***NEWSBRIEF***

***REFORMATION NEIGHBORS: LUTHERANS, HUTTERITES,***

***MENNONITES AND AMISH***

**The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation**

In the 16th Century, the “magisterial reformers” (so-called when they received the support of

the civil magistrates) were opposed to the “Anabaptist” reformers who practiced “rebaptism”

and also repudiated the historic alliance of Christianity and government. This was a huge departure from the practice of “Christendom” initiated by Emperor Constantine in the 4th Century when he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. This alliance was reinforced by decrees from Emperor Theodosius (380) and Justinian (529) that equated sedition with heresy. As a result, when certain reform-minded individuals in the 1520s in defiance of historic practice began to practice adult baptism, they incurred the violent reaction of both Catholics and Protestants.

The Anabaptists wanted to reform the reformers! The Anabaptists reasoned that magisterial reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin failed to reinstate the Christian Church along the lines of earliest, pre-Constantinian Christianity. Also known as the “radical reformers,” they first appeared in Switzerland as supporters of Zwingli; but the fateful turn for Anabaptists was the night of January 21, 1525, when Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock baptized each other. This was also the spark that fired the development of “believer’s baptism” in the subsequent course of Christianity.

Without doubt, the 16th and 17th centuries were trying for Anabaptists. The very name implied

heresy, and by 1535, up to 50,000 Anabaptists had been killed by Catholics and Protestants in ways that included drowning, torture and burning. This is all the more tragic, since another hallmark of the Anabaptists was non-violence. In fairness, there were some extremists among the ranks of Anabaptists, like Thomas Munzer who championed the armed revolt of the peasants, and Jan Matthis and Jan Brockelson who tried to force a theocracy in the city of Munster in 1534. Less extreme and not violent were the “spiritualists” like Sebastian Franck, Hans Denck, and Sebastian Castellio who forsook the empirical church for the inward church of mystical experience.

When the movement settled out, there were three bodies of Anabaptists who persevered with quiet tenacity and are among our neighbors today throughout much of North America: the

Hutterites, Mennonites, and Amish. Significantly, in 2010, Lutheran Churches belonging to the Lutheran World Federation issued a statement expressing “deep regret and sorrow” for the violent persecution of Anabaptists (though this was primarily directed to the Mennonites with whom official dialogues were exchanged).

The Hutterites owe their start to Jacob Hutter, a Swiss minister who became an Anabaptist in 1529 and rose to leadership in 1533 in Moravia. His followers followed the counsel of Acts 4:32: “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.” They strove to be a communitarian fellowship, separate from society, pacifistic, who disavowed

the sovereignty of the state and the magisterial church. The Roman Catholic, King Ferdinand, had Jacob Hutter burned at the stake in 1536, ostensibly because he threatened the unity of the empire which faced the Turkish Muslim threat on the east.

Waves of persecution forced the Hutterites to move in and out of Moravia, Hungary, Wallachia, and Russia. Moving in the late 1870s to South Dakota, they divided into groups known as Schmiedeleut (people of the smith), Dariusleut (people of Darius Walter), and Lehrerleut (people of the teachers, Jacob Wipf and Peter Hofer). Today there are approximately 50,000 Hutterites in the United States and Canada, and roughly 3000 in Montana on 55 colonies of Dariusleut and Lehrerleut.

Menno Simons, formerly a Dutch Catholic priest, brought Anabaptists into the Netherlands.

Persecution sent them to Germany, Switzerland, and in the 1860s to America. The Mennonites divide into four groups: the Old Mennonite of Swiss descent; the General Conference (most progressive), the Mennonite Brethren, and the Old Order Amish, often simply called Amish. Mennonites first entered Montana in 1902 near Bloomfield. Globally there are about 731,000 Mennonites, with about 350,000 in America.

The Amish are named after the Swiss Mennonite preacher Jacob Ammann, who broke away

from the Mennonites because he insisted on the practices of foot-washing during Communion

and shunning (*Meidung).* Unlike the Hutterites, their communities are not communes, but

are built around families who own their own goods while avoiding ostentatious display. They began migrations to America after the 1720s, most from the Alsace region in France and the Palatinate in Germany. Today there are about 85,000 Amish, and within the last decade have moved to several locations near Moore, Montana. They do not drive cars and instead drive

horse-drawn buggies or rent a car driver, they do not use electricity, do use machinery, and they worship in their homes.

Though “Anabaptist” is not the preferred term today to refer to the Hutterites, Mennonites and

Amish, it remains true that the theology of baptism is a key difference with Lutherans. Whereas

Anabaptists stress the mature readiness for baptism of the person getting baptized, Lutherans

stress the unconditional readiness of God’s decision to accept the baptized, regardless of age or ability. For Lutherans, baptism is not based on faith, but faith is based on baptism bestowing God’s grace. As Reformation neighbors, we have deep respect for each other, and look forward to growing in Christian sharing and friendship!

(*NEWSBRIEFS,* this one written by Rev. Dr. Paul Seastrand, are produced by the Quincentenary Task Force of the Montana Synod—ELCA to observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.)