

Stream of Information



Upper Susquehanna Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

In Historic and Humbling Action, Lutherans ask for forgiveness from Mennonites

In central Pennsylvania, Lutherans and Mennonites live as neighbors to each other. They may recognize each other at the farmers market or stand. They may farm adjacent fields. They might be seen bidding for items at the same auction, or interacting with each other at work, in hospitals, or during community events. Some may even enjoy speaking "Dutch" together.

Countless Lutherans have spent their early teenage years learning Luther's Small Catechism, and the history of Martin Luther and other reformers of the church in the 16th century and following. Yet few Lutherans in North America know much about Mennonite history, and particularly how it intersected in tragic ways with Lutheran history in that same period.

Lutherans and Mennonites of 16th century Europe held differing theological views about several things, among them, infant baptism and governmental authority. In Mennonite baptismal theology, people needed to make their own confession of faith prior to being baptized; therefore, they did not baptize infants. This is commonly called "believer's baptism." Lutherans, on the other hand, viewed baptism as a gift given by the Holy Spirit who creates faith within people, while also believing that baptism entrusts people to God regardless of their age, including infants.

With respect to governmental authority, Lutherans held government in high regard, because they believed it was ordained by God to keep good order in society. For this reason, Lutherans believed that it was permissible for Christians to serve in the military. Mennonites, on the other hand, were critical of government, especially in regard to government-sanctioned violence. The Mennonite tradition was a peace movement in church and society, and Mennonites did not serve in the military. Because of these different views, some 16th century Lutherans persecuted—and even executed—Mennonites. Understandably, this painful history is ingrained much more deeply in the Mennonite tradition.

Representatives of Lutheran churches from every continent gathered in Stuttgart, Germany, for the 11th Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation from July 20-27, 2010. On July 22, with numerous Mennonite brothers and sisters in Christ present representing the Mennonite World Conference, and

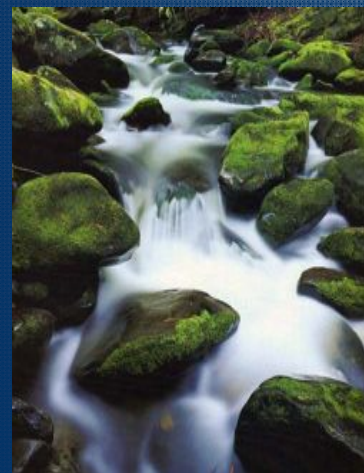
Lutheran- Mennonite Relations

- *News from the 11th Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation*
- *July 20-27, 2010 in Stuttgart, Germany*

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Leaders of the World Mennonite Conference presented Bishop Hanson with the gift of a wooden foot-washing tub.



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recognizing that “a wound, or healing, in one part of the Body effects the rest of the Body,” Bishop Mark Hanson (president of LWF) led fellow Lutherans in repentance, praying for forgiveness and healing from Mennonites on behalf of the Lutheran tradition. Hanson asked members of the assembly to either kneel or stand in support of this action. Following this request, Hanson announced that their repentance and request for forgiveness was “unanimously endorsed in a spirit of great humility;” his announcement was greeted with applause.

This action—of Lutherans acknowledging their responsibility for a painful and tragic past—and asking Mennonites to forgive them—held deep symbolism and meaning. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” Bishop Hanson called this truth-telling event “a communion building and communion defining moment” and recognized it as a chance to “look back and forward towards God’s promised future.”

Hanson also held up important lessons to learn from Mennonites, especially their “consistent witness for non-violence and peacemaking that calls us to engage in acts of peacemaking;” furthermore, “we have much to learn [from Mennonites] about how to be formed into communities of forgiveness.” As an example, Hanson cited the story of the gunman who killed 5 girls and himself in an Amish school house in Nickel Mines, PA, in 2006. Within hours of these murders, members of the Amish community went to offer forgiveness and grace to the gunman’s family. While the Amish are a separate group from Mennonites, they are “cousins” in the Anabaptist tradition, with many of the same core values.

In response to the public repentance, Bishop Danisa Ndlovu of Zimbabwe (who is president of the Mennonite World Conference), formally offered Lutherans forgiveness on behalf of his fellow Mennonites. Reflecting the need for every human being to rely on God’s grace, Bishop Ndlovu said, “Are we worthy to receive your requests? We cannot bring ourselves to this table with heads held high. We cannot come to this point without recognizing our own need for forgiveness. To God be the glory.” Mennonite leaders then presented Hanson with a gift of a wooden foot washing tub, which is used in Mennonite worship for church members to wash each other’s feet prior to receiving Holy Communion. A foot washing ritual is gaining greater use among Lutherans, particularly on Maundy Thursday, when we remember Jesus washing his own disciples’ feet.

The Rev. Gunther Bernhardt, pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Montgomery, PA, and a native of Hamburg, Germany, was privileged to be an observer of the LWF Assembly. Pastor Bernhardt reflected on what he witnessed that day: “It was very solemn, important. I had the feeling that this is the place to be, the Holy Spirit is present and here. I felt very humbled, and honored to be part of that.” Bernhardt also described what it was like directly following the Lutherans’ act of public repentance: “I was sitting in the visitors’ gallery surrounded by many Mennonites, and felt a responsibility or awareness, and very deeply, intimately connected with them. I was humbled and envisioned that now something new can happen.”

An initial awkwardness of standing among so many from whom he and other Lutherans were seeking forgiveness soon gave way to the signs of God’s reign breaking in among them. Said Bernhardt, “the Mennonite bishop really embraced us as Lutherans and welcomed this action. He was very joyful and appreciative that Lutherans were engaged in this.”

Living in the midst of a large Mennonite community as many of us in the Upper Susquehanna Synod do, Bishop Driesen expressed the hope that this historic moment in our church’s life might lead to opportunities for us to engage our Mennonite brothers and sisters in our local communities and ministeriums. Driesen offered this prayer as he looked toward the future of Lutheran-Mennonite relations: “May God use this act of reconciliation as an avenue for bringing us closer together in Christ.”

Multimedia and other coverage of this act of reconciliation can be found on the web at:

www.lwf-assembly.org