

## Refugees Arrested: Anabaptists in England, 1575 (full drama)

*Background:* This drama is about the short history of the first Mennonite church in England. It tells the story of obscure Anabaptist refugees who came to England to escape severe persecution in the Netherlands and found themselves arrested, attracting the interest of bishops and Queen Elizabeth I herself. Some Anabaptists recanted; others were deported by the English authorities, who also burned two of them for heresy.

*Props:* a scroll with the bishop's four requirements are written in bold: Renounce Anabaptism, Agree with infant baptism, Magistracy, Oaths

*Characters: (41 roles)*

15 female and 11 male Anabaptists including:	Constable
Anabaptist 1	Guards - 3
Anabaptist 2	Bishop of London
Anabaptist 3	Aldermen - 2
Anabaptist 4 (female)	Preachers - 4
Young lad	Commissioners - 2
Reader	John Foxe

\* \* \* \* \*

### PART 1

*(15 female and 11 male Anabaptists stand in a circle downstage right and sing the end of a hymn. After the hymn **Anabaptist 1** speaks.)*

**Anabaptist 1** Let us pray.

*(The **Anabaptists** bow their heads and freeze. **Reader** walks from upstage right to downstage right.)*

**Reader** Easter morning, April 3, 1575. About two dozen people—15 women, ten men and a young lad—gathered in a house near Aldgate in London. They were foreigners, refugees from Flanders, and had come together to hear the Word of God and to pray. At nine o'clock that Easter morning there was a loud knocking ... (**Constable** interrupts here as he mimes knocking at door while stomping a foot at stage left) at the door.

**Constable** Open up! Open up! I'm the constable here. *(He bursts through the "door" followed by three of his guards.)* Something funny is going on; so your neighbors tell us. Devils, then, are you? Here, you beadles, take down their names. Arrest them. We're taking them in. *(Guards roughly make those in the circle group together. The **Constable** and **Guards** stand at the right and the left of the group and usher them in a large circle around the perimeter of the stage as if leading them on a journey.)*

**Reader** So the constable and his men took the Flemish refugees into custody.

*(**Anabaptists** sit bunched together downstage left. One of them pulls out a piece of paper from his pocket and mimes writing while the others mime giving animated input.)*

**Reader** Over the next three months these obscure aliens were held in prison and became a preoccupation of the most notable figures in the realm.

*(The **Bishop, Aldermen and Preachers** walk behind the Anabaptist prisoners and peer at the group in a concerned manner. They end up stage right.)*

**Reader** The prisoners set to work immediately and composed a submission to the Bishop of London. In 13 articles filled with biblical references, they stated their faith in a humble fashion. Several days later they came face-to-face with the Bishop of London, two aldermen, three English preachers and one French preacher.

*(The **Anabaptists** freeze while two of them stand and cross stage right to the **Bishop, Aldermen and Preachers**, who come forward. The **Anabaptists** hold out their paper to the **Bishop**, who holds out his hand in rejection.)*

**Bishop** I am not interested in your agenda. You must renounce all heresies of the accursed sect of the Anabaptists and confess that you have been seduced by the devil. You must agree that infants ought to be baptized, that a Christian might administer the office of a magistrate and that a Christian might swear an oath. Say yes and sign these articles (*points to the scroll, which one of the **Preachers** opens and holds up*) and you will live. Say no and be burned alive.

**Anabaptist 1** But we cannot find any of this in the Scripture.

**Anabaptist 2** Our conscience will not allow us to sign your articles.

**Bishop** Your crimes are very great. You shall not inherit the Kingdom of God.

*(**Bishop, Aldermen and Preachers** turn and walk back upstage and freeze with backs to audience. **Anabaptist 1** and **Anabaptist 2** return to the group. The **Anabaptists** unfreeze and continue miming talking and writing.)*

**Reader** From prison the Anabaptists continued to write letters to the authorities.

*(When **Anabaptist 1, Anabaptist 2** and **Anabaptist 3** stand, all freeze.)*

**Anabaptist 1** (*Standing to face front*) God commands us to love the stranger as one's own self.

**Anabaptist 2** (*Standing*) Christ and his followers persecuted no one, but in his true Gospel taught the contrary when he says, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you."

**Anabaptist 3** (*Standing*) We are persecuted in our own land, and there is nowhere a place for us.

**Anabaptist 1** Hence, we must return to bloody countries, from whence we fled and where the blood of saints is (*the following words are spoken closely together by **Anabaptist 1** and **Anabaptist 2***) poured out like water.

**Anabaptist 2** Poured out like water.

**Anabaptist 3** Poured out like water.

*(Could use a rain stick here followed by a loud foot stomp. On the stomp, the **Anabaptists** turn to sit facing away from the circle, heads bowed and feet together in front of them.)*

**Reader** The prisoners were assisted to reflect on their errors by three weeks of solitary confinement with chains on their legs. The Bishop of London sent a message:

*(**Bishop** walks downstage right.)*

**Bishop** I promise that if the prisoners will adhere to the church, I will release them and free them from their bonds.

**Reader** Five of the Anabaptist prisoners, all men, gave in to pressure. *(Five **Anabaptists** stand and walk downstage. During the following sentences they turn stage right to face the **Bishop** in a line across the stage. The five cross their arms in front of them making an upright cross.)*

On June 25, at Paul's Cross outside the Cathedral in the presence of thousands of Englishmen and directly in front of the pulpit, these five men carried wooden crosses symbolic of their deserving of death while the bishop announced:

**Bishop** *(Turning to face line of men)* These men, who had been seduced, will now be joining the Dutch Reformed Church and will thus become brethren in the true church. **(Bishop ushers the five men to cross in front of him and sit downstage right.)**

*(As the following is read, the **Anabaptists** walk in pairs to the **Bishop** and **Commissioners** who hold up the scroll. As the pairs come up, the **Bishop** points to the scroll and mimes asking if they will recant. When the **Anabaptists** shake their heads "no," they have their hands "tied" behind their backs by the **Guards** and are pushed into a small cluster center stage.)*

**Reader** On May 21, seven weeks after their arrest, the remaining prisoners were called in, two by two, before the commissioners who urged them to sign up to the four questions. When the prisoners refused, all 14 women and a young lad were tied hand to hand and sent to Newgate, the prison of those confined for capital crimes.

*(**Anabaptist 4** stands and walks downstage center. Behind her the others stand two by two in a line running up to downstage as though in a boat. Hands are still tied behind them. **Young lad** stands at the very front.)*

**Anabaptist 4** We women imagined we would be the first to be burnt, because day by day officials came to visit us, holding up death before our eyes unless we should sign. But instead, we 14 women and the lad were carted to a ship at St. Katherine's Dock and deported to Holland. *(returns and joins the group.)*

**Reader** The cover letter to the captain stated: "These people were not worthy to come among Christians." Tied to the front of the cart and whipped as he went along was the young lad who blurted out:

**Young lad** This is for the name of Christ! *(The group walks together off stage left still in boat formation.)*

## PART 2

*(John Foxe paces back and forth across the stage and mutters to himself as though composing a letter in his head. He quickly discards each idea almost as soon as he thinks of it.)*

**Reader** While Anabaptist prisoners were suffering on the boat to Holland, attempts were being made to forestall the execution of the rest of the prisoners in England. The most impassioned intervention came in a letter to Queen Elizabeth from the martyrologist and divine, John Foxe. He wrote that a rumor had come to his ears that:

**Foxe** *(Stepping downstage to audience)* There are one or two concerning whom a decision will shortly be made (unless your compassion comes to their rescue) about the penalty of death by burning.

**Reader** This Foxe opposed, not because he favored Anabaptism, which he termed ...

**Foxe** This madness!

**Reader** ... but simply because he was revolted by burning. (**Foxe** *looks as though he is about to be sick and quickly walks offstage with a hand over his mouth*) In spite of these appeals, the process against the heretics continued. On June 2, the Bishop of London called the five prisoners before his episcopal court at St. Paul's.

*(Bishop stands on a cube stage right and a Guard holds the scroll. Five prisoners walk and stand in a line downstage and facing front. They speak out to the audience, as does the Bishop.)*

**Reader** Once again he confronted them with the four articles and threatened that unless they signed, they were to be burned at Smithfield.

**Prisoner** We will be burned? This is but a small matter.

**Bishop:** Heretics such as you should be shunned. *(gestures)* I hereby expel you from my church as bad members.

**Prisoner:** How can you expel us from your church when we have never yet been one with you?

**Bishop:** In England there is no one that is not a member of God's church. I condemn you all to death.

**Reader:** The five Anabaptist prisoners were now moved to the Newgate prison from which the women had recently been deported.

*(Guard clusters the men center stage.)*

**Reader:** They were confined among thieves and criminals who themselves had been warned by the bishop to take care lest they be seduced by the Anabaptists. Their imprisonment was severe, confined in cages in a deep dungeon so that they could not converse with their neighbors. They were threatened from day to day with death by hanging, burning and otherwise. In this desperate situation, the prisoners somehow engaged in more writing. They wrote to John Foxe who they hoped would again write on their behalf to Queen Elizabeth. They also wrote directly to the Queen. But they were wasting their time. When some maids of honor attempted to present the Anabaptists' appeals to the Queen, she reprimanded the women and refused even to touch the tainted papers. Meanwhile, in prison, one of the five prisoners died through the hardship of his confinement.

*(Bishop ushers one man to sit down.)*

**Reader:** The four remaining Anabaptists attempted to contact friends outside. They were visited by ministers, who in various ways did their best to get them to save their lives by recanting. One minister laid his hands upon them, and then fell on his knees, and cried out:

*(Bishop approaches prisoners.)*

**Minister:** Lord, convert their heart! Depart from them, thou wicked one!

**Reader:** On July 17, it was announced that the eldest two prisoners should be executed.

*(Bishop moves two men center stage.)*

**Reader:** On July 22, in front of a varied audience of dignitaries and common people, Jan Pieterss, a poor man aged 50, and Hendrick Terwoort, a goldsmith aged 35, were burned at Smithfield, a place where 20 years earlier Catholics had burned many Protestants. On his way to the stake, Terwoort asserted to the crowds:

**Terwoort:** This is the way that all the prophets went, also Christ our Savior.

**Reader:** At the stake, the prisoners were given a final opportunity to assent to the four articles. They refused and were executed in the slowest way possible without any strangling or gunpowder. In dying, Terwoort left his wife of just six months while Pieterss left nine children. He also left a hymn, written in prison:

**Anabaptists** We are, O Lord, now in the battle.  
Oh! keep us safe  
From our enemies, now  
Who encircle us on all sides.  
Oh Lord! Free us!  
So that we will persevere.  
O God, you are a great God,  
Strengthening us always in our need.

*(Bishop ushers the two executed men to sit down.)*

**Reader:** Two prisoners remained in Newgate prison. During the daytime they whiled the time away writing the most accommodating confession so far, but it was still too nuanced for the bishop who continued to insist on an unequivocal assent to the four articles. At night they worked on another project—filing off an iron bar from a prison window in the hope of a break-out. But in this they were foiled, and so were fettered much more heavily than ever before. But as they languished in Newgate, Queen Elizabeth and her Councilors evidently felt that the two executions had made their point, so just less than a year after their original arrest, the two remaining prisoners were taken out and sent back to the Netherlands.

*(Bishop ushers remaining two to sit down.)*

Source: *Martyrs Mirror*, 1008-1024. For comment and reflection, see Alan Kreider, "When Anabaptists were last in the British Isles," in Alan Kreider and Stuart Murray, eds., *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), 176-191.

© Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, 2011