



# Information – Transformation – Reformation: Reformation Jubilee 2017

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It's a time of change all over the world as well as in our churches. There are two ways of facing changes that we can't hinder. Either we can complain about globalization, secularization, birth rates, migration, and how bad we think this might be, or we can think positively and say: It is a time of change, but we are part of it, and we are capable of dealing with it in ways to transform ourselves as well as our churches, reminding ourselves that the church has always been and ever has to be a church for others. It is a time of *ecclesia semper reformanda* ("church always reforming"). This time of change can become a time of transformation and reformation as we move into the future.

The German Protestant Churches are not only rich in tradition but also very much engaged in today's social and political reality, nationally and internationally. We are challenged by a fast-changing environment, by new issues and concerns. In many places we are engaged in a process of reform and restructuring. All regional Protestant churches living in communion under the umbrella of the Evangelische

*This report of the extensive plans for the celebration of the quincentennial of the Reformation in Germany and beyond provides background information for the readers of Word & World, but might also stimulate ideas for observing the event in local congregations and larger expressions of the church in this country. Some might even be able to accept the author's invitation to join in the events in Wittenberg.*

Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) preserve their particular confessional and liturgical traditions.<sup>1</sup> This has proved to be a successful ecumenical model. The EKD sees itself as part of the worldwide communion of Christian churches.

#### ON THE WAY TO 2017: PROCESS OF REFORM

The Reformation Jubilee of 2017 is part of a long-term process, one more step on the way to renewal of the church.

In 2006, the EKD published an “impulse paper”: “Church of Freedom: Perspectives for an Evangelical Church in the 21st Century.” This paper opened discussions among pastors, synods, and church councils on the issues being proposed. The primary reasons for this publication were the demographic and financial developments facing the church, a decline in membership, and the awareness of a lack of language capability concerning the Christian faith.

The impulse paper had the aim of combining the reform efforts already begun in the several regional churches. The main question was: What should a church of freedom look like? Everyone in the church was asked to discuss the paper, to work with it, and to reflect on their work. Congregations were asked to work out their core church activities and to consider what that meant for the staff without giving up the commitment to work for a better world. Today’s visitations by deans of the congregations in their districts look for a target-orientated strategy for the work of the parishes.

For the first time, in May 2014, all the deans and one other person from each of their districts, primarily non-ordained, came together for a “Zukunftsforum” (consultation for the future) in the Ruhrgebiet, the former mining area of Germany. This region has gone through difficult times of depression and change. At such a place, it was thought, the church could learn how to transform itself by discussing issues in the atmosphere of that surrounding area. This opened up a new perspective for most of the participants.

#### THE LUTHER DECADE

The EKD decided to launch a “Luther Decade” in cooperation with public bodies and tourist associations. Bishop Wolfgang Huber, former chairman of the Council of the EKD, said in his inaugural speech on September 21, 2008:

As much as we value Luther’s contribution to German culture, especially his impact on the formation of the German language, we have less reason to repeat the claims to superiority with which Martin Luther is associated, namely, a supposed “German identity.” For a long time the figure of Luther was used to

<sup>1</sup>The Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland or EKD) is a union of twenty Lutheran, Reformed, and United regional churches (Landeskirchen). German Protestant church structures are based on federal principles at all levels. Each local congregation is responsible for Christian life in its own area, while each regional church has its own special characteristics and retains its independence. Without in any way diminishing this autonomy, the EKD carries out joint tasks with which its members have entrusted it.

mislead Germans both at home and abroad into confusing patriotism with nationalism.<sup>2</sup>

In this light, the Jubilee would have a clear ecumenical dimension and not focus only on Luther himself. The EKD preferred to call this the “Reformation Decade,” but for the public it seemed that a face was necessary to whom people could relate, which obviously would be Martin Luther. The hallmark for the decade was John 1:1, “In the beginning was the word,” along with Luther’s image.

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The decade started in 2008 with yearly topics spread over the ten years. The intention of this project has been to fathom the “length and breadth and height and depth” (cf. Eph 3:18) of the implications of the Reformation. While revolving around the gospel, the project would also consider the shadow side of this movement and its influence in the past and for today.

In 2011, large baptismal events took place in several locations.<sup>3</sup> Knowing that people postponed baptism for different reasons, districts sought a new approach to celebrate baptism services. These large baptismal events involved special preparations and feasts for the families. Celebrating with a large crowd was impressive for all, and this movement continues.<sup>4</sup>

In 2012, concerts were presented in different towns throughout Germany. A booklet with comments by the people who attended was brought from one place to the next one.

The year 2013 brought reflection on the cruelty, intolerance, and destruction that Luther and the Reformation disseminated.

## FRAUENMAHL

The Study Center for Gender Issues of the EKD established the initiative “Frauenmahl” (Women’s Feast), which began on October 30, 2011. It is a contribution to the Reformation Decade of the EKD. The format is related to the Table Talks (*Tischreden*) that were common in Luther’s home. According to Ulrike Wagner-Rau, Professor of Practical Theology and co-organizer of the Marburg

<sup>2</sup>Wolfgang Huber, *Festrede zur Eröffnung der Lutherdekade in der Schlosskirche zu Wittenberg*, September 21, 2008.

<sup>3</sup>See Susanne Erlecke, “Reformation und Freiheit: Das Jahr der Taufe 2011,” in *Kirchliches Jahrbuch 2011, Dokumente zum kirchlichen Zeitgeschehen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 2013) 38–80.

<sup>4</sup>In the area of the former monastery of Salem, Lake Constance, for example, fifteen congregations celebrated baptisms together. Over a hundred children, youngsters, and adults were baptized with one thousand people attending the festival.

Frauenmahl, “In his *Tischreden*, Luther was able to bring together theology and everyday life. We want to rediscover this kind of speaking for today.”

#### BUILDING ON PREVIOUS REFORMATION CELEBRATIONS

1617: The jubilee served as confessional self-assurance.

1717: Luther was characterized on the one hand as the godly, devout man of the pietists, and on the other the Enlightenment figure who spoke out against superstition.

1817: Luther was celebrated as a religious-nationalist person, in memory of the 1813 Battle of the Nations near Leipzig, culminating in the defeat of Napoleon. Luther was viewed as the savior of Germany.

1933: (450th anniversary of Luther’s birth) The Nazi Reich seized power, and Luther was surrounded with the aura of God-given great “Führer” in order to see Hitler as his successor.

1946: (400th anniversary of Luther’s death) Luther was seen as the comforter of the German people.

1983: (Luther’s 500th birthday) There were different interpretations, a kind of competition about Luther’s legacy in East Germany and West Germany. In the east (the German Democratic Republic) Luther was no longer the servant of princes but the representative of early bourgeois revolution.

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Looking back makes it even more important to be sensitive to what 2017 will mean. How will future generations judge the events of 2017? Surely there will be no “Luther cult” anymore, because we are more than aware of the fact that Luther also had his dark side (for example, his offensive statements against the Jews). Protestantism in Germany and Lutheranism worldwide are confident enough not to gloss over these dark realities or cover them with a cloak of silence. Consistently, we learn from them and therefore proclaim that this was a diverse movement that changed both church and state.

The year 2017 will not only be a date of remembrance, but one of reclaiming the message of freedom and grace that Luther and other Reformers rediscovered as they read the Bible anew. We will recognize the riches of our respective traditions and learn from one another because the ecumenical dimension is clear. The Reformation Jubilee 2017 is a global event.

The anniversary commemorates the liberating power of the gospel. People in present-day society are searching for a merciful God in a different way than in Luther’s time. Today, people need to be reminded of the fundamental insights of the

Reformation. Faith in Christ makes it possible to live a life without fear and without the inner constraint of self-justification. Faith makes us free before God and for God. This freedom calls us to responsible ministry to people and the world, because the gospel deals with key issues that are important to all people: justification, peace, human dignity, freedom, human rights, and sustainability.

#### WHO, WITH WHOM, AND WHY?

Many initiatives have been successful and publicly effective because they were done with partner churches and local authorities. Reformation was and is more than nailing theses on a door. The Reformation Jubilee is not only a church anniversary but one with and for society.

The German federal government, federal states, and concerned municipalities are participating in the preparation of the Jubilee and are already presenting many exhibitions. The German Bundestag acknowledged this Jubilee to be a “world-class event.” In October 2011, all political parties adopted in a united voice a resolution to promote and support the Reformation Jubilee 2017 at the federal level. All federal states decided to make October 31, 2017, a public holiday. One should note that in the town of Wittenberg only 7% of the inhabitants are Christians.

Many significant values are commonly understood to have been achieved by the Reformation:

- written language
- empowering education
- freedom of the individual
- considering issues of gender
- and from the theological perspective, the four *solis*: *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, *sola fide* (Christ alone, grace alone, Scripture alone, and faith alone).

All modern consequences of the Reformation cannot be related monocationally to the events in Wittenberg five hundred years ago. Even talking about Germany as the “Mutterland der Reformation” (Heartland of the Reformation) causes irritation in Switzerland and elsewhere. The Reformation movement is not a national one and it is not an anti-Catholic one.

Facing a society where the presence of Christian faith is weakening, there is a need to put the rediscovery of God in the center of the Reformation Jubilee. The all-embracing effort should be to bring God into dialogue with society. It will be important that all events be occasions to encounter the gospel, the Bible, grace, freedom, and responsibility. It will be important to create an anniversary that speaks to those alienated from the faith as well as those who are only distant members of the church.

Politics and art, youth and spirituality in one diverse world will be topics for

discussion, always with the aim of seeing the presence of God in modern life—to dare, to think, to ask, to tell, to discover, to celebrate, and to trust God.

The EKD, coming from Luther's Reformation, and the Swiss Protestant Churches (SEK) that originated from Calvin and Zwingli's Reformation decided in 2012 to set an example of the unity of Protestantism by organizing a joint congress in Zurich in 2013. Representatives from thirty-five countries on five continents attended that meeting. There was common agreement that Reformation has to be understood in plural terms and as a European movement whose roots date even back to earlier centuries (for example, the work of Peter Waldo, John Hus, and others).

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The context of global Christianity has to be addressed, including the confrontation with secularization and erosion on one side and the growth of fundamentalist tendencies on the other. But there is also a need to acknowledge the reality and future of ecumenical dialogues and global concerns (for example, climate change). The year 2017 should be a starting point for celebrations of the Reformation throughout the world in years to come.

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The EKD invites all people to celebrate 2017 cheerfully, with self-confidence and self-criticism, and openness to our ecumenical sisters and brothers. It will be a feast of Christ.

#### ECUMENICAL OPENNESS TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN GERMANY AND OTHER DENOMINATIONS

In the year 2013, considering the “dark side” of the Reformation, the EKD and the Roman Catholic Church in Germany installed an interdenominational committee to attempt to clarify those images and interpretations of the Reformation that constitute a substantial burden for us even today. A reconciliation service (“Healing of Memories”) will be celebrated on March 13, 2017.

Other ecumenical highlights involving both main churches in Germany (Protestant and Catholic) will be a pilgrimage of the Council of the EKD together with the German Catholic Bishops Conference to the Holy Land—Israel and Palestine—in October 2016, seeking to get back to the historical roots of faith. Ecumenical congresses are being planned on the Bible as well as on social issues and challenges for the churches caused by secularization. Another service will be held

on Holy Cross Day in September 2017, to consider the theology of the cross in the light of the Reformation.

The Reformation Jubilee will last from October 31, 2016, until October 31, 2017.

Both days will be celebrated with church services. National and international guests from churches, governments, and society are invited, starting on Reformation Day in Berlin in 2016 and finishing in Wittenberg in 2017.

#### LUTHER'S TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

On October 30, 2016, a revised edition of Martin Luther's translation of the Bible will be presented in a service to be broadcast on television. Language is the key to understanding today as it has been in the past. With Luther's translation in the Reformation period, German-speaking people were able to understand their faith by reading the Bible in their own language. This was an event that changed everything, opening education to a larger group of people.

#### KIRCHENTAG IN BERLIN AND WITTENBERG

The thirty-sixth Kirchentag<sup>5</sup> will take place in Berlin and Wittenberg, lasting from May 24 until May 28, 2017. Tens of thousands of people are expected to come to this great church festival. Across religious and denominational boundaries people will experience community, celebrating services, enjoying concerts, and being part of enthusiastic and honest discussions. There will be an emphasis on the international ecumenical world and interreligious dialogue as well as on five hundred years of Reformation and the future of Protestantism. These meetings and events will offer the possibility of sharing views on international politics, family, society, sustainability issues, peace issues, and much more.

On May 28, 2017, there will be a festive service on the meadows of the river Elbe, with a superb view of the towers of the Castle Church and St. Mary's Town Church in Wittenberg. Christians, locals, and people from all over the world will come to celebrate outside the gates of Wittenberg. This will be the highlight of the thirty-sixth Kirchentag in Berlin and Wittenberg. Three hundred thousand people are expected to pray, sing, and listen to God's word, giving thanks for God's grace and enjoying the community of faith in a growing ecumenical fellowship. There will be a *Nacht der Lichter* ("Night of Lights," modeled after the Taizé service) in the night from Saturday to Sunday morning. This closing service of the Kirchentag will celebrate not only five hundred years of Reformation but will look forward to the future.

<sup>5</sup>The Kirchentag (German Evangelical Church Assembly) is an assembly of lay members and clergy of the Evangelical Church in Germany. It sees itself as a free movement of people brought together by their Christian faith and engagement in the future of the Evangelical Church and wider society. The assembly partakes in Bible study, lectures, and discussions, and also hosts concerts. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_Evangelical\\_Church\\_Assembly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Evangelical_Church_Assembly) (accessed February 4, 2016).

## GATES OF FREEDOM: WORLD REFORMATION EXHIBITION IN WITTENBERG

The “Gates of Freedom” event will be held in Wittenberg from May 20 to September 10, 2017. At this event, a number of international institutions will present their views on the Reformation on the ramparts of the Wittenberg city center. Themed areas covering spirituality, peace, globalization, and culture will show that the Reformation was much more than just an historical event: it was a force for modernization, change, and above all, the improvement of human lives.

Join in! Be present! The gates will be open in Wittenberg to welcome you.

## PILGRIM TRAILS

As a collaboration of churches, tourism associations, local authorities, and others, pilgrim trails have been set up. The “Luther Trail” is open to hikers and visitors interested in the Reformation and its impact. The trail leads through different federal states and landscapes to the primary sites of the Reformation.<sup>6</sup>

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## LUTHERGARTEN (LUTHER GARDEN)

As a means of giving expression to the quincentennial, a Luther Garden has been established in Wittenberg on the grounds of the former town fortifications. In connection with this project, five hundred trees will be planted at different places in the city region, giving a concrete sign of the optimism so clearly expressed by Luther.

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On September 20, 2008, Mark Hanson, former president of the Lutheran World Federation and former presiding bishop of the ELCA, said during the foundation ceremony of the Luthergarten:

The time when Martin Luther lived was haunted by nightmares and fantasies about what the future would bring. They were nightmares of divine judgment and the fantasies of some utopia ironically created out of violence. There is a well-known story that Luther, when asked what he would do if God’s final judgment were to arrive the next day, replied that he would plant an apple tree. Although the story is likely a legend, it reflects the confidence that the life lived

<sup>6</sup>See <http://www.lutherweg.de/aktuelles/18263.html> (accessed February 4, 2016).

in Jesus Christ can be lived in evangelical repentance that is both joyfully attentive to life in this creation and joyously hopeful for life in the new creation. May the dedication of this garden provide the occasion for our witness to the repentant life in Christ and our joyous hope of life where Jesus lives.<sup>7</sup>

Come and join the world exhibition with your church, congregation, or other organization! Come and visit the places where the Reformation began and then spread all over the world. Begin in Wittenberg. Welcome! ⊕

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<sup>7</sup>See <http://www.luthergarten.de/english-vision-background.html> (accessed February 4, 2016).