

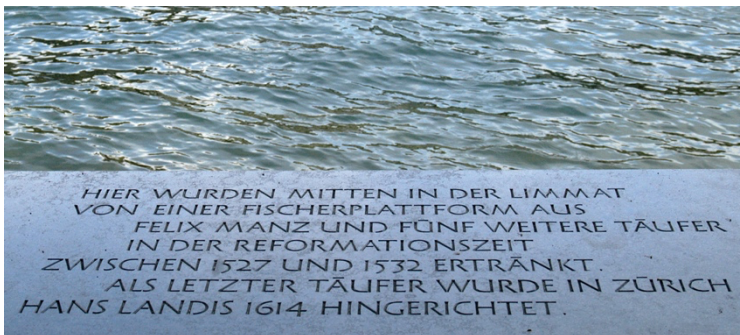
Steps to Reconciliation

On June 28, 2011 **John Landis Ruth** (Mennonite historian, then 81 years old) gave a memorable greeting to the Synod of the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich (in German!). Here is an excerpt from his speech:



“Since 1970, I have guided over a thousand Mennonites from North America to the Grossmünster and the Anabaptist cave near Bäretswil.

We come here because your Zwingli is our Zwingli. ... On the other hand, our Felix Manz, who was drowned in the Limmat in 1527 because of his faith, is also your Felix. ... My father's surname: Ruth points to his origins on the Buchholterberg in the southern Emmental. My mother's [Landis] genealogy leads to Zurich. ... The last Anabaptist to be executed here, under the Lindenhof, was a Hans Landis from Hirzel. We have not forgotten him. And then, in 2004, his name was engraved on the memorial plaque on the Schipfe. Can you imagine how that warmed our hearts in Pennsylvania? It makes us take a fresh look at our own history, including the treatment of the so-called Indians. They had to leave their ancestral lands so we could be farmers again. We all certainly have reason in the 21st century to ask for forgiveness and to grant forgiveness for things done in the name of God.”



“The persecuted do not forget their history; the persecutors by contrast would prefer to do so. We – representatives of the Reformed State Church of the Canton of Zurich – acknowledge that our church has largely suppressed the story of the persecution of the Anabaptists.”

This sentence from the Statement of Regret of the Reformed church was spoken to Mennonites from many parts of the world in Zurich on June 26, 2004. The dedication of a memorial plaque on the banks of the Limmat river in memory of the first Anabaptist leaders who were drowned there during the Reformation symbolically confirmed this confession. Every year, numerous Mennonites, mainly from the USA, make a pilgrimage to Zurich, the birthplace of Anabaptism. **“We will now also feel at home in Zurich.** And that changes how I will tell the story.” So confesses John Sharp of the Mennonite Church USA. From the Anabaptists' point of view, Zurich is no longer just the place of origin of the Anabaptist movement and centuries of persecution, but also the starting point for a new relationship between the Reformed and the Anabaptists. For generations, the Anabaptists have handed down the history of their martyrs. Now the story of reconciliation has been added to this. Is reconciliation possible and meaningful after such a long time? “Yes,” writes one Mennonite. Collective trauma require collective healing process. “The message of my humble experience is: healing is possible, thank God healing is possible.”

However, this day of reconciliation also opened up a new perspective for the Reformed:

“It is time to accept the history of the Anabaptist movement as part of our own, to learn from the Anabaptist tradition and to strengthen our mutual testimony through dialogue.”

Steps to Reconciliation – A look at history

- For almost 300 years, Anabaptists (Anabaptist communities, Anabaptist families) were marginalized, expropriated and deported. Tolerance was only introduced with the Toleration Act of **November 23, 1815**: “The presently existing Anabaptists and their descendants will enjoy the protection of the law, and their cult will be tolerated, with the condition that their marriages and the birth of their children be registered in the public registers; that their vows take the place of the oath in terms of legal force; and finally that, like the other members of the canton, they are obliged to serve the army, but can be replaced in accordance with existing national ordinances.” – However, many young Mennonites still went to prison in the 20th century for their refusal to do military service until the introduction of civilian service in Switzerland in 1996.
- **1925**: First Mennonite World Conference in Basel: contacts with the Reformed Church and theological faculties are already established, with the Reformed also expressing regret for past persecution.
- **1952**: 5th General Assembly of the Mennonite World Conference in Basel. During an excursion to Zurich, a memorial service for Felix Manz and Konrad Grebel is held in the Grossmünster with representatives of the Faculty of Theology and the Zurich Reformed Church. On this occasion, a memorial plaque for Konrad Grebel is erected at his parents' house (Neumarkt Zurich). The plaque contains the following text: “Konrad Grebel, who founded the Anabaptism together with Felix Manz, lived in this house from 1508 to 1514 and from 1520 to 1525.” However, a memorial plaque on the Limmat for the executed Manz, which was also planned, was rejected by the city council because it implied too much criticism of the Zurich authorities at the time.
- **The Swiss Protestant Synod (1983-1987)** expressly invited the Mennonites to participate in the negotiations with observer status as a sign of reconciliation. At the opening service in Biel on May 12, 1983, Pastor Michael Dähler asked the Anabaptists to apologize for all the injustices that had happened in the past. He is convinced that without this sign of reconciliation, there can be no blessing on the synod.
- **March 5, 1983**: Memorial service at the Grossmünster in Zurich: This is the conclusion of 10 years of dialog between the Reformed and Baptists. A representative of the Mennonites is also invited to this service. The Reformed side explicitly formulated words of apology and forgiveness. The Mennonites also acknowledge their own failures and narrow-mindedness, but also formulate the remaining challenges and differences.
- Bernese Anabaptism and the Reformation in dialogue: **in 1988**, an exhibition is held to mark the 450th anniversary of the Anabaptist Disputation of 1538. On the occasion of this “jubilee”, the Anabaptists and the Reformed Church enter into discussion – however, under significantly different circumstances than at the 1538 disputation: no bitter intensification of the differences, but rather steps towards each other. “An occasion for serious reflection – whereby on the part of the Reformed Church, repentance may predominate. That they found no other means than violence, expulsion or execution is inexcusable; ...”, says Prof. Gottfried W. Locher in the foreword to the exhibition catalog. It also states: “Our churches have long since made peace; this is evidenced by our joint commemoration. Result: We need each other.”

The **Statement of Regret** of June 26, 2004 on the occasion of the inauguration of the memorial plaque at the Limmat river in Zurich:

The Reformed Churches and the Anabaptist movement are all essentially branches on one and the same bough of the great Christian tree. Both are offsprings of the Reformation. Right from the start however they went their separate ways, so that a tragic rift ran through the Zurich Reformation, painful traces of which are discernable to this day. Executions, persecution and expulsions were carried out to eliminate the Anabaptist movement. Yet it has survived and is still flourishing today. The descendants of those early Anabaptists are a living testimony to this.

The persecuted do not forget their history; the persecutors by contrast would prefer to do so. We - representatives of the Reformed State Church of the Canton of Zurich - acknowledge that our church has largely suppressed the story of the persecution of the Anabaptists.

We confess that the persecution was, according to our present conviction, a betrayal of the Gospel and that our Reformed forefathers were in error on this issue.

We affirm that the judgement against the Anabaptists in the Second Helvetic Confession, which discards the teaching of the Anabaptists as unbiblical and refuses any communion with them, is no longer valid for us and that it is now our earnest desire to discover and strengthen our common ties.

We acknowledge the faithful of the Anabaptist tradition as our sisters and brothers and their churches as part of the body of Christ, whose diverse members are united through the Spirit of God.

We honour the radical approach of the Anabaptist movement to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world as a free community of committed believers putting into practice the message of the Sermon on the Mount.

It is time to accept the history of the Anabaptist movement as part of our own, to learn from the Anabaptist tradition and to strengthen our mutual testimony through dialogue.

Following the example of our reformed tradition, *we confess*:

We do not belong to ourselves. We belong to Jesus Christ who calls us to follow him and to be reconciled with those brothers and sisters who have any just reasons to reproach us.

We do not belong to ourselves. We belong to Jesus Christ who reconciles us with God through his death on the cross and has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation.

We do not belong to ourselves. We belong to Jesus Christ who tore down the wall of enmity and united people near and far in one body.