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500 years of the Anabaptist movement 1525-2025

A declaration by the General
Assembly of the Council of Churches in
Germany (ACK)

and a statement by the Faith and Order
Commission (DÖSTA) of the Council of
Churches in Germany

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A declaration by the General Assembly of the Council of Churches in Germany (ACK) on 500 years of the Anabaptist movement in the year 2025

The 500th anniversary of the start of the Anabaptist movement in 1525 is seen by the General Assembly as an opportunity to express gratitude for the testimony of Christians from Anabaptist communities then and now.

It encourages its member churches

- to practise ecumenical dialogue in order to sound out and reflect upon the similarities and differences in the relationship between faith and baptism.
- to continue on the path towards a common understanding of baptism and to take steps that can lead to a mutual recognition of baptism in all churches.
- to use the commemorative year as an opportunity to recognise and overcome prejudices.
- to deal with the themes and the history of the Anabaptist movement in preaching, catechesis, religious education and theological studies and to raise awareness for them.
- to find places which were significant for Anabaptism and to reappraise them ecumenically.
- to strive for a healing of memory where Anabaptist churches have suffered injustice and persecution, and to draw consequences for our present coexistence.
- to work towards ensuring that Anabaptist churches do not experience any disadvantages when it comes to giving religious education, to professorial appointments and other practical matters.
- to live as committed followers of Jesus' teaching in the Bible.
- to strive together for peace locally and globally and to model our own conduct on the principle of non-violence.
- to be grateful for the Anabaptist impulses on religious freedom and to raise our voices jointly and repeatedly whenever this fundamental human right is restricted or violated.

- to constantly examine our own attitude towards the state as well as the relationship between state and church, and to enter into ecumenical dialogue in this connection.

The General Assembly of the Council of Churches is aware of the commitment to unity that is founded in the one baptism. It is committed to the mission of the Apostle Paul:

"For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."
(Gal 3:26-28, NRSV)

The following statement by the DÖSTA develops theological insights that are recommended by the General Assembly of the ACK for reading and dissemination.

500 years of Anabaptism 1525-2025

A statement by the Faith and Order Commission of the German Council of Churches (DÖSTA)

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Commemoration

January 21, 2025, marks the 500th anniversary of the first believer's baptism in Zurich, which the Anabaptist churches commemorate as the date on which their Reformation baptismal culture was founded. For some years now, the churches associated with this tradition (Mennonites, Baptists and other free churches) have taken this opportunity to prepare for a commemorative year. In close co-operation with the ecumenical movement in Germany and worldwide, they intend to identify and reflect upon the way in which Anabaptist traditions have had a lasting impact on the relationship of Christians today. The Faith and Order Commission of the Council of Churches in Germany (ACK) has been supporting the co-operation of the churches for almost 75 years with its studies and statements on ecumenically relevant topics. It is now taking this important anniversary as an opportunity to honour the contribution of the Anabaptist movement and the Anabaptist churches.

Anabaptism, the third main stream of the Reformation, was a very complex organisation from the very beginning. There were several regional centres (Switzerland, Central and Southern Germany, Northern Germany) with their specific regional origins and independent theological characteristics. The Anabaptist movement included such diverse groups as the Mennonites, the Hutterites, the Swiss Brethren, the Melchiorites and many individual, mostly smaller communities. The various Anabaptist movements were interlinked in many ways, and it was the sustained persecution by the authorities from 1525 onwards which contributed significantly to their sense of togetherness. However, for this reason they were almost universally forced to develop a survival strategy as an "underground church" and to migrate again and again.

What all groups had in common was the practice of believer's baptism, which implied the rejection of infant baptism, even if they represented very different theological concerns and interpretations. The separation from the Reformation movements that co-operated with the authorities and the formation of their own congregations or

assemblies can be seen as a further common characteristic, whereby there were considerable theological differences when it came to the understanding of the church or concepts regarding the expectation of the kingdom of God.

This understanding of Reformation Anabaptism as a pluriform and internally differentiated movement contradicts the coherent image (or caricature) depicted by various reformers (including Luther and Bullinger) and Catholic theologians over hundreds of years. For centuries, the Anabaptists were condemned, persecuted or marginalised as “fanatics”, heretics or outcasts – and later even forgotten. From the outset, the Anabaptist movement was theologically innovative and diverse; yet the Anabaptist churches that emerged from it were repeatedly stigmatised as dissenters, sectarians, fanatics, zealots and rebels. The Anabaptist churches acted as a screen onto which one could project sketches of denominational enemies and stereotypes. The members of these churches were often subjected to defamation, marginalisation and persecution, even reaching to torture and execution. On the other hand, some of the various movements also inclined towards radical segregation, the formation of elite hierarchies and, when gaining power (for example in Münster), taking repressive measures against those who did not share their beliefs.

In the 19th century, as a result of the increasing democratisation of state constitutions, those churches, congregations and movements that were later known collectively as “free churches” were allowed for the first time to establish congregations legally in Germany. Among them were those Anabaptist churches that had developed primarily out of the Puritan separatism of the English Reformation in the 17th century, e.g. the Baptists, but also other churches that practised believer’s baptism, such as the Seventh-day Adventists, the Free Evangelical churches or the Brethren churches. Nonetheless, they continued to be confronted with defamation well into the 20th century. This included persecution and repression by the authorities, which was advocated and often demanded by the state church.

Various denominations that trace their origins or their ecclesiological self-understanding to Anabaptism are joining in the celebrations during the year of commemoration, in particular the Mennonite and Baptist unions. Nowadays, churches that practise believer’s baptism form large sections of Christendom.

The Mennonites and Baptists are founding members of the ACK. After 1945, the voice of the historic peace churches that originated in Anabaptism was raised even louder in the worldwide ecumenical movement, not least in the Decade to Overcome Violence (2001-2010) of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which they played a major role in shaping. They have proved themselves as dynamic and reliable partners in various national and international ecumenical dialogues. Ecumenical reconciliation processes (Healing of Memories) led to a thorough analysis of the history of conflict between Anabaptist and non-Anabaptist churches, whereby the latter often played the role of the dominant majority churches privileged by the state. This process contributed to a better mutual understanding, and one milestone was the service of repentance and reconciliation between the Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference in Stuttgart in 2010.

How can “500 years of Anabaptism” be celebrated ecumenically? In view of the thousands of people who were executed, imprisoned, forced into exile, deprived of their possessions and discriminated against, how can this date be celebrated in an ecumenically sensitive way? It would be important to find a specific approach to commemoration that does not ignore the dark side of religious conflicts and the violence involved, yet at the same time recognises the particular contribution of these traditions and their non-conformist witness within the big picture of the Reformation and ecumenism. In what follows, three lasting impulses of the Anabaptist churches are presented and analysed in terms of their significance for today’s ecumenism.

Impulses from the Anabaptist movement for ecumenism

Baptism

Nowadays there is a different background for discussions between Anabaptist and non-Anabaptist churches regarding the understanding and practice of baptism than was the case 500 years ago. At that time, the church's commitment to baptise was widely connected to secular law, which punished those who did not have their children baptised immediately after birth. This was one cause for the persecution of Anabaptists, but has meanwhile been resolved. When it comes to the theological interpretation of baptism, denominational traditions have come very close to one another and found substantial convergences and commonalities. Impulses from the Anabaptist movement have had a profound effect on other denominational traditions:

- Even churches that baptise infants emphasise that the grace bestowed by baptism must be appropriated by a confession of faith.
- There are also churches that baptise infants, but no longer treat such baptism as mandatory, and also offer other turning points in life as appropriate for baptism (for example: starting school, coming to confirmation, or generally reaching the age of religious maturity). In such cases, the wish to be baptised and its affirmation by the baptismal candidate are more clearly (or visibly) linked to the act of baptism itself.
- Those churches that affirm infant baptism theologically as an effective sign of the appropriation of salvation through Christ, without conditions or preconditions, also place baptism in a biographical and ecclesial context. They understand baptism as part of an initiation process in a person's biography, accompanied by the church, leading towards a later conscious and reflected affirmation of what God has promised in baptism.

Conversely, the churches that either emerged from the Anabaptist movement or are theologically committed to it respond to the questions of non-Anabaptist believers by emphasising, for example, that the desire and affirmation that are fundamental to baptism are also

entirely due to divine grace and in no way to individual merit. They emphasise that baptism is more than a mere act of confession, for it unites the baptised person with Christ by grace. In ecumenical contexts, they have also learnt to appreciate the practice of liturgical baptismal remembrance.

The ACK is grateful for the mutual understanding that has grown in this way. On the basis of what we have in common, challenges can also be addressed:

- Given that traditional ties with the established churches are going down continuously, some churches have introduced low-threshold offers of baptism in order to encourage people without church socialisation to come and have themselves or their children (including infants) baptised. However, this could lead to baptism being reduced to an isolated one-time ritual, should those baptised (and their families) not be shown the way towards a conscious affirmation of their baptism (which introduces them into the community of believers, the "body of Christ").
- All churches understand baptism as a singular act that cannot be repeated. However, when Christians who were baptised as infants later join an Anabaptist church as adults, they are often confronted with the question as to whether they should be baptised, given the case that their new church does not recognise infant baptism as valid baptism. Their respective church of origin would regard this, however, as a new baptism. As a result of ecumenical dialogues, many Anabaptist congregations have changed to practising "open membership", i.e. they accept people who were baptised as infants into the congregation on the basis of their testimony of faith. Some Anabaptist congregations do not use the form of a baptism when welcoming the new members, but rather celebrate baptismal remembrance in the sense of a consciously belated affirmation of baptism. If the person concerned expressly wants to be baptised on grounds of conscience, then this should be done with particular ecumenical sensitivity with regard to the one baptism. A regulation that is generally binding stands in contradiction to the congregationalist self-understanding of churches in the Anabaptist tradition, for they emphasise the independence of each individual cong-

regation and their authority in taking decisions in this question as well.

Such unresolved issues still stand in the way of a comprehensive mutual recognition of baptism such as was agreed between eleven member churches of the ACK in Magdeburg in 2007. The 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement can therefore offer the opportunity to ascertain with thankfulness the understanding reached in the many ecumenical dialogues and to continue to work and discuss together on this basis in order to deepen the common understanding of baptism in such a way that new steps can be taken leading towards full recognition of baptism.

Religious freedom

An essential aspect of the Christian faith is that it may not be forced upon a person, but can only be accepted in freedom (albeit by the working of God). Nevertheless, throughout their history, the churches have for many reasons had difficulties in taking this seriously and drawing the consequences. In dealing with people of differing beliefs, they repeatedly used the conviction that their own belief was the true one, and thus necessary for salvation, in order to justify coercive measures, even as far as the death penalty. In addition to this, there was the unquestioned intertwining of secular and spiritual power within most of Christendom for more than a thousand years. This meant that dissenters were seen as a threat to social order and had to be warded off accordingly. Historically speaking, the recognition of religious freedom as a fundamental human right is undoubtedly partly due to the pluralisation of the Christian faith and the Christian churches, which was a result of the Reformation and ultimately called the unity of spiritual and secular rule into question, leading finally to its abolition. Alongside the Enlightenment, it was Anabaptist doctrine and theology that played an important role in this development, but is not sufficiently recognised in a number of current presentations on this topic. To point this out and above all to appreciate it, without ignoring the respective context, is therefore not only an expression of historical justice, but can also lead to a greater awareness of the history of the Anabaptist movement both socially and ecclesiastically and to a commendment of its contribution to the self-understanding of church and society today. This does not mean that the Anabaptist churches are idealised, since they are

themselves aware that in their own lives and actions they often only practised their fundamental conviction of the freedom of belief to a limited extent and by no means always consistently. However, such a historical assessment does not diminish their merit in having contributed significantly to the recognition of religious freedom as a central human right, not from a philosophical point of view, but explicitly on the basis of biblical witness. The commemoration of the first believer's baptism in Zurich, which will take place in 2025, should therefore be an impulse for the Christian churches to recognise this contribution of the Anabaptists with gratitude and to reaffirm in word and deed the corresponding commitment of the Charta Oecumenica, which the member churches of the Council of Churches in Germany signed in 2003: "We are committed to recognise the freedom of religion and conscience of these individuals and communities and to defend their right to practise their faith or convictions, whether singly or in groups, privately or publicly, in the context of rights applicable to all." (Charta Oecumenica Art. 12)

Religious freedom in particular proves to be one of the landmarks that show how seriously a society takes human rights as a whole. That is why the defence of religious freedom is a common concern of the Christian churches, which they must actively represent in current social debates.

However, such a testimony will only be credible if the churches also apply it when dealing internally with those who deviate from, change or even abandon their faith. Here, theology is called upon to argue on the basis of faith in the triune God, who has revealed himself once and for all unsurpassably in Jesus Christ for the salvation of all people. It must be emphasised that such faith is only possible in freedom and that the commitment to freedom of religion and belief is therefore an essential part of this faith. Here too, the arguments and impulses of Anabaptist theologies can prove to be gifts that have enriched Christianity as a whole and continue to enrich it today.

Non-violence

"The worldly are armed with steel and iron, but Christians are armed with the armour of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and with the Word of God." These words are to be found in the Schleithem Confession of 1527, an early statement by the Ana-

baptist movement. Its followers thus contradicted the social consensus, binding themselves to the words of the Sermon on the Mount, rejecting the citizen's oath and refusing to bear the sword.

Even if this confrontation between what is secular and what is Christian may appear to be too extreme for many, the specific Anabaptist characteristic of non-violence is an ecumenical challenge for today – especially in the face of geopolitical crises and wars. In the 16th century, one spoke of “defencelessness”: in the Anabaptist understanding, this renunciation of the use of weapons and other means constitutes a fundamental attitude. Mennonite-Anabaptist theology today usually emphasises non-violent action, or speaks of “freedom from violence”, a term that places the attitude in the foreground and justifies it by God's own action in granting freedom. It refers to the experiences of both Christian and other pacifist communities in reducing and overcoming violence. Non-violence is linked to other fundamental Anabaptist ideas: discipleship, understanding of the church, believer's baptism, the courage to dissent and the departure from the unity of church and state in the historical “Corpus Christianum”.

In the Mennonite tradition, the call for non-violence is primarily based on the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” and its exemplification in the gospel, i.e. the message of Jesus of Nazareth, his life, his path to the cross and the resurrection. Jesus' interpretation of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” in the Sermon on the Mount shows that lethal violence begins much earlier, wherever another person is insulted and debased. Nowadays this idea is particularly relevant, for example when hate speech is spread anonymously on the internet. “Do not resist evil with evil” is a more appropriate translation of Mt 5:39, and the examples that follow each contain an element of surprise. The way Jesus talks about refraining from violence and loving one's enemy describes a third way beyond flight or fight. Jesus speaks of loving one's enemies, taking the example of God's love, God as one who loves beyond all measure. Even the adversary or enemy is a person loved by God, a child of God. Another example is Jesus' behaviour during his arrest, as he puts a stop to the violence and heals the injured man.

Not only Mennonite churches have their roots in Anabaptism, but Baptist congregations also trace their roots back to that movement,

although they did not subscribe to the principle of non-violence as a whole. However, one of the best-known representatives of Christian non-violence in the 20th century was the Baptist pastor Martin Luther King. His resolute stance of active non-violence against racism is still an inspiration to many today. Alongside other less well-known personalities from the Christian churches, his is an example of how non-violence has been and can be practised radically – albeit as an individual decision of conscience, alongside other possible ethical convictions. This is one of the differences between Mennonites and Baptists. From an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective, non-violence is an essential part of what constitutes the church. In addition to the rejection of military service and violence, this includes active commitment to peace, as expressed in the voluntary services. The ACK is grateful for this valuable position, which poses radical questions based on the gospel message of peace. It is a permanent challenge to the other Christian churches as to how they deal with this position. After the Second World War, the other churches overcame their aversion to pacifist positions (e.g. conscientious objection). “War is contrary to the will of God” – with this joint declaration at the founding assembly of the WCC in 1948, the churches overcame a stance which had long been valid. On the other hand, Anabaptist churches have revised their position of abstaining completely from political issues, and are now actively participating in the socio-political discourse and bringing their own position to bear. The founding of the European peace church network “Church and Peace” can be seen in this context, like the peace church commitment to the WCC’s Decade to Overcome Violence.

This change in attitude is also evident in the founding of CPT, Community Peacemaker Teams (formerly: Christian Peacemaker Teams), which are actively engaged in reducing violence in various places, for example in Colombia and on Lesbos. CPT came into being after the General Assembly of the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg in 1984, at which Ronald Sider preached on the price of discipleship.

In contrast to the original Anabaptist interest in rejecting military service and the use of weapons for defence, there is now a more comprehensive perception of violence, so that dimensions such as ecological, institutional, spiritual or sexual violence are now much more consciously in focus and need to be addressed and treated at

an institutional and structural level. On the other hand, it is greatly gratifying to see that in ecumenical dialogue the churches have succeeded in overcoming the violence, hostility and indifference that had come between them. Thus the final document of the international Catholic-Mennonite dialogue "Called together to be peace-makers" has established a great deal of common ground. However, considerable differences still remain in the understanding of power and church hierarchies.

Wars are a particular touchstone for Christian peace ethics. Anabaptist-Mennonite churches are ecumenical dialogue partners and at the same time a driving force for non-violence. In the assessment of current wars, the disagreements run through all denominations.

The Anabaptist attitude of non-violence follows the maxim that one must work towards peace even when it seems hopeless. "Living non-violently" means translating this attitude into everyday action. The Anabaptist tradition reminds every single person to act non-violently in everyday life on various levels:

- Aggressive impulses are human, but so is the ability to refrain from acting out these impulses. This is related to the image of humanity and the belief in the effects of grace.
- Conflicts belong to life, including Christian life and the life of the church. It is therefore important to be able to deal with conflict and to learn to be fair in dispute. The attitude of non-violence offers support and orientation for the culture of discussion and conflict in the churches and beyond.

Non-violence as a Christian conviction arises from the belief that life is given by God and is therefore inviolable. At the same time, it is important to strive for justice and protect the weak. Those who embark on the path of non-violence experience themselves as learners.

In 2025 and afterwards, the opportunity is given to all churches to take up the Anabaptist impulses for our time. As DÖSTA, we want to contribute to the perception of Anabaptist history and heritage. We are grateful for the mutual ecumenical learning process in questions of baptism, religious freedom and non-violence, which enriches not only the Anabaptist churches but also all the others. Wherever there

is injustice and marginalisation due to religious persecution, we want to raise our Christian voice and stand up together for justice and peace.



