

## Refugees Arrested: Anabaptists in England, 1575

*Background:* This reading dramatizes the short history of the first Anabaptist 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.

*Requirements:* 33 persons (11 speaking parts)—out of the 33, at least 15 are women and at least 11 are men; a flip chart on which the authorities' four requirements are written in bold: Renounce Anabaptism, Agree with infant baptism, Magistracy, Oaths

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*Ask 15 women and 11 men to come to the front, standing to one side. A flip chart stands center stage.*

**Reader:** It was 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 at the door.

**Constable:** Open up! Open up! I'm the constable here. 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.

**Reader:** So the constable and his men took the Flemish refugees into custody. 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 prisoners set to work immediately and composed a submission to the Bishop of London. In 13 articles studded with biblical references, they stated their faith in a humble and non-provocative fashion. Several days later, they came face-to-face with the Bishop of London, two aldermen, three English preachers and one French preacher. They discovered that the bishop was not interested in their attempt to set the agenda. Instead he confronted them with four articles which they must sign or be burnt alive. This was no time for discussion.

**Bishop:** *(reveals the charges on the flip chart)* You must desist from, renounce and forsake all errors, sects and heresies of the accursed sect of the Anabaptists and confess that they had been seduced thereto 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 or no.

**Reader:** To the Anabaptists' replies that they could not find this in the Scripture, or that their consciences would not allow that, the bishop replied:

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

**Reader:** From prison, the Anabaptists continued their attempt to explain themselves. They wrote a general letter giving a reasoned defense of their position and of their social vision. They also appealed to the consciences of their readers, writing:

**Prisoner:** God commands us to love the stranger as one's own self. Christ and his own persecuted no one, but in his true Gospel taught the contrary when he says: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you."

**Reader:** And the prisoners pointed out that they were, after all, refugee.:

**Prisoner:** There is nowhere a place for us. Hence we must go to bloody countries whence we fled, partly because of the great tyranny where the blood of saints is poured out like water.

**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:** 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 prisoners, all men, gave in to pressure. 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 firewood symbolic of their deserving of death while the bishop announced:

**Bishop:** These men, who had been seduced, will now be joining the Dutch Reformed Church and will thus become brethren in the true church. (*ushers five of the men to sit down*)

**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 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.

*Bishop moves the women and one man to the other side of the stage.*

**Reader:** The women imagined that they would be the first to be burnt because day by day, officials came to visit them, holding up death before their eyes unless they should sign. But instead, the 14 women and the lad were carted to a ship at St. Katherine's Dock and deported to Holland. 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.

*Bishop ushers the 14 women and one man to sit down.*

**Reader:** Meanwhile, attempts were being made to forestall the execution of the rest of the prisoners. Perhaps 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.

**Foxe:** 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 “this madness”—but simply because he was revolted by burning. 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. Once again he confronted them with the four articles and threatened that unless they signed, they were to be burned at Smithfield. There followed an exchange between the prisoners and the bishop:

*Bishop moves alternately between the prisoners and somewhere near the flip chart.*

**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.

*Bishop moves the five men across the 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 day after 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, 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 [*Yon Peters*], a poor man aged 50, and Hendrick Terwoort [*Hen-drick Tear-vort*], 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:

**Pieterss:** 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.

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