



Tavannes, April 20, 2019

Statement of the Swiss Mennonite Conference  
to the government of the Canton of Bern

## **Seeking Ways to Live Together in Peace Through Reconciliation**

On November 11, 2017, the state councillor and director of church affairs of Canton Bern, Christoph Neuhaus, asked the communion of Anabaptists "for forgiveness for all the harm that was done to the Anabaptists in our canton." In doing so he referred, among other things, to the anti-Anabaptist mandates of the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and their enforcement in Canton Bern. As the descendants of those Anabaptists, Swiss Mennonites receive this request with gratitude and joy, responding with "Yes, we forgive!"

Then as now, together with many other historic peace churches, Anabaptists take Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount as core to what it means to follow him. Thus we trust fully that those who were then persecuted would be of one mind with us today in responding to the apology with forgiveness.

As Mennonites we confess that we too have incurred guilt. We confess that our search for forms of life and community that are oriented to Jesus' life has at times led to a smug knowing-better and unjustified claims to moral superiority. The striving for a life consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ has not always sought for peaceable relations with everyone living in the land. With this offer of forgiveness we pledge ourselves to critically assess the consequences of a nonconformist posture, both past and present. In depicting past conflicts, Swiss Mennonites will endeavor not to hide problematic aspects of their own stance, but rather to present the intentions and scope of action of those carrying responsibility in the past as truthfully as possible. In no way should this lessen the high esteem in which the witness of those Anabaptists is held, nor disregard the high price they paid as victims of the dispute for their fidelity to the faith.



The plea for and the granting of forgiveness implies obligation. Thus, on this day the Mennonites of Switzerland make the following declaration to the Canton of Bern: in a spirit of reconciliation we seek ways which will lead to all in the land living in peace with each other.

Swiss Mennonites are fully aware that the request of forgiveness is of great importance also for the Reformed Church of Canton Bern, since it was implicated in the injustice of that time by virtue of the close connection between church and state. Today's step toward reconciliation joins the official steps toward reconciliation that have hitherto taken place on an ecclesial level, but which now brings the state into the picture as well.

The shock felt today at the violent suppression of nonconformist life and faith then points to the need for the state to give careful attention to freedom of religion and belief of dissident groups and movements. It is often difficult to integrate such groups into the overarching goals of the state, particularly when they are at times critical of the self-understanding of the state. We thus perceive in the request for forgiveness also an effort on the part of government to listen to such critical voices and to test their legitimacy. We rejoice when critical conversation partners are taken seriously in the search for peaceable life for all, and included in the conversation on what such a common life might look like and how it might be shaped.

In light of our history we ask the government that when promulgating laws which place limits on the freedom of faith and religion it heed the need to protect the dignity of the individual, and to see to it that the potential of communities to contribute to peaceful social co-existence with the goal of a good life for everyone not be constrained. That implies also that the state respect and protect those spaces in which religions and faith communities—each in their own form and function—participate in the general social processes in a conciliatory and peaceable fashion.

In reflecting on today's relationship between church and state, Swiss Mennonites take into account the great diversity of truth claims in our society. They also respect and value the multiple opportunities for shaping the common life the present form of the state creates and allows.

As a church community we are oriented to a life of following Jesus Christ. By virtue of the saving and reconciling action of God in Jesus Christ we see ourselves obligated to fostering a just peace, one which God brings, and one which takes shape in this world in social, economic, and ecological dimensions. We acknowledge that the state cannot base either its existence or its obligations on such a foundation in the same way. Given such differences we should expect that the relationship between Mennonites and organs of the state might also in the future not always be without tension. We nevertheless wish to participate constructively in the various processes shaping society and to ask with greater urgency how we might support the organs of the state with the specific competence we bring as a peace church.

With this statement Swiss Mennonites express the hope that these steps to reconciliation might free up cooperative energies for peace and justice which will bring benefit to our land and beyond its borders.

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