

Extending the Anabaptist trail

<https://anabaptistworld.org/extending-the-anabaptist-trail/> Paul Schrag, June 30 2025

Bold women and warring peasants emerge from history's shadow as Austrians keep the faith



Tour co-leader Kimberly Schmidt explores an Anabaptist history display at the Kirche St. Andrä Catholic Church in Salzburg, Austria. The quote on the image of Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hubmaier says, "The truth is undying." — Paul Schrag/AW

One can plan an Anabaptist history tour and still discover surprises, especially in a big anniversary year.

On May 22, 2025 in Salzburg, Austria, just two blocks from the hotel where American Mennonite tourists were staying, a banner outside *Kirche St. Andrä* (St. Andrew's Church) announced an exhibit on *Täufergeschichte in Österreich* (Anabaptist History in Austria).

The title: "*Brennen für das Leben*" (On Fire for Life).

The topic: 500 years of Anabaptism.

"Who knew?" said tour co-leader Mary Sprunger, professor of history at Eastern Mennonite University. "It looks to be sponsored by the Austrian Anabaptist Historical Society."

An Anabaptist exhibit in a Catholic church?

To the Americans, it was surprising.

To an Austrian?

"Being here is a miracle," said Peter Brandes, a Salzburg Baptist pastor who helped organize the exhibit.



Peter Brandes, a Baptist pastor in Salzburg, Austria, talks about the Anabaptist history exhibit he helped organize, displayed at the Kirche St. Andrä in Salzburg. — Paul Schrag/AW

In Austria, he said, there isn't a big difference between Baptists and Mennonites. They're two of Austria's five recognized free churches — adult-baptizing Protestants distinct from the state-affiliated Lutherans and Reformed — alongside the Roman Catholic majority (though only about 3% of Austrians are churchgoers).

And the historic rift between Catholics and Protestants?

"[The exhibit] is an expression of the change in the past 20 years," he said. "Then, there were no connections between Catholics and free churches. Now, we have dialogue. . . .

"It helps us as free churches to understand our history and to share it with the Catholics. The [Austrian] cardinal is very pro-Anabaptist. . . .

"It is good to know that Salzburg is on the Anabaptist trail."

It is now, the American visitors said. Salzburg diverges from typical Anabaptist history pilgrimages.

"We need more tours going east of Innsbruck [in western Austria], because that's important to our history as well," said Kimberly Schmidt, emerita professor of history at EMU, who co-led the tour.

The tour's theme, "Gender and Class" — specifically, women and peasants — put lesser-known stories in the spotlight.

"Anabaptist history isn't just about the elites like the Zurich Three [Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, George Blaurock]," Schmidt said. "For me, women and peasants are the big reason to do this tour, because they are so overlooked."

She saw the Austrian historians' exhibit in a similar vein.

"They're tying Anabaptism directly to the Peasants' War," she said, referring to the bloody revolt against lords and clerics that convulsed the German-speaking lands in 1525, the year Anabaptism began. "The people who are willing to make that connection are usually from outside our Mennonite tradition, especially the Austrian and German historians."

The full story hasn't been told. Brandes said many documents in the University of Salzburg archives could reveal more about Anabaptism in the region.

"I think we are on the brink of an explosion of information about Anabaptist history in Austria," Schmidt said.

For the 30 people on the trip, the surprise in Salzburg confirmed that Anabaptist history inspires diverse Christians today.

The group, mostly EMU alumni, visited Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany and Switzerland on a two-week tour, one of six organized by TourMagination around [Mennonite World Conference's celebration](#) of [Anabaptism's 500th anniversary](#) in Zurich on May 29.

On their first stop, Vienna, they met Alexander Basnar, a member of a tiny Anabaptist group in the Austrian village of Krumau am Kamp.



Alexander Basnar of Krumau am Kamp, Austria, talks about Anabaptist history in the courtyard by St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. — Paul Schrag/AW

With a long beard and brimmed hat, he appears Amish, but said the seven people in his fellowship are unaffiliated Anabaptists, living in community and sharing possessions.

"We are somewhere between Beachy Amish and Hutterites," he said. "We lean toward the Plain part of Anabaptism."

They're committed to sharing whenever there is a need but keep separate bank accounts.

"You could call it an intense way of fellowship," said Basnar, an unmarried schoolteacher whose daughter and son-in-law are part of the group. "I come home to family, and the church feels like that. It is a place to belong, and that is what I think the church ought to be — a home.

"We may look fierce and conservative, but we are quite warm and loving."

Basnar became a Christian after meeting a youth group in Vienna led by Canadian Mennonite Brethren missionary Abe Neufeld in 1987 and taking a Reformation history class.

"I caught fire," he said. "I noticed that the Anabaptist way of doing church is more courageous."

Learning about the Hutterites, Basnar was drawn to their communal way of life. Five years ago, he said, "the Lord led that we could start an Anabaptist church."

“We don’t preach that much,” he said, noting that Europeans don’t appreciate proselytizing. “It’s not about preaching. It’s about living as Christians. I know everyone in the village. They know what we believe.”

Carrying copies of the *Martyrs Mirror* and *Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* through the streets of Vienna, Basnar read stories of martyrs at historic sites.

The tourists stopped at the Stephansplatz, near the location where the Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hubmaier — a recurring figure on the group’s journey — was tortured before being executed by burning in 1528. Pausing at a building of the University of Vienna where Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli and Anabaptist founder Conrad Grebel studied, they talked about flawed heroes.

Grebel was “quite a wild card” in his university days, Schmidt said. He “got kicked out of Vienna and ended up in Paris, where he became even more rebellious,” frequenting brothels, fighting and failing to earn a degree.

“Grebel’s life turned around when he started studying with Zwingli,” Schmidt said. Grebel’s freethinking lifestyle foreshadowed his courage to challenge church and state authority.

“That type of history is often not spoken of, but we need to know that we can stumble and still accomplish great things,” Schmidt said.

Next, the group met Michael Deimel, who at 6-foot-11 would stand out in any crowd, even more so when sporting traditional Alpine garb. He and his wife, Martha, belong to the Mennonite Free Church of Vienna, a fellowship of 40 to 50 people.



Michael and Martha Deimel, members of the Mennonite Free Church of Vienna, at the Anabaptist house at the Niedersulz museum in Austria. — Paul Schrag/AW

It’s one of six Mennonite congregations in Austria, totaling just over 400 members, that make up the Mennonite Free Church of Austria, which in turn is a member of the International Community of Mennonite Brethren.

In 2022, Austrian MB congregations played a key role in driving vans loaded with donated supplies to Ukraine and returning with refugees from the war with Russia.

"I fell in love with the Mennonites because of the missionaries and their friends," Michael Deimel said. He credits the postwar revival of Anabaptism in Austria to Abe and Irene Neufeld — the mission workers Basnar also cited — who worked in the country for many years, beginning in the 1950s.

He said the Vienna congregation is about half the size it used to be.

"If you want to pray for us, we urgently need younger people," said Deimel, who is 76.

A version of Anabaptism that's new to Austria — while also drawing inspiration from the region's Hutterite history — is the Bruderhof, a communal movement that began in Germany in the 1920s. Some of its members felt God leading them to regain a presence in German-speaking countries, said Simon Manke, a leader of the community of about 30 people.

In 2019, the Bruderhof, with about 3,000 members worldwide, bought a farm from a Dominican monastery near Retz for three families — one each from the United States, Germany and England — to live the Bruderhof way: sharing a common purse and working together.

The community, Gutshof Bruderhof, runs an organic farm, selling vegetables and homemade products like tomato sauce, pickles, jam and crackers. Delivering about 120 boxes of produce a week, they've connected with the Mennonites in Vienna, who provide a pickup spot for customers in the city.

One member, Sue Barth, is a great-granddaughter of Eberhard and Emmy Arnold, who founded the Bruderhof movement. She moved from a Bruderhof in New York state.



Sue Barth of the Gutshof Bruderhof near Retz, Austria, describes products from the community's farm.
— Paul Schrag/AW

"I've promised that where the church needs me, I will go," Barth said. "Ultimately, I'm here to further God's kingdom, so it shouldn't matter where I live."

Farther north, at Niedersulz, near the border of the Czech Republic, a museum gives visitors a taste of Austrian life before 1900, including an oddity of Anabaptist history: chained women.

At the museum's "Anabaptist house," an iron chain symbolizes the 16th-century practice. Anabaptist women whose husbands hadn't joined the heretical sect were held prisoner in their own houses. It's not known how often this was done.



Tour participant Shirley Hershey Showalter holds a chain at the Niedersulz museum in Austria that symbolizes Anabaptist women who were chained to their houses. — Paul Schrag/AW

Because Anabaptists risked death or exile, and a family would fail without a mother, it was decided that “such a wife should be kept on a chain,” a museum display says.

One woman, Elizabeth Reich, charged with heresy in 1597, “was not properly connected to the chain” and presumably escaped.

“The legend is that the chains didn’t stop her from preaching,” Schmidt said of another woman, Margareta Hellwart, who rebuffed attempts by her husband and clergy to convince her of her error.

“The chain solved no problems,” the museum display says. “Indecisive men were often drawn to the side of their Anabaptist wives.”

Crossing Austria’s northern border to the Czech Republic, the group entered a region of historic Anabaptism that Mennonite tourists rarely visit. Until European Communism ended in the early 1990s, the 16th-century regional Anabaptist hotbed of Moravia was situated behind the Iron Curtain.

Today, it’s an uninterrupted short drive from the border to Mikulov, formerly Nikolsburg, where in 1526 Hubmaier established a short-lived Anabaptist city — “one of the few examples of territorial Anabaptism,” Sprunger said.



Mikulov, formerly Nikolsburg, in the Czech Republic, where in 1526 Balhasar Hubmaier established a short-lived Anabaptist city. — Paul Schrag/AW

A popular theologian willing to bear a sword, Hubmaier “gained the protection of the lords of Liechtenstein, and the main city church became an Anabaptist church,” Schmidt said.

By 1527, around 12,000 Anabaptists, mostly refugees from persecution, lived in Nikolsburg. But Anabaptist dominance lasted only about a year, collapsing amid conflict between the pacifist *Stäbler* (staff bearers) and battle-ready *Schwertler* (sword bearers).

The Liechtenstein nobles banished the *Stäbler* from Nikolsburg, and the dream of an Anabaptist city died — until the rise of the infamous Anabaptist cult that ruled Münster in 1534-35.

In modern Mikulov, an abandoned 500-year-old house stands as a lone relic of Hubmaier's time.

"This would have been the heart of the Anabaptist community, and this is all we have left," Schmidt said.

Returning to Austria, the tourists visited Münichau castle, where Helena von Freyberg, a rare Anabaptist from the nobility, used her wealth and prestige to get away with harboring Anabaptist fugitives.



Münichau, the castle where Austrian Anabaptist noblewoman Helena von Freyberg harbored Anabaptist fugitives. — Wendy Funk Schrag

Helena "flew under the radar because she was a woman," Schmidt said. "The authorities pursued the male leaders, thinking the movement would collapse. But Anabaptism was a grassroots movement, and the strategy failed."

Helena's entire household, except her husband, was rebaptized. She led Anabaptist meetings in the castle. When her privileged status could no longer protect her, she fled to Constanze, then Augsburg, where she led congregations and outwitted authorities, who called her "the evil Freybergerin" — a "nasty woman" of her day, Schmidt said, "who deserves much more attention than she gets."

Through their kinship and household networks, Anabaptist women played key roles in spreading the faith. They brought their maids and cooks into the movement. Because Anabaptist hunters didn't watch them closely, they could go to public markets and spread the word about secret meetings without raising suspicion.

Anabaptist hunters did lucrative work for the ruling authorities because they could claim the property of those who were arrested or executed.

An especially zealous employer of Anabaptist hunters was Wolf Dietrich von Raitenau, prince-archbishop of Salzburg from 1587 to 1612. Mobilizing his secular and religious power, Raitenau made the Tyrol region a center of the Counter-Reformation — the Catholic campaign to regain territory lost

to Protestants. Due to his wealth, “the struggle against Anabaptist heretics could be carried out with almost unlimited manpower,” Schmidt said.



The Residenzplatz in Salzburg, Austria, probable location where 18 Anabaptists were burned in 1528, depicted in a Martyrs Mirror illustration. — Paul Schrag/AW

In Salzburg, the tourists visited the square that’s the probable location — decades before Raitenau’s reign — where 18 Anabaptists were burned at the stake, a mass execution depicted in a *Martyrs - Mirror* illustration (below).



Continuing west to Innsbruck, the group visited one of Austria’s leading tourist sites — a town square featuring a golden roof — where a plaque honors Jakob Hutter, namesake of the Hutterites, who was burned at the stake in the city in 1536.

A monument in Huttererpark tells the story of the Hutterites, a branch of Anabaptism that continues in rural colonies in Canada and the northern U.S. Great Plains, with an estimated population of 58,000.

Honoring Tyrol's persecuted Anabaptists, the monument invites visitors to "reflect on how we treat dissenters."

Hutter's wife, Katharina, deserves to be remembered, too, Schmidt said. Arrested with Jakob, she refused to recant, escaped from prison and eluded the authorities for two years before being caught and executed in 1538.

Between 1527 and 1529, 49 Anabaptist women were executed in the Tyrol region, a higher percentage of women martyrs than anywhere else.

Though nonviolent, Anabaptists who were willing to die rather than deny their beliefs held much in common with those who fought in the Peasants' War of 1525.

"The peasants' armed resistance informed the Anabaptists' spiritual resistance," Schmidt said, citing a new book about the war, *Summer of Fire and Blood*, by Lyndal Roper. "Veterans of the Peasants' War formed the rank and file of the early Anabaptist movement."



A room in the library of the Melk Abbey in northern Austria. While the current structure was built in the early 1700s, the wealth of Catholic institutions was established centuries earlier. Resentment against the cloistered clergy's comfortable lives was one of the grievances that provoked the Peasants' War in 1525. — Paul Schrag/AW

The greatest popular uprising in Europe before the French Revolution, the Peasants' War claimed the lives of 70,000 to 100,000 people — about a third of those who took up arms. Peasant armies rose against lords and clerics, achieving success for a few months before being brutally crushed.

Like the Anabaptists, the peasants rallied around utopian ideals based on religious faith. Forging bonds of equality, they addressed each other as brother and sister and often shared possessions.

"'We are on Christ's side' was the universal cry" of the peasant armies, Roper writes in *Summer of Fire and Blood*. Calling Anabaptism "a product of the Peasants' War," Roper says "social issues were inseparable from theological visions." Quietist Anabaptists and militant peasants alike believed Christ "had bought [their] freedom with his blood."

Linking these religious and social movements, Hubmaier's exploits confronted the tourists again in Waldshut, Germany. Having visited Nikolsburg, site of his second attempt to establish an Anabaptist civic church, they now came to the town where the rabble-rousing theologian first achieved a short-lived territorial Anabaptism.



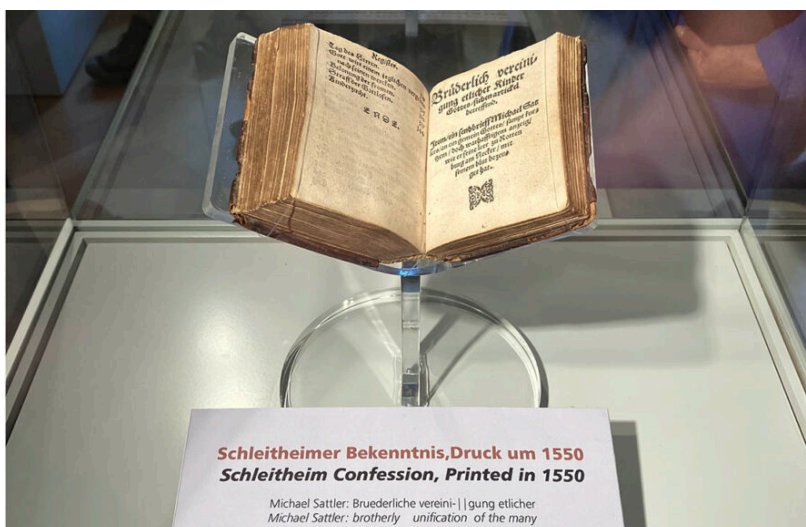
Waldshut, Germany, where Balthasar Hubmaier established his first Anabaptist city. — Paul Schrag/AW

"Hubmaier believed in using the power of government to protect the church and create a city that was all Anabaptist," said Sprunger, who became the tour's leading presenter as the group continued to the Netherlands after the celebration in Zurich.

Denouncing what he called the "worthless rubbish" of Catholic worship, Hubmaier "inspired mob iconoclasm" in Waldshut, Sprunger said. "People smashed images of Jesus, Mary and the saints."

Peasants poured into Waldshut, where Hubmaier baptized around 300 people in April 1525. For about eight months the town was solidly Anabaptist, until the Austrian emperor dispatched an army to suppress the heresy.

Even women, whom Hubmaier respected to an unusual degree, took up pitchforks to defend the city, Schmidt said. But the townsfolk were no match for the forces of the Habsburg dynasty that ruled the so-called Holy Roman Empire. The peasants of Waldshut surrendered, and the Austrian overlords reclaimed the city for Catholicism in December 1525.



One of four surviving copies of the 1550 printing of the Schleithem Confession (bound in a book with other documents), displayed at the Schleithem museum in Switzerland. — Paul Schrag/AW

Schleitheimer Bekenntnis, Druck um 1550
Schleitheim Confession, Printed in 1550

Michael Sattler: Brüderliche vereinigung etlicher
Michael Sattler: brotherly unification of the many

Hubmaier's sword-wielding, state-power version of Anabaptism isn't talked about much today, Schmidt said. Later generations favored the peaceful, us-against-the-world style of faith outlined in the Schleitheim Confession, written in 1527 by Michael Sattler in the Swiss town of Schleitheim, where the tourists viewed one of the oldest copies, from 1550.

Though the peasants' rebellion failed — and the brief window of women's leadership in Anabaptism closed after the movement's first couple of years — new ideals of faith had been born that would spread around the world.



The tour group sings in the Jura Täuferhöhle, a secret cave where fugitive Anabaptists worshiped. — Paul Schrag/AW

"The vision of a new society was not lost," Schmidt said. "It lives on in Anabaptism."