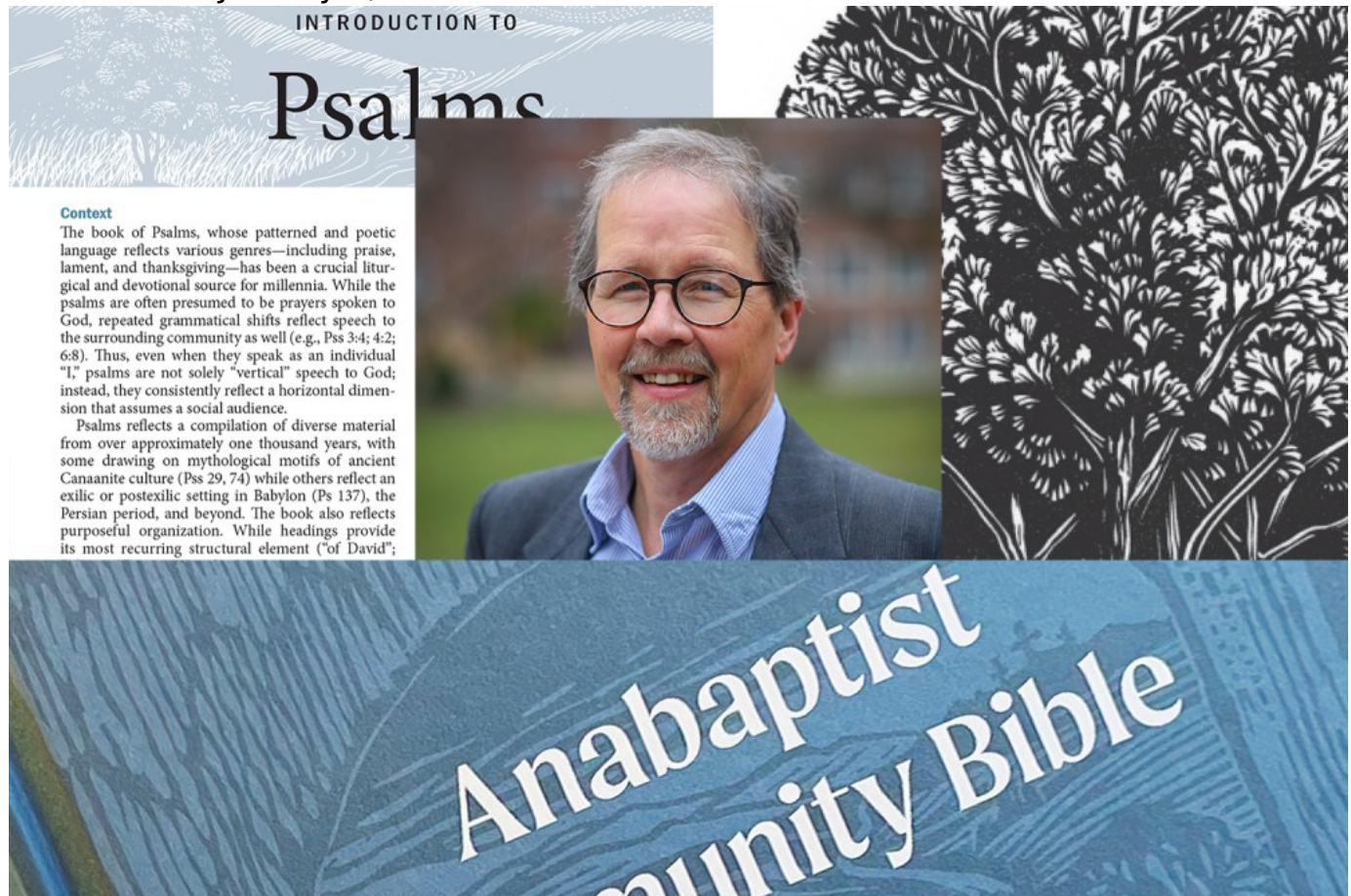


## A study Bible for Anabaptism's birthday

"This is not a Bible just for Mennonites," says Anabaptism at 500 project director John Roth.

Interview by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [January 2025](#) issue

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Editor John D. Roth (Images courtesy of MennoMedia)

**John D. Roth** is project director of MennoMedia's Anabaptism at 500 project, which commemorates the first adult baptisms in Zurich in January 1525—the symbolic start of the Anabaptist movement. Before coming to MennoMedia in 2022, Roth spent 36 years as a history professor at Goshen College, where he also served as director of the Mennonite Historical Library and editor of the Mennonite Quarterly Review.

## **What events are planned for this big Anabaptism anniversary?**

The Anabaptism at 500 project has, as its centerpiece, the Anabaptist Community Bible. But we also have been hard at work on three children's books and two devotionals—one that features art commissioned for the Bible and one that features the voices of 40 global Anabaptist leaders. And we have a photo book that includes vignettes of the creative expression of contemporary Anabaptist witness. Our motto for this project is "Looking back but living forward." So the photo book is an expression of who Anabaptists are in the world today, bringing good news in ways that might surprise people who think of Anabaptists mostly as Amish or mostly as people who are separate from the world.

We will be planning some events that celebrate the release of these projects at various points throughout the year. There are many other regional events, and Mennonite World Conference will be hosting a major gathering in Zurich on May 29. That will be an ecumenical gathering, but it's in Zurich for a reason: it will focus also on the reconciliation that has happened since the time of the Reformation. I'm also leading the planning for that meeting, but that's separate from the Anabaptism at 500 initiative.

## **Let's talk about the Anabaptist Community Bible. Where did the idea for that come from?**

The vision for it emerged within the leadership of MennoMedia in 2021. In August 2022, we convened a gathering in Chicago of about 70 pastors, lay leaders, conference leaders, biblical scholars—mostly North American, but across a spectrum of Anabaptist groups. We called it In the Beginning Was the Word. The basic approach to an Anabaptist hermeneutic is a conviction that the Bible is best read in community, so it seemed important that, from the beginning, there was a community process for envisioning what this Bible could become.

The mission of this project, formulated there, was an invitation to a renewed interest in scripture and its potential to transform our lives. We know that scripture is, in many settings, a contested arena right now: either it's a brittle text in which people often are hanging on with white knuckles to six passages that seem to carry the full

weight of the authority of scripture or—what concerns me just as much—it’s just irrelevant, it doesn’t matter.

We also emerged with a vision of three distinct sources for the commentary in this study Bible. We wanted to include biblical scholars; there’s a long tradition now of Anabaptist scholarship. We also wanted to hear the voice of tradition, so we gathered a group of historians who read through the corpus of 16th-century writing. Much of this is biblical commentary; these people were infused with scripture. They couldn’t write a grocery list without quoting scripture. It’s in their letters, in the interrogation transcripts, in prison letters, in hymns.

And then the really complicated but beautiful part of this Bible was an invitation to ordinary laypeople to gather around passages of scripture. We wanted 500 Bible study groups and we ended up with 597—each with six to ten people—across a spectrum of 18 Anabaptist faith communities. We developed a user guide and assigned them passages. They covered scripture twice, so we have two layers of responses to every passage, from Genesis to Revelation.

All of these marginal notes are linked to a specific verse or verses, offering a kind of midrash, a conversation among biblical scholars, tradition, and contemporary insights that unfold as you read the text.

We also commissioned eight essays to publish in the back, reflecting on things like, How did the biblical canon get formed? What about the apocrypha? Does a christocentric reading of scripture lead to antisemitism? Which is a genuine concern.

### **Did you run into any challenges working with 18 different faith communities?**

We translated the discussion group guide into German, Spanish, French, Amharic, and Bahasa Indonesian. And we received commentary in those languages, so one challenge—just a pragmatic one—was making sure that we had those translated in ways that honored the contributors.

We did work with 18 communities, but that doesn’t mean that they were represented proportionally. For example, I think we had one Old Order Amish study group, and that was an unusual group because the Old Order Amish, by and large,

don't do this kind of biblical study.

We had groups from [conservative communities such as] LMC—the former Lancaster Mennonite Conference—from Evana, and from the Mennonite Brethren, even though all three were hesitant to give a full-throated endorsement to the project because MennoMedia equals Mennonite Church USA which equals—well, fill in the blank, but it's not good.

Then we had an advisory group that read through the marginal notes—a kind of sensitivity reading. We encouraged Bible study groups that if they felt the need to scold or to set someone straight, to consider framing that as a question. And, by and large, that was not a hard process. We did not have the kind of contentious reading of scripture that some people feared would be the case.

**I know that crafting the appearance of a Bible often comes with a lot of intentionality. What, if any, were the special considerations for the way the Anabaptist Community Bible looks?**

There's a long tradition of the power of visual art in the biblical world, so we reached out to five Anabaptist artists and asked them to work in a woodcut or linocut style on 40 original art pieces. There were certain themes that we wanted to make sure were there, but we also wanted to give them freedom to do something that was interesting to them. And they came through.

We have maps of biblical lands, but we also created a map of the labyrinth groups that are part of the Anabaptist world in North America—as well as a more standard Mennonite World Conference map of the global Anabaptist family. People who are trying to understand where the Church of the Brethren or Brethren in Christ fit would be able to go to that map and find their orientation.

But the really unique thing about this Bible is the study groups. When I first started this, I called my friend Scott Tunseth at Augsburg Fortress, who was the editor of the Lutheran Study Bible, and he said, “Well, it's very simple, you just identify the 66 Anabaptist biblical scholars, give them a deadline, and compile what comes in.” I think that reflects a lot of how study Bibles are done. And we didn't want to dismiss the work of biblical scholars—but we have a very different hermeneutic.

That's also why we chose to use the Common English Bible translation: it's not a paraphrase, it's a translation, but it's a translation that was tested with groups for whom English is not their first language, and it is intended to be readable. We discovered that many of our immigrant congregations prefer the CEB just because it's easier to read. We want to lower the threshold. We want a people's Bible, which I think is in the spirit of the 16th-century Anabaptist movement. Ordinary people raising questions, sometimes doubts.

Many times those questions are just left hanging. We don't provide answers in the way that some study Bibles promise. Not everyone will like that approach, but I think it speaks to our faith and trust in reading scripture as a living word. That it is in that process of listening that clarity through the Spirit of God emerges.

**I will just lay my cards out on the table here: I have been trying hard not to buy this Bible, because I already have eight. But you are selling me on it.**

Get it for the art alone. The artwork is amazing.

**Do you have a favorite piece?**

I'm going to refuse to answer that. It's like choosing children.

**You mentioned earlier that a christocentric hermeneutic is important to Anabaptism, but I think many other Christian traditions would claim to have a christocentric hermeneutic, too. How do you see it as being unique to Anabaptism?**

I am happy to say that it is not uniquely Anabaptist. I think there is sometimes an inclination if you perceive yourself as a minority group—and Mennonites have so much privilege they don't recognize—but if you *perceive* yourself as a minority group, you tend to carve out your perspective as exceptional. Other people claim that they read the Sermon on the Mount, but we live it. I call it Mennonite exceptionalism, and I've had enough of that.

I've worked for 20 years now in ecumenical conversations with Catholics, with Pentecostals, with Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, and now with the World Council of Reformed Churches. And I have encountered over and over again people of deep faith who read the Bible with a zealous earnestness, who want to follow Jesus in their daily life, and who care about community. All of the markers that Mennonites sometimes jealously guard as our contribution.

So, the Anabaptist tradition might be distinct, but it is not unique. And there is an idolatry of uniqueness that we need to repent of.

However, in my ecumenical conversations, it does make a difference if you begin a hermeneutical discussion with a conviction that in the person of Jesus, we have the fullest revelation of who God is for humanity, that in Jesus we have the fullest expression of God's will. And it will make it more complicated to reach back to the Old Testament and say, well, God doesn't change, and so we can claim the Lion of Judah just as much as the Lamb of Jesus. It means that there's some hard exegetical conversations. It means that you're going to engage the Old Testament differently in the Anabaptist tradition than in some other Christian traditions.

### **How has Anabaptism changed over the last 500 years?**

Clearly we are living in a completely different context here in North America than 16th-century Europe. You can make some analogies, but the context without question is different, and I'm guessing that very few Mennonite churches today would want Conrad Grebel or Felix Manz as one of their members. Certainly not Hans Hut. We wouldn't know what to do with these people.

There was, among other things, an apocalypticism. There was also a sense of power and expectancy that is part of that initial literary engagement with scripture—a layperson who has never had access to the word of God, opening up the text and seeing it as the word of God. We can't reproduce that experience; you have eight different Bibles!

And the real story of Anabaptism in the last century, of course, is the globalization of the movement. Fifty years ago, there were maybe 600,000 Anabaptists in the world. Today there are 2.2 million, and 70 percent of them are in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Almost all of the growth, since the beginning of this century, has happened

outside Europe and North America.

### **What do you think Anabaptism has to offer to the world today?**

I think that's a question we need to keep asking, probably in fresh ways. There is a sense that all Christian traditions today are voluntary faiths. But even if you believe theologically in infant baptism, as many continue to do, you still face the huge question of what it means for that baptized child to become a fully active member of a living church. The recent trilateral dialogue on baptism between the Catholic Church, the Lutheran World Federation, and Mennonite World Conference made this apparent. And I think the Anabaptist tradition has some distinctive resources that might contribute in a useful way to that conversation.

A couple years ago, the surgeon general issued a report calling loneliness a national health-care crisis. We're in a confusing cultural moment in which we celebrate individual liberties, but we are also really concerned about speech and action that harm. I think there are theological resources that can point to what healthy community looks like. The Anabaptist tradition has given a lot of thought—sometimes in our failure—to how community can celebrate freedom but also recognize the gift that goes with the burden of accountability.

And then, reconciliation and peacemaking. Is there any question more relevant to our polarized culture, families, countries than that?

All of those things have been deeply anchored in this 500-year-old tradition. And they're relevant to the world we live in. Even if our churches are emptying out.

### **Do you see the neo-Anabaptist movement—the active adoption of Anabaptist values by non-Anabaptists—as a manifestation of that continued relevance? Even as churches that are formally Anabaptist are emptying?**

You don't get to be 500 years old without a renewal, and there are probably books to be written on the way renewal has unfolded in this Anabaptist tradition. Sometimes the renewal comes internally—prophetic voices from within that challenge and sometimes divide. But often renewal comes from outside.

People like Dennis Edwards at North Park Theological Seminary, or David Fitch at Northern Seminary, Brian Zahnd, Greg Boyd, Meghan Good, people who are part of Jesus Collective, Jesus Radicals, Shane Claiborne—I am so grateful that those voices are seeking renewal in their own traditions but also speaking into my world of more traditional Anabaptism.

And it's not uncomplicated. So much of my identity as a Mennonite was formed by the institutions of the church, which in the 20th century carried Mennonite identity for a certain group. But many of them have kind of spun out beyond the church. Or the ties are much more diffuse. Or they are imploding. So I think it's a healthy moment for voices that say, no, there's this Anabaptist ideal that is going to take on many different expressions. Thank goodness we have a publishing house. It has served a purpose in shaping denominational identity. And thank goodness we had Mennonite Mutual Aid. But that was a moment. Institutions evolve and change. And there are other forms that Anabaptist convictions will take.

It's hard for me, because mostly my heart is broken for the church. But in my head, I know that it's bigger than that. The gift of neo-Anabaptists is that they are a reminder that the church is out there. It's a mustard seed. Let it go. It's going to be OK.

### **What do you most hope people understand about the Anabaptist Community Bible?**

I hope that people will have a clear understanding that this is not a Bible just for Mennonites. When the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod published their study Bible, it was pretty clear that this is a Bible that shows the parameters of what it means to be in the LCMS tradition, reading the Bible. We're unabashed—this is an Anabaptist study Bible. But it's an Anabaptist study Bible *and* an invitation into a conversation that we hope could make the Bible interesting and alive to any Christian. I think that might be a little different than some of the other study Bibles out there.