

# Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



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## A Time for Faithful Repentance

In July of 2010 more than 400 Lutherans gathered from around the world in Stuttgart, Germany, for the General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, spending a week in worship, prayer, fellowship and discussion about the ministry and mission of Lutheran churches worldwide.

One afternoon, the assembly was presented with a historic opportunity: to publicly repent for Martin Luther's writings against Anabaptist Christians, the forerunners of today's Mennonite, Amish, Hutterite, and Adventist traditions. Luther strongly disapproved of the Anabaptists of his day, using words like "ungodly," "seditious," "wicked," and "fanatical" that provided justification for Lutherans to carry on significant—and often violent—persecution of Anabaptists.

Many were surprised and saddened to hear about this aspect of the church's legacy. Although Lutherans had clearly been in the wrong in their acts of violence, some wondered what good it would do to repent now. It wasn't as though we were still persecuting Mennonites today. While those present pondered this, the speaker announced that some members of the World Mennonite Conference were present for the vote. Up in the balcony of the meeting hall a large group was seated, overlooking the proceedings with eager expressions.

Seeing the faces of these fellow Christians, many of whom had traveled from other countries to be present for this moment, it became clear: These were not merely theoretical discussions, but flesh and blood relationships. *Our church's decision to repent was not about something other people had done a long time ago; it was about the fact that the church of the past and of the future are joined together in the church of "now."* We Lutherans were all part of the story already, and now we would write a new chapter.

When it came time to vote, the whole assembly was asked to kneel or stand silently. As people knelt on the floor of the hall, the movement of bodies reminded each one of kneeling for confession or prayer, or to receive ashes or Holy Communion—moments of profound awe in the presence of God. This was no different. The Holy Spirit filled the room as hundreds of Lutherans from Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and North America, knelt or stood as one body of Christ—one Lutheran communion. In unison the body repented for "the harm that our forebears in the 16<sup>th</sup> century committed to Anabaptists, for forgetting or ignoring this persecution in the intervening centuries, and for all inappropriate, misleading hurtful portraits of Anabaptists and Mennonites made by Lutheran authors, in both popular and scholarly forms, to the present day."

Tears were flowing on the faces of Lutheran delegates and our Mennonite guests in the balcony above. The Rev. Danisa Ndlovu, President of Mennonite World Conference, came forward to acknowledge this repentance, and he spoke emotional words of humility: "We cannot bring ourselves to this table with heads held high...We cannot come to this point without recognizing our own need for God's grace and forgiveness."

A powerful joint worship followed in which the assembly sang, prayed, shared stories, and anointed one another's hands with oil, saying to one another: "God gives you a new heart and a new spirit." Joined in our need for repentance, seeking God's grace and forgiveness, we are church together. We share the good news.

Meghan Johnston Aelabouni in *Gather*, November, 2018