

Christopher Zimmerman

## The Bruderhof: A Community in the Spirit of the Sermon on the Mount and the Radical Reformation

Friday, 3 November 2017, Stadthaus Wittenberg

In a year bursting with cultural offerings commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, a recent essay in the journal *Public Forum* caught my attention. It was by the eminent theologian Jürgen Moltmann, and instead of focusing on Martin Luther and his legacy, it addressed a topic that has tended to go unnoticed in the annals of European history, even today: the contributions of the so-called radical reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

Moltmann focuses on one of the most visible of these, Michael Sattler, a renegade Swiss prior turned Anabaptist apologist. Sattler is best known for having penned the *Schleitheim Articles* of 1527, but Moltmann argues that his contributions were far broader than that. In fact, he says Sattler deserves to be ranked with Zwingli and Bucer as a key player of the era. He goes on:

Luther accused the adherents of Anabaptism of being fanatics (*Schwärmer*), and historians today relegate it to the so-called left wing of the Reformation. I would argue that it was the only stream of the Reformation to reject, on the basis of Christian principles, the union of church and state. Constantine and his successors turned Christianity into a state religion and declared the Roman Empire to be the “Holy” Roman Empire of Christ. And all subsequent reformers, with the exception of the Re-baptizers, have remained subject, practically and theologically, to the law of this governmental authority. Only the Anabaptist reformation was a reformation based on faith alone: *sola fide*....

Luther freed the church from what he called the “Babylonian captivity” of the papacy. But it was Michael Sattler who freed her from the “Babylonian captivity” of the State. The only other branch of German Christendom to have achieved the same was the Confessing Church under the dictatorship of the Nazis.

And so I bow in reverence before this church of martyrs: before the Baptizers of the Reformation and the peace church of our own day. And I cover my face in sadness, ashamed that neither we Lutherans nor the Reformed Church recognized the Anabaptists as our brothers and sisters in the faith, and in spirit. It is high time that we not only acknowledge the guilt of our forebears, but also revise our own confession of faith.<sup>1</sup>

Moltmann is referring, of course, to the fact that in a year when Luther is being celebrated as one of history’s most important proponents of religious liberty, the main creed of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, „Reformation am Rande: Ohne alle Äußere Rüstung“ in *Publik-Forum* Nr. 5, 2017.

Lutheran Church – the Augsburg Confession – still contains surprisingly virulent and repressive language when it comes to the Anabaptists.

Who were these people, and why were they so ruthlessly persecuted – not only by the Catholics of Reformation Europe, but by Protestants as well? For our purposes here, I'll stick to the essentials: quite simply, the radical reformers felt the classical, big-name reformers didn't go far enough. To paraphrase the Mennonite historian Leonard Gross, whereas Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and their peers sought to improve and repair the corrupt ecclesial institutions of the day under the motto *reformatio*, the Anabaptists argued that the system was rotten to the core, and thus sought the re-constitution or restitution (*restitutio*) of the Body of Christ from its very foundations.<sup>2</sup>

Among their contributions, one could mention their unyielding adherence to the principle of nonviolent resistance (and thus their rejection of the sword); their belief in the “priesthood of all believers,” each of whom has direct access to God (and thus their disavowal of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and the view of the priest as mediator between the lay believer and Christ); and their emphasis on simplicity, mutual service, and community (and thus their condemnation of clerical pomp and personal wealth).

I already noted the contribution Moltmann focuses on, which is arguably their most important: their insistence that the body of Christ remain beholden to God and his Word alone, and not to the ecclesial powers that be, with all their legal strictures and traditions – let alone to a secular institution such as the State.

Moltmann is hardly the first Protestant to appreciate the witness of the Anabaptists, or to call for their historical rehabilitation – for lifting the old charges of heresy and welcoming them into the fold....

One-hundred and ten years ago, in 1907, a budding theologian from Breslau named Eberhard Arnold joined his wife Emmy von Hollander and her sister Else in having themselves re-baptized, thus becoming, in the truest sense of the term, Anabaptists. Their decision was the culmination of a long and arduous search fuelled not only by the stirrings of their own consciences and their participation in the spiritual revival then sweeping the university town of Halle, where they were living. In Arnold's case, his interest had been first piqued, ironically enough, in the library of his father, a staunch Lutheran scholar, where he had

---

<sup>2</sup> Much of the Anabaptist heritage is still visible in the communities and congregations of their descendants, who include (loosely defined) today's “Plain People” and “historic peace churches” – the Amish, Mennonites, Hutterites, Brethren, Baptists, and various associated offshoots and subgroups. Although largely invisible for centuries, they have gained cultural currency in recent decades, at least in a touristy sort of way, and popular references to them abound, from that dispiriting television series, “Amish in the City,” to David Williams' 2017 novel *When the English Fall*. In the academy, their importance is reflected by entire journals, libraries, and archives devoted to the scholarly preservation of their writings and the examination of their legacy.

discovered Gottfried Arnold's famed history of the heretics.<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, the book could be said to have changed his life.

There is a tendency in this anniversary year to keep looking back at 1517 – at yet another facet of the Reformation. I myself am a history buff – and there are endless fascinating aspects. But what does it all mean for us, today? Eberhard Arnold's genius was his readiness not only to grapple with this question, but also to *live* the answers he came upon. Though a brilliant academic, he was not satisfied with ideas and analyses, or with exploring radicalism retrospectively. He dared, in his searching, to assume a forward stance.

In specific, he sought to embody the core distinctives of the early Anabaptists, which he incidentally saw as identical with those of the earliest Christians: peace, voluntary poverty, community; and finally – in stark contrast to the idea of the *Volkskirche* – a personal commitment to the visible body of Christ, made through believer's baptism.

Not content to keep this calling to himself, he challenged anyone who would listen to join him on his new path; as his younger sister Hannah once wrote, "There was no one who was safe from him, no one whom he would not confront with the commands of Jesus, and the need to decide for or against him."<sup>4</sup>

Arnold's zeal cost him dearly. On a personal level, both he and his fiancée were verbally attacked by their parents, disowned and banned from their homes, and denied permission to be married until he had completed his doctorate. This was easier said than done: angered by his baptism, the theological faculty at Halle denied him permission to proceed, and he had to switch tracks to philosophy. He ended up writing his thesis on Christian and anti-Christian elements in Nietzsche.

After marrying in 1909, the Arnolds moved from one city to another, mostly on account of his work as a public speaker and officer for various Christian organizations, including the YMCA. During the first World War, the pressing issues of the day led the couple to read the Bible with new eyes (Arnold counselled veterans in an army hospital, and was shattered by what he heard and saw), and their searching soon carried them far beyond what they had experienced during the awakening in Halle. In Arnold's words, the time demanded a discipleship that "transcended merely edifying experiences."<sup>5</sup> Writing in 1931, his wife Emmy summarized the shift:

As deeply as the "good news" had penetrated our hearts – that Christ died for sinners, thus redeeming them – another message reached us just as forcibly in our searching:

---

<sup>3</sup> Gottfried Arnold, *Unparteyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie*. Leipzig / Frankfurt, 1699.

<sup>4</sup> Eberhard Arnold et al., *Poems and Rhymed Prayers*, Plough, 2003, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> "What we need today - and what none of us has yet attained - is a simple discipleship of Jesus that responds to the longing of the present but goes beyond spiritually edifying experiences." Eberhard Arnold, in a letter to Friedrich Böhm, November 13, 1920 (Bruderhof Archives, EAK Vol. 11-1920).

God wants to rule not only the lives of individuals but the whole world. And we were struck by the fact that God doesn't govern the so-called Christian world; Satan does.

Social contradictions such as the fact that one person can enjoy the plenty of life without sweating, while another does not have bread for his children, despite working like a slave, occupied us more and more. Through reading the Bible...we realized that this is not God's will.

From the outset of our friendship, Eberhard and I had wanted to give our lives in service to others. That was our primary concern, not our personal lives. So it was perhaps natural that we now found ourselves joining with people who were dissatisfied and were challenging public life and human relationships with the old slogans of freedom, equality, and fraternity.

These ideals were drawing people from everywhere: Pietists, members of the youth movement, anarchists, socialists, communists, reformers, artists, Free Germans, and former army officers. All of them were struggling to find God's will, even if not all of them would have expressed it like that.

One issue that particularly stirred us in a series of open evenings at our house in 1919 was our common guilt. We felt that we were responsible not only for our personal lives, but also for the condition of today's world order.

There was a cry in the circles we moved in for someone to show the way out of the confusion. The war had shaken many people's childlike faith in God. Some could no longer believe in a God of love. Many were confused by the stance of the churches – that pastors on both sides had blessed weapons, hurried soldiers onto the fields of slaughter, and prayed for the victory of their own nation. Whom should God heed?

The enslavement of the proletariat was also a burning question... Before long we were reaching out to poor families and individuals in northern and western Berlin who lived in terrible circumstances. We saw people living seven in one room, or crowded in damp cellars without windows. But we also saw how little we could do...

At our open evenings we read the Sermon on the Mount and were so overwhelmed by it that we decided to rearrange our lives completely, cost what it may. Everything written there seemed to have been spoken directly to us: from the Beatitudes, to what Jesus says about justice, about hungering for righteousness, loving one's enemies, praying, seeking God's kingdom first; and finally, doing God's will.

The Sermon on the Mount was also being illuminated for us from other sides. We discovered the message of the Blumhardts, Francis of Assisi, the early Quaker George Fox, the Jewish thinkers Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer, and others.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Arnolds' patrician friends had little understanding for the new direction the young couple's search was taking. As Emmy writes, these middle-class Christians were concerned primarily with rescuing sinners, and couldn't understand why the Arnolds took up social and political questions; or how they could sit on the same bench with non-believers –

---

<sup>6</sup> Emmy Arnold, "The Story of Sannerz," 1931. Unpublished manuscript, Bruderhof Archives.ü

people who had, in Emmy's words, "not yet experienced the grace of God in their personal lives."<sup>7</sup>

By early 1920, Eberhard gave notice at *Die Furche*, the Christian publishing house where he had worked since 1915. As Emmy put it, there were too many misunderstandings and tensions, and it was "no longer possible for him to go on working there in a productive fashion." Just around this time Eberhard was asked to take over the *Neuwerk* Publishing House, a new venture of the Free German Youth. *Neuwerk* was more than a business – it was a movement of young people who shared the Arnolds' ideals and intentions to live according to the Gospels, perhaps in an intentional community or rural settlement.

Emmy Arnold remembered her husband saying one day during this time of upheaval, "I can no longer speak and hold lectures – at least not until I change my life to what Jesus wants it to be." He had been struck by a sentence from the *Didache*, an early Christian text, which says, "Not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, but only he who models his way of life after the Lord. By his standard of living will both the false prophet and the true be recognized."<sup>8</sup> To quote Arnold directly:

In my youth, I tried to lead people to Jesus through the Bible, and through talks and discussions. But there came a time when I recognized that this was no longer enough. I began to see the tremendous power of mammon, of discord, of hatred, and of the sword: the hard boot of the oppressor upon the neck of the oppressed...

Shortly before the outbreak of the war, I wrote to a friend saying that I could not go on. I had preached the gospel but felt I needed to do more: that the demands of Jesus were practical, and not limited to a concern for the soul... I could not endure the life I was living any longer.<sup>9</sup>

In June 1920, the Arnolds made the plunge. Surrendering their life insurance policy for cash and leaving their home in cosmopolitan Berlin, they moved to Sannerz, a tiny Hessian farming village (and nerve center of *Neuwerk*, the wing of the German Youth movement I just mentioned), and began living in full community with others. (It bears mentioning here that an unpublished appendix to the Schleithem Confession of 1527, written in what scholars believe to be Michael Sattler's hand, refers to the communalism of the early Christians in Jerusalem and calls for the establishment of a common purse, making the *Neuwerk* community – at least in one vital respect – an Anabaptist venture from the start.<sup>10</sup>)

---

<sup>7</sup> Emmy Arnold, "The Story of Sannerz," 1931. Unpublished manuscript, Bruderhof Archives.

<sup>8</sup> Emmy Arnold, "Memories of the Years 1883-1920." Unpublished manuscript, Bruderhof Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Emmy Arnold, *A Joyful Pilgrimage*. Plough, 1999, 151.

<sup>10</sup>"Of all the brothers and sisters of this congregation none shall have anything of his own, but rather, as the Christians in the time of the apostles held all in common, and especially stored up a common fund, from which aid can be given to the poor, according as each will have need, and as in the apostles' time permit no brother to be in need." In practice, the exhortation that "no one shall have anything of his own" led the Swiss Brethren (who wrote and adhered to the Schleithem Confession) to set up communal funds to be drawn from as needed, for specific purposes, but not to a common purse; it was only the Moravian Hutterites who actually established

The fledgling commune grew by twists and turns. Idealists flocked to it, but most left after a short time, dissatisfied with its imperfections, and its poverty. To the Arnolds, however, it was never an experiment – it was the answer to a deeply-felt calling.

Over the next seven years, the Bruderhof (“place of brothers”) grew so rapidly that it was necessary to expand to a second location. Here the community’s original livelihood, publishing, was supplemented by farming, and by the sale of arts and crafts.

In the early 1930s, the community came into direct conflict with Germany’s Nazi government. After mandatory conscription was introduced, the community sent its young men of military age over the border. In response to the offer of a Nazi schoolteacher, they sent their children to a home in Switzerland. Members declined to give or receive the so-called German greeting, or “*Heil Hitler!*” salute; they argued that salvation was in the hands of another *Führer*. They harbored a disabled Jew. No wonder the Bruderhof soon became the target of harassment and open persecution. As a Gestapo official noted, it “represents a world-view totally opposed to National Socialism.” In 1937, secret police surrounded the community, imprisoned several members, and gave the rest forty-eight hours to leave the country.

Neighboring Liechtenstein offered temporary refuge but could not permanently protect the Bruderhof from the threat of Nazism. Fortunately, an influx of British guests opened doors in England, and the community was able to purchase a derelict farm in the Cotswolds and relocate there.

Over the next five years, the community grew to 350, largely through the addition of young English members (all of them pacifists, and many of them Socialists) seeking an alternative to war. During this period the farm was restored to productivity, the publishing work flourished, and several houses were built.

Even before the outbreak of the Second World War, the community’s German members (and the pacifist stance of its English ones) attracted deep suspicion locally. Economic boycotts were organized, and soon it became impossible to continue. When confronted with the option of either interning all German members, or leaving England as a group, the Bruderhof chose the latter, and began to look for refuge abroad.

---

full community in terms of production and consumption. See [www.anabaptistwiki.org](http://www.anabaptistwiki.org), which notes that the source for John Howard Yoder’s 1977 English translation (excerpted above) is Heinold Fast’s *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*. The original handwritten German is filed at the State Archives of the Canton of Bern, U.P. 80 Nr. 5 (A V 1453). The archives catalog describes the document as follows: “Sine dato (1525-1527?). Ordnung einer Täufergemeinde über Versammlungen, Gütergemeinschaft, Abendmahl. Handschrift Michael Sattlers? S. No. 9. Abgedruckt bei E. Müller, S. 37. Vergl. auch R. Feller im Archiv d. hist. Ver. Bern 1931, S. 115.”

Though the group sought entry in many countries including the United States and Canada, asylum was repeatedly denied – most likely because its members came from both Axis and Allied countries. Finally, with the help of American Mennonites, the community found refuge in Paraguay, a backward country whose population had recently been decimated by civil war. Getting several hundred people (including dozens of children and infants) across the submarine-infested Atlantic was a chapter in itself, but amazingly, everyone reached South America safely.

During the first year in the Paraguayan wilderness, Bruderhof members – mostly city-raised Europeans – fought what seemed a losing battle against primitive conditions, a harsh climate, and natural pests. Babies were lost to tropical disease. But the community persevered. Soon three settlements had been carved out of the jungle, as well as a hospital for community members and local Paraguayans. The only clinic in the area, it served tens of thousands for the next two decades.

Farming kept the Bruderhof on its feet during this period. Another source of income was the sale of turned wooden dishes and decorative objects.

In the 1950s, in response to growing interest in community living in North America and Britain, new Bruderhofs were founded there, and by 1962, all members had relocated to the United States, or to England.<sup>11</sup>

Over the last five decades, the Bruderhof has grown to almost three thousand souls in about two dozen communities primarily in New York, but also in other states, in England, Germany, Paraguay, and Australia. As regards our return here: in 2002, someone discovered that the Arnolds' house in Sannerz was on the market, and not long afterward, we purchased it. We have also had a house south of Leipzig since 2004.

The largest Bruderhofs have some four hundred members and are like self-contained villages, with multi-family dwellings, a nursery, kindergarten, school, communal kitchen and dining areas, laundry, various work departments, offices, and gardens.

The smallest have about twenty members, and tend to be located in urban centers like London or New York, or midsize towns. Each has its own daily rhythm (the smaller ones are mostly populated by college students), but each is built, inwardly, around a life of communal work, communal meals, and gatherings for singing and prayer.

Each community is served by a couple who pull the strings together, so to speak, and bear an inner responsibility for the wellbeing of their community. They do this as part of a team,

---

<sup>11</sup> New Bruderhofs were founded in New York (1954), Pennsylvania (1957), Connecticut (1958), and southern England (1958). Meanwhile, although the South American Bruderhofs were now thriving, a growing frustration with their isolation and inaccessibility, compounded with serious internal divisions regarding the goals of the movement and how to reach them, resulted in a decision to close them.

along with others who have been assigned to specific tasks such as work distribution or oversight of finances.

We have an Elder as well. It should be noted, however, that we share the skepticism of the early Anabaptists *vis-a-vis* sacerdotalism, and view hierarchical structures solely from a pragmatic viewpoint.<sup>12</sup> To us, the essence of Christian leadership is service; our example, Christ, who washed his disciples' feet. He is our sole Master, and all the rest of us remain equals as brothers and sisters. That is why every Bruderhof member has a voice, and not just when it comes to decision-making. Each one has an obligation to speak, should he or she feel that something ought to be addressed or corrected.

The Bruderhof regards marriage and family life as sacred. Parents bear the primary responsibility for their children, and every family has its own semi-private apartment. On the other hand, children are at the heart of community life, and participate in most gatherings. Children are cared for communally during the work day.

We regard every life as precious. Disabled and elderly members are loved and cared for within the community and participate in the daily work for as long as they are able. We believe that everyone has something to give, no matter their age, educational background, or ability – from the person with Down Syndrome to the one with an advanced degree.

Shared meals are an essential feature of our life together. Breakfasts are eaten in family apartments, but lunches and most dinners are prepared in a central kitchen and eaten in a communal dining hall.

Communal work is an important part of daily life and takes place primarily on the grounds of the community: a good half of the labor force works, either directly or indirectly, for one of our businesses. These include Community Playthings, a line of classroom furniture and toys that was started in the 1950s in a renovated chicken barn. Today it still provides us with a livelihood.

Another main source of income is Rifton, a line of adjustable equipment offering support and mobility options for people with disabilities. Developed in the 1970s, it is now a leader in the rehabilitation industry.

No one at the Bruderhof receives a salary or has their own bank account. Income from our businesses is pooled among all communities – none is any richer or poorer than the others – and used for the care for all members, and for outreach.

Unlike the Amish, we welcome technology when it aids production, efficiency and communication, but frown on it to the extent that it might rob someone of meaningful work

---

<sup>12</sup> That is, we do not believe (for example) that a minister is any closer to God than anyone else; nor do we rely on trained or certified pastors or priests.



or isolate us from one another. We value and nurture manual and creative skills – from growing flowers and keeping bees to making pottery or playing a musical instrument.

For the same reason, we disdain television. We don't want to be entertained: we would rather read, play chess, etc. – or sing together or play in a chamber group, or put on our own theatrical production.

Bruderhof schools run from kindergarten and grade school through high school. Beyond this, students are encouraged to continue their education in some way. Some pursue a degree, whether in teaching, medicine, physical therapy or accounting, etc.; others learn a trade. Still others gain life experiences on their own, by working with an organization like the Catholic Worker, one of Vanier's L'Arche communities, or Habitat for Humanity.

Naturally we hope our children will become responsible citizens who serve the greater good and thus contribute to society in a positive way. But they do not automatically become members.<sup>13</sup> Rather, we nudge them to try their wings elsewhere before deciding whether to join.

Speaking of which, our goal generally is to serve society at large. We are not interested in building up cloistered "islands of the blessed"<sup>14</sup> in the manner of those latter-day descendants of the early Anabaptists who were happy to live as *die Stillen im Lande* (the quiet ones in the land.) On the contrary, we feel challenged by the Catholic theologian Gerhard Lohfink's concept of *Kontrastgesellschaften* or "contrast communities" – microcosmic societies that act as a corrective (and offer an alternative!) to a society that has gone off the rails; or to use a biblical metaphor, to be leaven in the world's dough.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly we do not hold the view that everyone else ought to be living in community as we do, or that by doing so ourselves, we are somehow better than other Christians. As Eberhard Arnold once put it, the Bruderhof is of little importance in terms of its size – it is "as small as a gnat on the back of an elephant." And yet, he argues, the task entrusted to us is of the greatest importance:

It is by no means our task to solve all the problems of the day. Ours is a much more straightforward and simple one. Our task to represent unity in the midst of a disunited world; to live in friendship in the midst of a hostile world. Our task is to represent the justice of true brotherly love in a communal life in the midst of an unjust world.<sup>16</sup>

In this regard, we have always devoted considerable energy to our publishing arm, the Plough; and books – mostly spiritual classics and inspirational collections – remain at the center of

---

<sup>13</sup> Membership is voluntary and open to anyone 21 or older.

<sup>14</sup> "*Insel der Seligen*" - a concept Josef Ben Eliezer used – and abhorred.

<sup>15</sup> Matt. 13:33

<sup>16</sup> Eberhard Arnold, *Love and Marriage in the Spirit*. Plough, 1965, 133.

our efforts to reach others. In recent years, we have developed several websites, and we are currently expanding our online presence with an eye to reaching younger seekers.

Aside from proclaiming the Gospel in this way, and through the witness of our daily life, we shy from proselytizing, converting, and trying to “save souls.” That’s God’s business anyway. To quote the Letter of James, “True religion is to minister to widows, orphans, and the poor in their distress, and meanwhile to keep from being polluted by the world.”<sup>17</sup> In that vein, a few pertinent sentences from our constitution, *Foundations*:

Love of neighbor means a life wholly dedicated to service. This is the opposite of all selfish pursuits, including a focus on personal salvation. We want to... concern ourselves with the need of the whole world. We acknowledge our share in humanity’s guilt and suffering, and desire to respond through a life devoted to love....

Love of neighbor leads us to give up all private property, the root of so much injustice and violence. Christ teaches his followers to reject mammon – the desire for and the power of possessions. Mammon...drives some to build up individual fortunes while millions lead lives of misery. As a force within economic systems, it breeds exploitation, fraud, materialism, injustice, and war....

Love of neighbor demands that we stand with the mistreated, the voiceless, and the oppressed... that we confront public and private wrong boldly with the authority of the gospel, as Jesus did... We feel called to help him in his work of redemption and justice.<sup>18</sup>

Through the Bruderhof Foundation, a charity, we serve on the boards of local non-profits, and volunteer at prisons, hospitals, refugee centers, foodbanks, and after-school programs for underprivileged children. Through “Breaking the Cycle,” a nonviolent conflict resolution program, we also bring former gang members and other motivational speakers to public schools and reach thousands of teens each year.

While on the subject of nonviolence, I’ll note that as conscientious objectors to war, members of our community do not served in the armed forces, either as combatants or non-combatants. In periods of compulsory military service, this has required them to perform alternative service; in several case, it has resulted in civil disobedience and prison terms.

Back to our outreach: beyond our immediate surroundings, we have sent members on relief missions to Lesbos, Palestine, Bolivia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Nepal, Cambodia, and Pakistan in recent years. Currently, we have members serving in Texas and Puerto Rico (post-hurricane relief), and in Jordan, at one of the largest refugee camps in the Middle East.

---

<sup>17</sup> James 1:27.

<sup>18</sup> The Bruderhof, *Foundations of our Faith and Calling*. Plough, 2012, 15, 17.

I've summarized the way we strive to live according to the Anabaptist vision; next, I'd like to touch on our history with respect to Anabaptism, and specifically to Hutterianism.<sup>19</sup> In 1907, as I mentioned earlier, the co-founders of our community had themselves re-baptized here in Germany. In 1921, Arnold learned that Hutterites still existed in North America and began corresponding with them. By 1929 the community had structured itself as a Hutterian "Bruderhof"; in 1937, when the Gestapo closed down the Bruderhof, the presence of two Canadian Hutterites very likely prevented mass imprisonment in a concentration camp, or worse.

Since then, our relationship has vacillated, with periods of close collaboration alternating with periods of estrangement, primarily because of tensions over differing worldviews.<sup>20</sup> The most recent event of note in our relationship was our expulsion from the Hutterian Church in 1995, largely on account of our involvement with other groups and organizations, and in broader social movements. But we've never wanted to just nurture each other; and as for any close-knit community, there is always the danger of ossification and complacency.

Here in Germany we are in touch with several communities, and have found our ongoing exchanges with them to be mutually enriching and encouraging – all the more so, because we are so different from one another, and can thus complement (or challenge!) one another and learn from one another. One could mention *Offensive Junger Christen* (near Darmstadt), *Gemeinde in See* (near Nürnberg), *Kommunität Siloah* (near Gotha), *Die Konspirative* (near Leipzig), and the *Basisgemeinde*, with branches in Kiel and Berlin. This last group, incidentally, grew out of a grassroots reform movement of Lutheran pastors in Kornwestheim near Stuttgart in the late 1960s, and then developed into a community under the leadership of Gerhard Weber. He was inspired by his study of the early Christians and the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation – in particular, the Hutterites.

Back to our ongoing rift with the Hutterites: we have never represented that we were in the right, or even that one side is right, and the other wrong. That doesn't matter. What is important is that the viability of community be demonstrated somewhere, by somebody, so that (to quote Dostoevsky) "the flag may be kept flying, and the great idea may not die." Or, to paraphrase the religious socialist Christoph Blumhardt: it doesn't matter where the break is in the cloud-cover that surrounds our planet. The vital thing is that somebody, somewhere is praying for an opening through which the light of God may shine down. As Johann Heinrich Arnold, a former elder of our communities, writes:

---

<sup>19</sup> The Hutterites are best known as the communal wing of the Radical Reformation. After their beginnings in Moravia in 1528, where they thrived for more than a century, war and persecution drove them to eastward to Hungary, Romania, and then czarist Russia. In the 1870s they resettled in North America. Today there are some 40,000 Hutterites living in 350 "colonies," mostly in Canada and the northwest Plains of the USA.

<sup>20</sup> A rural farming people, the Hutterites have always hewed to a medieval picture of the church as a geographically-defined entity. They have a deep-seated mistrust of higher education, and tend to cling to their *Ordnungen* or rules. The Bruderhof developed in very different circumstances – out of an urban-academic milieu – and has always understood the Holy Spirit to work through change, rather than through tradition. .

Let us consider for a moment the “community of believers,” the Body of Christ that has continued through all the centuries. What is the Bruderhof in this light? Whatever good there may be in it is there only insofar as it is surrendered to and gripped by this stream of life. The Bruderhof will pass away as many movements have passed away, but the stream of life of which it is a part can never pass away. That is what matters.<sup>21</sup>

If one considers the Body of Christ worldwide at this point in history, riddled as it is with bullet holes caused less by external forces (such as persecution) than by internal ones (such as schisms and controversies and divisions) this seems vital to reflect on. Reconciliation can happen only to the degree that we see ourselves as a smaller part of a greater whole. At the end of the day, will it really matter if we were Anabaptists or evangelicals or Catholics or Lutherans?

I sometimes imagine God laughing (if not weeping) at all the labels we use to identify ourselves, and – more worryingly – all the energy we expend on trying to distinguish ourselves from others. Think about it: if you were to stack all the apologies and defences and treatises and confessions that earnest believers have devised and sweated and fought over since 1517, they would probably reach the moon. And still, not one of them can claim to have a monopoly on the truth! Here’s an insight from Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI on the subject:

We do not own the truth, and so we do not have to be afraid of losing it or having it taken away from us. The important thing is that the truth owns us, and that we are gripped by it. If we take this attitude, we need not fear others whose views run counter to ours, or even those who know nothing of Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

In that vein, I’d like to relate the story of our community’s relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. When I was growing up, the Bruderhof frowned on Catholicism (it was, after all, the driving force behind the persecution of Anabaptist our forebears). We had basically nothing to do with Catholics, and certainly never entered a Catholic church.

Today, despite our doctrinal differences, we count them as brothers and sisters in faith and collaborate with them at every level, from the local parish to the Vatican, on matters of mutual concern – whether moral issues like abortion and euthanasia, to social ones like the abolition of the death penalty and conscientious objection to war.

Planned events, formal meetings, and joint statements played a role in this development, but they were never at its heart. The real story is the dialogue, rapprochement, and reconciliation that came about gradually, chiefly through person-to-person encounters. With neighbourhood priests, activists like Sister Helen Prejean, and writers from Daniel Berrigan to Robert P. George. With Mother Teresa of Calcutta; the Franciscan Friars of Renewal in New York City;

---

<sup>21</sup> J. Heinrich Arnold, *Discipleship*. Plough, 1994, 94.

<sup>22</sup> Public address, September 2012

and the *Katholische Integrierte Gemeinde*, a community of lay people and priests in Munich. With Cardinal Dolan of New York and the Pope Francis. Through it all we have come to recognize that in a time when the Christian world often seems as bitterly polarized as the secular one, we *need* one another.

As we see it, such a path of reconciliation is an illustration, no matter how modest and limited, of the love and unity Jesus calls us to demonstrate, “so that the world knows you are my disciples.”<sup>23</sup>

Naturally, we cannot stop at ecumenical fellowship; there is also the reconciliation called for by the writer of 2 Corinthians: “As Christ’s ambassadors, we implore you on Christ’s behalf: be reconciled to God!”<sup>24</sup> Surely it was this desire to be true to God – to be reconciled with him – that animated all the great reformers of history, from Luther to Hutter, and impelled them to speak out against whatever they felt was binding the church and preventing it from fulfilling its true mission on earth.

Which brings us back to 2017, and the following questions: In what sort of “Babylonian captivity” might the Reformers find us today? To what extent does our slavery to a middle-class mind-set of entitlement – to a good education, vacations, etc. – reveal our true allegiances and priorities? What idols of the present – consumerism, sex, infotainment, technology – threaten to hold us latter-day Christians in bondage from day to day? In a time of instability and turmoil not unlike Luther’s, where does our real security lie?

History shows that reform rarely begins at an institutional level; that the renewal the church needs again and again tends to come from the margins and the grass-roots. In that regard, a thought from Oscar Romero: “What the world needs... is people who take the risk of renouncing everything and seeking only God’s justice and love. It needs people of eternal hope; people who do not yield to pessimism or let earthly cares exhaust their faith in eternal ideals.” More specifically, he goes on, “What the world needs is people who live out their baptism; who are faithful to their calling. So many of us have practically become baptized pagans, and we need to shake ourselves and each other out of habits that threaten to keep us as such.”<sup>25</sup>

In other words, we need, each of us, a revolution of the heart; to return to what the writer of Revelation calls the “first love,”<sup>26</sup> so that, as workers in Christ’s vineyard, we can become co-creators in establishing his realm of peace and love and justice and community on this earth. So that we can bear fruit.

---

<sup>23</sup> John 13:35

<sup>24</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:2

<sup>25</sup> Oscar Romero, homily, January 13, 1980.

<sup>26</sup> Rev. 2:4.

It will cost us. The storied martyrs of the Radical Reformation proved that five centuries ago. So did the first members of my community, the Bruderhof, many of whom were kept on the move for the entirety of their lives, at great personal sacrifice, as they fled persecution and war; or sought to rebuild after crippling internal crises. Yet as Jesus himself says, “Whoever tries to save his life will lose it. But whoever gives up his life for my sake will find it”<sup>27</sup> – in abundance, and eternally.

This life need not be a deferred dream. It is promised to us now – today – wherever even a handful of people come together in peace and love, reconciled with one another, and with him: “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”<sup>28</sup> In a world of apocalyptic catastrophes and terrors – a world in which, as the Gospels presciently warn, the love of many “shall grow cold”<sup>29</sup> – such words hold tremendous hope.

\* \* \* \* \*

---

<sup>27</sup> Matt. 16:25.

<sup>28</sup> Matt. 18:20.

<sup>29</sup> Matt. 24:12