The Mennonite*, July 18, 2006, 15-17; Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2006), chapters 8 and 12; York, *The Purple Crown*.

³⁰ *The Mirror of the Martyrs*, museum exhibit, curated by Robert Kreider, opened in 1990, Bethel College, Kansas, www.bethelks.edu/kauffman/martyrs/moreinfo.html.

³¹ Cruz Cordero, “Onward Martyrdom,” rap lyrics (no date), www.mcusa-archives.org/mhb/Cordero-Rap.html, accessed June 6, 2013. Videos: www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxxDDFWaUfA and www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIimiokalAVE

their story. Mennonite churches have flourished in several contexts of hostility or persecution, including Ethiopia, Colombia, and Indonesia.³²

A conversation to “update” the MM has emerged in recent years. The idea is still taking shape, but among those who participated in a recent consultation on the project (to which I was invited but unfortunately unable to attend), there was general agreement on the value of compiling more recent stories of faithfulness in the midst of suffering. The goals identified were “to inspire greater faithfulness within the global Anabaptist community (and among all Christians) through the gathering of stories of costly discipleship to Jesus, to encourage a deeper sense of ecclesial connectedness and spiritual unity within the global Anabaptist community (and, secondarily, within the broader Christian church), and to honor the voices and experiences of the vulnerable.”

However, this prospect raised a host of questions for the consultation participants. Is this an “updating” of MM, or a new project? What’s the difference? Must accounts involve death, or would other forms of suffering be included? What are the confessional “boundaries” of inclusion? Explicitly Mennonite? Anabaptist in “spirit”? Will this project reinforce Mennonite or Anabaptist identity over against other Christians, or will to be more open in gifts given to and received from the wider church? One person asked whether it is appropriate to assume that we, the North American Mennonites leading the project at this point, are heirs of the martyrs; perhaps in the current global order, we are more akin to the persecutors.³³

Some of the participants in that consultation echoed concerns expressed by the Mennonite delegation in the International Lutheran-Mennonite dialogue. In that final report of that dialogue, the Mennonites acknowledged that we “have sometimes claimed the martyr tradition as a badge of Christian superiority and have sometimes nurtured an identity rooted in victimization that has fostered a sense of self-righteousness and arrogance and has blinded us to the frailties and failures that are also deeply woven into our tradition.”³⁴ This raises a crucial question I will address in my final section. Does the legacy of the MM foster division among Christians, or help overcome it?

³² See Nancy R. Heisey, “Martyrdom as Metaphor: Aspects of Global Anabaptist Witness,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 31-48.

³³ Unpublished minutes, “Bearing Witness: A New *Martyrs Mirror* for the 21st Century?” consultation, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, August 5-8, 2012.

³⁴ “Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ,” report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation; Strasbourg: Mennonite World Conference, 2010), 107.

V. *Martyrs Mirror* in ecumenical perspective

Anabaptism has enjoyed something of a resurgence in recent decades, both theologically and missiologically.³⁵ In a post-Christendom context, there is interest in a tradition that has long articulated the theological desirability of being a minority, and attempted to integrate evangelical passion with practical discipleship. And with this has come an interest in the ways in which Anabaptist history, including martyr history, may be inspiring and instructive today, not just for Mennonites, but for the churches.

Add to this a general ecumenical interest in saints and martyrs, and the movement to adopting the martyrs of other traditions. Pope John Paul II asserted that martyrs are “the most powerful proof that every factor of division can be transcended and overcome in the total gift of the self for the sake of the gospel.”³⁶ The various ecumenical initiatives to “adopt each other’s martyrs” across current confessional lines, such as the commemoration of ten martyrs of the 20th century in Westminster Abbey and the Ecumenical Martyrology about which we will hear more tomorrow, are surely fruit of such remarkable insights. One can almost imagine Dirk Willems among their number.

A major problem is that Anabaptist martyrs were generally executed by other Christians who believed their actions were just as faithful. If we now regard Lutherans and Catholics for example, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we cannot say that Anabaptist martyrs fit the classical pattern of accepting death at the hands of those who hated the faith. Some of the doctrines for which Anabaptist martyrs died remain contentious, even church-dividing, to this day. Yet, it is not theological tenable for these to be just “our” martyrs, in a sectarian way, as if their deaths are primarily about the legitimacy of contemporary Mennonite denominations. There is clearly an inward looking, sectarian, dimension of the MM that I believe ought not to be the last word. Nor ought we to celebrate them simply for “dying for what they believed in,” if the content of their beliefs are actually misguided, even unfaithful. Of course, we must seek to understand their actions in their 16th century context historically and theologically, but we cannot leave it at that if we are to consider their significance for today. If they are truly martyrs, they point to Christ with their lives and with their deaths, and are thus witnesses of and to the whole church.

³⁵ I am most familiar with the North American context. I would point to the influence of key theologians (John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas), peace-minded evangelicals (such as Brian McLaren and Ron Sider), the “discovery” of the Anabaptists by Baptist scholars in the U.S., the new Monastic movement, the work of Mennonite Central Committee and Christian Peacemaker Teams, and Anabaptist networks in places such as the UK (see Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* [Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010].)

³⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint: Encyclical Letter on Commitment to Ecumenism* (1995), no. 1.

Though some Mennonite theologians would disagree with me, I maintain that Mennonites and other Christians ought to regard Anabaptism as a reform movement within the church catholic.³⁷ Within that framework, is the legacy of the MM a hindrance or a gift?

First, we may notice some ecumenical impulses within MM itself. Not only 16th-century Anabaptists are included. The story of faithfulness includes Catholics and other Reformers throughout church history, framed in terms of a suffering, true, church. Even in the 16th century, there is the remarkable inclusion of Leonhard Keyser, a Lutheran. Though the editor probably thought Keyser was an Anabaptist—he did speak about believers baptism, and linked baptism with suffering—this misrecognition might suggest that seemingly rigid doctrinal boundaries in are in fact more fuzzy in reality.

As already noted, the editors of MM sought to heal various Mennonite schisms by including in one volume Anabaptist martyrs revered by divided Mennonite churches. The editors not only bound these stories together under one cover, they reframed the story of the martyrs as a much larger one, stretching back to the early church and Christ himself, and including an often hidden history of radical reform in the church. They reframed Mennonite martyrology in order to accomplish a goal they deemed consistent with that for which the martyrs died, even if the martyrs themselves might not have put it that way.

Secondly, I would call Mennonites to a specific posture of repentance. The recent request for forgiveness by the LWF to Mennonites for 16th-century persecution presents a powerful witness to other Christians and to the world, but also a temptation for Mennonites to claim self-righteousness. The Lutheran action *may* be taken as a sign that our Anabaptist forbearers navigated the Reformation-era with greater faithfulness; after all I can say to Catholics, and Lutherans, and Reformed, you killed us but we didn't kill you. Our contemporary consciousness of human rights and religious freedom judges religiously motivated lethal violence to be virtually the worst offence imaginable. But from a Christian theological perspective, execution is not the worst thing one may undergo. We Mennonites must ask what spiritual damage we have caused? How we have alienated individuals from God, inhibited the movement of the Spirit, denied Christ, betrayed the church? Rowan Williams reads the gospel story as God's graceful forgiveness of *our* killing of Jesus. The victim exalted by God is not just any victim, but *our* victim.³⁸ Furthermore, he writes: "The whole church needs for its wholeness the memory both of its capacity for violence and of the great witnesses to the risen Jesus who have appeared in the midst of it."³⁹

³⁷ I develop this claim further in "Reframing Anabaptism," presentations to the Mennonite Church Canada Ministers Conference, 2011, <http://resources.mennonitechurch.ca/ResourceView/43/13757>.

³⁸ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, rev. ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 4-5.

³⁹ Williams, *Resurrection*, 50-51.

Thus, I believe that in addition to adopting each other's saints and martyrs, we Mennonites ought to ask what it would mean to adopt our persecutors as one with us in the Body of Christ. Our use of martyr language for this 16th century history suggests that we have regarded our persecutors as outside the Body. I believe it crucial for us to begin to see how 16th century ruptures were not "us" versus "them," but rather the tragedy and sin of violence and division within the Body. We must see ourselves in the mirror of those who put others to death, and there experience the pain of recognition. This is step towards seeing ourselves as persecutors, as betrayers of Jesus, and thus in profound need of repentance, forgiveness, and grace. As I have written elsewhere, "It may be that the testimony of the Holy Spirit is most clearly revealed in what is done with the *story* of the sixteenth-century martyrs. That testimony may turn out once again to remind a faithful people of God's grace in the face of continued human revolt. The profound lamentation of the wounds within the Body and the repentance that is the only proper response, learned through wrestling with a history of confessional martyrs, may be the real gift to the church."⁴⁰

Thirdly and finally, I propose that a penitent relationship with even the MM means, for Mennonites, that we let go of our sense of exclusive ownership of this martyr history. We ought to "give it away" for the sake the wider church, and for the sake of receiving a truly Christian, as opposed to narrowly Mennonite or Anabaptist, identity. We have claimed it, but it is not really "ours" to give in the first place. In a recent journal article, I proposed that we Mennonites cease regarding those Anabaptists in MM as martyrs unless and until we hear from other Christians that these deaths do bear a kind of witness for the whole church.⁴¹

I mean this quite seriously and I especially welcome your response. I do not want a sense of guilt for the legacy of religious violence to cause Lutherans or Catholics to say too quickly, "of course they are martyrs." It may be that Lutherans who repent of past theological justification of lethal violence will very legitimately be unable to regard those victims of violence as martyrs in the full theological sense.

Moreover, I do not mean my proposal for adopting each other's persecutors, for Mennonite repentance, or for the "giving away" of Anabaptist martyrs, to be in any way a denial of gifts the Anabaptist tradition may have to offer for the continual reform of Christ's church. If I were not persuaded that such gifts exist, I would not be a Mennonite. Rather, I envision my proposal as ultimately oriented to the possibility that my strong convictions and commitments to reform may be truly heard by other traditions as a call from *within* the Body of Christ.

Some of what I am calling for is happening in the Bridgefolk movement, a primarily North American grassroots movement of "sacramentally-minded Mennonites and peace-minded Roman

⁴⁰ Jeremy M. Bergen, "Problem or Promise? Confessional Martyrs and Mennonite–Roman Catholic Relations," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41 (2004): 387. See also Heisey, "Remembering Dirk Willems," 355-375.

⁴¹ "Lutheran Repentance at Stuttgart and Mennonite Ecclesial Identity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 86 (2012): 335-338.

Catholics” who gather for fellowship, sharing, and encouragement. A year ago, “the Michael Sattler House,” on the grounds of the Saint John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, was dedicated as a place of spirituality, service, and social justice. Sattler was a Benedictine prior who became an Anabaptist. He was the primary author of the foundational Schleithem Confession of 1527 and martyred soon after. At the dedication, an open letter was read: “We at the Michael Sattler House have come to believe that Catholics can now regard Michael Sattler as an early martyr witness to the principles of social justice and freedom of conscience which became official Catholic doctrine at Vatican II—in the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, and in *The Church in the Modern World*... We also believe Mennonites and Amish can now view Michael Sattler not only as one of their major founders, but as one who brought with him the riches of the pre-Reformation Benedictine tradition in which he was formed, and on which many of their own traditions are based.”⁴² I still have questions about what this means for Catholics to regard Sattler as a martyr, but I’m glad this conversation is happening.

Though Sattler and Dirk Willems and others would undoubtedly be surprised, even puzzled, by the twists and turns in the reception of their witness in various parts of the church catholic, I do believe they could detect an impulse for greater faithfulness, and thus for the unity, of the Body of Christ.

⁴² Dated May 20, 2012; available at: www.bridgefolk.net/misc/an-open-letter-to-our-mennonite-and-catholic-colleagues/, accessed June 24, 2013. See also Peter C. Erb, ed., *Martyrdom in an Ecumenical Perspective: A Mennonite-Catholic Conversation* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007).