

A historical path tracing the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement in Zurich

# 1 Events at a Glance

## ► THE REFORMATION REACHES ZURICH

When Ulrich Zwingli began his ministry as a priest in Zurich on 1 January 1519, all of Europe was in a state of upheaval. Church and society were being reorganized. In 1523 the First Zurich Disputation (or debate) on issues regarding church reform was a great success for the Reformation in Zurich—among other things, it determined that “sermons must conform to Scripture.”

## ► INITIAL DIFFERENCES

This step marked the beginning of ongoing disputes within the reform movement. Who decides on the interpretation of Scripture? And who is responsible for enforcing what aligns “with Scripture” in matters of faith and life? Increasingly, Zwingli and his fellow reformers disagreed about these questions.

## ► ZWINGLI WANTED A STATE CHURCH

According to Zwingli and others, the authoritative interpretation of Scripture was a matter for theologians. They should be the ones to decide what was “scriptural” and therefore what was binding. The city council, as the political authority, must support their decisions and guarantee their implementation. Zwingli thus advocated for a state church model: the Reformation was to be binding for the entire population.

## ► FAITH IS A PERSONAL DECISION

Zwingli's original followers, however, were convinced that only the personal convictions and voluntary decisions of the individual matters in the renewal of the church. Only those who seek to understand the Bible in community with others, and live their lives accordingly, should belong to the church. They called for an Anabaptist, or free church, model. On 21 January 1525, the group around Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz and George Blaurock expressed this by undergoing voluntary baptisms as adults.

## ► NO TOLERANCE FOR ANABAPTIST POSITIONS

Zwingli's Zurich Reformation, however, stood firm. The political authorities had decided. The time for discussion and compromise regarding other models had expired. “Where there is faith, there is freedom!” Zwingli once said. But the freedom he demanded for himself and his reform vis-à-vis the Catholics was no longer granted to others.

## ► SPIRAL OF VIOLENCE

From now on, the authorities increasingly reacted to the Anabaptist movement and its representatives with repression, violence and a refusal to negotiate. The Anabaptist movement also met with harsh resistance from the church and the authorities in other Swiss cities and throughout Europe. After 1700, Zurich had eradicated nearly all Anabaptists.

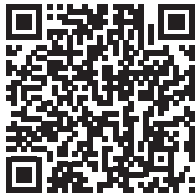
The **Historical Walking Trail** traces key places in this story, introducing us to **relevant sites**. It provides **historical facts**, but it also invites us to **linger**, to **reflect** (🤔), and to engage in **conversation** on the way to the next station.

## 🌱 DIALOGUE

The voluntary nature of faith and church membership, freedom of conscience, renunciation of violence, a sense of community, a willingness to suffer, and a commitment to reconciliation—these Anabaptist principles have only recently come to the attention of a wider public. Today, after many reconciliation initiatives between national churches and representatives of the Anabaptist movement, the doors to dialogue are open again. What examples are you aware of?

## THE ANABAPTIST MOVEMENT TODAY

Despite the challenges of persecution, the Anabaptist movement continued to grow. By the end of the 16th century congregations existed in Moravia (the Czech Republic), Switzerland, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, where an influential priest named Menno Simons helped to bring theological stability to the movement. By the 19th century, Anabaptists could also be found in South Russia, the United States and Canada. Today, the global Anabaptist church numbers approximately 2.2 million baptized members living in 86 countries. Among groups who identify Anabaptists as their spiritual forebearers are Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, Old Colony Mennonites, Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ, Brethren Church of the Brethren and dozens of other smaller groups. Demographically speaking, the “average” Anabaptist person today is a young woman from Ethiopia.



🌐 Why is the Meserete Kristos Church the fastest-growing Mennonite church?



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## 2 The city of Zurich during the Reformation

The church needs renewal! This became increasingly obvious in Zurich at the beginning of the 16th century. This is why the City Council brought Ulrich Zwingli to Zurich in 1519 as the "people's priest." Zwingli set the course for the Reformation as early as January 1523 at the First Disputation, where he determined that sermons should be based on Scripture and set himself up as the guardian of this principle. In the future, decisions about the church and faith would be settled in the Zurich city hall – the building in front of us on the other side of the Limmat River.

### ► FULL SUPPORT AND INITIAL DIFFERENCES

The people of Zurich took a lively interest in the church reforms that were unfolding. Initially, the majority welcomed the course that Zwingli took in close cooperation with the Council. Increasingly, however, some supporters of the Reformation called for a shift in emphases.

### ► THE REFORM MUST BE MORE RADICAL!

Various groups of men and women in the city began to advocate for a more comprehensive and rapid renewal of the church. They wanted a more radical application of the new biblical insights—namely, the alternative voluntary church model of the Anabaptists. These groups accused Zwingli and his friends of being too willing to compromise with the Council. Their opinion was initially well received. However, this quickly collapsed when Zwingli and the Council responded harshly to the radical demands.

### ► FROM THE CITY TO THE COUNTRYSIDE

Suppressed in the city, the Anabaptist movement flourished in the countryside. Here, the concerns raised by Anabaptists merged with a longstanding desire by the local population for greater independence from urban dominance. The city authorities responded with repression, persecution and the confiscation of property. By 1650, several Zurich Anabaptists had died after

lengthy imprisonment. Many Anabaptists escaped the harsh repression by temporarily fleeing or by emigrating. Some moved down the Rhine River to the Kraichgau and the Palatinate.

### 🌱 RENEWAL

Looking at the world today—at our countries or our communities—where is renewal needed most? Where is renewal visible? What does renewal mean to us today in light of the biblical Spirit and Word?



🌐 The Anabaptist Movement Today:  
Conflict in the church: Lessons from Acts 15



Ruin of the church of St John, Philadelphia, in present-day Alayeh, Turkey.  
Photo: Irma Sulajovski



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## 3 City Hall as a place of decision

The town hall is the workplace of influential and powerful people. This is where the course of the Zurich Reformation was decided. Here is where debates took place on how the Bible should be understood and applied, and what concrete steps would be taken for the renewal of the church. This is also where the City Council passed mandates against anyone who opposed their guidelines for the Reformation. The current town hall dates to the 1690s, a time when Anabaptism no longer existed in Zurich. The original town hall stood slightly upstream on the other side of the street.

### ► ANABAPTISTS ARE UNWELCOME

On 17 January 1525, the first Anabaptist disputation took place in the town hall. The council re-examined the dissidents' arguments . . . and decided against them. The following day, it decreed that infant baptism would be compulsory. On 21 January, the council banned further meetings by anyone who opposed infant baptism. Grebel and Mantz, both from Zurich, were forbidden to speak in public. Reublin, Brötli, Hätzer and Castelberger, who were not from Zurich, were summarily expelled.

But that same evening, the radicals (*täuferisch Gesinnten*) met at Felix Mantz's house where they carried out the first voluntary baptisms.

### ► ZURICH ANABAPTISTS ARE EXPELLED

Until well into the 17th century, the Zurich town hall issued numerous mandates in an effort by the Council to weaken and eliminate the Anabaptist movement. To be sure, there were always isolated individuals who supported Anabaptist ideas. But they could not change the course of events. In the early 1630s, the city council responded to the renewed growth of Anabaptism in the countryside by

confiscating property, imposing long prison sentences and sending numerous Anabaptists into exile.

### 🗣️ THE STATE

Participation? Opposition? Withdrawal? As Christians inspired by the Bible, how do we engage in society, the state and politics today?



🌐 The Anabaptist Movement Today:  
South Korean Conscientious Objector Released  
from Prison



Sang-Min Lee freed after 15 months in jail for refusing mandatory military conscription.  
Photo supplied.



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# 4 Monument with Bible and sword

The relationship between the Bible and the sword has always been explosive – and controversial! We are standing in front of the Zwingli monument. Created by the Austrian sculptor Heinrich Natter, the statue depicts Zwingli with the sword in one hand and the Bible in the other.

## ► THE SWORD MUST PROTECT THE GOOD

Zwingli and his friends were convinced that the Christian faith and everything it creates and promotes must be defended with God's help and, ultimately, with the sword. Most major church traditions and movements for social reform share this assumption even today.

## ► JESUS WAS NONVIOLENT

The Christian faith is based on the example of Jesus. Jesus did not defend himself or promote the gospel by force of arms. Nor should we. The Anabaptists were convinced of this. This is what they stood for and tried to put into practice. They trusted God, along with the transformative power of debate, nonviolent resistance and patient endurance, regardless of the consequences.

## ► PEACEMAKING WITH OR WITHOUT WEAPONS?

The Anabaptists refused to go to war in defense of their country or their faith. Rulers were threatened by this conviction, especially in unsettled times. It was

the main reason for the centuries-long persecution of the Anabaptists.

## 🌱 DEFENSE

Today, regardless of our convictions, we are faced with very similar questions. How do we react when our personal values and ideas are attacked by others?



🌐 The Anabaptist Movement Today:  
Welcoming my Enemy, Safari Mutabesha (DRC)



A congregation of Mennonite Brethren Church in Malawi worships together.  
Photo supplied.



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# 5 The Grossmünster – A place of ideas, debates and disputes

At the time of the Reformation, the Grossmünster was the main church in Zurich. Ulrich Zwingli worked from here. It was also the venue for large events if space in the city hall was insufficient. Around 900 people gathered here for the Second Zurich Disputation (26-28 October 1523)!

## ► FIRST DISAGREEMENTS

For years, Zwingli and others – including several people who would later become his theological opponents – worked intensively at the Grossmünster to renew the church according to Scripture. Here they discussed the veneration of images, the mass, and whether or not the mass was a “sacrifice.” Zwingli and the later Anabaptists agreed that these practices had no biblical basis and should therefore be abolished. But determining how that decision should be reached revealed growing differences.

## ► THE SCHISM

Zwingli's radical colleagues wanted to decide the next steps of renewal for themselves, immediately. Zwingli, however, delegated these decision to the City Council. For political reasons, the Council decided to retain the mass, at least for the time being. But when the question of infant baptism emerged, several of Zwingli's former friends were no longer ready to turn to the Council. They took action. Not content to simply reject infant baptism, at a gathering on 21 January 1525, they began baptizing adult believers on their confession of faith.

## ► A HARSH RECKONING

By the fall of 1525, the Reformation movement in Zurich splintered over the issue of baptism. Because Anabaptism (= re-baptism) was now spreading rapidly in the countryside, the council again hosted a wide-ranging debate – the “Anabaptist Disputation” (6-8 November 1525) – at the Grossmünster. This, however, was not a conversation of equals but something more like a trial. The Council sided completely with

Zwingli and the leading Anabaptist spokesmen were subsequently all thrown into prison.

## 🗣️ DEBATES

What are the key issues facing us in society and in our congregations today? How do we deal with them? How do we make decisions?



🌐 **The Anabaptist Movement Today:**  
Identity and Ecumenicity A Theology of Interchurch  
Hospitality and Denominational Identity, Alfred Neufeld



The Renewal 2017 gathering occurred in Augsburg, Germany, some 500 years after Luther's famous appeal to sola scriptura launched the Reformation. (Renewal is a series of events commemorating the 500th anniversary of the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement.)  
Photo: Wilhelm Unger



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# 6 Neustadtgasse – Revival site

In one of the houses here on Neustadtgasse supporters of the radical Bible-based Reformation took a spontaneous, but decisive, turn that led to an independent Anabaptist movement. We don't know exactly where the meeting took place, but it was likely in the pink house to the left of the fountain where Felix Mantz lived with his mother.

## ► BEWILDERED

On Saturday evening, 21 January 1525, a group of men and women gathered here. Heavy on their minds was the surprising, disappointing decision made by the Council three days earlier. Their concerns had been rejected. All unbaptized infants were to be baptized within eight days. As Zurich residents, Grebel and Mantz were forbidden from any further teaching or debating—their “special schools” must cease. Leaders who were not Zurich residents – Reublin, Brötl, Hätzer and Castelberger – must leave the city within a week. What now?

## ► BAPTIZE ME!

Represented among those present were some who were unsure; but also those ready to press forward. One of the latter was George Blaurock – a priest from Graubünden. Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him, perhaps as a spontaneous impulse. Grebel did so, even though he was not an ordained priest. Blaurock then baptized everyone else who requested it on the profession of their faith.

## ► LAUNCHING OUT – BUT WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES?

The evening was also marked by the emotional statements of those present, in which they confessed their sins and ask for forgiveness. The meeting at Neustadtgasse had a strong revivalist character. Will it now lead to

separation from the larger church? Or is it possible that there would be a resolution? Both outcomes still seemed possible.

## 🌱 BAPTISM

What does baptism mean to us personally and to our congregations today? How do we preserve the memory of our baptisms or special baptism services?



🌐 The Anabaptist Movement Today:  
Baptism in a Barrel



Desalegn Abobe is president of Meserete Kriston Church (Christ our Foundation), an MWC member church in Ethiopia. Photo: Christian Argha Adhitya



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# 7 Spiegelgasse 14 – World history meets Anabaptist history

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known simply as Lenin (1870-1924), once lived here at Spiegelgasse 14 with his wife. On 9 April 1917, following the February Revolution and the fall of the Tsar, Lenin returned to Russia. From St. Petersburg, he supported the Bolsheviks in their struggle. When the Bolsheviks came to power in the October Revolution, Lenin became a leading figure in the new Soviet Union.

outreach, have helped give birth to numerous independent local churches around the world.

## SOLIDARITY

What does the global community mean to us today? How do we experience it?

## ► BUT WHAT DOES LENIN HAVE TO DO WITH THE ANABAPTISTS?

Since the late 18th century, Anabaptist communities in the Netherlands and northern Germany had been emigrating to South Russia. World War I and the subsequent Russian Revolution devastated the numerous Mennonite colonies that had flourished there. Mennonites did not fit into the Soviet scheme. In addition, a severe famine caused enormous suffering. In response to these needs, Mennonites in North America founded a relief organization known as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Nevertheless, many people died of hunger in the following years and many others were forced to flee or emigrate.

## ► WORLDWIDE FELLOWSHIP REMAINS IMPORTANT

Mennonite World Conference (MWC) emerged in 1925 as an effort to help Mennonites around the world provide spiritual and material support for each other.

Today, 110 Anabaptist-Mennonite churches, including roughly 1.5 million members, are part of MWC. In addition to relatively new churches in countries like Portugal, Austria, Italy and Lithuania, Anabaptists in Europe can be generally divided into the Swiss/South German/Alsatian branch and the Dutch/North German/Russian branch. Both have their roots in the 16th century and both, through their mission



 The Anabaptist Movement Today:  
Love Opens Hearts to Learn More, Walter Jakobeit



Photo: Susanne Werner



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# 8 Am Neumarkt – Respectable house with an erratic son

The highly-respected Grebel family once lived in this house on Neumarkt. The father, Jacob Grebel, was a wealthy Zurich city councillor and father-in-law of the St. Gallen mayor and reformer Joachim Vadian. As a councillor, he supported Zwingli's Reformation efforts. But his son, Conrad Grebel, seems to have led a somewhat irresolute life. A perpetual student, Conrad studied at Basel, Vienna and Paris, yet failed to complete his degree. Was his father frustrated by this?

## 🗣️ CALLING

What has been the trajectory of my faith and life? How have my life and my faith developed over the years? What traces will I leave behind?



## ▶ COMMITTED REFORMER

When Conrad Grebel returned to Zurich in 1520, he joined Zwingli's Bible study group. Later, he met Felix Mantz, and both quickly became fervent supporters of the Reformation. Unlike the more reserved Mantz, Grebel expressed his convictions with unbridled passion and reckless energy. But his efforts seemed to be in vain. Grebel and Mantz were quickly at odds with the City Council.

## ▶ SAD DOWNFALL; LASTING IMPACT

When, in March of 1526, his son and other Anabaptists were ordered to "die and rot in the tower," Jacob Grebel begged the council for mercy. To no avail. Conrad escaped from prison, but later died of the plague. Shortly thereafter, on 30 October 1526, Jacob Grebel was executed for mishandling pension funds. The erratic son of a flamboyant father, this complicated personality nevertheless became a co-founder of the Anabaptist movement.

🌐 The Anabaptist Movement Today:  
Resistance, repentance and a sweet harvest



Benjamin Isak-Krauß co-pastors with his spouse Rianne at Mennonitengemeinde Frankfurt, a congregation of Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mennonitischer Gemeinden (AMG) in Germany. He represents the Deutsche Mennonitische Friedenskomitee (German Mennonite Peace Committee) on the steering committee of Community Peacemaker Teams. Photo supplied.



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## 9 Froschaugasse – the Bible printing alley

Here, in a courtyard behind this alley, was the workshop of Christoph Froschauer, one of the great printers of the Reformation era. Froschauer was a good friend of Zwingli and a supporter of his cause. Already in 1522, he provoked the public by openly hosting a meal of sausages during the Lenten fast as a demonstration against church traditions that had no biblical basis. He and his successors printed many editions of the Bible. These Bibles, which enjoyed great success, were the result of a collective translation project by the Zurich Prophezeey—a gathering of biblical scholars skilled in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. Several individual Anabaptists were also initially involved in this effort.

### ► THE HEART OF THE REFORMATION

The Bible was also the starting point—the linchpin—of the Reformation in Zurich. Since the invention of book printing by Johannes Gutenberg around 1450, printed material could be easily reproduced and quickly disseminated. Erasmus von Rotterdam's edition of the Greek New Testament, published in Basel in 1516, also provided a much more accurate textual basis for these translations.

### ► TRANSLATION WITHOUT "IFS" AND "BUTS"

The Zurich Bible subsequently became the primary "working tool" of the Anabaptist movement. The 1536 revised edition was particularly popular with the Anabaptists, in part because it did not include the marginal notes that Zwingli would soon add to later editions with their confessional arguments. Since later editions also contained commentary supportive of the political authorities, the Anabaptists oversaw numerous

reprints of the 1536 edition, which became known as the "Froschauer Bible."

### 👤 BIBLE

Today, most of us have countless Bible translations at our disposal. Which do you prefer and why? How is our engagement with the Bible reflected in our lives: ethically, morally, politically?



🌐 The Anabaptist Movement Today:  
Another Way, César García



Saudo Padilla walks by the Israel separation wall in 2017 at Aida (Aydi), a Palestinian refugee camp north of Bethlehem in the West Bank, Palestine. Photo: MCC Photo/Saudo Padilla



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# 10 The Schipfe:

## A place full of memories

This is the site where Felix Mantz was drowned in the Limmat River on 5 January 1527. Those who refused to submit were silenced—that's simply how things were. Other Zurich Anabaptists would later suffer a similar fate. Compared to other cities in Europe, however, Zurich sentenced relatively few Anabaptists to death. The last person to be executed in Zurich was the Anabaptist elder Hans Landis from Horgenerberg, who was beheaded in 1614.

### ► HIGH PRICE FOR PERSONAL CONVICTIONS

For decades, thousands of Anabaptists in Europe paid for their convictions with their lives. Many were judicially executed. But many more died from illness or exhaustion while serving long prison sentences, working as galley slaves, on the run as refugees. Was their commitment and martyrdom justified? Is their resolve impressive and admirable? Or were they simply narrow-minded and stubborn?

### 🌱 COUNTING THE COST

What price are we prepared to pay for our personal convictions

today? Where do we choose to conform? Where do we remain silent? And where are we called to stand up and accept responsibility, along with the consequences, of our beliefs and convictions?



🌐 The Anabaptist Movement Today:  
Holy Spirit works through Catholic Synod



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