

Group seeks forgiveness for trauma of Münster

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MÜNSTER, Germany — An unprecedented time of forgiveness came in May to the site of a notorious and violent Anabaptist uprising.

A litany of healing and exchanges of understanding were part of a national Catholic gathering in Germany that included participation by an international group of Anabaptists in the city that still carries the scars of a nearly 500-year-old conflict.

Katholikentag (Catholic Days) drew more than 40,000 Catholics to Münster May 9-13, providing the setting for healing meetings between Anabaptists and Catholics.

The Anabaptist group sought an opportunity to begin a healing process for the trauma of the 1534 Anabaptist seizure of Münster, which ended in the leaders' bodies placed in cages and hung from St. Lambert's Church tower, where the cages still hang.



Civic discussion persists over whether to take the cages down.

The trauma resulted from — among other things — twisted views of eschatology, bizarre views of the ministry of the Holy Spirit and abuse of women. It confirmed a belief that Anabaptists were radical troublemakers to be suppressed.

American participants included Lancaster Mennonite Conference bishops Keith Blank, Stephen Weaver and Lloyd Hoover, Perkiomenville (Pa.) Mennonite Church senior associate pastor Charles Ness, Amish bishop Ben Girod and his sons Benjamin and Stephen. European Mennonites were German theologian and pastor Andrea Lange, Dutch leader Jacob Schiere and German Anabaptist researcher and activist Wolfgang Krauss.

Ecumenical sharing

Anabaptist participation in *Katholikentag* took the form of three ecumenical events planned with input from Krauss. The first was attended by hundreds of people in a room with insufficient space for a panel discussion on perspectives surrounding the Anabaptist reign

in Münster. The panel included Münster historian Rolph Klotzer, Lutheran pastor Holge Bartsch, Mennonite theologian Andrea Lange and professor Hubertus Lotterbach, a Catholic theologian and historian.

A time of confession, blessing and worship with Catholics, Lutherans and Anabaptists was held at St. Lambert's Church itself, with participation by Blank of the U.S., Münster Catholic dean Jörg Hagemann, Lange of Germany, Schiere of the Netherlands and Münster Lutheran Ulf Schlier. This historic moment of repentance and blessing after was witnessed by an overflow crowd of hundreds of people. The healing service came to a close with a time of greeting each other with a blessing of peace and reciting the Lord's Prayer.

Another panel discussion between Catholics and Anabaptists about baptism again exceeded the room capacity. Krauss moderated the panel with Catholic vice-bishop Reinhard Hauke and Lange. After the presentations, a young priest stood and stated that whether Catholic or Anabaptist, it is essential for every individual to make a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ. And if a person says "I will," the church needs to meet that decision with serious discipleship. The room burst into applause.

'Enemies' find healing

On the evening before the meetings, the U.S. group was taken to a surprise reception at the Burgmannshof in Wolbeck, a townhouse built in 1554-57 by Marshall Dirk von Merveldt, the leading officer of the combined Catholic and Lutheran forces who were tasked with reclaiming Münster in 1534. Briefly expelled Catholic bishop Franz von Waldeck rewarded von Merveldt lavishly with plunder from Anabaptists to construct the complex.

The reception included members of the von Merveldt family and Princess Philippa Salm-Salm, a descendant of bishop Waldeck, as well as other Mennonites from Germany, Catholic theologians, historians and other members of the nobility. It was a memorable experience to share a simple meal with those who 500 years ago would have considered each other enemies.

Ben Girod, Hoover and Ness acknowledged the wrongs of the past and asked forgiveness for gross misrepresentations in the 1530s of the kingdom of God and the Anabaptists' actions during their brief regime.

Specific mention was made of a wariness of the Holy Spirit that some believe has a grip on Anabaptists, a wariness that may have its roots in the trauma of Münster. This moment of confession prompted silence around the room. It seemed to the participants that forgiveness and blessing were poured out and that God's love found space among those who were present. Weaver led a prayer to bless the building and the von Merveldt family.

Relational healing has begun. Perhaps someone will decide to bring down the Anabaptist cages hanging on the bell tower. Based on discussion with city leaders, however, it seems likely that the cages will remain and that information will be added to the story about the cages, telling a story of forgiveness and peace.