

ANABAPTIST TESTIMONY NIGHT

Raising Anabaptist Awareness
From Within a Congregation

*Developed by the MCBC Faith & Life Committee
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ANABAPTIST TESTIMONY NIGHT

This provides a way to 'raise Anabaptist awareness' in your congregation without having to bring in an outside speaker.

The Basics - all you have to do is:

1. Choose a night when many people from your church will be able to come. Plan for the meeting to be about 1.5 to 2 hours long, with a chance for 'spontaneous testimonies' near the end. (Alternatively, you could incorporate this into your Sunday service for 4-6 weeks, with one testimony per service.)
2. Find 3-4 people in your congregation who would be willing to spend 5-10 minutes answering the question "Why are you an Anabaptist?" or "I am an Anabaptist Christian because..." Try and find as wide a range of people as possible – young and old, male and female, people of different ethnic backgrounds, those who've grown up in a Mennonite church and those who came to it later in life.
3. Find 1-2 people willing to read a story of another Anabaptist believer (see below for three testimonies and resources where more can be found). This is a way to incorporate greater diversity into your testimony night, especially if you are a church that is not very ethnically diverse (i.e. you have many congregants who are 'ethnically Mennonite' and grew up in this denomination, or you are a new immigrant congregation who have only recently come into the Mennonite church and might not know much about Anabaptism).
4. Begin and end the night with prayer and perhaps with song of worship. It would also be good to incorporate quotations, prayers, and statements of belief that are distinctively Anabaptist (see the final two sections of this document for examples).

Encouraging Those Who Will be Sharing Their Stories:

1. Encourage them to focus on what they find appealing about Anabaptism, not what they might find (or have found) unappealing about other denominations. When possible, encourage those giving testimonies to note commonalities between Anabaptists and other denominations, as well as things they might appreciate about other Christian traditions.
2. Encourage them that their story is worth telling, even if it seems simple or 'not special enough'. Sometimes those who have been in an Anabaptist/Mennonite context their whole lives, or those who came into the Mennonite church through non-spectacular means (just 'by chance') can think they don't have a story to tell, but they do. God works in all our stories in different ways!
3. Encourage them to name what it is specifically about Anabaptism that attracted them and/or keeps them in this denomination (i.e., pacifism, reconciliation, believers baptism, social justice, care for refugees, simple living, sense of community, priesthood of all believers, etc.). Encourage them to name that even (perhaps especially) if it is something that is common to many denominations, not just specific to Anabaptism (i.e. Jesus at the centre of the faith). Again, while this is a chance to help deepen your congregation's sense of its own Anabaptist identity, this isn't about establishing the 'superiority' of Anabaptists over other denominations (we have our failings and blind spots too!).

Anabaptist Testimonies:

Here are three sample testimonies that could be read out – the first two (Sunoko Lin and Jason Evans) were printed in the “New Anabaptist Voices” booklet (Missio Dei (Number 20), Mennonite Mission Network, 2012). The third (Anna Janz) is from the forthcoming book *Bearing Witness: Stories of Martyrdom and Costly Discipleship*. If you wish to find other stories, please consult the resource list below.

This Testimony is adapted from a conversation with Sunoko Lin, pastor of Maranatha Christian Fellowship in the San Fernando Valley of California.

[Maranatha Church] is actually the first church in the San Fernando Valley serving the Indonesian community. It came into existence in 1987 to meet the needs of Indonesian immigrants, part Indonesian students at California State University Northridge. The composition of the church has, however, changed drastically. Now, most of the people attending are Indonesian immigrant couples with children.

Our community of San Fernando Valley is an urbanized valley located in the northern section of the city of Los Angeles. It has experienced a tremendous shift in three decades from a predominantly white population to a multiethnic population. The Valley is now home to immigrants from diverse places such as Mexico, El Salvador, Iran, Israel, Armenia, Vietnam, Korea, India, and China. One-third of the Valley’s 1.7 million residents are foreign-born. Furthermore, our church is located in one of the four poorest communities. Many high-school students do not finish their schooling. Sometimes, you can find three or four families living in one apartment. I have told our church that we need to be aware of these realities in our community. Most of our children in the church are straight ‘A’ students. One of them was even featured in the *Los Angeles Times* for her hard work. So our church has these blessings, and our community has these needs. And so the question is, how can we become a visible witness in this place?

One thing that attracted me to Anabaptism, with its emphasis on discipleship and radical faith, is [this] visible witness. For our church in the San Fernando Valley, we must live incarnationally in our community. The church should have an important role in shaping and influencing the life of the community. And for me that is the incarnational message. Anabaptism reminds me that we are to bear fruit. In John 15:1-11 the words ‘abide in me’ appear four times, and they mean more than just an imitation of Christ’s life and teaching. They point to our active engagement with the One who lives in us by the Holy Spirit. Christ is telling us that fruit-bearing is inevitable when we are connected to him. We need to work with Christ in our engagement with our community. May God’s pruning hand be at work in our lives so that we can bear much fruit and be a visible witness!

This testimony was written by Jason Evans, who lives in San Deigo, Calif. He is married to Brooke and has three children, Paige, Matt, and Sam. He is the founder of the Ecclesia Collective, a network of grassroots, missional communities.

On an early weekday morning in late 2001, I sat next to my 9-month-pregnant wife, watching a plane crash into the second of the Twin Towers on TV. My arm was wrapped around her. I could feel her belly, stretched tight with our child inside, against my hand. “What kind of world are we bringing this child into?” was all that she could say to me. I had no response.

For weeks, months, the world cast blame on religious radicals for these terrible acts. I found myself asking “What does my faith have to say about violence?” I am a Christian. I took Church History at a Christian high school. I knew what the church had to say about violence. We embraced it. We became it. I didn’t like that. Nor more than you like reading it. But it was true – the crusades, inquisitions, slavery, and so on. As a political, social, and cultural force, the church was often found at the center of some of the most horrific moments in history.

But then there was Jesus. While public Christian figures cast judgement on prime-time television, I found myself reading the Gospels. And there, I could see nothing resembling their rhetoric in Jesus. Jesus blessed peacemakers. He chastised his close friend, Peter, for attacking an officer. He was tortured and sentenced to capital

punishment, yet refused to retaliate. Jesus embodied the very opposite of violence. Why was it that we no longer resembled the One who we claimed to follow?

In my journey of answering this question, I found myself planting a church that was more a community than congregation. We realized that many of the power and authority structures to which we had become accustomed allowed for a more subtle form of violence against lay people. So we decided to do our best to shape a community that functioned more like a spiritual co-operative where we all shared in being a 'royal priesthood' rather than having a 'professional' carry most of that load. Since we didn't have overhead, we were able to use our resources to take care of each other and others as we discerned together the best way to use our gifts. It has not been easy to develop this kind of community, but it has been more than worth it.

Along the way, we began to read Anabaptist theologians such as John Howard Yoder and others. Within the Anabaptist stream of Christianity we found a theology that affirmed our convictions. This stream of history felt as though it were ours. Anabaptism drew Christian theology away from a monologue and more into dialogue. It became a counterpart in a conversation. And it was always asking, "Yes, we believe that, but how do we live it?"

To respond to that challenge, we had to look again at how we practiced our faith through the lens of Scripture. Rather than just valuing ideals such as 'community' or 'mission' could we actually become those things together? It has not been easy. We haven't achieved all that we hope to and probably never will. But we feel that we have chosen to enter a stream that has brought back life to our faith.

As an 'outsider' to the Anabaptist tradition, it has often been hard to find a place within the church's institutions. Yet as the church in North America looks to the future with concerns about sustainability, it seems important for us to find ways to learn from each other. The early Anabaptists were sometimes called 'the swarm.' They were an unstoppable movement that spread across Europe. They found a way to thrive without the weighty demands of the other traditions that hunted them down.

Creative ways to not simply sustain but to thrive are often found at the margins. It never comes easy and most often requires significant sacrifice. As Anabaptists, we have within us the DNA to sustain hard times. I am convinced that some of us as Christian immigrants to Anabaptism are rediscovering many of those ancient ways. And as we do, perhaps our discoveries can be of value to the broader Anabaptist faith community as we together seek how to both survive and thrive in the years ahead.

This Testimony is about an early Anabaptist – Anna Janz, who was killed for her faith in 1539 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

A girl named Anna was born to a wealthy family in Briel, a town in South Holland. Little is remembered of her life until she married a man named Arent Janz. The couple was baptized in 1534, when Anna was twenty-four, by a Münsterite named Maynard von Emden.

Anna's world highlights the complexity of Anabaptism at the time. Von Emden was proclaiming the arrival of the New Jerusalem in the city of Münster, a common refrain at the time among those influenced by the apocalyptic teachings of Lutheran preacher Melchior Hoffman. Some restless leaders hungry for revolution took Hoffman's teachings as a directive to prepare the way for the return of Christ. But even though they used scripture to support their position, their way was anything but that of the peaceable kingdom. The group overthrew Münster's government, abolished private property, redistributed the wealth of the city's citizens to the poor, and made adult baptism a requirement to live in the city.

Maynard von Emden was spreading the news and teachings of this group when he baptised Anna and her husband. At the time, encouraged by the successful takeover of Münster, a similar group of revolutionaries began marching in the streets of Amsterdam, proclaiming 'the day of the Lord.' They hoped to follow the example of Münster, raising a militia of armed citizens large enough to overthrow the city government. The authorities responded by arresting Anabaptists across Holland, regardless of whether they had been radicalised by the extreme teachings of the group.

When the hunt for Anabaptists came to Briel, Anna's husband fled to England. She stayed behind. She had met an Anabaptist leader named David Joris, a rival of Menno Simons. Joris opposed Menno's emphasis on a

Bible-centred church, teaching that mystical revelations held greater authority than scripture. But like Menno, he championed pacifism over the violence used by Münsterites. His teaching on nonviolence captured Anna's heart.

Under the leadership of Joris, Anna realised that she could prepare for the arrival of the New Jerusalem without resorting to the mad violence of the Münsterites. She wrote a tune called "The Trumpet Song" which became a favourite of Anabaptist activities. In it, Anna hailed God's vengeance and justice, but never encouraged humans to seek that justice by the sword. Anna encouraged Joris in his leadership, and the two became close friends and confidants. She called him a 'valiant leader of Israel' and urged him to 'prepare the Lord an acceptable people, so that he may speedily come into his temple.'

Her close relationship with Joris understandably angered her husband, Arent. He returned from England to confront Anna. He demanded that other Anabaptist leaders investigate Joris's relationship with Anna, fearing that, if she had not already committed adultery, she would soon. After the investigation, Anna returned with her husband to England (it is not known whether or not this was by choice).

Their stay in England was to be short, though. Two years after their arrival, Thomas Cromwell initiated a new wave of persecution against Anabaptists in England, forcing Anna to return to the Netherlands. She was accompanied by her fifteen-month-old baby, named Isaiah, and an older female companion named Christina Barents. The historical record does not reveal what happened to Arent, but he was likely a victim of the persecution that drove Anna and her child back to their homeland.

Soon after returning to Holland, Anna and Christina were arrested. While they had been travelling, someone on the road had heard the two women singing an Anabaptist song and reported them to the authorities. In prison, Anna composed a letter to her son, reminding him of God's solidarity with the poor and the weak, calling him to follow her along the path of faithful suffering blazed by Jesus Christ, and encouraging him to live simply and generously.

Anna was sentenced to death in Rotterdam for her beliefs. When the time came for her execution, Anna's thoughts were on her son. She cried out to the crowd gathered to watch her die, offering her significant fortune to anyone willing to raise her boy. A baker accepted her offer, taking her son and the testament she had written for him in prison.

"Behold," she wrote to Isaiah, "I go the way of the prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and drink of the cup which they all have drunk. I go the way which Christ Jesus – the eternal Word of the Father, full of grace and truth, the shepherd of the sheep, who is the life, himself went... See my son, this way has no retreats, there are no roundabouts or crooked little paths; whoever departs to the right or to the left inherits death... There are some who well perceive that this is the way to life, but it is too severe for them; it pains their flesh... May the Lord cause you to grow up in his fear, and filling your understanding with his spirit. Sanctify yourself to the Lord, my son."

Anna and her companion, Christina, were drowned at nine in the morning on January 24, 1539. The letter she wrote to her son, along with her "Trumpet Song," was preserved by her fellow believers, giving strong expression to her faith in the face of fierce persecution and her deep commitment to walking with God in peace and the light of the Bible. Tradition says that the baker who in her son increased in prosperity, and that Isaiah eventually became the mayor of Rotterdam, the city that had put his mother to death.

Anna's words to her son, passed down through the centuries, remain a source of encouragement to Anabaptists today.

Further Resources for Testimonies:

- > “Bearing Witness” website: commonword.ca/ResourceView/6/17064 (book to be published in 2016)
- > *By Birth or by Choice: Who can become a Mennonite?* Martha Denlinger Stahl [Herald 1987]
- > *Why I am a Mennonite*, Ed. Harry Loewen [Herald, 1988] - commonword.ca/ResourceView/2/2075
- > Profiles of Anabaptist Women - commonword.ca/ResourceView/2/3179
- > On Fire for Christ - commonword.ca/ResourceView/2/8128
- > Plant a Seed of Peace (many, but not all, are Anabaptist) - commonword.ca/ResourceView/2/9609
- > Mirror of the Martyrs - commonword.ca/ResourceView/2/4142
- > “Anabaptist Dramatic Readings/Monologues” - commonword.ca/ResourceView/2/13580
- > Mennonite Martyrs - commonword.ca/ResourceView/2/1956
- > “Celebration Snapshots” – stories of the global Mennonite church – some, but not all are testimonies - commonword.ca/ResourceView/52/6882

Another very recent and helpful resource on Anabaptist Spirituality is *Life Together in the Spirit: A Radical Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century*, by John Driver (2015)

Anabaptist Prayers and Quotations:

Great God,

Give us open hearts and open minds. Grant us a vision of you as you are, and of the world as it might be. Touch our lips; give us words of truth for one another. Then set us free to do what you ask of us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

- John D. Rempel, *New York City*

For true evangelical faith is of such a nature that it cannot lie dormant; but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love; it dies unto flesh and blood; destroys all forbidden lusts and desires; cordially seeks, serves and fears God; clothes the naked; feeds the hungry; consoles the afflicted; shelters the miserable; aids and consoles all the oppressed; returns good for evil; serves those that injure it; prays for those that persecute it; teaches, admonishes and reproves with the Word of the Lord; seeks that which is lost; binds up that which is wounded; heals that which is diseased and saves that which is sound. The persecution, suffering and anxiety which befalls it for the sake of the truth of the Lord, is to it a glorious joy and consolation.

- Menno Simons, *Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing*, 1539

“No one can truly know Christ unless they follow after him in daily life, and no one can follow Christ in daily life unless they truly know him.”

- Hans Denck

Heavenly Father,

We pray for all our brothers and sisters in the faith, wherever they may be, even unto the ends of the earth, whether assembled or scattered, in sorrow or sickness, in bonds or in prison for your name's sake.

Comfort them and us with your great love, and them and us with your Holy Spirit and in your word and your will. May we all abide in your love and not depart from the way of righteousness, neither to the right nor the left, but remain faithful unto the end of our lives.

In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

- *Die ernsthafte Christenpflicht* (original 1739), translated in *A Devoted Christian's Prayer Book* (Aymler, Ont: Pathway, 1984)

Our loving, patient, and generous God:

Because we are confident in your power and love, we sense the freedom to lament, to cry to you, and to ask with the martyrs under the altar: How long will it be... (Rev. 6:10)?

Because we rejoice in your goodness and justice, we ask that you transform the hearts, minds, and souls of those powers that cause untold suffering and injustice.

Because we are mindful of your promises to forgive, we confess our complicity and solidarity in so many ways with the evils perpetrated on human beings also created in your image.

Because we know of your faithfulness, we commit ourselves to you so that your creation can again reflect the glory of your purposes.

As your people we pray: May it be so. Amen.

- Mennonite World Conference website (written by the Peace Commission, Sept 2014)

Read Matthew 5:3-10 (the beatitudes) and then pray this:

God whose justice shines like the sun, you bless all who seek first your kingdom and righteousness. Fill our hearts with the spirit of the Beatitudes that we may live this day in simplicity, mercy, and joy. Through Jesus, who taught us to do, we pray for the coming of your reign: **Our Father...**

- from Take our Moments and our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book (Vol 1, pg 186)

Anabaptist Creeds/Convictions:

1. Read a few of the articles of the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (or the summary of all the articles, found here: mennolink.org/doc/cof/summary.html).

2. An adaptation of the Apostles Creed (with the 'Anabaptist Comma', from Peace Mennonite Fellowship in Claremont, California)

Disciples: I believe in God ,
The Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ,
God's only Son,
our Lord, who was
Conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
One disciple: [Welcomed by shepherds,
Greeted by Magi,
Pursued by Herod,
Sheltered in Egypt,
Taught by Joseph,
Baptized by John,
Tempted by Satan,
Followed by disciples,
Heard by multitudes,
Understood by simple,
Despised by clergy,
Praised by lepers,
Hosted by outcasts,
Seen by the blind,
Touched by the ill,
Obeyed by psychotics,

Rejected by siblings,
Rebuked by Martha,
Embraced by Mary,
Anointed by a prostitute,
Cheered by crowds,
Loved by John,
Hated by the Powers,
Abandoned by all,
Grieved in Gethsemane
Betrayed by disciple,
Denied by Peter,
Arrested by Herod,]

Disciples: Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
On the third day he rose again;
He ascended into heaven,
He is seated on the right hand of the Father,
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting.

3. The 'Shared Convictions' of Mennonite World Conference (adopted by MWC, General Council, March 15, 2006):

By the grace of God, we seek to live and proclaim the good news of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. As part of the one body of Christ at all times and places, we hold the following to be central to our belief and practice:

1. God is known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Creator who seeks to restore fallen humanity by calling a people to be faithful in fellowship, worship, service and witness.
2. Jesus is the Son of God. Through his life and teachings, his cross and resurrection, he showed us how to be faithful disciples, redeemed the world, and offers eternal life.
3. As a church, we are a community of those whom God's Spirit calls to turn from sin, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, receive baptism upon confession of faith, and follow Christ in life.
4. As a faith community, we accept the Bible as our authority for faith and life, interpreting it together under Holy Spirit guidance, in the light of Jesus Christ to discern God's will for our obedience.
5. The Spirit of Jesus empowers us to trust God in all areas of life so we become peacemakers who renounce violence, love our enemies, seek justice, and share our possessions with those in need.
6. We gather regularly to worship, to celebrate the Lord's Supper, and to hear the Word of God in a spirit of mutual accountability.
7. As a world-wide community of faith and life we transcend boundaries of nationality, race, class, gender and language. We seek to live in the world without conforming to the powers of evil, witnessing to God's grace by serving others, caring for creation, and inviting all people to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

In these convictions we draw inspiration from Anabaptist forebears of the 16th century, who modeled radical discipleship to Jesus Christ. We seek to walk in his name by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we confidently await Christ's return and the final fulfillment of God's kingdom.