

3,500 gather in Zurich to celebrate 500 years of Anabaptism

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Paul Schrag, June 2 2025

Worshippers 'rejoice in a journey of reconciliation' with Reformed, Lutherans, Catholics



About 1,200 worshippers filled the Grossmünster in Zurich, Switzerland, on May 29 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism. — Mennonite World Conference

Bells pealed from the towers of the Grossmünster as Anabaptists from around the world streamed out of the 800-year-old church. Lingered at the Zwingliplatz, they stood in the long shadow of history, having just celebrated the 500th anniversary of their faith tradition in the city where it began.

The estimated 3,500 Anabaptists who gathered in Zurich, Switzerland, on May 29 did more than praise the Radical Reformation and the global church it birthed. Along with the leaders of churches that once tried to crush the Anabaptist movement, they affirmed that faith in Jesus Christ now unites the spiritual heirs of former enemies.

Symbolizing reconciliation, Anabaptist and Reformed Church leaders — César García, the general secretary of [Mennonite World Conference](#), and Setri Nyomi, interim general secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches — washed each other's feet.

The Catholic Church shared a message from Pope Leo XIV, read by Cardinal Kurt Koch of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.

The statement from the pope — elected just three weeks earlier to lead the world's 1.4 billion Catholics — said that the Zurich celebration's theme, "The Courage to Love," reminded Catholics and Mennonites alike to show love, seek unity and serve others.

"It likewise points to the need for honesty and kindness in reflecting on our common history, which includes painful wounds and narratives that affect Catholic-Mennonite perceptions up to the present day," Koch read.

The pope's statement continued: "In the context of our war-torn world, our ongoing journey of healing and of deepening fraternity has a vital role to play, for the more united Christians are, the more effective will be our witness to Christ, the Prince of Peace, in building up a civilization of loving encounter.

"I assure you of my prayers that our fraternal relations will deepen and grow."

Representatives from 13 global church organizations led a procession into the Grossmünster, which seats about 1,200. When the church was full and the doors closed, hundreds were turned away. About 800 watched on screens at other sites, which also filled up.

The worship service concluded a daylong slate of events at churches and other venues along the Limmat River, near the site where Felix Manz became the first Anabaptist martyr, executed by drowning on Jan. 5, 1527.

In his sermon, García said the "Courage to Love" theme came from the words of the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli, who mentored the Anabaptist founders in Zurich but rejected their radical ideas of adult baptism and nonviolence.

When Catholic authorities threatened to crush the Reformation in Zurich, Zwingli appealed to the city council to muster an army.

"For God's sake, do something courageous," Zwingli pleaded. Thinking that going to war was the way to show courage, he was killed in a battle with Catholic forces on Oct. 11, 1531.

"Today, as we commemorate the early Anabaptists, I invite us to ask ourselves, both as individuals and as churches: What does it mean to do something courageous for God's sake?" García said.

"Empowered by the Holy Spirit, can we find the courage to break cycles of violence? Can we directly confront our past, not to confirm our victimization but to heal our wounds and those of others and to mend fractured relationships?"



Setri Nyomi, interim general secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, washes the feet of César García, general secretary of Mennonite World Conference, during the worship service celebrating the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism in Zurich, Switzerland, on May 29.

Dale D. Gehman for AW

For a biblical example of courage, he pointed to 2 Kings 5, in which an enslaved Israelite girl boldly urged the foreign commander Naaman to seek healing from the prophet Elisha. Though she had no right to speak, the girl gave the oppressor not what he deserved but what he needed: the chance to be transformed. Jesus, who cited the story in Luke 4:27, showed the way to transformation.

García said the Anabaptists of Zurich 500 years ago believed it was not naïve to love their enemies, because they found courage in their relationship with Jesus.

“For them, the courage to love, made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit, was the only path to a new humanity,” he said.

In addition to Cardinal Koch, leaders from the Lutheran World Federation and the World Communion of Reformed Churches joined with Mennonites to affirm unity and healing.

“We all inherit a legacy of pain from Reformation divisions,” MWC representative Janet Plenert said. “We know that differences of theology and practice remain, but we rejoice in a journey of reconciliation that we have shared together.”

For Mennonites and Lutherans, a process of reconciliation was completed in 2010. Reaffirming confessions and forgiveness from that time, Larry Miller of MWC and Anne Burghardt, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, anointed each other’s foreheads with the sign of the cross.

“We thank God that more and more Lutherans and Mennonites appreciate each other’s witness to the gospel,” Burghardt said.

Mennonites and Reformed Christians completed a reconciliation process this year. The Reformed tradition includes Presbyterian, Congregational and other denominations.

Nelson Kraybill, a former MWC president, noted that in 2004 the city of Zurich and the Swiss Reformed Church erected a plaque on the bank of the Limmat River recognizing the execution of Manz and six others.



Cardinal Kurt Koch of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity reads a message from Pope Leo XIV during the worship service celebrating the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism in Zurich, Switzerland, on May 29.

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In a new joint statement with MWC, Reformed Christians acknowledge that the persecution of Anabaptists was “a betrayal of the gospel.” For their part, Anabaptists “confess that too often our convictions, ideals and memory of martyrdom have fostered self-righteousness and a reluctance to see the face of Christ in our Reformed sisters and brothers.”

Gladys Geiser and Lukas Amstutz, co-presidents of the 1,860-member Swiss Mennonite Conference; Henk Stenvers of the Netherlands, MWC president; and Martin Rüschi, the Grossmünster’s pastor, welcomed the crowd.

The service featured a planned “disruption” styled after Anabaptist George Blaurock’s interruption of a Reformed sermon at nearby Zollikon in 1525. The disruption included a shower of leaflets —

printed with the words of Matthew 5:1-7 (the Beatitudes) as they appeared in the 1531 Froschauer Bible, favored by Anabaptists at that time — dropped from the balcony.

Several disrupters, identified as “your Anabaptist forebears,” quoted scripture and made declarations such as “to the powerful we say war is contrary to the will of God” and “we will obey God rather than human authority.”

Throughout the service, the Eastern Mennonite University Chamber Singers sat at the front of the stage. Ensembles from Switzerland, Paraguay, Indonesia and Kenya also sang.

Worshippers sang “Holy God We Praise Thy Name” during the opening procession. The South African song “Siyahamba (We are marching in the light of God)” enlivened the recessional.

Activities preceding the worship service included historical exhibits, a quilt show, films and seminars. A panel discussion on peacemaking featured Amos Chin of Myanmar, Rebeca Gonzáles of Mexico, Siaka Traoré of Burkina Faso, Hansuli Gerber of Switzerland and Carolyn Yoder of the United States.

Throughout the afternoon, outside the Grossmünster, the crowd, including a few in Plain garb, mingled under clear skies, applauding the choirs and enjoying free ice cream.

“It was my dream come true to see this place,” said Subroto Dey of India, sitting in the shade near the river. “God has given me the opportunity, and I am very grateful to see where Anabaptism started.”

Rebecca Osiro of Kenya, a former MWC vice president, thought the scene looked like a preview of heaven.

“I feel at home here,” she said. “I feel spiritually connected to the people of the past, and they are speaking to us today. I am proud to be an Anabaptist.”