

'A Believing Church' Reconsidered

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Abstract

The first part of the article describes the author's journey towards discovering the meaning and relevance of Anabaptist tradition for the present day. From a formal theological education in a state university which concentrated on the Magisterial Reformation, the author was challenged during a period of sabbatical study leave in 1984 to consider the Radical Reformation and, especially, the Swiss Anabaptists and those who followed Balthasar Hubmaier to Moravia. Post sabbatical, the author engaged with the work of Mennonite scholars, Alan and Ellie Kreider, leading to his involvement with various Anabaptist initiatives in England. This caused the author to write a book for English Baptists on insights gained from this exploration of the Anabaptist heritage. The second part of the article explores some of the issues in the book *A Believing Church*, which was published in 1998, and re-evaluates those insights for baptistic Christians in 2025.

Keywords

Baptist; baptistic; Anabaptist; radical; marginalised; inclusivity; meals (eucharistic)

Introduction

This volume of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* is intended to offer reflections as to how the Anabaptist form of radical Christianity has influenced the baptistic traditions, perhaps especially within Europe. My own contribution to this reflection engages with a booklet I wrote whilst with the Baptist Union of Great Britain, later revised and reprinted and, at the last count, translated into Armenian, Lithuanian, and Spanish.¹ The book itself arose out of my own experiences and, therefore, I first offer a review of a series of life events, before venturing into an iteration of some of the key themes of *A Believing Church*.

¹ Keith G. Jones, *A Believing Church: Learning from some Contemporary Anabaptist and Baptist Perspectives* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1998).

In this article I set out my journey of discovery into the world of the Radical Reformation from having been schooled in classic Reformation studies. I then return to re-examine the modest book I produced for British Baptists, which gained an international audience. Hopefully, this two-part article will map out a journey of discovery, rather than a masterplan of insights. Issues explored include ecclesiology, inclusivity, the place of meals, and whether classic ministry as envisaged by the Reformers has a place in the new order. The article concludes with a brief reminder of the forward-looking statement of faith produced by a group of international scholars for the 2005 Centenary Gathering of the Baptist World Alliance.

Part One: A Journey to a Radical New Place

My formation as a British Baptist minister took place within the Northern Baptist College² and in terms of gaining a theological degree, the University of Manchester,³ which, at that time, possessed a Faculty of Theology.⁴ In the 1970s the faculty boasted amongst its senior staff outstanding scholars in the likes of F. F. Bruce, Basil Hall,⁵ David Pailin, S. G. F. Brandon, and Ronald Preston. In terms of Christian history, the emphasis of the Department of Ecclesiastical History, within the faculty, was on the Church Fathers and, in terms of the Reformation era, on John Calvin. Perhaps this was not surprising as the professor of ecclesiastical history was none other than the eminent Calvin scholar, Basil Hall,⁶ who, with his colleague Ben Drewery, himself a Lutheran

² Peter Shepherd, *The Making of a Northern Baptist College* (Manchester: The Northern Baptist College, 2004).

³ Brian Pullan with Michele Abendstern, *A History of the University of Manchester 1951–1973* (The University of Manchester Press, 2000).

⁴ The Faculty of Theology has long since disappeared and the current Religions and Theology Department is a sub-set of a larger Faculty of Humanities, despite the fact that the Free Church Colleges in Manchester developed and supported an excellent Faculty of Theology throughout the twentieth century.

⁵ See, for instance, Basil Hall, *Humanists and Protestants 1500–1900* (T & T Clark, 1990).

⁶ Basil Hall's obituary in the *Independent* newspaper, Monday 2 January 1995, describes him as 'one of the finest Church historians in Britain'. He was ordained into the then Presbyterian Church in England, which was a founding denomination of the later United Reformed Church in Great Britain.

expert,⁷ presented the Reformation era through the spectacles almost exclusively of Luther and Calvin, paying but little attention to Huldrych Zwingli⁸ and spending absolutely no time at all on the radical reformers, including the Anabaptists.⁹ This deficiency in my formation presented a critical challenge in my vocation and one I have spent the rest of my ministry trying to overcome and help others to see that there is a significantly wider perspective to be understood and engaged with in our journey to be authentic disciples of Jesus. I was later to advocate an ecclesial vision of a ‘gathering’,¹⁰ intentional, convictional community of disciples.¹¹

The first significant move to a wider understanding came during a period of sabbatical study leave my then employer, the Yorkshire Baptist Association,¹² granted me in 1984. Opportunity to undertake this study period in Switzerland at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüslikon was a moment to both open my eyes to the fascinating world of European Baptist life and to attend seminars with H. Wayne Pipkin¹³ on the life and work of Huldrych Zwingli. This occurred in the 500th anniversary year of Zwingli’s birth. As Ed Furcha and Wayne Pipkin say in their introduction to the two-volume translation of Zwingli’s works they edited and published in 1984, the anniversary led to these volumes

⁷ E. G. Rupp and Benjamin Drewery, *Martin Luther* (Edward Arnold, 1970).

⁸ G. R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge University Press, 1976); W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Clarendon Press Oxford, 1986).

⁹ George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992).

¹⁰ I use the word ‘gathering’, rather than the more traditional and accepted English word ‘gathered’. I have argued elsewhere that gathered implies a complete and settled community at peace. Gathering reminds us that the Holy Spirit is still at work, and we must be missional in reaching out to others and accepting of others and the change they might well bring when they join our ecclesial communities. There is nothing static in baptistic churches.

¹¹ Keith G. Jones, ‘Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 4.2 (2004), pp. 5–13.

¹² *Our Heritage: The Baptists of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire 1647–1987*, ed. by Ian Sellers (The Yorkshire Baptist Association and the Lancashire and Cheshire Baptist Association, 1987).

¹³ H. Wayne Walker Pipkin was an eminent American historian who served on the staff at Rüslikon and who later delivered the Hughey Lectures in Prague. Amongst his relevant works see H. Wayne Walker Pipkin, *Scholar, Pastor, Martyr: The Life and Ministry of Balthasar Hubmaier (ca 1480–1528)* (International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006) and his 500th Anniversary two volume translations of the writings of Huldrych Zwingli, *The Defence of the Reformed Faith and In Search of True Religion: Reformation, Pastoral and Eucharistic Writings* (Pickwick Publications, 1984).

as an attempt to 'overcome a lamentable gap in English language Reformation studies by making available for the first time several important Reformation, pastoral and eucharistic writings of Huldrych Zwingli on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of his birth'.¹⁴

Of course, during this time of sabbatical and talking with Wayne Pipkin, I began to understand much more about the Radical Reformation and the works of Zwingli's erstwhile friend and leading Anabaptist theologian Balthasar Hubmaier,¹⁵ who I would come to appreciate in a deeper way when I paid regular visits to Mikulov¹⁶ in Moravia and the surrounding villages on the Moravian/Slovakian border. This was an area where Anabaptist communities flourished and where you can still find remains of their village design, pottery, and housing.

From my 1984 experience, I began to re-form my inadequate understanding of the reformations.¹⁷ Returning to the United Kingdom, my journey and development was stimulated by that amazing Mennonite couple, Alan and Ellie Krieder. Sent as 'missionaries' to England, they entered into a partnership with Northern Baptist College and, with many individuals initially in the North and Midlands of England, to reflect on their own Mennonite heritage and our shared Anabaptist radical heritage.¹⁸ The development of an Anabaptist network in the

¹⁴ H. Wayne Pipkin *Zwingli: The Positive Religious Values of His Eucharistic Writing* (The Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1985).

¹⁵ *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. and trans by H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Herald Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Mikulov is the town where Hubmaier ministered from 1526 to 1527. It was then known by its Germanic name Nikolsberg and was home to the Liechtenstein family.

¹⁷ I use the word 'reformations' rather than the still common 'reformation', recognising that alongside what might be described as the magisterial Reformation of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin there were other dynamic streams of Christian thought which grew and developed during the 1500s onwards.

¹⁸ There are those who argue English Baptists owe nothing to the continental Anabaptist movement, despite Smyth and Helwys being counted as 'the English brethren' in the Anabaptist church in Amsterdam and others noting the correspondence of the first English Particular Baptist Church, the so-called Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church, who entered into dialogue with the Anabaptists in Amsterdam as they searched for what the 'True Church' might look like. I follow that illustrious Baptist, the late Ernest A. Payne, in his view that 'ideas have wings' and early English Baptists were influenced by the Anabaptists (E. A. Payne *The Baptist Movement in the Reformation and Onwards*, [The Kingsgate Press, 194], introduction).

isles,¹⁹ which included local meetings of people from across the denominations,²⁰ a publication, *Anabaptism Today*,²¹ a theological study network that met almost annually at Offa House, the Anglican Diocese of Coventry Retreat House, and, thanks to the initiative of the Revd Dr Ian M. Randall and Dr Stuart Murray Williams at Spurgeon’s College, a master’s degree in Baptist and Anabaptist studies, which was later also offered at IBTS in Prague.

Much more could be said about the blossoming of contemporary reflection of Anabaptist insights for those of a baptistic²² inclination in the isles, and I will return later to reflect on my own, very modest, contribution from that period — *A Believing Church*. At this juncture, I will address the historical moment of radicalism in January 1525 that we are marking five hundred years on.

The Twenty-first of January, 1525: A Moment of Radicalism

The Hutterite *Chronicle*²³ provides George Blaurock’s reminiscences of the first radical reformation baptism of believers on the twenty-first of January 1525. To me, this marks the decisive and radical break with the emerging Reformed Church of Zwingli. Dates and times can pass us by. Yet, we can be suddenly arrested by moments of what we later understand to be cosmic shifts in understanding. Here, the reforming

¹⁹ I use the term ‘the isles’ to be inclusive of the islands of Britain and Ireland and the surrounding groups of smaller islands as the Anabaptist network was not confined in the isles of one territorial jurisdiction, but moved across the boundaries of nations and peoples with a fluidity mirroring the original trans-local network in continental Europe.

²⁰ For instance, the Oxford group included myself as Deputy General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain; the Revd Professor Christopher Rowland; Dean Ireland, Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture in the University of Oxford (Church of England); and the Revd Dr John Weaver, then a Fellow at Regent’s Park College (Baptist) in Oxford.

²¹ *Anabaptism Today* was published three times a year over an extended period from 1992 until 2003.

²² I use the term ‘baptistic’, rather than the more typical ‘Big B Baptist’ as the insights I and many others have reflected over since the 1980s have not been confined to a narrower denominational, Baptist union or convention domain, but the journey has included Anglicans, independent churches, charismatic churches, United Reformed churches and many others alongside those in the four Baptist denominations in the isles — the Baptist Union of Great Britain, Baptist Union of Scotland, Baptist Union of Wales, and the Irish Baptist Network.

²³ Preserved in a unique codex in South Dakota and edited by A. J. F. Ziegelschmid, *Die älteste Chronik der Hutterischen Brüder* (Philadelphia, 1943) translated as *Chronicle of the Hutterite Brethren 1525–1665* and edited by the Brethren (Plough Publishing House, 1989).

zeal of Zwingli faltered. In his reflection on Scripture, Zwingli had once had doubts about infant baptism, declaring,

I thought it was much better that children should have their first baptism when they reached an appropriate age.²⁴

This debate between friends, leading to a decisive act by Blaurock, Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel and others, focuses on an insight I described in *A Believing Church* as being radical. Radical, of course, means going back to our roots. It is used by some to mean departing from the accepted norms of whatever society we find ourselves in. Radicalism seems to provoke fears in governments and in juridical forms of denominational church government. Yet I am attracted to this other understanding. Growing up in Baptist churches, we often make the claim that we do not emphasise 'Tradition' as some other Christian World Communions do.²⁵ Yet, I still think that is a disingenuous response. Baptist unions, conventions, federations, associations, and churches are still, if we scratch the surface, full of traditions and policies which do not seem to be drawn out of the gospel message but have been accumulated over the years, sometimes centuries, of organised church life.

The actions of the twenty-first of January 1525 were mould breaking because they were formed out of carefully looking at the roots of believing, reflecting on the written-down accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus, and then a group of men (it seems their radical instincts did not initially apply the insight to women, though that soon followed²⁶) acting on what they discerned in reading and re-reading and discussing together these foundational documents. In 1998, I asked the question of British Baptists, 'Are we a radical people — looking for a church formed out of the New Testament insights? What "traditions" do we put in the way?' This question still seems very relevant. It is one

²⁴ G. R. Potter, *Huldrych Zwingli: Documents of Modern History* (Edward Arnold, 1978), p. 37.

²⁵ Christian World Communions is a term used in ecumenical circles to describe in a collective way the major Christian traditions: Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Baptist, Pentecostal, Anglican, and so on.

²⁶ The Anabaptist experience soon embraced women and we learn about their radical discipleship in, for instance, C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996).

rightly asked of what we now often call ‘inherited church’, that is to say, a church that, as I have hinted at earlier in this article, is shaped by the ways of being of the last century, not all of which quite seem to work in this century.

Do the Anabaptists go on teaching us about ever-reforming? To place one topic within this context which seems to present a struggle in churches in the isles, if not elsewhere, ‘Does the life, words and actions of Jesus point us towards a church which is open to all?’ Is there an inclusivity about the community of faith to be drawn from the life and teaching of Jesus, or is there a tradition of exclusivity? When I was a student at theological college, our New Testament tutor, the Revd W. E. Moore,²⁷ a man of passion, once preached a memorable sermon in our chapel on the theme ‘if you think you’re in, you’re out, and if you think you’re out, you’re in’. Baptist Christians can reflect a long time upon this insight. Are there any who are beyond, permanently excluded from the community of those who follow Jesus? In times past there have been those who excluded women, slaves, those who lacked a place or status in society.

That Anabaptist insight of being radical, going back beyond ‘tradition’ and the ‘Traditions’ to explore, perhaps in forensic detail, the implications of the life and teaching of Jesus, especially as we do it through the ‘spectacles’ of the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, may well still find us challenged anew in our understanding of being a gathering, intentional, convictional community of faith. On this anniversary, radicalism still calls.

Ecclesia of the Marginalised

Wherever we look in the Anabaptist story we are presented by gathering communities of those who might be judged a painful interruption to the accepted ordering of the nation state. Huldrych Zwingli understood the mayhem that might ensue if the instructions to baptise infants in their early months was cast aside. What would become of civic order? How would the Nation State, the authority of the Canton, be maintained if

²⁷ The Revd W. Ernest Moore was tutor at Rawdon Baptist College, West Yorkshire, from 1956 until the move to Manchester in 1964 and then a tutor at NBC until his retirement in 1981.

there was not some clear marking out of those who would one day be citizens? Had not the Emperor Constantine seen the need for a regulated church formed in the mirror of the state? Christianity had come from the 'outside' to the 'inside' with the so-called 'Peace of the Church', and in 380 CE the Emperor Theodosius I settled the matter in the Edict of Thessalonica, making a clear line between the church that accepted the Nicene Creed and proscribing those ecclesial communities who were not included, declaring them heretical and instructing that their goods and properties be confiscated.²⁸

We know the understanding down through the centuries as enunciated by Martin Luther during the reformations — 'the faith of the Prince is the faith of the people' — and although the universalism of Roman Christianity was disjointed, during the reformations we emerge with national churches in the West, and later in the East, that are territorial and relate to specific rulers or governments.²⁹ Baptist Christians have often struggled with the gathering intentional instinct to be wary of the principalities and powers of the state. We have been willing to acquiesce to positive engagement with the nation state in ways which are sometimes far from transparent. It would be invidious of me to give contemporary examples of where baptistic Christians have engaged with the state and civic authorities in ways which would not have been understood by the early Anabaptists, and indeed to mention some might well be to overlook others. Yet, as we mark 500 years since that Anabaptist event at Zollikon, it is a reminder that there are possible iterations to understand in our on-going learning.

²⁸ Emperor Theodosius I settled the matter, to his own mind, on the 'True Church' — namely, the church accepting the Nicene Creed and in communion with Rome. Yet, the church was more diverse than that. See, for instance, *The Origins of Christendom in the West*, ed. by Alan Kreider (T & T Clark, 2001).

²⁹ The national church often played a significant part in the ruling of the nation. In the United Kingdom, the Church of England (though not the reformed Church of Scotland) play a part in government by virtue of Bishops serving in the upper legislative chamber, though as the present British government seeks to reform the second chamber, the House of Lords, there is a campaign to have the State Church Bishops removed.

Part Two: ‘A Believing Church’ 1998–2024

My experiences arising out of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Zwingli and my encounter with the writings of Hubmaier led to a modest booklet of sixty-five pages. When it was published in 1998, I little thought it would spark a reaction and set others on their own journeys of seeking out Anabaptist insights to inform their own baptistic experience of following Jesus. I certainly did not imagine that other Baptist communities in Europe and beyond³⁰ would consider the booklet worth translating and publishing in their own contexts. Twenty-seven years on, I engage with some of the insights I promulgated in that book and ask, ‘Has there been any abiding difference to the missional and ecclesial life of baptistic Christians in the isles?’

Alan Kreider wrote the foreword to the book, reminding readers of the post-modern context in which our believing now takes place. Writing then, the way in which churches existed in their daily life of worship and mission might rightly be thought of as an attempt to revive and renew the mid-century Christianity that struggled to be relevant in the post-World Wars’ reality. No longer did a high proportion of children and young people have some engagement with the church on the street corner — afternoon Sunday School, uniformed organisations, youth club on a Friday night, Sunday School cricket teams playing in a local league. Fading also from sight was, at least in the isles, the era of mass evangelistic rallies with calls for repentance and thousands responding to be ‘counselled’ and encouraged to attend their local ‘evangelical’ church.³¹ Already announced as ‘disappearing from sight’ was the notion of the omnicompetent minister of the ‘Word and Sacrament’, exclusively paid and supported by a single local congregation.³² What no longer worked seemed increasingly clear, but where would fresh reforming streams emerge?

³⁰ The Spanish version of the book was translated and published by Chilean Baptists.

³¹ The last such large-scale rally I attended was in Hungary in 1989 when Billy Graham preached at a packed sports stadium in Budapest at the end of a European Baptist Federation Congress.

³² The Baptist Union of Great Britain produced a report in 1971 entitled ‘Ministry Tomorrow’ which predicted the demise of full-time stipendiary ministry. The time scale suggested was twenty years. It has taken longer, but this model of vocational leadership has significantly declined in the English North and Midlands.

Without doubt, we see fresh insights which come with increased clarity in what we now often term the 'missional church'. Many of these owe their roots to previous times and traditions. Churches have drunk the clear water out of several wells as we have sought to revive and renew our discipleship, and whilst I have felt particular inspiration in the life of Anabaptists and radical reformers of the 1500s, this is not to argue that these are inclusive for baptistic Christians.³³ Nevertheless, the focus of *A Believing Church* was with those who worked at studying the Bible with Huldrych Zwingli in the School of the Prophets³⁴ after sketching out the story of the first Anabaptists — both the 'good stuff' and the struggles of the early Anabaptists' intent, as so many of them before and since, to work out what it means to be the 'True Church'.

A Distinctive Lifestyle

In *A Believing Church* I used the story of Dirk Willems,³⁵ the Dutch Anabaptist who escaped from prison and ran across frozen ice. He was followed by his gaoler who fell through the ice. Willems stopped and returned to save him. This story from 1569 opened up something of the ethical values of Anabaptists, for which many in the first generations were noted and seemed to challenge a conformist lifestyle into which many twentieth-century baptistic believers had fallen. From the Anabaptists, issues such as truth telling and the sharing of goods offered critical lifestyle challenges. These past decades have seen several notable attempts to establish baptistic community living and rules of life which in some ways mirror early Anabaptist models. There has, I believe, been a fresh attempt amongst many baptistic Christians to engage more

³³ My own journey has also been greatly influenced by my friend the Revd Roy Searle and the 'Northumbrian Community' and their journey drawing on the wells of the Celtic Church. I have been stimulated in my interaction with Professor Stefan Paas of the Vrije University, Amsterdam, and his work on missional church planting and by my interaction with Professor Jon Sobrino of the University of Central America, and the insights from base communities continues to be transformative.

³⁴ The School of the Prophets marks a distinctive learning point in itself. Here is a scholarly community engaged together in biblical study. An insight still worthy of reflecting on over against the scholar in her or his study in splendid isolation.

³⁵ Thielman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Fifteen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom from the Time of Christ to AD 1660* (Herald Press, 1950), p. 741.

seriously with ethical dimensions of how we live³⁶ and our care for creation.³⁷ Anabaptist lifestyle and the example of the early Anabaptist work in Moravia, where barren fields were turned into productive vineyards and where pottery with simple but effective designs was produced to support communal living, have, I believe, influenced contemporary baptistic communities to approach with fresh eyes our ethics and lifestyle, not least our relationship with the whole of the created order and our role as stewards and trustees.³⁸ These concerns came alive and were explored more fully during my time at IBTS in Prague, especially as we interacted with Dr Glen H. Stassen (and later, Dr David P. Gushee) with whom my colleague, Dr Parush R. Parushev, had an abiding friendship.

An Inclusive Ecclesia

In *A Believing Church*, I reflected on the notion of an inclusive community. Whilst Baptists talked much about the ‘priesthood of all believers’, I realised that my upbringing and teenage years had understood this in a less than adequate way. For instance, though British Baptists³⁹ claimed to have ordained women to pastoral ministry for over 100 years, until the 1960s very few women were accepted for ministerial formation and only a handful had exercised pastoral charge.⁴⁰ Many

³⁶ In the Baptist Union of Great Britain my former colleague the Revd Anne Wilkinson-Hayes spearheaded an important initiative, Five Core Values for a Gospel People, which arose from the denominational consultation of 1996. The story of this period of renewal of British Baptist life is expertly recounted by Ian M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the 20th Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005), especially p. 471 onwards.

³⁷ Keith G. Jones, ‘Baptists and Creation Care’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 42 (2008), pp. 452–476. See also *The Place of Environmental Theology: A Guide for Seminaries, Colleges and Universities*, ed. by John Weaver and Margot R. Hodson (Whitley Trust, UK, and the International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007).

³⁸ Here I pay tribute to regular IBTS visiting lecturer, Dr Glen H. Stassen and his monumental work with David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in a Contemporary Context*, 2nd edn (Eerdmans, 2016).

³⁹ By ‘British Baptists’, I mean those in membership with the Baptist Union of Great Britain. The Baptist Union of Scotland, for instance, did not at that time recognise the ministry of women and does so only today in that it does not exclude a church that calls a woman as pastor.

⁴⁰ In the 100th anniversary year, the Baptist Union of Great Britain initiated a research project, Project Violet, named after the first woman minister, the Revd Violet Hedger. Project Violet reported to the Baptist Union Council in October 2024, and a plan of implementation of its recommendations is now under way.

British Baptist churches refused to recognise the ministry of women and a significant minority did not allow women to serve as deacons or elders, nor to preach.

At the time of my writing *A Believing Church* the issue was coming to a head in British Baptist life, as it was clear in many aspects of denominational life we had been operating with a male patriarchy. If the situation was out of balance in the isles, on engaging more directly with Baptist Unions across Europe, the attitude of churches and leadership was notably more hostile to women being recognised as having gifts of ministry and servant leadership and being allowed to recognise such gifts. Having been challenged by the historic witness of Anabaptist women,⁴¹ I understood that to be truly baptistic we must engage male patriarchy wherever we encountered it in the communities claiming to follow Jesus. In the Baptist Union we established a 'Women's Issues Working Group' to advance inclusivity. In Prague I sought to ensure that our regular weekly eucharist with preaching was presided over by women in order to demonstrate to our students the inclusive call to women and men to the work of servant leadership. This was a serious challenge to some of our male students who had come from Baptist Unions which held to exclusive models of 'male headship', and to many of our female students it gave the courage to take hold of their sense of vocation and seek ways to exercise that in their own contexts.⁴²

More recently, the challenge to be truly inclusive has brought the local church I am currently a member of to address the complex area of human sexuality and explore the teaching of Jesus to see if any are excluded from the gathering community because of their orientation. Drawing on the insights of Anabaptists and a communal approach to understanding the Bible, after a year of discussion and reflection we came to this common mind:

We believe in being an inclusive Church — By this we mean we are striving to be a community of faithful disciples of Jesus who do actively wish to include people and not discriminate on any level on grounds of economic

⁴¹ On their stories, see *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, ed. by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht.

⁴² For a recent example of reflection on the place of women in Baptist churches, see *Baptists and Gender*, ed. by Melody Maxwell and T. Laine Scales (Mercer University Press, 2023).

power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ, which is Scripturally faithful, which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.⁴³

Inclusivity must also lead to an adjustment of our baptistic denominational practice, which in many places has become marked by a juridical approach to interdependency, rather than a missional and collective approach. I tried to address this concern in a paper delivered to the Seventh Forum of the Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools held in Odessa, Ukraine in July 2012.⁴⁴ It also requires a fresh look at our language, certainly where we have been inclined to focus on the notion of ‘family’, thereby marginalising those who are not part of a contemporary nuclear family, especially that significant group amongst us of single women, an element my friend, and former colleague, Dr Lina Toth, has focused on.⁴⁵

Drawing and extending insights from the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century and extrapolating them to our current reality is no simple activity; but in this concern for inclusivity, which was heralded in those early gatherings of believers, it seems clear to me that the model of church developed by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin and that focused on the academically qualified man [*sic*] presiding at the table and the font, preaching the Word in an authoritative way,⁴⁶ is not now, if it ever was, an appropriate and adequate baptistic model. The ministry for which I was formed in the 1970s, is no longer an omnicompetent model to which I, and indeed many others,⁴⁷ can give unqualified assent as we re-evaluate baptistic life in the light of insights from the Anabaptists.

⁴³ ‘Statement on Inclusivity’, Shipley Baptist Church, West Yorkshire, 2020. The statement appears on the church website <<https://shipleybaptistchurch.org.uk/inclusive-church/>> [accessed 24 October 2024].

⁴⁴ Keith G. Jones ‘Spirituality and Structures’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 13.2 (2013), pp. 29–49.

⁴⁵ Lina Toth, *Transforming the Struggles of the Tamars: Single Women and Baptistic Communities* (Pickwick, 2014); *Singleness and Marriage After Christendom*, (Cascade Books, 2021).

⁴⁶ The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe coalesces around such a definition of where the True Church is to be found. Perhaps it is one good reason why Baptists do not belong in that fellowship?

⁴⁷ Stuart Murray Williams and Sian Murray Williams, *Multi-voiced Church* (Paternoster, 2012).

A Believing Church Has Meals A-Plenty

My journey of reflection using Anabaptist insights to inform my baptistic evaluation of Baptist churches has included a total re-assessment of the standard model of Sunday worship in English Baptist churches and, particularly, the place of eating. I first explored some of my ideas in the Whitley Lecture of 1999.⁴⁸ At the International Baptist Theological Seminary, I convinced my colleagues to substitute occasional community worship for daily morning prayer and, after meeting some opposition, a weekly eucharist with preaching. When, later, we founded the Šarká Valley Community Church as a multi-cultural baptistic community in membership with the Czech Baptist Union (BJB), we created a monthly eucharistic service where we shared a community meal together, during which bread was broken and wine⁴⁹ shared by the passing round of the common cup. This fell short of my personal desire for a weekly meal, but marked a considerable development from the Baptist church of my youth.

In 2012, I set out my thinking in this journal, offering a vision of gathering worship describing this as tentative proposals for reshaping worship in our European Baptistic Churches today.⁵⁰ I will not rehearse all my arguments here, though simply emphasise points of iteration as my thinking has developed over the past decade. I see even more that 'place' is important. Baptists drew lessons from Zwingli about iconoclasm and our buildings were plain and simple for several centuries. At one stage worship was very much for those already committed to the life of the believing community, but if, as I have argued elsewhere, in this post-Christendom world, we inevitably engage with the curious and the enquirer, then our porous churches need to inhabit a comfortable space and offer food as a way of drawing others into a 'safe space'. Of course, this is no new idea but the recovery of the

⁴⁸ Keith G. Jones, *A Shared Meal and a Common Table: Some Reflections on the Lord's Supper and Baptists* (Whitley Publications, 1999).

⁴⁹ This was always good Anabaptist wine from the vineyards they developed on the rolling hills between Mikulov and Linz.

⁵⁰ Keith G. Jones, 'Gathering Worship: Some Tentative Proposals for Reshaping Worship in our European Baptistic Churches Today', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 13.1 (2012), pp. 5–26.

style of Jesus, with whom meal sharing was a basic activity. I believe the Anabaptist communities which emerged in the 1500s often demonstrated this missional style of Jesus and a recovery of regular porous⁵¹ *koinonia*. Though others often agree with me when this is discussed, from agreement to action remains a difficult journey.

A Believing Church — the Affirmation of the World

In being baptistic and learning from Anabaptists I offer one final insight. Anabaptists had another aspect to their inclusivity. Alone of all the churches which emerged out of the reformations' milieu, they were not caught up in the geographical, territorially predominant model. Their way of being church focused on gathering and on being 'free' of the boundaries imposed by the nation state. Nor, hopefully, are we bound by strict Confessions of Faith, though many Baptists try to impose these on others. Applying an Anabaptist hermeneutic to my baptistic believing has created for me an ecumenical network of friends who follow Jesus, though they might worship in different ways to my own. The True Church, I have come to see, has many colours and hues and is not monochrome, but multi-coloured and sparkling with joyous difference. I anticipate this as an araban, a foretaste, of the commonweal of God.⁵²

On What Has Not Been Said

My list of insights from the Anabaptists which have changed my Baptist perspectives over forty years is not exclusive. I have not reflected further in this article on peace-making, missional congregations, separation of church and state, and how far Baptists have taken, or not taken, that journey. Freedom of religion and human rights remain a high priority with the Baptist World Alliance, but today the refusal of Anabaptists to be a part of the civil authority does not seem to resonate with baptistic Christians, and taking support from the state for our church-related activities is commonplace across Europe. Despite these omissions, I look at the period 1984–2024 as one in which many of a baptistic

⁵¹ I have tried to explore a *koinonia* of porosity in my article on 'Gathering Worship'.

⁵² The phrase 'kingdom of God' is not so helpful to me. Sadly, it has overtones of patriarchy and, living in a country where I am counted as a subject, not a citizen, I have chosen to opt for the more egalitarian word commonweal, which, I think, reverberates better with my understanding of the gospel.

inclination, Baptists and those from other communions, have gained a range of powerful insights in their attempts to follow Jesus and, certainly for myself, my Christianity has been clarified and radicalised by what I understand to be my baptistic foreparents.

Afternote: A Believing Church — Into a New Millenium

In the year 2000, I was asked to moderate a group of Baptist scholars from across the continents who were asked to prepare an address to Baptists when we gathered in Birmingham in 2005 to celebrate 100 years of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA).⁵³ Following a suggestion from my friend and colleague, the Revd Dr Nigel G. Wright, who served on that commission, we agreed a message couched in eschatological terms — a message for the future.⁵⁴ The message was too long to feature in the congress programme and we produced a much shorter summary which was presented to the congress. The full message continues to merit discussion and, indeed, I believe offers signs of how Anabaptist insights have gained traction amongst baptistic Christians and, in a small measure, Baptist churches, unions, conventions, associations, baptistic churches and even the BWA itself.

⁵³ For a full account see *Baptist World Centenary Congress: Official Report, Birmingham, England July 27–31, 2005* (Baptist World Alliance, 2006).

⁵⁴ Keith G. Jones, 'The Baptist World Alliance and Baptist Identity: A Reflection on the Journey to the Centenary Congress Message, 2005', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 8.2 (2008), pp. 5–17.