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Anabaptist movement changed Christianity
by Marlin Jeschke, Goshen, Ind.

The presentation in the courtyard at Menno-Hof shows a re-enactment of the first adult baptism in Zürich, Switzerland, in 1525. Most American Christians have likely not heard of this 1525 event, although they likely have heard of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli.

By 1500, most of Europe had been sufficiently Christianized that practically everyone in European society was a Christian and member of the church—most likely baptized as an infant.

In a scholarly tome titled, “Baptism in the First Five Centuries of the Church,” patristics scholar Everett Ferguson examines everything he can find on the doctrine and practice of baptism in those five centuries, and concludes that infant baptism likely arose because of high infant and child mortality. Baptism was seen as the door to salvation, and Christian parents wanted their children safely “in” before they died.

Several unique experiences that I have encountered there have only helped me become stronger in my knowledge of Anabaptism and in my faith.

Recently, a large group came to visit from Detroit, Mich. Since the group was so large, we divided it in half and I took the first group to the room that I refer to as the church history room. It spans from the time of Christ to the 16th century (cont. on page 3)

On March 7, 1526, the Zürich (Switzerland) council passed an edict that made adult re-baptism punishable by drowning. On January 5, 1527, Felix Manz, one of the leaders of the Anabaptist movement, became the first casualty of the edict, and the first Swiss Anabaptist to be martyred. At 3 p.m. on that day, he was taken, bound from his last imprisonment, to be drowned in the waters of the river Limmat (pictured above) which flows through the heart of the city of Zürich. Last minute efforts on the part of the clergy to cause him to recant were of no avail. He could hear the supportive and encouraging voices of his mother and his brother who stood nearby on the shore. His last words were, “Into thy hands, O God, I commend my spirit.”

cont. on page 2
Anabaptist movement (cont. from front) baptism in Europe was pretty well universal. And none of the three major reformers questioned it, even though the church was characterized by a very unchristian moral life.

Thanks to Gutenberg, inventor of the printing press in 1439, by 1525 literate Christians were reading their Bible and becoming aware of what the church of the New Testament looked like and of how far the church around them fell short of that model. And since just about everyone agreed with Martin Luther that the Scriptures were authoritative for faith and practice, some Christians in Zürich decided to re-start a church on that New Testament model.

They initiated the practice of baptism of only adults who made a serious profession of faith in Christ and accepted accountable membership in a church. Anabaptists, they were called (from the Greek “ana,” meaning “again”), though they discontinued the baptism of their own children and in that sense did not make rebaptism an established practice.

It may be hard for us to understand today, but both political and religious leaders of Europe felt so threatened by this voluntary church movement that they sought to stamp it out. Historians tell us that over 2,000 of these so-called Anabaptists perished in the persecution of the ensuing century. Some

Anabaptists were burned at the stake (which the Holy Roman Empire had sanctioned in 1238 as a method of execution), though many more died of diseases in prisons.

In the end, that first baptism of adult believers in Zürich in 1525 turned out to be a historic game changer. To use a term familiar to us in our computer era, the beginning of the practice of baptism of adult believers changed the default. Before 1525 the default was universal infant baptism, through which everyone was automatically a Christian and a member of the church. After 1525 being a Christian and a member of the church began to be seen as a choice. It took some time, but eventually the new understanding also influenced infant baptism churches. They introduced the rite of confirmation, at least in Western Christianity, in which those baptized in infancy later need to decide for themselves whether they will be Christians.

We still have some re-baptizers today, Christians visiting Israel who can’t resist getting rebaptized when they come to the Jordan. But for some reason we don’t persecute them.

Marlin and his wife, Betty, are Menno-Hof volunteers and attend College Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind. Marlin is professor emeritus of philosophy and religion at Goshen (Ind.) College.

Amish by the numbers
source: Amish Studies by the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown (Pa.) College

308,030 is the estimated population of Amish (adults and children) in the United States and Canada as of May 2016.

31 states have Amish communities as well as

3 Canadian provinces. In 2016, the Amish established two new settlements in the province of Prince Edward Island.

Largest Amish settlements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Estimated population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lancaster County Area</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>35,070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holmes County Area</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>34,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elkhart/LaGrange Area</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>23,565</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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A new, good experience (cont. from front)
Reformation. As the last people were being seated, one gentleman came to me and asked, “Is this room talking about religion?” I explained that it was and he said, “I don’t think some of us will go through.” I told him that was fine but then every one of the persons that were with his group, got up and left the room.

A couple that had listened to the initial Anabaptist story in the first room, but was not part of that group, stayed behind. Later as this couple completed their tour, the gentleman said to me, “I noticed a few people had noted their religion in the guest book by the cash register as atheists. Why would they want to come through here?” I had no answer for that but it helped me understand why they did not want to hear any more “talking about religion.”

A rather amusing visitor interaction involved the multimedia presentation from the first room. I started the presentation, closed the door and walked out to the front desk. Miriam (another volunteer) reminded me that I needed to record the number of people in the group so I went back in to count. By now the presentation had been going for approximately five minutes. I walked in and started to count when suddenly I realized that this was a group of English speaking visitors and I had inadvertently started the story in German (we have three language options).

Needless to say, I quickly stopped it and apologized. They all had a good laugh and we continued in English. Later, one of the gentleman told me “I just wondered how long we would all sit and listen to something we didn’t understand until someone spoke up about it.” I am grateful that they all took it in good stride with laughter.

Probably the most frequently asked question is “What does Anabaptist mean?” (Or on one occasion the gentleman asked, “What does anti-baptist mean?”) This question always reminds me of my roots and why I believe as I do. I love to share my story. My grandparents and parents brought me up believing that I was a special child of God. When I chose to be baptized, they affirmed to me that it was a very important time of my life. God has led me through many difficult times and I have His joy in my heart. (cont. above)

Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites—we are no better than any other Christian religion, but that is where my roots are. It is something that I truly cherish. To have the opportunity to be able to share that with others through my experience at Menno-Hof has truly been a blessing.

Linda grew up in Middlebury, Ind., where she resides today. She is a member of First Mennonite, Middlebury, and enjoys reading and traveling. Her job as a registered nurse fuels her passion for helping and comforting others. Linda began volunteering at Menno-Hof in April 2016.
This year has certainly been a period when many of us find ourselves being encouraged to choose sides and unfortunately, those doing the encouragement have not always done so with a good spirit infused with love.

It would be easy to only refer to the current political parties and their relentless ranting about the other party but we may have also experienced this type of poor spirited encouragement in our church communities, neighborhoods, businesses and sports team fan bases. Such experiences really challenge us to consider what it means to be “in the world but not of the world.” As Anabaptists we need to commit ourselves to not fall into the worldly trap of over-valuing worldly outcomes. It can be hard for me to remember that if I truly trust Christ, no matter what the outcome of political races, sports events, community or even church arguments, we can still call on Him to help us navigate our journey through life here on earth.

Does it sound like I’m over simplifying the issue? Maybe, but I wanted to share some feedback one of our volunteers received as a gentleman completed his tour and contemplated the Anabaptist story and values presented. He said he was so impressed that he wished everyone was Amish or Mennonite. “It would take care of many conflicts and resolve many issues in the world today.” Does this over simplify reality? Obviously, this fellow holds Anabaptists on a higher pedestal than many of us deserve. However, love, peace and reconciliation are powerful weapons that Jesus says we can use to overcome the powers of this world. Do we believe it? Is so, how are we living it out?