

Remembering Well as a Pathway Towards Radical Renewal

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Considering the Story of Dirk Willems

No image of an Anabaptist martyr has captured the North American imagination more than Jan Luyken's 1685 iconic depiction of Dirk Willems. As the story goes, Dirk had been imprisoned on account of his Anabaptist convictions but managed to escape and flee across a frozen pond. A prison guard gave chase but fell through the ice. Dirk turned back and rescued his pursuer. He was then recaptured, placed in a more secure confinement, and eventually burned at the stake.¹ Peace educator and activist, Carl Stauffer, observes that the Dirk Willems story of "'enemy love' is probably the quintessential myth of Mennonite pacifism-in-action of all time."²

Dirk's story was immortalized through Thielemann Jansz van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror* but was relatively unknown before the middle of the twentieth century. David Weaver-Zercher, who wrote a social history of the *Martyrs Mirror*, notes that it was only after the Second World War that Dirk's image became clearly identifiable in English editions of the *Martyrs Mirror* and other publications in North America. He suggests that the popularity of Dirk's image had to do with the fact that it is the only illustration by Luykin in which an Anabaptist assumes bodily power over an adversary, and it is the only image "in which an Anabaptist performs an act of service for the sake of the larger world."³ Evidently, as North American Mennonites were seeking to rid themselves of their separatist past and becoming more engaged in the world at home and abroad, Dirk's image became a symbol of love and active self-sacrificial service, an example worth emulating.⁴

Stauffer refers to Dirk's story as a product of mythmaking which he understands to be a natural dimension of human experience. For Stauffer, myths are not untruths. They are typically grounded in historical happenings "that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world."⁵ According to Stauffer, the Dirk Willems story has served as a founding myth and because of its

¹ The account of Dirk Willems's martyrdom may be found in Thielemann J. van Braght's *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, fifth edition, translated by Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950), 741-742. The account already appeared in an earlier martyr book, Pieter Jans Twisck's *History of the True Witnesses of Jesus Christ*, and was included in subsequent martyrologies prior to van Braght's inclusion in 1660. See David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror: A Social History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 266.

² Carl Stauffer, "Formative Mennonite Mythmaking in Peacebuilding and Restorative Justice," in *From Suffering to Solidarity: The Historical Seeds of Mennonite Interreligious, Interethnic, and International Peacebuilding*, edited by Andrew P. Klager (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2025), 145.

³ Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror*, 273-74.

⁴ Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror*, 282.

⁵ Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1, quoted in Stauffer, "Mennonite Mythmaking," 140.

succinct descriptive power, it has often been helpfully used “as an ‘identity descriptor’ for who the Mennonites are and what they believe.”⁶

Myths can serve both positive and negative functions and can lead to both constructive and destructive legacies. The Dirk Willms story can motivate communities to consider the importance of enemy-love, but it can also be linked to “historical harms.” For some, there is the question whether Dirk is really the best example for abuse victims. Kimberly Schmidt wonders, for example, whether those who are abused must always return to their violent partners and rescue them from their violent deeds.⁷ For others, Dirk has become a cliché, “an overused and too-often-trite allusion to the piety of early Anabaptists,”⁸ or worse, a symbol of Mennonite arrogance and exceptionalism that focusses attention on self-aggrandizement and the degradation of others. Read hagiographically, Dirk’s story can lead to arrogance, a sense of superiority and even hateful charges,⁹ which does not lend itself to learning from other faith traditions and engaging meaningfully in ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue. While formative myths can nurture solidarity and unity among Anabaptist communities, Stauffer notes that “as Mennonites, our integrity in peace and justice work will depend on our willingness to be transparent with ourselves and others in order to carry a balanced narrative of our history—one checkered with failures and successes.”¹⁰

Dirk’s image, I trust, will continue to inspire as it should. It is a story worth repeating because it is an example of enemy love and self-sacrifice, a Christian virtue that Mennonites have held deeply over the centuries. Nevertheless, Anabaptist communities would do well to note the ways in which the story has sometimes functioned negatively. In my view, a particular problem with the story is that it is sometimes treated as the essence or totality of what Anabaptism is about. And yet, the Anabaptist tradition is complex and varied and cannot be easily encapsulated in a single narrative. We need multiple stories to convey the breadth and depth of the tradition.

Moving Forward: Remembering Well

In the current year, Anabaptist communities around the world are commemorating “Anabaptism at 500,” and at this conference, the Anabaptist legacy is ever present as we consider radical renewal and what it means to faithfully bear witness to a “new heaven and a new earth.” What are the stories that we should be considering at this time—stories that will inspire and accompany us toward such a hoped-for reality?

⁶ Stauffer, “Mennonite Mythmaking,” 145. Two other stories that Stauffer refers to are the Eichenfeld massacres that occurred in Ukraine in 1919, and the “Elmira Restorative Justice Case” in 1974 that led to the “Victim Offender reconciliation Project.” See pp. 149-59.

⁷ Kimberly D. Schmidt, “Run, Dirk, Run! Westling with the Willems Story” in *Resistance! Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse with Peace Churches*, edited by Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022), 238.

⁸ Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror*, 283.

⁹ Nancy R. Heisey, “Journeying in the Baptism-Martyr Matrix,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 99, no. 1 (January 2025): 173.

¹⁰ Stauffer, “Mennonite Mythmaking,” 161. For a more extensive discussion on the problem of emulating Dirk, see, for example, Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror*, 283-291 and Jennifer Otto, “Remembering Anabaptist Martyrs,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* vol 25, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 28-35.

British historian Kat Hill notes that anniversaries are important “moments of memory activation” that can give us an opportunity to consider the narratives that we would like to tell. She points to the margins and suggests that it is precisely here that our thinking can be reinvigorated. Memory on the margins might help us even in reconsidering the center.¹¹ She suggests that in a postcolonial era we need to give attention to global perspectives, contexts outside of Europe, especially the Global South. Such memoryscapes provide pathways toward reconstituting our narrative traditions that “diversify our concepts of the Reformation and its legacies.”¹²

There is much to consider in Kat Hill’s discussion about giving greater importance to stories on the margins. Stories from the Global South, and even stories that we might assume to be peripheral within European and North American contexts deserve our attentiveness. What interests me in this presentation are not only stories on the margins, but stories that we have tended to marginalize--stories that we have chosen to forget even though they have significance for understanding the tradition. To illustrate, I want to look ever so briefly at just two stories that are somewhat well known but for various reasons Mennonite collective memories have tended to marginalize. Here I am thinking of the Anabaptist-peasant connection at the time when the Anabaptist movement was just getting started. And I’m also considering a story about the Dutch Mennonites (Doopsgezinden) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during a time when they were becoming a part of mainstream Dutch culture. Both stories, in my view, have generally been overlooked, yet both may potentially provide glimpses of what “radical renewal” can look like.

Anabaptists and the Peasant Connection

It is strange that the story regarding the Anabaptist-peasant connection has not received greater attention in Mennonite and other Believers Church communities. In the past fifty years a near consensus in sixteenth century Anabaptist scholarship has emerged maintaining that the activities of the first Anabaptists were often in line with those of the peasants, and in the months following the first adult baptisms, Anabaptists continued to participate in events connected to the Peasants’ program. While it is true that the Peasant protests constituted a much broader historical phenomenon than Anabaptism, and most participants of the uprising did not join the adult baptizing movement, nevertheless, in many parts of Switzerland, Austria, and Germany, the peasant protests and revolutionary activities provided the context for the beginning of Anabaptism, and in the early phase of the movement, the aims and actions of the Anabaptists and the peasants were often indistinguishable.¹³

¹¹ Katherine Hill, “Memories from the Margins? Anniversaries, Anabaptists, and Rethinking Reformations,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 93, no. 4 (October 2019): 533.

¹² Hill, “Memories,” 547. See also 539.

¹³ See, for instance, James M. Stayer, *The German Peasants’ War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), 61-92; C. Arnold Synder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997), 67-78; C. Arnold Snyder, “Swiss Anabaptism: The Beginnings,” in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*, edited by John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007): 45-81; C. Arnold Snyder, “The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism (1520-1530),” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 80, no. 4 (October 2006): 501-645. Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 11; Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “Karlstadt, Müntzer and the Reformation of the Commoners, 1521-1525,” in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism 1521-1700* edited by John D. Roth and James M Stayer (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), 1.

However, in describing Anabaptism's historic position regarding pacifism, Mennonite collective memory has typically highlighted its passive character, while ignoring the extent to which the earliest Anabaptists participated in provocation and resistance and the extent to which they were concerned about justice. Especially scholars in the field of peace and conflict studies have persisted in repeating the mantra that in the history of Anabaptist pacifism, there has been a shift from quietism to activism, from nonresistance to peacebuilding, and so on.¹⁴ While this perspective is understandable in view of 20th century developments in North America, a careful examination of the story of Anabaptist origins suggests a different narrative and a different interpretation of Anabaptism's earlier peace tradition. Perhaps the problem in Mennonite collective memory is that the story of Anabaptist origins is often understood through the lens of Swiss Anabaptism and its Schleithem Confession, the assumption being that herein lies the essence of Anabaptism with its emphasis on passive nonresistance and flight from the world.

Note, however, that unlike the Anabaptists of the 1525, the supporters of the Schleithem articles in 1527 were representatives of a persecuted community and had been forced underground and driven into hiding. In the decades and centuries following, Mennonites in southern Europe and in parts of Poland/Prussia and Russia likewise experienced various forms of persecution and repression, and so out of necessity and survival, they took up a posture of remaining "quiet in the land." Predictably, this form of quietism persisted as these Mennonites came to the New World as immigrants and refugees and tended to settle in rural areas. However, if we focus on the perspectives of the earliest Anabaptists, we may observe that they were critical and vocal of empire politics and ecclesial hierarchies and that they actively sought to change their social, political, economic, as well as religious situation. Collective memory has typically failed to take notice or take seriously the extent to which these Anabaptists—Anabaptists such as Conrad Grebel, and George Blaurock—set out to be agents of social, political, as well as religious change.

In the contemporary context, Mennonites, and other groups associated with the radical reformation have understandably wanted to distance themselves from the Anabaptist-peasant connection because of its perceived association with violence. Indeed, the peasant program often spiraled into violent activity. However, the overall aim of the peasants and the Anabaptists who were participants in protest and acts of provocation in 1525, were committed to an ethic of peace and justice, with a view to following both the teachings and example of Jesus. Proto-Anabaptists and those that joined the movement after January 1525, were clearly advocating for a religious politics of equality, inclusion, tolerance, and a concern for the oppressed and the marginalized. They were interested in the values of peace and justice and saw both as integral to the message of the New Testament.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Gayle Gerber Kootz, "Peace Theology in Transition: North American Mennonite Peace Studies and Theology, 1906-2006," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 81, no. 1 (January 2007): 77-96. Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, "Varieties of Contemporary Mennonite Peace Witness: from passivism to pacifism, from nonresistance to resistance," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 10, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 243-257; Leo Driedger & Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale PA and Waterloo ON: (Herald Press, 1993); Ervin R. Stutzman, *Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite church Peace Rhetoric 1908-2008* (Scottsdale PA and Waterloo ON: Herald Press, 2011); Andrew P. Klager, *From Suffering to Solidarity: The Historical Seeds of Mennonite Interreligious, Interethnic, and International Peacebuilding* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011); J. Lawrence Burkholder, *Mennonite Ethics: From Isolation to Engagement*, edited by Lauren Friesen (J. Lawrence Burkholder, 2018); Altaras, Cameron, and Carol Penner. *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*. Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022.

Nevertheless, Mennonite (and other Believers Church) communities have either by-passed this aspect of the story of Anabaptist origins or have proceeded with the presumption that this part of the story is simply not the “genuine” story. Schleithem has continued to be seen as the “theological landmark,” the “crystalizing point” of the Anabaptism movement in its beginning stages, thus representing the true genesis of an Anabaptism that has prevailed, the presumption being that what transpired earlier was underdeveloped.¹⁵ And yet, in an age when Believers Church communities have become interested in the interplay between peace and justice, might the memory of the Anabaptist-peasant connection also inspire, also provide some direction for a generation that is looking for “radical renewal,” or glimpses of what acts of “witnessing to a new heaven and a new earth” might look like?

The Worldly Dutch

The Dutch Mennonite story (or the story of the Doopsgezinden) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries might also provide glimpses of radical renewal. Because of time constraints, my remarks will need to be limited here.

Mennonite historians in North America have often judged this era of Dutch Anabaptism to be about “worldliness” and decline and thus a period of history not worth examining. To be sure, the Dutch Mennonites of this era struggled against the pressures of assimilation; they were faced with an “embarrassment of riches” during a colonial era from which they benefitted.¹⁶ And yet, it was exactly during this time “when the Dutch got worldly,” that we see members of the community committed to service and prophetic engagement in the world. We need to be reminded here that this took place long before North Americans in the 20th century dreamed up various forms of active service through such organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee.

We should recall that for some 150 years, the Dutch worked bravely and tirelessly, advocating on behalf of the oppressed.¹⁷ In the context of a more tolerant society, these Dutch Anabaptists were not “the quiet in the land,” not passive in their politics. They were urbanites, working in the cities,¹⁸ actively and provocatively calling on ecclesial and state authorities in places such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague, advocating on behalf of Swiss Anabaptists, but also

¹⁵ This was John Howard Yoder’s argument. See, for example, “Der Kristallisationspunkt des Täuferturns,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 29, new series 24 (1972): 35-47.

¹⁶ See, for example, Karl Koop, “Dangers of Superabundance: Pieter Pietersz, Mennonites, and Greed during the Dutch Golden Age,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 27 (2009): 61-73; Ruud Lambour, *Mennonites in the Slavery Economy and Slave Trade of the Eighteenth Century: An Exploratory Inventory*, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* vol. 98, no. 3 (July 2024): 311-318.

¹⁷ See, for example, Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, *Letters on Toleration: Dutch Aid to Persecuted Swiss and Palatine Mennonites 1615-1699* (Rockport, ME: Picton Press, 2004); James W. Lowry, editor and translator, et al, *Documents of Brotherly Love: Dutch Mennonite Aid to Swiss Anabaptists*, vol. I 1635-1709, vol. II 1710-1711, vol. III 1712-1784 (Millersburg, OH: Ohio Amish Library, 2007, 2015, 2023).

¹⁸ Mary Sprunger, “In der Stadt und von der Stadt: Die Täufer in der Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Goldenen Zeitalters der Niederlande: Ein Gegenentwurf zum Agrarisch Geprägten Mennonitentum,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 79 (2022): 43-68; Piet Visser, “The Bible and the Literary Arts among Dutch Mennonites and Doopsgezinden, 1600-1740,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* vol. 40, no. 2 (2022): 149.

other fellow-Anabaptists in places such as Slovakia, West Prussia, Switzerland and the Palatinate. They also contributed aid to groups outside of the Anabaptist world who were likewise experiencing repression, such as “the Waldenses in northern Italy and the Huguenots who were expelled from France in 1685.”¹⁹ These Dutch Anabaptists, many of them wealthy entrepreneurs and businesspeople, worked tirelessly in an effort to convince authorities across Europe that they should act more justly, be more religiously tolerant, and treat marginalized communities more respectfully. Note also that these Dutch Anabaptists gave generously so that refugees could find their way to the “new world.”

Concluding Words

Anniversaries and commemorations can be important “moments of memory activation” that can give communities an opportunity to reflect on the past and consider the future. In thinking about radical renewal in an age of commemorations, what are we remembering, what are we forgetting? Perhaps we need to reconsider some of the stories that our collective memories have typically marginalized—the stories of protest and provocation, or the stories of political activism and inspiring generosity in the context of a very “worldly” context. In times of crisis and systematic injustices, what stories yet untold might inspire us to radical renewal, to a form of witness that points to a “New Heaven and a New Earth”?

¹⁹ Visser, “The Bible and the Literary Arts,” 176, n. 13.