

Church on the run

If I want kinship with my Anabaptist ancestors, I know where to look: in prison.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [January 2025](#) issue

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The square in the Neumarkt area of Zurich where Conrad Grebel lived in 1525, and where began the Anabaptist movement on January 21 of that year, with the baptisms of Grebel and George Blaurock. (Google Maps)

January 21 marks the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism, the day when George Blaurock, a former Catholic priest, was moved by the Spirit to request believers' baptism from Conrad Grebel. In turn, Blaurock baptized Grebel along with the dozen others who had gathered in secret at the home of Felix Manz in Zurich, Switzerland.

In less than a year, the Zurich city council outlawed believers' baptism. The punishment was death. Manz was arrested and executed by drowning in the River Limmat. Blaurock was severely beaten and exiled from the city. Grebel left Zurich to spread the gospel and died at age 28, likely from the plague.

A hundred years later, a Dutch Mennonite named Thieleman Jansz van Braght compiled these stories of imprisonment and state execution in a volume called the *Martyr's Mirror*, a hefty compilation of the horrors exacted on the faithful.

Looking through this book reminds me that no one from 16th-century Anabaptism lived long enough to write a systematic theology. None of the first Anabaptists was free to form a polity for the future church to enact. Mennonites, my branch of Anabaptism, are named for Menno Simons because he happened to live long enough to gather people into a church. I often remind my congregation that the theology we have from the Mennonite church was born on the run—hiding in caves, chased by soldiers, chained to a wall.

There's a picture above my desk that tethers me to this fractal history. In red and green calligraphy, a fraktur sprouting leaves and tulips declares, "The Prince of Peace is Jesus Christ. We who were formerly no people at all, and who knew of no peace, are called to be a church of peace. True Christians do not know vengeance." In looping scroll the attribution reads, "Menno Simons, Reply to False Accusations, 1552." We know our spiritual ancestry not through theological treatises but in what we can discern from legal briefs, trial documents, and final statements before execution.

As the 500th anniversary of my tradition approaches, I've been looking back through this documentation: "Testimony Before the Zurich Court (November 1525)," "An English Episcopal Draft Article Against the Anabaptists, 1536," Anna of Rotterdam's "Testament to Her Son Isaiah."

I recognize the tone of these writings, the desperation and resolve on the page, from the time I've spent with people impacted by the US system of incarceration. Prisons are places for the despised, places where the despised are forgotten. Each time members of my church embark on the training to become volunteers inside our local prison, I warn them that they will hear dehumanizing descriptions of the people inside. They will hear that people in prison cannot be trusted, that they will take advantage of you. Volunteers are told not to believe anything they're told.

I've watched incarcerated women claw back their dignity in prisons designed to strip them to the core of their being. They refuse the story told around them, told about them. Like my Anabaptist forebears, the women who I meet in worship at the prison carve out an identity near the heart of Jesus.

When I meet them I often think of Anna Jansz. She was born into a wealthy family and grew up near the Dutch city of Rotterdam. Both Anna and her husband were caught up in the Munsterite rebellion, an apocalyptic wing of the Anabaptist sect that led her to believers' baptism. Soon she was marching through the streets of Amsterdam, waving a sword as a crowd attempted to rally the people to an Anabaptist takeover of the city.

After this Anna went to England for a while but returned to Amsterdam a few years later, this time with her 15-month-old son, Isaiah. It's possible her husband was killed under the persecutions of Thomas Cromwell. By now, Anna had renounced the violence of her earlier life and attached herself to the Anabaptist renewal movement in Amsterdam. A short time later, she and a female companion named Christina were arrested after someone overheard them singing an Anabaptist hymn. Like thousands of others, they were sentenced to death by drowning.

In the *Martyr's Mirror* Anna stands proud and desperate before a crowd, holding out a bag of money. She is begging passersby to take the funds and raise her child. A baker takes her up on the offer. He uses the money to open two breweries, and he raises Isaiah—who eventually becomes the mayor of Rotterdam, the town that murdered his mother.

Anna's final letter to her son is preserved in the *Martyr's Mirror*. In it she describes the power of her conversion and how it led her from a dynastic family to a humiliating death among a sect of outlawed and despised Christians. She offers him these words:

But where you hear of a poor, simple, cast-off little flock, which is despised and rejected by the world, join them; for where you hear of the cross, there is Christ. . . . Honor the Lord in the works of your hands, and let the light of the Gospel shine through you. Love your neighbor. Deal with an open, warm heart your bread to the hungry, clothe the naked, and do not tolerate having two of anything, because there are always those who are in need.

When I lead worship inside the women's prison, I usually include time for testimonies from our "cast-off little flock." I trust the women in this place to do what my spiritual ancestors did: to speak the words of the Holy Spirit, just as I have entrusted my faith to testimonies from prison, from the letter of Paul to the disputations against my Mennonite ancestors. "The prison system already runs through the veins of Anabaptist identity," writes century columnist Isaac Villegas in the 2010 issue of the *Conrad Grebel Review*. If I want to find kinship with Anna Jansz and Conrad Grebel, with my church on the run, I know I will find it here.