



For immediate release  
May 17, 2022

**AMBS news contact**

Annette Brill Bergstresser, [abbergstresser@ambs.edu](mailto:abbergstresser@ambs.edu), 574.343.6709

## Chortitza Oak sapling to be planted at AMBS

ELKHART, Indiana (Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary) – A tree sapling with roots in Mennonite and Ukrainian history will find its home on the campus of [Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary](#) (AMBS) in Elkhart, Indiana, on Friday, June 3, 2022.

The sapling is a clone of a daughter of the ancient **Chortitza** (Kor-teet'-zah) **Oak**, a 700+-year-old oak tree located near the original village of Chortitza along the Dnieper River near Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. The original tree – a giant landmark measuring 118 feet (36 meters) in height and 21 feet (6.4 meters) in trunk diameter – was a beloved gathering place for Mennonites of the Chortitza Colony (or Old Colony), which was established in 1789 as the first Mennonite settlement in Russia.

According to the Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the Cossacks who lived in the Chortitza area until 1774 considered the oak to be sacred because of its great age and wide branch span – 142 feet (43.3 meters) in diameter.

“We are excited to join several other communities across the United States and Canada that have descendants of this famous tree that holds historical significance for many Mennonites,” said [Janeen Bertsche Johnson](#), MDiv, Director of Campus Ministries, Alumni Director and Development Associate. “As we plant it on our campus, we acknowledge our connections to the people of Ukraine – past, present and future.”

Bertsche Johnson noted that acorns were gathered from the Chortitza Oak – an English oak (*Quercus robur*) – during a Mennonite Heritage Tour in 1997, a few years after the tree had begun to die. A seedling from one of the acorns was planted in March 2002 near the Swiss (Volhynian) Mennonite Memorial west of Moundridge, Kansas.

AMBS alumnus **Lyle Preheim** of Freeman, South Dakota, took cuttings from that tree and grafted them onto bur oak saplings, creating trees that are genetic clones of the daughter tree in Kansas. The sapling to be planted at the seminary is one of these clones, donated to AMBS by Preheim and his spouse, **Lois Janzen Preheim** (MDiv 1979).

### June 3 events in connection with the tree planting:

(All times are Eastern Daylight Time)

- **5-5:30 p.m.:** Planting of the sapling on the AMBS campus between Lambright Center and Waltner Hall; Lyle Preheim will speak about the grafting process
- **5:30-6 p.m.:** Dinner featuring foods from trees in the Lambright Center Dining Hall (\$10/person; registration required by May 26)
- **6-6:20 p.m.:** Presentation on the Chortitza Colony by **Walter Sawatsky**, PhD, AMBS Professor Emeritus of Church History and Mission, in the Lambright Center Dining Hall

**Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary**

3003 Benham Avenue, Elkhart, IN 46517, USA • 574.295.3726 • [ambs.edu](http://ambs.edu) • [ambs.ca](http://ambs.ca)

The tree planting, dinner and presentation are open to the public. For those attending the dinner, payment (\$10/person) and registration by May 26 are required; register online at [ambs.edu/chortitza](https://ambs.edu/chortitza).

Parking is available in the parking lot near Lambright Center. Participants may bring lawn chairs if desired for the tree planting time. The tree planting will take place rain or shine.

*Located in Elkhart, Indiana, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary is a learning community with an Anabaptist vision, offering theological education for learners both on campus and at a distance, including a wide array of lifelong learning programs – all with the goal of educating followers of Jesus Christ to be leaders for God's reconciling mission in the world. [ambs.edu](https://ambs.edu)*

###

–AMBS release

**Image available:**

The Chortitza Oak in 1987 (Credit: Justina Neufeld)

**Shorter announcement for bulletins or newsletters:**

**Chortitza Oak sapling to be planted at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary: Friday, June 3.** A tree sapling that is a clone of a daughter of the ancient Chortitza Oak will be planted at 5 p.m. EDT on the AMBS campus in Elkhart, Indiana. The original tree, located in Ukraine, was a beloved gathering place for Mennonites of the Chortitza Colony, the first Mennonite settlement in Russia (1789). The June 3 tree planting will be followed by dinner and a presentation on the Chortitza Colony by AMBS Professor Emeritus Walter Sawatsky, PhD, in the Lambright Center Dining Hall. The events are open to the public; for those attending the dinner, payment (\$10/person) and registration by May 26 are required. [ambs.edu/chortitza](https://ambs.edu/chortitza)