

Unpacking the 1st Core Conviction

Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. He is the source of our life, the central reference point for our faith and lifestyle, for our understanding of church and our engagement with society. We are committed to following Jesus as well as worshipping him.

Unlike the classical creeds, which begin with a statement about God and are set in a Trinitarian framework, we start with a statement about Jesus. The Anabaptist tradition is unapologetically Trinitarian but its distinctive emphasis has been on the human life of Jesus and on his centrality for understanding God, history and humanity. The concern of the early Anabaptists (like many radical movements before them) was that European Christians were giving inadequate attention to the life, example and teaching of Jesus. The story of Jesus as told in the Gospels and his challenging call to discipleship seemed to have been obscured in the creeds, doctrinal debates, ecclesiastical traditions and liturgical practices of the mainstream churches. Anabaptists urged recovery of a Jesus-centred approach to faith that impacted every aspect of discipleship.

They challenged the Christendom tradition, which had found it hard to cope with the radical Jesus in a world that Christians now controlled and had shifted the emphasis from following Jesus to worshipping him. They challenged the medieval lay piety that was devoted to Jesus but tended to spiritualise and privatise encounters with him. And they challenged the Reformers, who thundered the centrality of Jesus for salvation but seemed reticent to make Jesus normative for lifestyle, church and mission.

“Following Jesus” is a strong motif within the Anabaptist tradition. One of the best-known 16th century statements is Hans Denck’s assertion: “No one can know Christ unless he follows after him in life.” All claims to spiritual experience and theological knowledge are to be tested against lived discipleship. Is this salvation by works, as the opponents of the Anabaptists charged? The second part of Denck’s saying is less well known but indicates that obedience and encounter are interwoven: “and no one can follow him unless he first know him.” Anabaptists actually had a stronger experiential emphasis than their contemporaries on the work of the Holy Spirit, but they were not interested in either doctrinal correctness or spiritual experiences that did not result in changed lives, faithful discipleship, authentic church and courageous mission.

How does this conviction inform and inspire Christians today?

- In a postmodern world that is deeply sceptical about truth claims, living out the radical and surprising message of the gospel is crucial
- In a post-Christendom world that is heartily sick of institutional Christianity, there is still a fascination with the person of Jesus if we tell his story
- Taking seriously the example and teaching of Jesus calls us to re-examine many accepted Christian practices and explore more radical options
- Jesus-centredness poses questions about the way we do church – our authority structures, the songs we sing, our priorities and what we don't do
- Jesus-centredness challenges the ways we participate in society, the values we espouse, the basis on which we engage with social issues

Unpacking the 2nd Core Conviction

Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation. We are committed to a Jesus-centred approach to the Bible, and to the community of faith as the primary context in which we read the Bible and discern and apply its implications for discipleship.

The Anabaptist movement began at a time when the Bible was newly available to people in 16th-century Europe. Although literacy was limited, recent translations of the Bible into contemporary language meant that Christians all over the place were reading or hearing the Bible read for themselves. And many of them were asking whether the clergy and preachers were interpreting it properly. There were many practices in both church and society that seemed to have little biblical support – indeed, some seemed to be contradicted by biblical teaching.

Furthermore, the Reformers seemed to be encouraging them to interpret the Bible for themselves rather than relying on traditional understandings and the pronouncements of popes and church councils. “Scripture alone!” was their rallying call. Anabaptists revelled in this new freedom and searched the Bible together for guidance on how to live as followers of Jesus and how to build communities of disciples. The answers they found on many issues were very different from the answers given by Catholic priests or the Reformers, and very threatening. A different way of reading and interpreting the Bible was emerging that would result in the planting of different kinds of churches and in persecution.

What was different about the Anabaptists’ approach to the Bible?

- They were confident that ordinary Christians, who had not received official accreditation or theological training, but who were open to the Holy Spirit, could interpret the Bible responsibly.
- They believed that the congregation, not the seminary or preacher’s study, was the place where the Bible should be interpreted – understanding the Bible was a community practice.
- Their focus was on application rather than mere interpretation – discovering what the Bible meant for discipleship rather than just searching out its original meaning.
- They insisted that the Bible must be interpreted in the light of the life, teaching and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the centre of the Bible, the one to whom both Testaments pointed.

This approach, which seemed arrogant, irresponsible and chaotic to their opponents (who quickly revised their suggestion that biblical interpretation was something everyone should be involved in!), challenged many long-held assumptions about how the Bible should be interpreted and resulted in profound disagreements about what it actually meant.

Many traditional views on ethical issues and church life appeared to be based on the Old Testament rather than the teaching of Jesus. On subjects as diverse as warfare, economics, swearing oaths, baptism, church discipline, leadership and the state, the Anabaptists argued that a Jesus-centred approach to the Bible resulted in a radically different understanding of discipleship. When the Reformers responded with a barrage of Old Testament texts, they complained that this was illegitimate – the Old Testament (and the New) had to be interpreted in the light of God’s decisive revelation in Jesus. Otherwise, Jesus would continue to be marginalised, as he had been since the early years of the Christendom era, and the Bible would continue to be misapplied.

There are some obvious dangers in the Anabaptists’ approach: ignoring scholarship and training may deprive churches of helpful insights, the Old Testament may be marginalised and congregational interpretation may be a pooling of ignorance. But this approach was liberating in the 16th century, where Anabaptists feared that otherwise the monopoly of the Catholic priest would simply be replaced by the monopoly of the Protestant preacher. And it resulted in the emergence of a radical renewal movement, in which the Bible was studied, discussed and applied in fresh ways – many of which are now widely accepted in both Catholic and Protestant circles!

This approach to the Bible continues to challenge and liberate those who encounter it through the Anabaptist tradition:

- Starting with Jesus, rather than trying to fit Jesus into positions derived from other parts of the Bible, leads to different and more radical views and practices on many issues of mission, church life and discipleship. A pertinent example is the role of women in church and society.
- Focusing on application (as various liberation theologies also advocate) takes Bible study out of the realm of academic discussion and into the realm of costly but invigorating discipleship.
- Empowering the community to learn together challenges the dominance of monologue preaching and invites scholars, teachers and other specialists to offer their insights within a multi-voiced community, where the insights of all are valued.



Unpacking the 3rd Core Conviction

Western culture is slowly emerging from the Christendom era when church and state jointly presided over a society in which almost all were assumed to be Christian. Whatever its positive contributions on values and institutions, Christendom seriously distorted the gospel, marginalised Jesus and has left the churches ill-equipped for mission in a post-Christendom culture. As we reflect on this, we are committed to learning from the experience and perspectives of movements such as Anabaptism that rejected standard Christendom assumptions and pursued alternative ways of thinking and behaving.

'Christendom' was both a political arrangement and a way of thinking. It can be traced to the decision of the emperor Constantine in 313 to adopt Christianity as the imperial religion and to bring the churches in from the margins of society to the centre. Almost a century later the emperor Theodosius made Christianity compulsory, and the once-persecuted church became a persecuting church. The church gained enormous wealth, power and status and grew massively in numbers and influence. But it also changed in many ways.

The Christendom shift required the Bible to be read in a different way: Old Testament practices were adopted in the Christian empire; interpretations that supported rather than challenging the status quo were preferred; the unsettling teachings of Jesus were explained away or postponed to the future kingdom. The church also changed from a multi-voiced community to an institution dominated by professionals; from a mission-oriented to a maintenance-oriented organisation; from small groups of committed disciples to huge congregations of mainly nominal Christians. The commitment to truth telling was replaced by the swearing of oaths; the commitment to peace was replaced by justification for war; and the commitment to sharing resources was replaced by the tithe.

Gradually the whole of Europe was drawn into the culture known as Christendom – some willingly, others under pressure of coercion or inducements. All aspects of life were infused with new ideas. Christianity inspired the creativity of artists and sculptors, musicians and poets, architects and craftsmen. The biblical story and Christian theology provided the framework for literature and legislation, judicial practices and imaginative writing. Many have judged the 'Christendom shift' to have been a God-given opportunity to explore the implications of the gospel throughout society. Undoubtedly it resulted in a rich, vibrant and enduring civilisation.

But it was a totalitarian culture, where dissent was not tolerated. It was marred by such institutions as the Inquisition and the Crusades. And it became increasingly corrupt and resistant to challenge. Various medieval radical movements (Waldensians, Lollards and others) dared to criticise the system – and paid a high price. By the early 16th century, the protests were increasing: the peasants rose up seeking social justice, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a church door in Wittenberg (calling for reform) and the Anabaptist movement picked up the baton of more radical dissent from the medieval movements. Christendom fractured into mini-Christendoms that went to war against each other. The attempt to reform Christendom did not work. Those who protested that this was an illegitimate system that distorted Christianity seem, with the benefit of hindsight, to have been right.

Four centuries later, assailed by the Enlightenment and secularism, discredited by the church's involvement in warfare, splintered further by division, Christendom is coming to an end – at least in Western Europe, though it lives on in various forms elsewhere. Whatever we think of Christendom, this era is coming to an end. We are heading into the unknown territory of 'post-Christendom', where the church is no longer at the centre but on the margins and where, if it is to flourish or even survive, it must rediscover its calling to be a missionary community.

Scattered across church and society, though, are vestiges of Christendom – practices, institutions, privileges, reflexes, attitudes, ways of speaking and thinking – that are not only outdated and inappropriate in a plural society but often unjust and a hindrance to the church's mission. We will need to divest ourselves of these and learn different ways of thinking and acting in post-Christendom.

The Anabaptist tradition is a helpful resource for this task. For nearly 500 years, it has represented an alternative way of discipleship, church and mission. Having rejected the Christendom shift, Anabaptists have explored different perspectives on all kinds of issues and have experimented with different practices. Though far from perfect, it does offer fresh insights that are far more suitable for post-Christendom than the mainstream traditions we have inherited from Christendom. Christians from many traditions today are drawing gratefully on these insights.

But above all the Anabaptist tradition insists on the centrality of Jesus. Perhaps this was the greatest price paid for the Christendom shift: to come in from the margins to the centre, the church had to push Jesus to the margins. And perhaps this is the greatest opportunity on the threshold of post-Christendom, as the church finds itself once more on the margins – to restore Jesus to the centre. It is the insistence on the centrality of Jesus that may be the Anabaptist movement's greatest gift to us.

Unpacking the 4th Core Conviction

The frequent association of the church with status, wealth and force is inappropriate for followers of Jesus and damages our witness. We are committed to exploring ways of being good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted.

The previous article in this series reflected on the implications for the church and its witness of the 'Christendom' system (where church and state shared power). Whatever the advantages of this system, the church underwent a startling transition during the fourth and fifth centuries. No longer a powerless, deviant, marginal community subject to intermittent persecution, the church through the following centuries accrued status, wealth and power as a central institution within European society.

The impact was evident in all kinds of ways. Bishops were wealthy and influential civil servants, with ceremonial robes that befitted their new status. Most church leaders came from the aristocracy and promoted the values of their class. Huge basilicas and cathedrals were designed to be awesomely impressive and were adorned at huge cost. The laity were disempowered as the clergy dominated liturgical spectacles and singing was prohibited except to trained choirs. The poor became increasingly alienated from the churches.

The institutional church could now impose its beliefs, values and morality through legislation rather than modelling and commending alternative possibilities. Dissidents could be punished by imprisonment, confiscation of property, torture and execution. And the church's influence could be extended through conquest under the sign of the cross, through crusades and enforced baptisms. It was little comfort to the victims of this oppression that the state undertook the less pleasant activities at the behest of the church!

The demise of Christendom over recent centuries has pushed the church back onto the margins and gradually eroded its status, wealth and capacity to impose its will. This is a cause of celebration rather than regret, however we feel about diminished influence and shrinking congregations. In post-Christendom we have an opportunity to recover our calling to be good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted, to identify with those at the bottom of society rather than the top, to develop 'trickle-up' strategies, rather than 'trickle-down' approaches.

But the Christendom legacy lives on – in the church and in society. Despite its reduced size and influence, the church is still perceived by many as a reactionary institution that embodies and promotes establishment values – more concerned about social order than social justice. Many churches and denominations remain wealthy property-owners and are much stronger in affluent areas than poor communities. Although the church may no longer be able to coerce those with whom it disagrees, it still often speaks and acts as if it occupies the moral high ground and ought to be able to dictate to the rest of society. Many continue to promote top-down mission strategies (to engage with the ‘movers and shakers’). The strong impression is that the loss of status, wealth and the power to exercise control is a result of historical circumstances, not renunciation or repentance. We hanker after past power and glory rather than seizing the opportunity to relocate ourselves where we belong – in solidarity with the poor, powerless and persecuted.

The Anabaptist tradition, rejecting the Christendom system while it was still dominant and subjecting its values and priorities to rigorous scrutiny, has long challenged this prevailing and persistent misunderstanding of the church’s calling. As a movement of the poor and powerless in the sixteenth century, Anabaptism made common cause with the peasants of Central Europe, calling for social justice and economic reform. This economic radicalism provoked great fear in many places, including England, where the thirty-eighth of the *Thirty Nine Articles* of the Church of England (1571) countered this with the statement: ‘The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast.’

Anabaptists were also deeply concerned about issues of coercion and marginalisation. Their own experience of powerlessness and persecution made them sensitive to other minorities; they not only denounced warfare, violence and coercion as unchristian but championed the cause of religious liberty for all – including Jews and Muslims.

Their approach to the Bible undergirded these convictions: their approach has been described as a ‘hermeneutic of justice’ rather than a ‘hermeneutic of order’. Rather than interpreting the Bible in ways that supported the wealthy and powerful and did not disturb the status quo, Anabaptists challenged conventional interpretations and advocated ways of following Jesus that prioritised the poor, powerless and persecuted. Their testimony and legacy can inspire and guide us as we struggle to divest ourselves of inappropriate assumptions, values and loyalties that damage our witness.



For many who are drawn to the Anabaptist vision, the so-called 'Nazareth Manifesto' (Luke 4:18-19) challenges us to a deeper identification with the mission priorities and values of Jesus:

'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

With Christians from many other traditions – most of us now on the margins of a post-Christendom culture – we hear the call of Jesus to explore new ways of identifying with others on the margins and being his faithful witnesses.

Unpacking the 5th Core Conviction

Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission, places of friendship, mutual accountability and multi-voiced worship that sustain hope as we seek God's kingdom together. We are committed to nurturing and developing such churches, in which young and old are valued, leadership is consultative, roles are related to gifts rather than gender and baptism is for believers.

This is another core conviction that concerns the church. The previous conviction expressed certain priorities and commitments in relation to the role of the church in society, especially in the post-Christendom societies that characterise 21st century western culture. This fifth conviction gathers up several important aspects of the internal life and character of the Christian community.

Anabaptists have historically been insistent that the witness of the church (as with individual followers of Jesus) must be coherent with its lifestyle and ethos. How the church behaves matters at least as much as what it says.

Many of the aspirations and commitments spelled out in this conviction are shared quite widely by Christians from many traditions, and we are certainly not suggesting these are unique to Anabaptists. The pioneering and costly witness of Anabaptists to some of these dimensions of church life, however, has not always been accorded the respect it deserves. And some of these ways of being church remain contentious – in particular, the baptism of believers and refusal to restrict roles on the basis of gender.

Nor can we point to churches where all these elements are flourishing in exemplary ways. But we do know churches that aspire to many or all of these ways of expressing Christian community and that are working hard at 'nurturing and developing' their corporate life in these areas and moving from aspiration to reality.

This conviction contains too many elements to expound in any detail in a short article, but we can highlight some of the features many of us yearn for in our churches:

- Churches that are kingdom-oriented rather than self-promoting, realistic about the groaning of creation, the violence and injustice in human society and their own flawed witness, but joyfully resilient and quietly hopeful.
- Churches in which Christian baptism is the baptism of Christians, celebrating the commitment of those being baptised to following Jesus as disciples.



Anabaptist Mennonite NETWORK

- Churches where we enjoy relationships that are true friendships rather than the insipid 'fellowship' or institutional 'membership' models that often replace these.
- Churches where many voices are heard in worship, prayer, teaching, prophecy, testimony, biblical interpretation and conversations about direction, and where reversion to the default position of few voices (or even one) is resisted.
- Churches where honesty and mutuality is encouraged and processes are put in place to help us put right wrong relationships, change our attitudes and follow Jesus wholeheartedly.
- Churches where young and old learn together and from one another, valuing both the enthusiasm of youth and the experience of age, and where women and men value each others' perspectives without labelling and stereotyping.
- Churches where leadership is valued as a spiritual gift and practised gently, patiently and courageously in order to draw out the gifts and contributions of the whole community.
- Churches that recognise post-Christendom as a mission context that precludes a 'business as usual' approach and invites a different way of telling and living out the Christian story in a world that does not know this story.

The demise of Christendom has been marked by great uncertainty about the kinds of church life that are viable in a changed and changing society. Many Christians have left the churches in recent years, most of them still eager to follow Jesus but no longer inspired or sustained by their experience of church. Some of these identify as causes of their disillusionment issues that are pertinent to the elements described above – superficiality and failure to engage realistically with the world beyond the church, the silencing of many voices by a few dominant voices, the absence of real friendships and inability to deal creatively and graciously with conflict.

Others are exploring different ways of being church: the 'emerging church' scene that has attracted increasing attention can be described in various ways: diffuse, tentative, creative, desperate, missional, self-indulgent, courageous, etc. It is certainly too soon to attempt to evaluate the significance of this phenomenon or its constituent parts. But these diverse ecclesial experiments indicate both disillusionment with existing forms of church and a longing for something fresh. This is something those of us drawn to the Anabaptist tradition should be able at least to appreciate, as the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement was motivated by similar passions. But we may be concerned that some of the experimentation focuses on form and style, rather than ethos and core values. The fifth conviction, though it will have implications for structure and shape, is primarily concerned with deeper issues of community life.



In a time of uncertainty about church life, when Christians are drawing gratefully on ancient traditions (Catholic, Celtic, Orthodox, monastic, etc.) as well as contemporary technology and culture to discover ways of being church that sustain themselves and engage with the world beyond the church, our conviction is that the Anabaptist tradition also offers resources for renewal – sometimes in areas of church life where other traditions have less to offer.



Unpacking the 6th Core Conviction

Spirituality and economics are inter-connected. In an individualist and consumerist culture and in a world where economic injustice is rife, we are committed to finding ways of living simply, sharing generously, caring for creation and working for justice.

In our article on the fourth conviction we noted the reference to Anabaptists in the thirty-eighth of the Anglican *Thirty Nine Articles* (1571): 'The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast.'

It was not the Anabaptists' insistence on baptising believers rather than infants or their supposedly heretical theological beliefs that most worried English ecclesiastical authorities. What was most disturbing was their economic radicalism, challenging notions of private property, modelling communal ownership, implicitly and often explicitly criticising the wealth of the churches and their failure to respond to the needs of the poor. Good Anglicans, this Article goes on to insist, should certainly be generous in sharing their resources, but they should not be misled by this kind of radicalism. They should continue to assert the importance of private ownership, which was such a foundational principle of English society.

Having 'all things in common' was not, in fact, the normal expression of economic discipleship among Anabaptists. The Moravian Hutterites developed 'common purse' communities, initially through necessity and increasingly on the basis of theological conviction and biblical interpretation (especially of Acts 2-4). The short-lived and disastrous Anabaptist uprising at Münster, which so alarmed English and other authorities, also imposed common ownership. But Swiss Brethren, Mennonites and most other Anabaptists practised 'mutual aid', continuing to own property but gladly making their resources available to brothers and sisters in need.

This sounds quite similar to what the Thirty-Eighth Article advocated, so why was Anabaptist economic radicalism so troubling in the 16th century? And what are the implications of Anabaptist thinking and practice at the start of the 21st century?

Wholehearted commitment to 'mutual aid' (and even more powerfully to 'common purse' community) did, in fact, result in much more radical sharing of resources than the Thirty-Eighth Article normally inspired. Over the centuries, though not always consistently, Anabaptists have been distinguished by their *simple living, contentment, community ethos, resistance to consumerism and practical service to others*. There have

certainly been some who have been seduced by individualism and consumerism (as in all Christian traditions), but overall the Anabaptist tradition offers perspectives and practices that may continue to be helpful in our struggle against these powerful twin temptations.

Anabaptism (in common with some other Christian traditions) has generally insisted that theology and practice cannot be divorced: orthopraxy is as crucial as orthodoxy. Spirituality and economics are interwoven. Love for God is demonstrated in love for brothers and sisters, expressed in very practical ways (cf. 1 John 3:17). Lifestyle matters. Living simply and being content with enough demonstrates faith in God and an orientation towards the kingdom of God.

One of the aspects of the Anabaptist tradition that attracts others is the practice of community that offers a counter-cultural way of living in an individualistic culture. This is multi-faceted but certainly includes 'mutual aid', from the barn-raising of the Amish to creative alternatives to mortgages for house purchases to the deployment of church planting teams that mutually support their members.

Another very disturbing feature of the 16th-century Anabaptist movement was its opposition to paying tithes. This state-church tax was experienced by the poor as oppressive and provoked frequent protests (for example in the peasants' movement of 1524-1526), but it was foundational to the Christendom system and defended by both church and state with determination and increasing desperation. Anabaptists, in common with other radical groups, rejected the state churches' approach to tithing as unjust and based on bad biblical interpretation.

The re-emergence of tithing during the 20th century, especially among some evangelicals, who promote this as a form of economic radicalism, would have surprised and appalled 16th-century Anabaptists. Tithing is highly individualistic, does little to challenge global or local injustice or the power of consumerism, continues to disadvantage the poor and does not build community. Those drawn to the Anabaptist tradition today are much more interested in exploring other biblical concepts such as *jubilee* in the Old Testament (the proper context for the tithe) and *koinonia* in the New.

Two areas contemporary Anabaptists have been exploring in recent years that 16th-century Anabaptists were either unaware of or unable to engage with are caring for creation and working for justice. Anabaptists were no more ecologically aware than their 16th-century contemporaries and, as a powerless and persecuted minority, they had little opportunity to work actively for a more just society. But the principles of simplicity, contentment, community and service that have imbued the Anabaptist



tradition are increasingly inspiring Anabaptist Christians to explore the connections between spirituality, caring for creation and actively working for justice.

Unpacking the 7th Core Conviction

Peace is at the heart of the gospel. As followers of Jesus in a divided and violent world, we are committed to finding non-violent alternatives and to learning how to make peace between individuals, within and among churches, in society and between nations.

Anabaptism shares with the Quaker tradition the designation of being a 'historic peace church' – a movement that regards peace as fundamental to the gospel rather than an incidental item and that regards the use of violence (especially lethal violence) as incompatible with Christian discipleship. Although early Anabaptists were not all of one mind on this issue, opposition to warfare, capital punishment and other forms of violence characterised many branches of the movement and the developing tradition came to espouse non-violence as a core conviction.

According to Anabaptists, peace is multi-faceted. It includes peace between humanity and God, but embraces also inter-personal relationships, attitudes towards those who are different from us, approaches to crime and punishment, strategies for resolving conflict and global politics. As the wonderfully rich concept of *shalom* in the Old Testament indicates, peace is not just the absence of conflict but implies well-being, wholeness, justice, community and harmonious relationships with all of creation. Peace is at the heart of the gospel for those who follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

But the use and justification of lethal violence and participation in warfare are critical issues. The so-called 'war on terror' is the latest in a long line of conflicts that depend on convictions about the capacity of violence to resolve conflict. Anabaptists have challenged Christians from other traditions to reject the dominant 'just war' approach (which derived from classical rather than biblical sources under the influence of the Christendom shift) and the crusading ideology of 'holy war' in favour of a return to the predominantly pacifist tradition of the early churches.

At times, this opposition to war and other forms of violence has appeared 'passivist' rather than pacifist, leading to accusations of disengagement from society, lack of concern about injustice and irresponsible idealism. But Anabaptists have also been at the forefront of initiatives to find non-violent alternatives to violent and punitive approaches to conflict that appear more 'realistic' in a fallen world but often fail to deliver.

Examples of non-violent alternatives include:

- Christian Peacemaker Teams that take risky initiatives in conflict zones in the hope of protecting those who are in danger and stimulating different ways of thinking and relating across divisions.
- Victim-offender reconciliation programmes and other restorative justice practices that offer alternatives to retributive and anonymous approaches to crime and punishment.
- Mediation services (such as *Bridge Builders* at the London Mennonite Centre) that work for healthy congregational life and conflict transformation.

Members of the Anabaptist Network are involved in these initiatives and in efforts to challenge reliance upon what Walter Wink calls the 'myth of redemptive violence'. It has been encouraging to discover growing numbers of Christians – and many other people – who no longer believe this myth, who are opposed to the use of violence to resolve conflicts between nations and who are interested in exploring alternatives.

Our commitment is to continue reflecting, experimenting and learning. After centuries of adopting the 'just war' and 'holy war' approaches as if these were authentically Christian, finding peaceful alternative strategies will take time and imagination. The Anabaptist tradition is a resource, pointing us back to the life and teaching of Jesus and offering historical examples both of resistance to the use of violence and of the struggle to be consistent.

One of the iconic figures in the Anabaptist tradition is Dirk Willems, who belonged to an underground church in the Netherlands in the second half of the sixteenth century. Fleeing capture across a frozen canal he heard the ice give way behind him and turned back to rescue from the icy water a bailiff who was pursuing him. This compassionate act cost Dirk his life, as he was promptly arrested and soon afterwards burned at the stake. As Anabaptists have reflected on this story¹ and asked why Dirk turned back, many have concluded that this reflexive behaviour was possible only because he had been nurtured in a community in which enemy-loving was regarded as normative for disciples of Jesus. Becoming a peace church² is not achieved by issuing statements or even 'core convictions' but by developing counter-cultural reflexes in our community life, worship and understanding of God's purposes.

¹ Two articles reflecting on this story have appeared in *Anabaptism Today* (issue 6 in June 1994 and issue 15 in June 1997).

² See further Alan & Eleanor Kreider: *Becoming a Peace Church* (Anabaptist Network, 2002) and the course based on this book that can be downloaded free of charge from <https://www.amnetwork.org.uk>.

At the conclusion of this series of articles on the core convictions of the Anabaptist Network, it is worth underlining that these are aspirations and commitments, values that we hold but have not yet fully worked through. We find the Anabaptist tradition helpful as it points us back to Jesus and challenges us to creative and faithful forms of discipleship. Together with many brothers and sisters in other traditions, we want to continue to discover how to follow Jesus beyond Christendom in a world we cannot control but within which we can hope to live provocatively and distinctively. Finding and modelling non-violent alternatives in a divided and violent world may be one of the most useful contributions we can make to contemporary society and one of the most attractive expressions of Christian discipleship.