

“Woe is me! For I am undone”: Remembering as repentance and revival

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Scholars of World Christianity have made a compelling case that it is impossible to understand the spread of Christianity and its development into a global religion without paying close attention to mission.¹ And mission, in its turn, does not occur without the impetus of revival and renewal movements. Revival, according to Mark Shaw, has historically acted as a “delivery system” for mission, evangelism, and Bible translation.² This is just as true for the Anabaptist tradition as it is for the broader Christian movement.

That is why I want to begin this reflection about the significant marks of the Anabaptist movement in the last five hundred years with a story about mission, revival, and the fuse that lights revival: repentance.

REVIVAL AND REPENTANCE IN SHIRATI

It happened in East Africa in 1942, at a Mennonite mission station in then-Tanganyika. Revival had been sweeping across Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya throughout the 1930s. It was grounded in friendships between Africans and European and North American missionaries. Women

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¹ Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2; Lamin O. Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially Chapter 3. Note that I use mission here in its broadest sense to refer to all efforts to cross boundaries with the Christian message (Robert, *Christian Mission*, 3.)—that is, all “activity by which the church seeks to render itself universal,” per Jean-Marc Ela in *African Cry*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 9.

² Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 11–12.

played a crucial role. The revival began to blur the lines among denominations, among ethnic groups, and between expatriates and Africans who began to walk in the light together in fellowship and accountability groups.³ However, revival had not yet touched the Mennonites in Tanganyika—about twenty North American missionaries and a hundred baptized African believers associated with a handful of mission stations on the eastern shore of Lake Victoria.⁴

In early 1942, Rebeka Makura, an African “Bible woman” or lay evangelist affiliated with the Africa Inland Mission, felt moved to pray for the Mennonites in the Musoma area of Tanganyika because she “detected a spiritual dearth among both missionaries and church members.”⁵ She was illiterate and a “weak speaker,” yet when single American Mennonite missionary teacher-nurse Phebe Yoder met her, Yoder’s own spiritual life was transformed, and she knew that “God would use Makura to answer the prayers for revival among the Mennonites.” The two collaborated, walking miles on foot together, to bring the revival message to the Mennonite mission stations.⁶

On August 8, 1942, the revival reached the last Mennonite mission station of Shirati. American Mennonite missionary bishop Elam Stauffer, as well as several African and American church leaders, felt that “darkness” and “sin” were burdening the church. They decided to postpone the planned communion service at 2:00 pm, and instead asked the gathered congregation to pray for revival.⁷ Church elder Hezekiah Odera offered a short message, and the congregation began to pray on their knees. After some time, according to an account by Stauffer, there came “the sound of

³ Derek R. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Daewon Moon, “Testimony and Fellowship for a Continuous Conversion in the East African Revival,” *Studies in World Christianity* 24, no. 2 (2018), 157–73; Richard K. MacMaster, *A Gentle Wind of God: The Influence of the East Africa Revival* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006); Festo Kivengere, with Dorothy Smoker, *Revolutionary Love* (Moscow, ID: Community Christian Ministries, 2018); Shaw, *Global Awakening*, 91–111.

⁴ MacMaster, *Gentle Wind*, 68, 72. The American Mennonite missionaries in this story were sent out by the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, now Eastern Mennonite Missions, beginning in 1934. (Anne Marie Stoner-Eby, “Building a Church Locally and Globally: The Ministry of Zedekiah Marwa Kisare, First African Bishop of the Tanzanian Mennonite Church,” *Journal of African Christian Biography* 7, no. 2 (2022), 22.)

⁵ MacMaster, *Gentle Wind*, 73.

⁶ MacMaster, *Gentle Wind*, 73–74.

⁷ Elam Stauffer, “The Holy Spirit’s Working in East Africa, ca. 1963–1964” (Stauffer papers, Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, Lancaster, PA, n.d.) as cited in MacMaster, *Gentle Wind*, 76.

a breeze" that he soon recognized as "weeping."⁸ This was followed by the "pouring out of sins"—a deep unburdening through mutual confession in small groups—leading to joy and praise.⁹

Zedekiah Kisare, who would replace Stauffer in 1966, becoming the first African bishop of the Mennonite church in Tanzania, was present that day as a young man. In his autobiography, he used more dramatic language to describe the events:

A great cry burst from every heart. In a moment the whole church was filled with weeping. It was as when you strike a match to petrol: suddenly with a great whoosh the whole congregation was struck down! It was like the explosion when the sizzling fuse ignites dynamite, whoom! It was like the cry at the death of a king, everyone in a moment weeping out of the empty lostness of his soul. "Woe, woe is me! For I am undone."¹⁰

Thinking back over his life, more than forty years after the revival and after his own retirement, Kisare vividly recalled the pain and injustice that the American missionaries' "colonial mentality" caused to Africans associated with the mission, especially due to their refusal to allow Africans to pursue higher education.¹¹ He emphasized that when the revival came to Shirati, part of its significance was that it led American Mennonite missionaries such as Bishop Stauffer to repent of their "Swiss-German self-righteousness."¹² After this, even though the colonial mentality was never entirely eradicated, the American and African Mennonites in Tanzania began to relate to each other in profoundly new ways. Kisare described it as the realization that through Jesus, it was now possible "for all of us to be brothers and sisters in the same village":¹³

At first I could not accept that God wanted me to be the brother of the missionary, that God wanted me to account the missionary to be of the same village with me. How could I accept that, when I felt the missionary's own ethnic pride so keenly? . . . But that evening we all saw Jesus. By that I mean that we saw the crucified Lamb of God

⁸ Stauffer, "Holy Spirit's Working," as cited in MacMaster, *A Gentle Wind of God*, 76.

⁹ Stauffer, "Holy Spirit's Working," as cited in MacMaster, *A Gentle Wind of God*, 75–76.

¹⁰ Zedekiah Marwa Kisare, *Kisare, a Mennonite of Kiseru: An Autobiography as Told to Joseph C. Shenk* (Salunga, PA: Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1984), as cited in Stoner-Eby, "Building a Church," 26.

¹¹ Kisare, *Kisare*, 73, as cited in Stoner-Eby, "Building a Church," 23; Stoner-Eby, "Building a Church," 25–26.

¹² Kisare, *Kisare*, 77, as cited in Stoner-Eby, "Building a Church," 27.

¹³ Kisare, *Kisare*, 81, as cited in Stoner-Eby, "Building a Church," 27.

whose blood removes the walls that separate people from each other and from God their Father. A great light from heaven shone on us, and each saw his own sin, and each saw the new village of God. We all saw this revelation together, so it was easy to confess to one another and to forgive one another . . . It was only because of Jesus' blood that Elam Stauffer and I were able to recognize each other. Without that sacrifice he was nothing to me."¹⁴

Participants in the revival observed that it was through confession that transformation began. One described it as "unprecedented confession of sin, and that particularly on the part of church members, elders, and teachers who were supposedly in good standing."¹⁵ Confession included making "costly restitution" when necessary.¹⁶ Consistent with what has been noted for other major twentieth-century revivals, it was when the leaders—including the missionaries—finally came clean about their deep moral failures that deep transformation began. The revival in Tanganyika led to renewal in North America as well, as both North American Mennonite missionaries and African leaders brought this message to the United States, leading to renewal within the Lancaster Mennonite Conference and elsewhere.¹⁷

Historically, there have been moments when Mennonites have experienced a movement of the Holy Spirit—whether a whoom or a breeze—and when oppressive relational patterns have been briefly overturned. These are moments of deep repentance, of being cut to the heart and overwhelmed by the sense that we have so deeply missed the mark that all seems lost. These moments, to me, are the points of light or significant marks of our five-hundred-year tradition. They are the streams that refresh and enliven our long story, with its many moments of decline and stagnation.¹⁸ And as I look back over our five hundred years of history, I am convinced that we need another such breeze—or dynamite explosion—today.

REMEMBERING WRONGLY

Studies of Anabaptism authored by North American and European Anabaptist-Mennonites sometimes exude a kind of self-congratulatory

¹⁴ Kisare, *Kisare*, 81–82, as cited in MacMaster, *Gentle Wind*, 77.

¹⁵ MacMaster, *Gentle Wind*, 75.

¹⁶ MacMaster, *Gentle Wind*, 75.

¹⁷ MacMaster, *Gentle Wind*. See also John M. Janzen, Harold F. Miller, and John C. Yoder, eds., *Mennonites and Post-Colonial African Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 44–49.

¹⁸ Shaw, *Global Awakening*, 27.

attitude that I increasingly find not only distasteful but deeply distressing.¹⁹ In informal conversations in the lead-up to the five hundredth anniversary, I often hear exhortations, more or less urgent, for us to celebrate our radical stance on adult baptism, our creative acts of nonparticipation in the military, our third-way peace theology, our ancestors' courageous martyrdom. I find that I have become almost allergic to such language. I have begun to resonate deeply with the observations of some ecumenical dialogue partners—such as Lutherans—who have expressed their perplexity about Mennonites' tendency to root their identity in “victimization” in a way that leads to “self-righteousness,” “arrogance,” and an inability to recognize their own failures.²⁰ Given the significance of rituals of collective memory as a form of worship and renewal—as pointed out by John Roth in his reflections on Anabaptist-Mennonite commemorations—it is important to remember that there is such a thing as “remembering ‘wrongly’ or ‘badly.’”²¹ Focusing our commemorations on bolstering the “myth of Mennonite exceptionalism”—that is, continually asserting Mennonites' supposedly particularly virtuous distinctiveness from the world—leads to a failure to recognize our rootedness in broader cultural patterns, including participation in violent structures to safeguard our own privilege and power.²²

In contrast, I propose that in the lead-up to this five hundredth anniversary, it is critical for us to hear, remember, and allow our identity to be deeply shaped by two specific kinds of stories that tend to be marginalized by our self-conception as a peace church: stories of the contributions of sisters and brothers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to

¹⁹ I offer some further thoughts along these lines in a recent book review. See Anicka Fast, “Review of John M. Janzen, Harold F. Miller, and John C. Yoder, eds. *Mennonites and Post-Colonial African Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2021),” *Anabaptist Witness* 9, no. 2 (2022), 63–70.

²⁰ Lutheran World Federation and Mennonite World Conference, *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ—Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2010), 107, <https://mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/oea-lutheran-mennonites-web-en.pdf>. See also the discussion in John D. Roth, “Forgiveness and the Healing of Memories: An Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42, no. 4 (2007), 581.

²¹ John D. Roth, “How to Commemorate a Division?: Reflections on the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation and Its Relevance for the Global Anabaptist-Mennonite Church Today,” *MQR* 91, no. 1 (Jan. 2017), 24–25. Roth draws on the work of Miroslav Volf. See Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). See also John D. Roth and Mollee Moua, *Anabaptism at 500 Tool Kit: Ideas and Resources for Commemorating the 500th Anniversary of Anabaptist Beginnings* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2024), <https://anabaptismat500.com/anabaptism-at-500-tool-kit/>.

²² John D. Roth, *A Mennonite College for Everyone(?): Goshen College and the Quest for Identity and Inclusion, 1960–2020* (Goshen, IN: Goshen College, 2023), 33–35.

the growth and identity of the Anabaptist movement; and stories of those who have been and are still being harmed, betrayed, and damaged by our Mennonite “peace” institutions. Currently, through my research on the history of Mennonite beginnings in Africa, and through my involvement in a campaign to hold Mennonite Central Committee accountable for the systemic abuse of its workers and partners, I find myself listening to these two kinds of stories on a regular basis.

STORIES FROM THE NEW CENTERS OF THE ANABAPTIST MOVEMENT

These days, I spend many of my mornings editing biographies of Congolese Mennonites that were written by sixteen participants in a workshop in Kinshasa in March 2023.²³ These stories will appear as a first volume of a new Mennonite World Conference global Anabaptist-Mennonite history series to be published by Langham.²⁴ I am repeatedly in awe at these nineteenth- and twentieth-century stories of resistance, faithfulness, struggle, perseverance, love, and revival. These are stories of strong women who didn’t wait for a man’s permission before taking leadership. They offer new perspectives on the reasons why North American Mennonite missionaries were welcomed to the Belgian Congo in the early twentieth century that differ quite significantly from those proposed by mission agency–authored histories or colonial sources. They

²³ Charly Ntumba Malembe, “Church History Writing Workshop for Congolese Mennonites, March 20–24, 2023—Centre Universitaire de Missiologie, Kinshasa, DR Congo. A Personal Report,” *Journal of African Christian Biography* 8, no. 2 (2023), 60–61; Michèle Miller Sigg, “Shaping a Truly Global Network through Christian E-Publishing?: Assessing Strategies for Access and Dissemination within the Dictionary of African Christian Biography,” *Journal of African Christian Biography* 8, no. 3 (2023), 44–51; Anicka Fast, “Excerpt from ‘Publishing as Global Church Bridge-Building: Case Study of a Collaborative, Biography-Based Approach in DR Congo’ (Presentation at American Society of Missiology Annual Meeting: ‘Global Arts on Mission: Embedded, Embodied, Empowered,’ St. Mary’s College, June 16–18, 2023),” *Journal of African Christian Biography* 8, no. 3 (2023), 51–57.

²⁴ This new Mennonite World Conference history series will be based on biographies of Anabaptist believers and faith communities in the Global South. It builds on the now-completed Global Mennonite History Series, which tells the story of Anabaptism on five continents, with one volume per continent. Each volume will grow out of a collaborative workshop where authors receive training in research, writing, and world Christian history before writing high-quality biographies of individuals who have played an active role in the transmission, appropriation, and contextualization of their faith. These biographies, to be available both online and in print, can be used in churches, seminaries, and universities to promote reflection about the ways in which the Holy Spirit has been and continues to be at work through women and men around the world. Some volumes, including the first, will also be part of the new *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*’s African Christian Forebears series.

offer insight, carefully unearthed by original oral history research, into the self-conception and conversion motives of young Congolese women in the 1930s that is almost never reflected in the historical record. They illuminate the central role of African individuals in founding congregations and missions, which has long been obscured or buried by the louder and more prominent stories of North American missionaries. And they carefully attempt to describe the mysterious role of the Holy Spirit.

Consider Malengeza (Mukoso) Marthe (1938–2021). She was a timid yet strong woman who gathered women around her for Bible study and prayer, “under the impulse of the Holy Spirit,” until their husbands were drawn in. In this way, she became one of the founders—often overlooked—of a large Mennonite Brethren congregation in Kikwit.²⁵

Or what about Sengu Rebecca (ca. 1920–1985), an early Congolese Mennonite feminist, midwife, and Bible woman?²⁶ Sengu insisted on controlling her first earnings; enrolled in a mission school against her royal parents’ wishes; gave advice to men in conflict, including her husband; exhorted men to give women their place in the home and the church; helped to found a girls’ school; and took in vulnerable children. Her example of women’s leadership gave others courage to follow in her footsteps.²⁷

These biographies are powerful because they illuminate the impact on the Mennonite church of those whose actions and agency tend to be glossed over, and because they show how individuals who faced a variety of deeply painful circumstances—including at times the condescending cultural imperialism of North American Mennonite missionaries—left an example of faithfulness and resistance that has shone into subsequent generations. I am delighted by these stories, in awe of the obstacles that

²⁵ Kabeya Nambu Flore, “Malengeza Kalunga Marthe (1938–2021),” in (Provisional Title) *Histoires de Conversion, de Mission, et de Renouveau Au Congo/Stories of Conversion, Mission, and Renewal in Congo*, ed. Anicka Ruth Fast and Michèle Miller Sigg, Global Perspectives Series (Carlisle, UK: Langham, forthcoming).

²⁶ Ba-Dia-Ngungu Mundedi Bercie, “Sengu Mbongu Rebecca (ca. 1920–1985): Finding Freedom at the Crossroads.” *Journal of African Christian Biography* 9, no. 2–3 (2024), 39–46. Also to appear in Fast and Sigg (forthcoming).

²⁷ Sengu’s biographer, Bercie Mundedi, is one such person. She credits Sengu with awakening her “vocation to serve God full-time.” Ba-Dia-Ngungu Mundedi Bercie, “Sengu,” 42. She is the first woman director of a Congolese Mennonite Bible institute and was one of the first three women to be ordained by the Communauté Mennonite au Congo. Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, “First Woman to Direct Mennonite Bible School in Congo,” *Anabaptist World*, August 5, 2016, <https://anabaptistworld.org/first-woman-direct-mennonite-bible-school-congo/>.

their authors overcame to write them down, and extremely aware of the barriers that still inhibit their publication and wide distribution.

These stories strengthen my conviction that the need to change the narrative about what it means to be an Anabaptist-Mennonite Christian has never been more urgent. Despite the scholarly shift to a world Christianity paradigm and the plethora of overview textbooks that have begun to narrate the story of Christianity as a non-Western religion, academic and ecclesial institutions in the Global North—including Mennonite ones—struggle to make the “world-Christian turn” with integrity.²⁸ Ironically, scholars and historians located in the Global North are still the main producers of scholarship documenting the globalization of the world Christian movement.²⁹ They are still the guardians of the bastions of Mennonite “intellectual capital,” which “overwhelms and shuts down all the other parts of the conversation within the global church,”³⁰ undermining what I have elsewhere called “catholicity” in both “representation” and “knowledge production.”³¹ Structural obstacles,

²⁸ See Paul Kollman, “Understanding the World-Christian Turn in the History of Christianity and Theology,” *Theology Today* 71, no. 2 (2014), 164–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573614529785>. Among the first one-volume textbook overviews of World Christianity were Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 2 vols. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001 and 2019); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002); Douglas Jacobsen, *The World’s Christians: Who They Are, Where They Are, and How They Got There* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Robert, *Christian Mission*; Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion: An Introduction*, second ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*; Charles E. Farhadian, *Introducing World Christianity* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). Among Mennonites, Wilbert Shenk was active in calling attention to the need for a new historical paradigm in Wilbert R. Shenk, “Toward a Global Church History,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 2 (1996), 50–57; and Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002). The Global Mennonite History Series was an innovative five-volume series written by scholars from the relevant continents (Africa [2003], Europe [2006], Latin America [2010], Asia [2011], and North America [2012]). See <https://mwc-cmm.org/en/resources/global-mennonite-history-series>. For a one-volume history of the global Anabaptist movement, see Troy Osborne, *Radicals and Reformers: A Survey of Global Anabaptist History* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2024).

²⁹ Stan Chu Ilo, “Pandemic, Persecution, and Poverty: The Trials, Tribulations, and Triumph of God’s People in Africa” (2020/2021 Annual Meeting of the Association of Professors of Mission: Mission, Persecution, Martyrdom, and Meaning-Making: Instructional Strategies and Methods of Interpretation, Zoom, June 17, 2021); Osborne, *Radicals and Reformers*.

³⁰ Henok T. Mekonin, “Prayer, Evangelism, and Justice Entwined: Meserete Kristos Church’s Holistic Approach in Ethiopia,” *Anabaptist Witness* 11, no. 1 (2024), 173.

³¹ Anicka Fast, “Becoming Global Mennonites: The Politics of Catholicity and Memory in a Missionary Encounter in Belgian Congo, 1905–1939” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2020),

such as a lack of access to sources, academic credentials, and publication venues, still prevent the voices of theologians and historians in the Global South from being heard adequately.³² And, as Henok Mekonin points out, the minimization of the role of the Holy Spirit by North American Mennonite theologians likely makes it more “difficult for Anabaptist churches in the Global South . . . to bring their authentic lived experiences to the forefront and reconnect with brothers and sisters in North America.”³³

As I work on these biographies in the mornings, frustration about these obstacles coexists with enthusiasm as I contemplate how these stories have the potential to change all of us, in both North and South, as we gather new ancestors into our Anabaptist family.³⁴ I am increasingly convinced that until the stories of Mennonites give appropriate prominence to the role of Mennonites from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, we are misremembering our story in a way that impoverishes and harms our global body. As I have argued elsewhere,

the shared remembering of early struggles for catholicity in ways that truthfully address trauma and pain, that lament the moments when the church pursued an ecclesial imagination that linked it with state violence, and that celebrate the boundary-crossing friendships that shaped a new peoplehood on the margins, helps to create a catholic people today.³⁵

As we recognize the contribution of non-Western Mennonites to the development of global Anabaptism, and as we gain a more accurate understanding of the global flows and non-Western initiatives that have always been a part of the Christian and Anabaptist story, I see hope for a stronger, healthier, and more Spirit-filled identity within our global movement.

62–78. See also Anicka Fast, “Biography as a Bridge within the Global Church,” *Journal of African Christian Biography* 7, no. 2 (2022), 66–81; Anicka Fast and Jean Luc Enyegue, “Intercultural Teaching in a Global Church: Questions of Identity and Power” (Workshop, Annual Faculty Teaching and Research Seminar, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminaries [via Zoom], November 7, 2022); Anicka Fast, “Des étudiants burkinabè écrivent l’histoire de l’Église africaine,” *Christ Seul*, March 2022.

³² Andrew F. Walls, “Structural Problems in Mission Studies,” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 143–59; Ilo, “Pandemic.”

³³ Mekonin, “Prayer,” 171.

³⁴ Stan Chu Ilo, “Stories My Grannies Never Told Me: Memory and Orality in the Narrative of African Christian History,” in Dana Lee Robert, ed., *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges* (Pietermaritzburg, SA: Cluster Publications, 2018), 53.

³⁵ Fast, “Becoming Global Mennonites,” 119.

STORIES OF “PEACE CHURCH” VIOLENCE

Meanwhile, however, in the afternoons, as a member of the steering committee of MCC Abuse Survivors Together (MAST), I am often gasping in pain and grief as I listen to stories of people who describe psychological and sexual abuse, bullying, and gaslighting at the hands Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) leaders. People who meet with us to share their stories express the emotion they felt when they read our June 11, 2024, open letter to MCC constituents and its related petition. In this letter, I and six other former MCC workers allege a longstanding pattern within MCC of “psychologically violent and financially unethical firing practices that disregard workers’ and partners’ health and wellbeing” and that serve to cover up “workplace abuse.”³⁶ Those who have come forward with their own stories of abuse since then tell us what a relief it is for them feel validation of their similar experiences—about which they had often kept silent for years—and share examples of unsupportive friends and congregations who made them feel “crazy” for calling a beloved Mennonite institution into question. Meanwhile, even as the number of cases of which MAST is aware has surpassed fifty, MCC leaders have responded with statements emphasizing the “humility and compassion” with which they are “holding” the “concerns recently raised,” suggesting that observers sympathetic to the campaign are unfairly taking sides without knowing the—conveniently confidential—“facts.” They have minimized the allegations as “workplace conflict” rather than “abuse,” and are proposing new policy changes that will further strengthen the power of MCC’s human resources department to contain complaints and silence whistleblowers.³⁷ So far, North American Mennonite

³⁶ Anicka Fast et al., “Concerns about Abuse within MCC and Call for Answers,” June 11, 2024, <https://online.fliphtml5.com/rcyuu/lcvv/#p=1>. Anicka Fast et al., “MCC, Stop Harming Your Workers and Partners Now!” (Change.org, June 11, 2024), <https://www.change.org/p/mcc-stop-harming-your-workers-and-partners-now>. Initial coverage of the open letter and petition and the stories of the terminated workers soon appeared in Mennonite periodicals. See Will Braun, “Involuntary: Terminated MCC Workers Call for Accountability and Change,” *Canadian Mennonite*, July 17, 2024, <https://canadianmennonite.org/involuntary-terminated-mcc-workers-call-for-accountability-and-change/>; CM Staff, “Involuntary: Behind the Scenes,” *Canadian Mennonite*, June 28, 2024; “Former MCC Workers Allege Abuses,” *Anabaptist World*, June 20, 2024, <https://anabaptistworld.org/former-mcc-workers-allege-abuses/>. Stories of two other workers who came forward with allegations of sexual assault and corruption can be found at Will Braun, “MCC Accused of Inadequate Response to Sexual Assault Allegation,” *Canadian Mennonite*, October 2024. Further coverage by Religion News Service is forthcoming.

³⁷ For details about the forty-three cases of which MAST is aware, see MAST Steering Committee, “Stop MCC Abuse—Press Release, September 10, 2024,” September 10, 2024, <https://online.fliphtml5.com/rcyuu/ugka/#p=1>. For MCC’s official responses to date, see Ann

churches, the “owners” of MCC, have, with a few exceptions, remained silent.³⁸

Those who come forward to share their stories with MAST tell us about patterns of abuse that have sometimes gone on for years. They describe senior staff who have been credibly accused of sexual harassment and are allowed to quietly resign or retire, or supervisors forcing workers into mediation with people they have accused of sexual harassment or assault. One woman, describing years of gaslighting and sexual discrimination and harassment, says: “Before I entered that job, I was proud to be who I am, an independent, strong-headed woman. But by the time I left I was crawling out of there, with barely any of my essence left intact.” We hear multiple stories of staff fired in callous and dehumanizing ways after speaking up about financial corruption, sexual discrimination, or workplace abuses of power, or after becoming ill on the job. We speak with current employees who express deep fear of losing their jobs if their names become known. As I draft this reflection, we hear from a regional board member who tells us that she was pressured into resigning because she spoke out in a very general way in support of the #stopmccabuse campaign in a couple of Facebook comments. Some stories are decades

Graber Hershberger and Rick Cober Bauman, “MCC Executive Directors Respond to Concerns of Former Workers,” *Canadian Mennonite*, July 19, 2024; “MCC Statement in Response to Open Letter and Petition,” June 18, 2024, <https://mcc.org/our-stories/mcc-statement-response-open-letter-and-petition>; and “MCC’s Response to Concerns Raised by Former Employees,” September 2024, <https://mcc.org/our-stories/mccs-response-concerns-raised-former-employees>. For an article that emphasizes MCC’s support of its workers and implies that observers don’t know the facts, see Laura Kalmar, “A Journey of Service with Mennonite Central Committee,” July 15, 2024, <https://mcc.org/our-stories/journey-service-mennonite-central-committee>. MAST obtained a copy of the proposed revisions to whistleblowing policy 7412 (Reporting Illegal, Unethical or Other Inappropriate Behavior), which expand the text from two to thirteen pages with changes that further entrench the power of MCC’s human resources department while severely limiting the ability of MCC staff to speak openly about any negative experiences or abuse they are experiencing. For more analysis of the proposed revisions, see Anicka Fast, “Revisions to MCC Policy 7412—Whistleblowing Policy,” Facebook post, September 23, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/anicka.fast/posts/pfbid0WpLTkEaduyLsDCT4AfCB7eUVeoM1FDjgGuku5QbDsgzgRjbgHF2NooQUzZjKmpql>.

³⁸ The open letter and related media coverage generated lively discussion in Readers Write sections of subsequent issues of the *Canadian Mennonite*, and more than one hundred of the fifteen hundred signatories of the petition also offered comments of support. One conference minister has stated his public support for these expressions of concern. See Eric Massanari, “Living Faith Requires Support and Accountability,” *Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference E-Bulletin*, August 19, 2024. See also the editorial in the *EMC Messenger*: The Editors, “MCC Association Doesn’t Mean We Discount Allegations,” *EMC Messenger*, October 2024.

old, but many date from recent years, and in a significant number of cases the abuse is still ongoing.

One congregational abuse prevention committee from a Midwestern Mennonite congregation asked us to publish a letter in which they detailed “extreme emotional and spiritual abuse of a dedicated long-term MCC employee” that occurred on their own church premises sometime in 2023 at the hands of the MCC US human resources director and her hired contractors. They shared how their attempts to get answers from MCC leaders—even though the survivor of the abuse had by now signed a nondisclosure agreement that appeared to involve an offer of cash in exchange for silence—were met by denial, victim-blaming, the insistence that this was an isolated event, and an “investigation” shrouded in secrecy. These actions—or failures to act—on the part of top MCC leadership only deepened the “grave breach of the trusting relationship” that the congregation had previously had with MCC and intensified the committee’s determination to speak out.³⁹

Such stories about harm done and lives damaged by leaders in an organization that prides itself on acting in the name of Christ are just my path into the reality to which other Mennonite scholars have been calling attention for decades, and one that I had begun to dimly perceive in my previous research—a reality in which the violence of Mennonites behind closed doors of homes and institutional facades has “gutted” our “living peace witness.”⁴⁰ A growing body of scholarship calls attention to Mennonites’ difficulties with facing their own abuses of power and complicity with violence, the role of Mennonite churches and institutions in enabling or minimizing abusers’ behavior, and the ways in which Mennonite peace theology is weaponized to legitimize violence and injustice while downplaying the need for resistance and accountability.⁴¹

³⁹ For the full letter, see Stop MCC Abuse, “Survivor Story,” Facebook post, September 24, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02WLvz3MFicm6b7EXPcHMCP4aEXYWP7NAbZY5oWAHBFkpas2fdocGuWbMnaH3Yo3Lql&id=61561075914880.

⁴⁰ Ruth Elizabeth Krall, *The Elephants in God’s Living Room*, vol. 4: *Bearing the Unbearable: A Collection of Conversational Essays* (Enduring Space, 2014), 28, <https://ruthkrall.com/books/the-elephants-in-gods-living-room-series/volume-four-bearing-the-unbearable-a-collection-of-conversational-essays/>. The websites of Into Account and Mennonite Abuse Prevention, two organizations that serve Anabaptist abuse survivors, offer survivor support and documentation of both sexualized violence and failed institutional responses to abuses of power within numerous Mennonite congregations and educational, service, and mission institutions. See <https://mennoniteabuseprevention.org/cases/> and <https://intoaccount.org/reports/>.

⁴¹ Regarding the entanglement of Mennonites and National Socialism, and MCC’s role in propagating a providential escape narrative in the post–World War II years that “contributed to myths of Mennonite innocence of collaboration with Nazism and complicity in the Holocaust,” see Rick Cober Bauman, Ann Graber Hershberger, and Alain Epp Weaver,

While much of this scholarship has focused specifically on sexualized violence, these scholars insist that they are simply the ones who are naming most directly the broader problem of “violence that Mennonites commit against one another.”⁴² They argue that the essence of sexualized violence is not its sexual nature but the domination and violation of others’ “bodily and psychological integrity” that all violence involves.⁴³

CONCLUSION: RIGHT REMEMBERING, ANTIVIOLENCE, AND A NEW CATECHESIS

Why is it so hard for us—North American and European readers of this journal—to hear these two kinds of stories? Is it because our insistence that we are a peace church makes us both wary of mission and unable to face the depth of our own capacity for violence? Is it because our proximity to the ethnic heartlands of Mennonitism or the strongholds of intellectual capital make it nearly impossible to recognize as spiritual ancestors those who are not genetically or academically related to us? What will it take for us to start to tell the story of the Anabaptist movement as a story of women, of friendships, of struggles for justice, of rare but precious moments of repentance and revival, and also of repeated and heinous acts of violence that we lamentably continue to commit against our most vulnerable members?

Roth points out that “right remembering” for the Anabaptist-Mennonite church should be grounded in confession—an “open acknowledgement

“Editorial,” *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (2021), 1–3. See also Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020); Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, “Benjamin Unruh, Nazism, and MCC,” *MQR* 96, no. 2 (April 2022), 157–205. For broader explorations of abuses of power and violence perpetrated by Mennonites, see Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner, eds., *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022); Stephanie Joan Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2015), <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/entities/publication/8b48c4bf-57be-4491-a22e-d24ed273412f>; Rachel Waltner Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” *MQR* 89, no. 1 (Jan. 2015), 7–80; Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Darryl W. Stephens, eds., *Liberating the Politics of Jesus: Renewing Peace Theology through the Wisdom of Women* (London: T & T Clark, 2020); Elizabeth Yoder, *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, Occasional Papers (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992).

⁴² Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds,” 6.

⁴³ David C. Cramer and Myles Werntz, *A Field Guide to Christian Nonviolence: Key Thinkers, Activists, and Movements for the Gospel of Peace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 132. Cramer and Werntz are referring to the seminal work of Marie M. Fortune: *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1988).

of the church's limitations, distortions, and failures"—while also being resolutely attentive to multiple stories that go beyond simplistic narratives of faithful martyrdom, that recognize connections and relationships with other Christian traditions, that are oriented toward the global reality of Anabaptism, and that invite the work of the Spirit for renewal.⁴⁴ In other words, there is something critically important about paying attention, especially at anniversary moments like this, to how we have messed up and continue to fail, while also seeking to deepen our kinship with those who exist outside the boundaries of our official narratives and our centers of power. A Catholic political theologian, William T. Cavanaugh, has articulated this in terms that hit uncomfortably close to the Anabaptist focus on the visible church. The church becomes visible, Cavanaugh claims, not through its holiness or purity, but through its penitence and repentance.⁴⁵

The two kinds of stories that I have shared here exemplify these claims. They show the depths of psychological, spiritual, and sometimes physical violence of which Mennonites have been capable. And they show how renewal and revival are what have historically moved our story forward, often by bringing Mennonites to cross boundaries in friendship and to recognize the contributions and leadership of those outside their ethnic heartlands or home villages. In these ways, they are attempts at what I have elsewhere referred to as "catholic remembering"—the "construction of historical narratives that are infused by" a "commitment to the universal church."⁴⁶ Such memories invite us to celebrate the contributions of those situated on the margins of official stories and powerful institutions, and to respond with lament and justice to the pain of those betrayed and harmed.

Today, I dare to claim that on our five hundredth anniversary, we are called to turn our attention in a disciplined way to these two kinds of stories—both the slightly easier-to-digest biographies in which painful struggles have been contextualized within a full personal narrative, and the much more confrontational and urgent accounts of ongoing suffering at the hands of people who are still in positions of power within Mennonite institutions and churches right now. Listening deeply to those stories may lead us to interrogate our placid self-conceptions. Are we a peace church? A leading producer of avant-garde peace theology? Founders of a globally significant peace organization? The ultimate apologists for Christian nonviolence? I long to see our commemorations of the last five

⁴⁴ Roth, "How to Commemorate a Division?," 24–30. See also Roth and Moua, *Anabaptism at 500 Tool Kit*, 55.

⁴⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, "The Sinfulness and Visibility of the Church: A Christological Exploration," in William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 141–69.

⁴⁶ Fast, "Biography," 67.

hundred years include a significant focus on the ways in which we have ripped to shreds any credibility we might have had in the peace and nonviolence department through our betrayal of our suffering or marginalized members. I long to see *nonviolence* begin to refer not only to our refusal of military service and our migrations to avoid conscription, but also to the work of naming and identifying our own violence, hearing from those who have been harmed by it, confessing and rejecting it, and repairing the harm it has caused.⁴⁷

Given what is now known about how individual and institutional abusers are adept at avoiding accountability, deflecting responsibility, and weaponizing theological concepts such as reconciliation and peace theology,⁴⁸ repentance must involve not only the confession of sin but the willingness to embark on a process of truth and repair.⁴⁹ In such a process, stories of victim-survivors become central, and our theology makes space for resistance to violence—"antiviolence."⁵⁰ When stories of marginalization, betrayal, and pain—carefully documented and courageously shared—can be honored and believed in our communities as part of our very "catechesis,"⁵¹ then our communities can become places where "harm is repaired and offenders are held accountable."⁵²

⁴⁷ The development of an understanding of nonviolence as "violence resistance or antiviolence" is documented in Cramer and Werntz, *Field Guide*, especially chapter 8 ("Christian Antiviolence").

⁴⁸ Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner, "Introduction," in Altaras and Penner, eds., *Resistance*, 6. Contributors to Altaras and Penner's volume call attention to how theologies of martyrdom and nonresistance within the Anabaptist tradition contribute to the legitimization of violence and injustice while downplaying the need for resistance, accountability, and justice. See also Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast'" and Wade Mullen, "Impression Management Strategies Used by Evangelical Organizations in the Wake of an Image-Threatening Event" (Lancaster, PA, Capital Seminary and Graduate School, 2018).

⁴⁹ Judith Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 2023).

⁵⁰ See Cramer and Werntz, *Field Guide*, 127–45.

⁵¹ Gerard McGlone, SJ, is a principal investigator in a recent research study that shows that exposure to stories of survivors of institutional abuse does not destroy listeners' faith; rather, it increases their "sense of spiritual groundedness" and reduces levels of moral injury and institutional betrayal. For other survivors hearing such stories, this contributes to their healing. He concludes that such stories should become part of the "catechesis" of our faith communities. Gerard McGlone, "Telling and Preserving Survivors' Stories: The Healing Power of Survivors' Stories," in *Taking Responsibility: Jesuit Educational Institutions Confront the Causes and Legacy of Clergy Sexual Abuse* (Bronx, New York: Fordham University, 2022), 28–29.

⁵² MAST Steering Committee, "Stop MCC Abuse—Press Release." The hope expressed in this press release draws on the groundbreaking work of Judith Herman in her latest book, —Herman, *Truth and Repair*.

May the Spirit, as in the revival at Shirati, bring us to the awareness that without such contrition, everything we thought we were doing with God's approval goes up in smoke—whoom!—and we are undone.