

Response to Roger Forster's paper: Anabaptists

I would like to commend Roger Forster's paper as an introduction to Anabaptists, specifically the 28 Characteristics of Anabaptists as a helpful insight. I would like to contribute three additional themes to the paper, women, global histories and social justice. All three being lessons we can learn from the Anabaptist for the 21st century

I am a woman of African Caribbean descent born in the UK, these facts are important to me, inevitably when reading history, I could be mistaken to believe that individuals like me had nothing to contribute. Recently invited to teach church history at a bible college here in the UK, after reading the notes, I decided to remind students each time I taught that this was Church History from a Eurocentric, protestant, male perspective. Others were –

1. Not recognised.
2. Not acceptable
3. Opposed
4. Invisible
5. Only able to operate when allowed without acknowledgement
6. Appendage
7. Undervalued.

How many of those statements are still a lived reality for individuals globally.

It is usually the case that the contribution of women in church history are written separately. The Profiles of Anabaptist Women in the sixteenth-century gives insight to the voice of Mennonite women doing theology alongside their male counterparts. These and other voices are missing from Roger's paper.

1. Katherina Hutter of Switzerland, with her husband led groups of refugees across the country side when they were removed from their homes. They moved from one safe house to the next, baptizing, encouraging demoralized believers, Katherina was imprisoned in 1535 in the castle of Branzoll above Klausen
2. Maria van Beckum, a Dutch Mennonite who is chained to the stake before her execution by fire, later the same day her sister in law Ursula van Breckum was burned at the stake.
3. Anna Jansz of Rotterdam 1685 is a mother of a young boy – Isaiah, as she is led away to her execution she is calling out to the onlookers for someone to take her child, to raise him. A local baker steps out of the crowd and promises to raise the boy as his own.

The above and several other women's plight are documented comprehensively and should be compulsory reading for any individual studying the historical contribution of Mennonites. ¹

The Anabaptists have gifted Christendom another offering of history, The Global Mennonite History Series was initiated by Mennonite World Conference at its thirteenth global assembly in Calcutta, India in January 1997.

¹ Profiles of Anabaptist Women Sixteenth-Century, C Arnold Snyder & Linda A Huebert Hecht, Editors, 1996

For some it is the first time they have cooperated in telling their story in their own voice. The themes in each book differ from those in another. These striking and effectual telling of the of the stories of Mennonites is intentional in its intent to grow a worldwide movement of equals and to acknowledge the shift from North to South.

The Global Mennonite History Series consists of five volumes of history, one from each continental region. Writers from each region trace their own origins, development and mission of the Anabaptist-related churches there, reflecting the experiences, understandings and perspectives of these churches.

If we acknowledge that most of church histories of Africa read in the West have been written by Westerners and that these writers have typically been missionaries or relief workers; their analyses and conclusions have reflected those perspectives.

Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts on the contrary is written by people of African descent. Each writer is an African church leader or pastor, and they write about the emergence and development of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in the countries from which they come. "The story of God's work in Africa did not begin with the arrival of the missionaries, but rather -- from the African perspective -- their arrival continued, reinterpreted and re-shaped an ancient story,"²

The series includes the following five volumes:

(All volumes in English, with translations of some into selected languages)

1. *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts*, released in 2003 at the 14th global assembly in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (also available in Spanish and French)
2. *Testing Faith and Tradition*, the volume from Europe, released in 2006 (also available in Spanish, French, and Dutch)
3. *Mission and Migration*, the volume from Latin America, released in 2010 (also available in Spanish)
4. *Churches Engage Asian Traditions*, the volume from Asia, released in 2011
5. *Seeking Places of Peace*, the volume from North America, released in 2012

Anabaptists consciously worked to narrow the gap between their theology and practice. William and Clara Anderson were early members of the Rocky Ridge Mennonite Mission near Quakertown, Pennsylvania, USA. They were the first African-Americans to join a Franconia Conference congregation, in 1932. In that year, at the conference in Franconia meetinghouse, a resolution was passed: "That a colored applicant applying for admission at the Rocky Ridge Mission, be baptized and received into the Mennonite Church."³ This resolution, which was read from the pulpit in all conference congregations, established a standard of racial integration.

In Harlem one church was at the heart of the civil rights movement, Harlem Mennonite Church at 2526 Seventh Avenue, later to be renamed Seventh Avenue

² *Anabaptist Songs In African Hearts*, John A Lapp & C Arnold Snyder, General editors 2006

³ <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/tag/franconia-mennonite-conference/>

Mennonite Church. Urban African Americans and rural individuals of European descent worshipped together as one. This was the beginning of a quiet resolve to build a cross-cultural church of two very separate and different communities for the greater purpose of the radical love of Jesus Christ and building the Kingdom of God.⁴

We have much to learn and emulate from the trajectory of historical writings of the Anabaptists.

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⁴ <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2017/11/24/a-radical-love-in-harlem-resolve-resilience-and-restoration-part-1-1952-1975/>