

Elaine Enns and Ched Myers explore a theology of restorative solidarity

How can a people paralyzed by facing its history move forward? by
Samuel Wells October 11, 2021



Samuel Wells (right) is the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London and author of *Learning to Dream Again* and *A Nazareth Manifesto*.

This profound, timely, humbling, but ultimately empowering study is exemplary in every way, offering a path through thickets of intense debate and hope amid cacophonies of denial and anger. The fruit of Elaine Enns's ten-year quest for an Anabaptist discipleship of decolonization and Ched Myers's lifetime of soaking scriptural exegesis in practices of restorative solidarity, this sequel to the pair's impressive two-volume *Ambassadors of Reconciliation* is a landmark statement on how a people paralyzed by facing the horrors of its own history can go on. For every contemporary quandary of the penitent church, Enns and Myers offer true solidarity (in place of sentimental compassion), riveting analysis (in place of lazy generalization), and practical steps (in place of depressed inertia). It's an emotionally intelligent, culturally aware, refreshingly prescient gift to a confused, dispirited church.

Enns's 18th-century forebears left Prussia for the Russian steppe, responding to Catherine the Great's invitation to cultivate the soil but paying less attention to the people who were driven out to make that steppe available. These German-speaking Mennonites, preserving their subculture, then scattered in the face of the Russian Revolution, fleeing across Russia, dying by slaughter, or making their way to the Canadian plains. They were a people without a land, but the land they came to possess was not without a people.

With a deft hand, Enns traces, in gripping detail, the history of trauma her people endured— but never excuses the trauma those same people, and Canada as a whole, inflicted on the Indigenous residents of Saskatchewan and neighboring provinces. This is the tragic irony at the heart of the book, and perhaps at the heart of North America: the settlers' acute awareness of their own trauma and of the fertility of opportunity around them—alongside their inability to perceive the corresponding experience of the native peoples among them or to honor the treaties they signed when they did.

Recognizing that she, too, on marrying Myers, became a settler in the Ventura watershed of California, she does the honest work of coming to understand the historic bearers of her new land—though few in her neighborhood are able to enlighten her—and seeking to do better than her forebears in honoring and abiding with those to whom the land inveterately belongs. In the process, she adopts a number of propitious methods and telling commitments that make the book not just a study of how settlers and their descendants should relate to those who have a deeper belonging, but a guide for all efforts at allyship and restorative justice. In James Baldwin's words, White people "are still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it." Much of *Healing Haunted Histories* is implicitly about narrative and how to dismantle myths of innocence, nobility, and destiny.

Mennonites often tell how they left the old country under duress, arrived poor in the new land, pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, and reached prosperity through hard work and faithfulness. But such a story overlooks privileges given on arrival (or guaranteed prior to it), harm against those who were already there, and assimilation into the advantages of Whiteness in a racialized North America. Enns sweeps aside perennial excuses that the horrors are too distant and impersonal by constantly highlighting the intimate accessibility of the issues involved. The greatest irony is that this is a story about Mennonites: a people set apart from the state and rooted in peacebuilding. Yet, the book hints, it was a denomination that found itself, albeit not to the extent of the Catholics and Anglicans, co-opted into the genocidal Canadian project.

The great theme of the book is restorative solidarity. Coining the term response-ability, Enns and Myers expose how North American society was shaped by collusion between churches and empire: “we must resist the temptation simply to ignore this history (as conservatives do) or denounce it (as liberals do).” This means a cycle of (1) doing our own work (for which there are dozens of suggestions), (2) reckoning with harms and building capacity for response, and (3) making covenants and taking concrete steps of solidarity, reparation, and repatriation in relationship with communities injured by past and present injustices.

This may be the humble work of learning about, listening, and supporting; it may be the more active work of accompaniment and direct action. It invariably involves foregoing the need to be right, to be in charge, and to possess. Restorative solidarity is the key to decolonization: it includes the quest for justice but, unlike many such movements, it never forgets that the ultimate goal of justice is right relationship.

The book’s material on Whiteness is marvelously wise and acute. In an area fraught and contested, Enns and Myers dispassionately diagnose ten pervasive strategies for securing innocence—including willful ignorance, ahistorical individualism, the self-congratulatory ideology of progress (from the Catholic doctrine of discovery to Protestant notions of chosenness), and the “most odious” move of “fictimization,” by which White people claim that their own victimhood is the most egregious of all. Such false innocence, according to Zeus Leonardo, is like “suggesting that a person could walk through life with other people stuffing money in to his or her pockets without any awareness or consent on the walker’s part.”

There follows a helpful distinction between shame and guilt. In the words of Brené Brown, guilt is “holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values, and feeling psychological discomfort,” whereas shame is the feeling or experience “of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” Countering shame when called to accountability means responding with gratitude and humility rather than anger or rationalization, listening and self-reflecting rather than emotionally closing down, and soliciting feedback about one’s own blind spots.

The authors model the humility they advocate by quoting the great and the obscure, the wise of other cultures and the less known of their own, and by enticing the reader into the dynamism of the countless symposia they’ve conducted and in which they’ve participated where wisdom has been generated, new vocabulary coined, stories told, songs shared, and truths owned. But one feature can’t be held down for long: Myers’s electric exegesis. It surfaces at several moments, most compellingly in his treatment of the rich young man in Mark 10:17–31, where with characteristic genius he shows beyond dispute that the command the young man refuses is the injunction to repatriate land acquired from those defaulting on debts. Rather than begin the book with this study as a programmatic manifesto, the authors place it near the end as a brilliant climax.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “we are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or feel remorse for this shameful episode.” Elaine Enns and Ched Myers have gone a long way toward showing the United States and Canada what it would mean to embark on the reschooling, restorative solidarity, reparation, and repatriation that are needed to right that wrong. We are greatly in their debt.