

## A Brief History of the Anabaptists

Anabaptist was the name given to a radical group from central Europe that practiced adult baptism upon confession of faith. This group was one of the many reform movements of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that challenged the beliefs and exposed the corruption of the Catholic Church.

In Zurich, Switzerland on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1525, in the home of student Felix Manz, young reformer George Blaurock requested of fellow reformer and 'founder' of anabaptism, Conrad Grebel that he be baptized upon confession of faith, a radical concept that challenged the authority of the church.

Anabaptist beliefs appealed to the common population and spread throughout Switzerland, southern Germany and the Netherlands, Since re-baptism was illegal, many were killed and followers were persecuted severely. Anabaptists eagerly searched for new lands where they could worship peacefully.

After much of the original violence between Catholic and Protestant groups settled in Europe, Anabaptist began to move in several directions.

First, in the Netherlands, Menno Simons, a former priest, encouraged and unified the Dutch followers. His influence was so great that most of the Anabaptists today are called 'Mennonites' after him. These Dutch Mennonites eventually moved to Poland/Prussia where they experienced religious freedoms for over 250 years. In 1786 the first migrations to Russia began. Here the Mennonites experienced wealth and prosperity. In 1874 some 18 000 left Russia for homes in Canada and the United States. Another 21 000 came to Canada in the 1920s, with 4000 moving to Paraguay, Mexico and Brazil.

After the terrors of World War Two only 11 000 escaped to freedom. The rest felt the heavy hand of the communist system. Only after the collapse of communism in 1989 were the surviving Mennonites allowed to leave.

The second group of Mennonites were those of Swiss South German origin. In the late 1600s many took up the invitation of William Penn who was looking for settlers for his new lands. Later dubbed the 'Pennsylvanian Dutch' these Anabaptists were some of the first to settle in the new world. After the Revolutionary War, many moved north into southern Ontario. Some of those who stayed moved west and settled around Illinois and some of the prairie states.

The Hutterites were formed under the leadership of pastor Jacob Hutter in Moravia in the 1530s. The Hutterites distinguished themselves from other Anabaptist groups with their focus on the sharing of communal goods. They too moved to Russia in the 1800s and then followed the migration out to Canada and the United States. Most Hutterites today live in the prairie provinces and states.

The Amish had a later start, forming under the strict leadership of Jacob Amman, a Swiss preacher. In 1693, upset with the moral laxness of the church, Amman enforced the ban, simplicity of dress and separation from the world. Most Amish moved to the United States, where they live today.

There are other groups that have arisen out of both the Swiss and Dutch based Anabaptist churches: the Mennonite Brethren, the Evangelical Mennonites, the Chortitza, the Holderman, the Sommerfelder, the Old Order Mennonites, and others.

There are only a handful of Anabaptist based churches in Europe. Other migrations of those European Mennonites focus on travels within North America. The direct descendants of these Mennonites live in Canada, United States, Mexico, Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil, Belize and in the Netherlands, Germany and Russia.

After World War Two evangelism began on a large scale. There are now more people who ascribe to Anabaptist beliefs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formally Zaire) than in Canada.