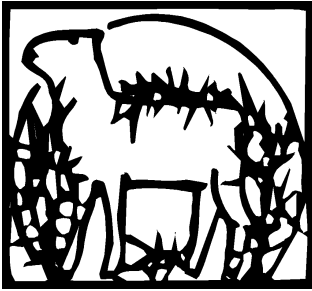


# Chapter 1: Uncovering Anabaptists

## Anabaptists all over the place

‘The Anabaptists are back!’ announced an American author a few years ago in a book with this title.<sup>1</sup> He was intrigued by growing interest in the Anabaptist tradition in North America, where Mennonite, Hutterite and Amish communities have long been part of the religious scene. Christians from many other traditions were discovering the practices and convictions of these quiet, often withdrawn, communities – and finding them surprisingly relevant in contemporary culture.

Something similar seems to have been happening in Britain and Ireland. Anabaptists are becoming visible in a society where, unlike North America, they had not been part of the religious scene until very recently.



Anabaptist Network logo

The Anabaptist Network was launched in 1991 to serve Christians from many churches and denominations who had stumbled across Anabaptism and wanted more resources and opportunities to learn together. During the past twenty years, many others have joined the Network or have contacted us with comments or questions that have become familiar:

- ‘I’m so relieved to find others who believe what I do – people in my church think I’m crazy when I go on about these things.’
- ‘You Anabaptists seem to be popping up all over the place.’
- ‘What is an Anabaptist?’
- ‘What do Anabaptists think about.....?’
- Where is the nearest Anabaptist church to me?

Our first attempt to respond to this interest and answer these questions was a collection of stories, published in 2000 under the title *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland*.<sup>2</sup> Anabaptism is a story-rich tradition, so presenting the stories of about sixty Christians who identified with the Anabaptist tradition seemed appropriate. These stories recount how the contributors discovered Anabaptism and what attracted them.

The ‘coming home’ theme emerged so often in these stories that it became the title of the book. It was not that the Anabaptists were ‘back’ – there had hardly been any Anabaptists

in Britain and Ireland for the past four centuries – but those who discovered Anabaptism experienced this encounter, as I did, as a homecoming. Here were other Christians who shared our convictions about discipleship, community, peace and mission!

In the past few years Anabaptists have become even more visible – and vocal. We have continued to organise conferences and study groups in different parts of the country, but there is also now a consortium of a dozen or more ‘Anabaptist-flavoured’ organisations involved in all kinds of activities, ranging from church planting to training programmes, conflict transformation to media work, restorative justice and peacemaking to a political think-tank.<sup>3</sup> And we have received invitations to contribute ‘an Anabaptist perspective’ in books and conversations on various subjects, including church and state, the atonement, diaconal ministry, the Alpha course and the emerging church.

Surprisingly for a tradition routinely accused of being sectarian, interest in Anabaptism today is remarkably ecumenical and boundary-crossing. On the Network’s website are stories of Christians from several denominations who have been ‘drawn to Anabaptism’. Although many are from evangelical backgrounds, Christians from liberal, charismatic, reformed and anglo-catholic backgrounds are represented in the Network. And writers from many traditions have spoken warmly of Anabaptism, some suggesting it might be a movement whose time has come and a way of being Christian that makes sense in post-Christendom culture. This strange ecumenism is worrying to some, but deeply attractive to others.

We have also noticed in recent years that a number of people attending our conferences have had no recent church connection. Indeed, some would not call themselves Christians at all. I had a conversation at a recent event with an anarchist, who was fascinated by the Anabaptist tradition. And one of the stories on the website was written by an ex-atheist, ex-Buddhist, who has found through Anabaptism an authentic Christian faith.

So when we hear that Anabaptists are ‘popping up all over the place’, we understand why some might think this. But the Anabaptist tradition is still very much a minority voice in Britain and Ireland. Some of us are happy to be known as ‘Anabaptists’, but many others resist this tag and prefer to talk about the positive impact of Anabaptism on their thinking and practice as Catholics, Baptists, Methodists or whatever. A very small number of local churches identify themselves explicitly as Anabaptist, but several others have embraced Anabaptist values and introduced Anabaptist processes and resources.

So, if Anabaptists are all over the place, we are spread pretty thinly in Britain and Ireland, and we are often not that obvious. This may explain the diverse comments and questions we receive from some who are relieved to find us and from others who are surprised that we exist. There is more chance now of uncovering Anabaptists, in person or in print, but who are we and what do we believe? *The Naked Anabaptist* is an attempt to answer these questions.

## **Bumping into Anabaptists**

Where might you already have bumped into Anabaptists?

You might have attended one of the conferences the Anabaptist Network has organised in the past two decades – not necessarily because the event was organised by Anabaptists, but because you were interested in the subject matter. Topics have included learning from the early church, the implications of the end of Christendom, gender issues, worship and mission, English radicalism, the practice of community, becoming a peace church, faith and politics, why people are leaving the church, radical discipleship, youth ministry, and new monasticism. Three conferences, co-sponsored with the Northumbria Community, have explored the contributions of the Anabaptist and Celtic traditions to contemporary discipleship.

You might have come across *Coming Home*, the book of stories mentioned above, or a copy of *Anabaptism Today*, the journal we published for several years until 2004. You might have recognised someone featured in one of the stories or the author of one of the articles and thought ‘I didn’t know s/he was an Anabaptist!’

More recently you might have thumbed through, or even sat down and read properly, one of the books in the ‘After Christendom’ series, mentioned in the Introduction.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps you did not know enough about Anabaptism to spot Anabaptist perspectives permeating these books, but some reviewers did – one of them commenting on the ‘Anabaptist axe grinding in the background’!

You might have encountered Anabaptist perspectives on international events through *On the Road*, the journal of the Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand.<sup>5</sup>

You might have been to one of only two Mennonite churches in England – the Wood Green Mennonite Church in North London or the recently planted Portuguese-speaking and mainly Brazilian Mennonite church in Eastbourne. Or you might have been in touch with other Anabaptist-influenced churches, such as Peace Church in Birmingham, the E1 Community Church in East London, or the Wesleyan Reformed Church in Mexborough.

You might have come across one of two common-purse communities in the south-east of England (in Kent or Sussex), known as Bruderhofs. Drawing inspiration from one branch of the Anabaptist movement – the Hutterites, who have lived in community for centuries – Bruderhof communities offer a distinctive and radical expression of certain Anabaptist values and practices.<sup>6</sup>

You might have read about the tragic shooting of Amish school children in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania in October 2006 – and the startling response of this Anabaptist community as it expressed forgiveness towards the gunman and reached out in compassion towards his family. Or you might have been aware of the Amish already if you saw the 1985 film *The Witness* starring Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis. But you may have associated this community with buggies and bonnets and not with Anabaptism.

You may remember Norman Kember and his colleagues, held hostage in Iraq, where they were members of a Christian Peacemaker Team. You may not know that this organisation was founded in response to a challenge at an Anabaptist gathering in 1984 to go beyond pacifism to costly peacemaking: ‘What would happen if Christians devoted the same discipline and self-sacrifice to non-violent peacemaking that armies devote to war?’<sup>7</sup>

You might have encountered Mennonite volunteers in Northern Ireland at the height of ‘the troubles’ there, working quietly as agents of reconciliation in a divided community, and training others in non-violent approaches to conflict.

You might have stumbled across Anabaptists through the work of Urban Expression, an inner-city church planting agency, founded in 1997, which is working in several British cities and now also in the Netherlands and North America.<sup>8</sup> Although not an explicitly Anabaptist mission agency, it has Anabaptist values at its core, as several observers have commented. Urban Expression is one of the main sponsors of the Crucible course.<sup>9</sup>

You might have been on a conflict transformation training programme run by Bridge Builders, based at the London Mennonite Centre, which has trained hundreds of church leaders from various denominations.<sup>10</sup> You might have ordered books on discipleship, peace or community from the Metanoia Book Service, another of the Centre’s services.<sup>11</sup> You might have visited the Centre for one of its Cross Currents seminars or ‘table talks’, or noticed their stand at the Greenbelt Festival.

You might have studied on for the Workshop Christian training programme<sup>12</sup> that has run for over a quarter of a century in cities across Britain. As you listened to its director Noel Moules teaching on different subjects each month, you might have begun to recognise a distinctive approach to church, mission, the Bible, discipleship and community. Perhaps only towards the end of the year did you realise that Noel and many other teachers on the course were Anabaptists, even if they rarely used this label.

You might have been puzzled or intrigued by statements from Jonathan Bartley or Simon Barrow, directors of the Christian political think-tank, Ekklesia.<sup>13</sup> In media interviews, in articles on their website and in daily comments on the news, they offer perspectives on church, theology, ethics, politics, economics, culture, education or global issues that often challenge familiar Christian assumptions and priorities. You might not have realised that both have been strongly influenced by the Anabaptist tradition.

You might have participated in days of action initiated by Speak<sup>14</sup>, a network connecting together young adults and students to campaign and pray about issues of global injustice. Some years ago members of Speak and members of the Anabaptist Network discovered each other and recognised shared values. One of Speak’s leaders, Jo Frew, remembers: ‘Anabaptism is something we found out about and thought, “Yeah, that seems like us!”’

If you are an Anglican, you might have discovered a surprising (and negative) reference to Anabaptists in the founding document of the Church of England. Although there were practically no Anabaptists in the country, fear of this continental movement prompted the

inclusion of the thirty-eighth of the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* (1571), which warns English Christians about this worrying movement.<sup>15</sup>

If you are a Baptist, and especially if you took part in the celebrations in July 2009 that marked the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Baptist movement, you might know that English Baptist refugees first met in an Anabaptist baker's shop in Amsterdam and that early Baptist leaders were deeply influenced by Dutch Anabaptists. You may not know that Baptist historians continue to debate whether Anabaptism should be acknowledged as the source (or at least one major source) of the Baptist movement.

If you are (or have been in the past few years) a student at any of the Baptist colleges in England and Wales, you have probably encountered at least one tutor who is a member of the Anabaptist Network. At Spurgeon's College in London, and also at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, you would also have had the opportunity to take courses or modules in Anabaptist studies. And if you were a student at Bristol University in the past two or three years, you might have participated in one of the first modules on Anabaptism to be taught in a British university.

If you have been involved in the New Churches (previously known as the House Church movement), you might have encountered Roger Forster (the founder of Ichthus Christian Fellowship) introducing Anabaptists in his church history course as one of several radical movements that continue to inspire Christians today.

If you participate in the 'emerging church conversation' you are probably aware of Brian McLaren's writings. His book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*<sup>16</sup>, includes Anabaptism as one of the traditions he values. Elsewhere he writes: 'Anabaptists know things that all of us need as we slide or run or crawl or are dragged into the postmodern world.'<sup>17</sup> He suggests in a recent interview: 'Emergent represents a rediscovery of the Anabaptist spirit. It's very hard in other Protestant denominations to find people who take Jesus as teacher deeply seriously, and take Jesus' teachings and the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus' example of nonviolence, seriously.'<sup>18</sup>

If you are interested in church history, especially in the Reformation era in Europe (early sixteenth century), you may have encountered references to the Anabaptists as a 'third way' that was neither Catholic nor Protestant. If you studied some time ago, these might have been only passing references or footnotes. If there was more, it might well have been an account of the reign of terror a renegade band of Anabaptists imposed on the city of Münster in the mid 1530s. Most church history textbooks and courses now offer a more balanced treatment of early Anabaptist history, but old caricatures still appear in unexpected places (including *Third Way* magazine and Spring Harvest teaching notes in recent years).

If you are interested in theology or ethics, you may have read books or articles by Stanley Hauerwas, James McClendon or John Howard Yoder. Hauerwas is an Episcopalian who teaches at a Methodist university, McClendon was a Baptist, and Yoder was a Mennonite, but all three drank deeply of the Anabaptist tradition and their writings reflect this.<sup>19</sup>

If cooking and hospitality appeal to you more than theology and ethics, you might have encountered Anabaptism without realising it in various cookbooks – especially the *More-with-Less Cookbook* by Mennonite, Doris Janzen Longacre.<sup>20</sup> When we invited people to tell their stories in *Coming Home*, we asked which books (if any) had introduced them to Anabaptism. The top two were John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* and the *More-with-Less Cookbook*.

If you are interested in art, you might be aware that the great Dutch painter, Rembrandt, painted the Mennonite preacher Cornelis Claesz Anslo and his wife and had links with the Mennonites in the seventeenth century. Indeed, some even suspected Rembrandt (almost certainly wrongly) of being an Anabaptist himself, though he was undoubtedly sympathetic to the movement.

If you are involved in the criminal justice system, you are probably familiar with efforts to incorporate ‘restorative justice’ principles alongside the dominant retributive approach. You may not know that Anabaptists were pioneers of this alternative approach, especially through victim-offender reconciliation programmes.<sup>21</sup>

If you have holidayed in Europe and enjoy visiting historic sites, you might have read in your guide book about Anabaptist communities and incidents in early Anabaptist history – not just in Münster, but in Zürich, Strasbourg, Amsterdam and several other cities. You might even have found the guided walk on the Anabaptist Network website that takes you around several sites in central London that have links with Anabaptism and other radical groups.

Where have you bumped into Anabaptists before reading this book?

### **Encountering Anabaptism**

When I began writing this book, I invited people involved in the Anabaptist Network to tell me, as succinctly as they could, how they had encountered Anabaptism and how this tradition had impacted them. Here are some of their responses:

‘I encountered Anabaptism during a time when I was trying desperately to inhabit very different worlds: the ungrounded world of charismatic spirituality; the intense intellectual world of theology; and the daily struggle with life where I spent most of my time. Anabaptism brought these together in a holistic way and helped me think, act and feel my way to God.’

(Tim Foley (Portadown))

‘Discovering Anabaptism was like finding the edge bits of a jigsaw puzzle. We were already attempting to piece together a thoughtful lifestyle and a commitment to Christian community while paying global attention and grappling with Scripture. Then we met people further along this same journey and found a satisfying mix of honesty and fun.’

Bill and Ali Phelps (Leeds)

‘I first came across Anabaptism via people at the New Churches’ Theology Forum. I quickly discovered that Anabaptist teaching and practice resonated with ways of being church which were foundational to the church I belong to, though our attempts seemed feeble compared to the cost they paid for their discipleship.’

Linda Wilson (Bristol)

‘I’d always felt uncomfortable with all forms of “civic religion”. I felt instinctively that Christians should not be ruling society but should be a witness to it, an alternative society with different values. I’d also been unhappy with Christian attempts to recall society to standards, such as the Ten Commandments, and wondered what had happened to the revolution of Jesus. I felt followers of Christ had to be more than moralists. I didn’t understand how anyone could approve of war from a Christian perspective. And I longed for community, not just “fellowship”, in the church. When I discovered Anabaptism I found I’d really been an Anabaptist all along without knowing it. The church to me is not the glue of the establishment, but an outpost of the radical changes the kingdom brings.’

Veronica Zundel (London)

‘My family background is in the Churches of Christ, an Anabaptist movement. I understood church needed to be a voluntary, multi-voiced community of baptised believers. What made Anabaptism decisive is its emphasis on “following after” the way and words of Jesus: peace-giving, thirst-quenching, disciple-making, earth-sharing, risk-taking faith.’

Andrew Francis (Swindon):

‘I discovered G. H. Williams’ *The Radical Reformation* at University in the early 1970s: it revolutionized my study and teaching. The unjust exclusion of Anabaptists from the history offended me, and their radical interrogation of Christian tradition and practice challenged me – in a historic denomination – to take nothing in my church for granted.’

Adrian Chatfield (Cambridge):

‘I came across Anabaptism through Urban Expression, and it was attractive as it seemed to be voicing things that I was feeling instinctively. It was great to find a group of people who thought similar things to me and to be able to think more deeply about these things.’

Sarah Warburton (London)

‘Our backgrounds are Baptist and Brethren, and exploring the Anabaptist tradition has provided us with a place of spiritual “common ground”. We have particularly related to the emphasis on peace, justice and radical discipleship, and have found our local Anabaptist Network group to be a place of community and accountability.’

Simon and Liz Woodman (Bristol)



‘I was increasingly disillusioned by the kind of Evangelicalism that joined the dots between faith and political conservatism. Talking with the director of the London Mennonite Centre in the early 1980s, I remember we talked about simplicity, community and peacemaking, but it was the “feel” of the day that remains with me: the sense that I had found a place of belonging and integration.’

Phil Wood (Wallingford)

‘Conversion doesn’t always happen in the comfort of churches full of knowledgeable people. Life afterwards is never easy, dealing with past sins. The honesty of Anabaptists helped me take Jesus’ words at face value with no extras, and to love and accept myself; so important before you can love others.’

Pete Jones (Liverpool)

‘I first encountered the Anabaptists as a child due to my father’s interest in their history and theology. I renewed my interest in this tradition as an adult, partly as in response to a crisis of faith but mainly due to dissatisfaction with modern theology and church growth models.’

David Kirkman (Annan)

‘The recovery of Anabaptist emphases on discipleship, church as subversive and exemplary community, the biblical word oriented towards Jesus the living word, and peacemaking as integral to the Gospel has given me fresh hope for a truly liberating, post-Christendom vision and practice of Christianity – something both committed and open.’

Simon Barrow (Exeter)

‘My encounter with the Anabaptist tradition has radically changed my attitude to peace, the gospel, and the course of my life. It has led me to leave a job in which I felt unable to truly embrace Jesus’ nonviolence and call to peace; it has led me to investigate ways of sharing an Anabaptist understanding of peace with other people in the church; and it has led me to apply to be part of a delegation to Colombia with Christian Peacemaker Teams – to see for myself how people living with and threatened by violence are responding non-violently.’

Ros Parkes (Bristol)

### **But aren’t Anabaptists...?**

Some of those who bump into Anabaptists, past or present, in print or in person, have no preconceived ideas about a tradition that is quite new to them. For others, Anabaptism may have various associations – some positive, others quaint and a few rather disturbing. As nakedness implies vulnerability, it seems appropriate, early in *The Naked Anabaptist*, to uncover some of the charges against Anabaptists.

If Anabaptism is new to you and you have not heard disturbing things about Anabaptists, you can, of course, skip this section – unless you want to know what kinds of things they have often been accused of or associated with!

*But aren’t Anabaptists just a footnote in church history? What relevance does a bunch of sixteenth-century trouble-makers have today?*

It is certainly true that, until quite recently, students reading standard textbooks on church history encountered the Anabaptists, if at all, as a footnote to the main action. In the first half of the sixteenth century the Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformers occupied centre stage, competing for hearts and minds and, at least as importantly, for the support of various political authorities. When the dust finally settled, Western Europe had been divided into Catholic and Protestant zones – and citizens in each zone were expected to concur with the religious choices their rulers had made.

Anabaptists faced serious difficulties in both Catholic and Protestant zones, persecuted because they refused to submit to the demands of the state churches and conform to the beliefs and practices of their superiors. They were, indeed, regarded as trouble-makers, who were teaching heretical ideas, setting up unauthorised churches, calling people to be baptised as followers of Jesus, questioning the legitimacy of violence and wealth, and in other ways disturbing the status quo. Unlike Catholic and Protestant Christians, they had no zones of their own where they could practise their faith unhindered. Occasionally, if a

landowner or prince was sympathetic, they found temporary refuge, but imperial pressure soon forced him to expel or arrest them.

Their contemporaries wavered between dismissing the Anabaptists as a minor irritant or damning them as dangerous heretics and writing at length about their deviant behaviour. And occasionally, extreme elements among the Anabaptists (persecution sometimes leads to extremism) played into their hands. Most notorious was an incident in 1534-35, when some Anabaptists gained control of the North German city of Münster and, convinced that the return of Christ was imminent, instituted a reign of terror designed to cleanse the city and prepare it for this great event. The city was besieged by a Catholic army, its inhabitants were massacred and the bodies of the rebel leaders were displayed in cages as a warning to others. Most Anabaptists denounced this tragic episode as contravening fundamental Anabaptist principles, but Protestant and Catholic authorities across Europe pointed to Münster as proof that this supposedly peaceful movement was dangerous.

Historians have oscillated between consigning Anabaptism to a footnote and telling the story of Münster as if this were typical of the movement. Another unsavoury incident, sometimes also reported as representative, was a naked procession in Amsterdam to warn of coming judgement (not the kind of 'naked Anabaptism' we have in mind!). Historians, until quite recently, generally endorsed the judgements of those who were opposed to the Anabaptists. They either treated them as marginal or presented them in a very negative light. What few historians did was to investigate what Anabaptists wrote or said about themselves or how most Anabaptists actually lived.

Only in the past half century have historians begun to take Anabaptism more seriously as a radical renewal movement that might have considerable contemporary significance. At first, Mennonite historians led the way as they scoured their past for resources for faithful discipleship today. Others have joined them, from different Christian traditions and from none. They have translated Anabaptist tracts and treatises, collected and analysed records of Anabaptists on trial, told the stories of individuals and communities, traced the social and geographical spread of the movement and shown that Münster and naked processions were atypical. Their interpretations and assessments of Anabaptism have varied, but there is no longer any justification for marginalising the movement or judging it on the basis of its worst moments.

Renewed interest in the Anabaptist tradition owes much to the careful research of these scholars. And the rediscovery of Anabaptism is timely. As the Christendom era comes to an end, and the mainstream Catholic and Protestant traditions that were victorious in the sixteenth century struggle to adjust to a changing culture, the alternative perspectives of the long-neglected Anabaptist tradition (which rejected Christendom as a wrong turning in European church history) suddenly seem attractive and highly relevant. Perhaps they were not just a bunch of sixteenth-century trouble-makers, who should be consigned to obscurity, but a prophetic movement whose voices we need to hear today.

One of the obstacles we face, though, as we investigate this tradition, is that Anabaptism is sometimes presented in a rather academic way. Maybe this is not surprising given the

role of scholars and historians in recovering Anabaptism. But most recent directors of the London Mennonite Centre (where many of us discovered the Anabaptists) have also been academics. And interest in Anabaptism in Britain and Ireland over the past twenty years has perhaps been strongest among church leaders and tutors at theological colleges. There is a danger that Anabaptism can be regarded as a special interest group for historians and other academics (or ‘posh Baptists’ as someone recently remarked).

This would be a great shame, depriving us of very practical resources for mission, church life and discipleship in an emerging post-Christendom culture. It would also be untrue to the Anabaptist movement itself, which was overwhelmingly comprised of non-academic, often uneducated, Christians who were passionate about their faith, resilient in the face of sustained opposition and extraordinarily irritating to the academics who tried to convince them of their errors. *The Naked Anabaptist* is an attempt to present Anabaptism in a less academic way.

*But aren't Anabaptists just another denomination? I'm an Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal... (insert your own tribe). Why should I be interested in another tradition?*

The Anabaptist movement began as a loose-knit coalition of groups who were forming in various places across central Europe – the ‘emerging church’ equivalent of the sixteenth century. These groups spoke different languages, were shaped by different spiritual and cultural influences and did not always agree with each other on all aspects of faith and practice. There was a central core of belief and behaviour that distinguished them from others and welded them together into a movement, but Anabaptism was never uniform.

Nor did it form a single denomination. Driven underground or scattered by persecution, developing denominational structures was neither feasible nor the main priority in the early years. Gradually, institutional features began to emerge and eventually a number of denominations or distinct groupings developed. In common with many other traditions that broke away from the Catholic Church, Anabaptist denominations sub-divided from time to time, and some subsequently reconnected.

The major denominations or communities that trace their origins to Anabaptism are the Mennonites, the Mennonite Brethren, the Hutterites, the Amish, the Brethren in Christ and the Church of the Brethren. Baptists continue to debate how much they owe their beginnings to the influence of the Anabaptists: there are many shared characteristics and convictions, but also some significant differences. If we exclude the Baptists, as indirect rather than direct descendants of the Anabaptists, there is virtually no denominational expression of Anabaptism in Britain and Ireland. The interest in Anabaptism reported in this chapter has impacted people from many denominations, but it has not created a new denomination here.

Why are Anglicans, Presbyterians, Catholics, Quakers, Methodists, Baptists and others interested in the Anabaptist tradition? Most are not searching for a new denomination to join or looking for a way to leave their own. They are seeking inspiration, resources and fresh perspectives to enrich and enhance their own lives, local church or denomination,

and they suspect that the Anabaptist tradition might have something to offer. Because Anabaptism (especially as people encounter it in Britain and Ireland) is a tradition rather than a denomination, they can explore it and learn from it without feeling disloyal to their own community.

Neither the Anabaptist Network nor the London Mennonite Centre (the two communities to which people usually go to explore Anabaptism) has attempted to express Anabaptist values and practices by planting churches or founding a new denomination. Both groups have offered resources to Christians from many denominations without suggesting they should abandon their existing commitments. There are advantages to this policy, but we recognise that it also has certain drawbacks – not least that the Anabaptist tradition can be presented in an idealistic or disembodied way that is not tested in the rough and tumble of church life and denominational relationships. This is not so much ‘naked Anabaptism’ as ethereal Anabaptism. But with this health warning attached, we continue to invite people from any denomination to take what they find helpful from the Anabaptist tradition.

Anabaptism is not, of course, the only tradition to which people are looking for insights and inspiration today. Many more are looking to Celtic Christianity and finding resources to sustain and renew them. There are fewer historical sources from which we can attempt to discover authentic Celtic Christianity, so the danger of reading back into this tradition what we want to find is greater than with Anabaptism. But people from many traditions embrace Celtic perspectives and practices without disconnecting from their own church or denomination. And the Celtic tradition has been mediated through poetry, art, music and liturgy, rather than academic presentations, making it more accessible to many than the Anabaptist tradition.

In an increasingly post-denominational era, and with easy access to resources of all kinds, few Christians today draw only on one tradition or stream of spirituality. While there are undoubtedly dangers in sampling many traditions without inhabiting any, and of slipping in and out of communities rather than truly belonging, restrictive tribal loyalties no longer discourage us from learning from others beyond our immediate boundaries as they once did. *The Naked Anabaptist* is not suggesting that the Anabaptist stream is the only one we should drink from, but that it has been a less familiar tradition than many others and that learning from it does not threaten other commitments.

*But aren't Anabaptists hung up on the issue of baptism?*

As has been the case with many other movements, the label ‘Anabaptist’ was imposed by others rather than chosen by the people involved – who tended to call themselves simply Christians or ‘brothers and sisters’. And, as often, the label referred to a distinctive aspect of the movement rather than its central convictions. In the case of the Anabaptists, it was their rejection of infant baptism and their insistence on baptising believers (even if they had been baptised as infants) that prompted their opponents to label them ‘Anabaptists’ (‘re-baptisers’).

This was an important and hugely contentious issue in the sixteenth century. Baptising infants marked their incorporation into a Christian society; re-baptising them years later implied that they – and the society into which they had been inducted – were not truly Christian. This was precisely what the Anabaptists claimed, causing huge offence in the process. They argued that infant baptism lacked biblical support and disconnected the rite of baptism from the reality of faith and discipleship. Baptism, they taught, was reserved for those who could choose to follow Jesus and commit themselves to the community of the church. But they refused to regard this as rebaptism, claiming that infant baptism was no baptism at all. The label ‘Anabaptist’ was applied to them, not only to challenge this assertion, but to make them liable to prosecution under an ancient law that forbade such rebaptism on pain of execution.

But the distinctive and subversive Anabaptist practice of baptism pointed to deeper issues that the label does not pick up. Baptising believers and associating this rite with entry into the church challenged the way in which church membership had been understood during the Christendom era. For believers’ baptism meant a believers’ church, not a territorial church; entered by choice, not birth; requiring active participation, not just attendance. It also meant that discipleship was not a higher calling for monks and nuns but expected of all believers. And it was based on the judgement that biblical precedent trumped ecclesial tradition. No matter how many centuries of baptising infants the Catholic and Protestant churches could point to in support of this practice, if it lacked a convincing biblical basis, Anabaptists were unimpressed.

These were revolutionary ideas in the sixteenth century, but are hardly so today. Many Christians now (though not all) are willing to question long-established traditions if these appear to be unsupported by Scripture. The believers’ church model is not only familiar alongside the state church or people’s church models but is becoming normative in most societies. And few would now suggest that the call to discipleship is applicable only to a spiritual elite. Questions about baptism may still be quite contentious, but the Anabaptists have carried the day on the issues to which their baptismal practice pointed.

Furthermore, the cultural context is significantly different today. Some have suggested that in post-Christendom baptising one’s child is as much an act of spiritual defiance as refusing to baptise one’s child was in the sixteenth century. This is not an argument for infant baptism most Anabaptists would find persuasive, but it does highlight the culture shift that requires Christians in all traditions to think carefully about the induction and nurture of children within the Christian community. And it indicates that the cultural significance of infant baptism may be evolving into something rather different than it has been for many centuries.

Maybe this explains why Anabaptists today are not ‘hung up on baptism’ in the way they seemed to be in the sixteenth century.<sup>22</sup> It is not that baptism is unimportant, but this practice no longer carries the freight it carried before. So those who continue to defend and practise infant baptism can participate freely in Anabaptist gatherings and draw on the Anabaptist tradition without needing to argue about baptismal practice. And those

who advocate and practise the baptism of believers can welcome and worship alongside those who disagree with them in a way that would have been unthinkable 450 years ago.

*But aren't Anabaptists separatists? Don't Anabaptist communities withdraw from the world and refuse to get involved in society?*

There are certainly some Anabaptist communities today that adopt a separatist stance and appear withdrawn from the rest of society. Amish and Hutterite communities, especially, are distinctive in the way they dress and the restrictions they impose on themselves and their engagement with outsiders. These communities regard such separation as essential for faithful discipleship. This may not imply that they are unconcerned for others; indeed, members of these communities have sometimes been actively involved in campaigns for social justice, especially in protesting against the death penalty. But they understand their primary calling to be living out the gospel in their daily lives, in preparation for the age to come, and as a witness to any who will pay attention.

Most other Anabaptists today, whether members of denominations descended from the Anabaptists, or others who identify with the Anabaptist tradition, do not subscribe to this understanding of mission or this perspective on separation. But the Anabaptist tradition is dogged by the charge of separatism, which is often made without supporting evidence. In some ways this is understandable, given statements from the early years of the movement that are unmistakably separatist in tone. But these statements need to be read in context. Persecuted communities often have little option but separation if they hope to survive. If the state is trying to eradicate you, if other churches brand you as heretics and neighbours are expected to denounce and betray you to the authorities, what else can you do?

In fact, early Anabaptists were deeply concerned about social justice, economic issues and community transformation. Many had participated in the peasants' movement of the mid-1520s until this was crushed by military force. This experience persuaded them that the only way forward in the current climate was to form separate communities in which they could embody their convictions and from which they could reach out in mission to any who would listen. This led to a wave of church planting across Europe. Anabaptism was at its core a missional movement.

But the authorities found these unauthorised churches, their deviant convictions and their enthusiastic advocates too threatening to ignore. Years of persecution eventually silenced the Anabaptists, who either fled or survived by withdrawing into their own communities and no longer talking about their beliefs – in some places they became known as 'the quiet in the land'. This understandable response to persecution then became embedded in the Anabaptist tradition so that, when persecution ceased, the separatist instinct was hard to resist. Anabaptists have frequently succumbed to withdrawal over the centuries, so the charge of separatism is not without foundation, but this can be interpreted as a distortion of the original vision.

Anabaptists today, with the exceptions mentioned above, interpret separation differently. Some have frankly become assimilated into the wider culture and retain only vestiges of

their non-conforming heritage. Others have explored ways of expressing their convictions and distinctives creatively in different cultural contexts. Many have become passionately engaged in social, economic and political activism, or in evangelistic and church planting initiatives. The charge of separatism simply does not apply to them.

Members of the Anabaptist Network's steering group, for example, cannot legitimately be characterised as separatists. This group includes an inner-city church planter, a social worker, a university lecturer, a staff member of Christian Aid, a psychiatrist, a mediator working on the issue of gang violence, and the CEO of a global environmental agency. Some years ago, one of us was invited to address a meeting of academic theologians in Cambridge. During the discussion that followed his presentation he was charged, as an Anabaptist, with advocating withdrawal from the world. Having come straight from his office, where he worked as the financial director of a large business, into the rarefied atmosphere of a theological study centre, he found this accusation bizarre and amusing.

*The Naked Anabaptist* will offer many examples of ways in which Anabaptists today, far from advocating withdrawal, are engaging creatively and courageously in society. It is time for the charge of separatism to be reviewed.

And yet, perhaps it should not be dropped entirely, and perhaps Anabaptists should insist that a separatist approach is not completely unwarranted. Old and New Testaments both call for the people of God to be distinctive, non-conformist and separate. So followers of Jesus are to be discriminating in how we become involved in society. As the Christendom era comes to an end and we rediscover our biblical status as 'resident aliens'<sup>23</sup>, maybe the Anabaptist tradition can help us discern when principled withdrawal is more appropriate than collusion, how to assess the benefits and drawbacks of participation, and whether there might sometimes be less conventional ways of being involved.

*But aren't Anabaptists all pacifists?*

The short answer to this question is simply 'No'. Not all Anabaptists in the sixteenth century were pacifists. Not all Anabaptists in later generations have been pacifists. And not all Anabaptists today are pacifists. This is not a requirement for learning from the tradition, or even for participating in many Anabaptist churches and communities.

But the Anabaptist tradition is a peace tradition, and pacifism or non-violence has been one of its distinguishing features. Unlike their Catholic and Protestant contemporaries, Anabaptists never (with the exception of the Münster aberration) persecuted those with whom they disagreed or attempted to coerce conversion. Pacifism very quickly became the settled conviction of the Anabaptist movement and it has remained so through the centuries. Some individuals have dissented, some congregations have allowed dissenters to remain, but Anabaptists have continued to advocate non-violence as the Christian way and, with the Quakers and the Church of the Brethren, comprise what are known as the 'historic peace churches'.



This commitment to peace is one of the gifts the Anabaptist tradition brings to the wider church. It represents a recovery of the practice of the early churches, a natural expression of what it means to be followers of Jesus in post-Christendom culture, where the church is no longer compromised by its partnership with wealth, power, status and control.<sup>24</sup>

So, if you are not put off by these charges against the Anabaptist tradition, read on.

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<sup>1</sup> Duane Ruth-Hefffelbower: *The Anabaptists are Back!* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Kreider & Stuart Murray (Eds.): *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland* (Waterloo: Pandora Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> We are linked together as the Root and Branch network: see [www.rootandbranch.org.uk](http://www.rootandbranch.org.uk).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.postchristendom.com](http://www.postchristendom.com).

<sup>5</sup> See [www.aaanz.mennonite.net](http://www.aaanz.mennonite.net).

<sup>6</sup> See [www.churchcommunities.com](http://www.churchcommunities.com).

<sup>7</sup> See [www.cpt.org](http://www.cpt.org).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.urbanexpression.org.uk](http://www.urbanexpression.org.uk).

<sup>9</sup> See [www.cruciblecourse.org.uk](http://www.cruciblecourse.org.uk).

<sup>10</sup> See [www.menno.org.uk/bridgebuilders](http://www.menno.org.uk/bridgebuilders).

<sup>11</sup> See [www.metanoiabooks.org.uk](http://www.metanoiabooks.org.uk).

<sup>12</sup> See [www.workshop.org.uk](http://www.workshop.org.uk).

<sup>13</sup> See [www.ekklesia.co.uk](http://www.ekklesia.co.uk).

<sup>14</sup> See [www.speak.org.uk](http://www.speak.org.uk).

<sup>15</sup> This will be examined further in chapter 6.

<sup>16</sup> Brian McLaren: *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Writing in the foreword to David Greiser & Michael King: *Anabaptist Preaching* (Telford: Cascadia, 2003), 9.

<sup>18</sup> See [www.mennoweekly.org/2008/4/21](http://www.mennoweekly.org/2008/4/21).

<sup>19</sup> For example, Stanley Hauerwas: *The Peaceable Kingdom* (London: SCM, 2003); James McClendon: *Systematic Theology I: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986); John Howard Yoder: *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Doris Janzen Longacre: *More-with-Less Cookbook* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> See further [www.vorp.org](http://www.vorp.org).

<sup>22</sup> This issue will be explored further in chapter 5.

<sup>23</sup> A term popularised by Stanley Hauerwas and a translation of a Greek term in 1 Peter 1:1.

<sup>24</sup> This will be explored further in chapter 6.