



Living into Reformation: 2017 and Beyond

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When was the last time you celebrated a five hundredth anniversary? The traditional list of gifts appropriate for different anniversary years doesn't stretch nearly that far. Some of us remember the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's birth, in 1983. United States Lutherans collaborated across denominational lines to hold a weeklong Martin Luther Jubilee in Washington, D.C. The United States Postal Service issued a twenty cent commemorative stamp honoring Luther. In communist East Germany, 1983 was a double celebration of German national pride: the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth and the one hundredth anniversary of Karl Marx's death.

October 31, 1517, marks the symbolic beginning of the Reformation. On this date, we are told, Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses were posted on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Scholars still debate whether this is fact or legend. We do know that Luther "posted" his theses by mail to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. It was common to post such university announcements on the doors of the churches in Wittenberg. If Luther's Ninety-five Theses were actually posted on the door of the Castle Church, it is likely that this was done by a student

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or servant rather than by Luther himself, and it certainly would have been done with wax rather than a hammer and nails. So much for our iconic image of the first Reformation Day!

As we anticipate the five hundredth anniversary of this event,¹ there has been lively conversation about the best verb to use to describe what we will do in 2017. To some, “celebrate” sounds too triumphal. Should we celebrate the division of the church? But the suggested alternatives come with baggage of their own. “Commemorate” seems to imply a past that is over and done with. “Observe” sounds too detached, as if watching from a distance. This discussion signals that an appropriate engagement with 2017 is complex.

Anniversaries are not only about the past—who we are and where we come from. Anniversaries are also about the future—who we are and where we are going. Regardless of the word or words we use, a faithful engagement with the Reformation quincentennial is best understood less as a celebration of Martin Luther and Lutheranism than as a celebration of the gospel that was—and is—at the heart of the Reformation movement. As Luther himself wrote in the sixty-second of his Ninety-five Theses, “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”

This essay explores some themes intended to widen our perspective on the significance of 2017 and offers some concrete suggestions for congregations and synods as they plan for the five hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation.

A WIDENED VIEW

In July 2012, I attended the summer seminar of the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France.² The theme was “What to Do about 2017? The Ecumenical Challenge of an Anniversary.” By the time the seminar papers were posted online several months later, though, the title had changed in one small but significant way. The subtitle was no longer “The Ecumenical Challenge of an Anniversary” but had become “The Challenge of an Ecumenical Anniversary.” The shift reflected what the seminar organizers themselves had learned in the process. Initially, 2017 had felt like “our” anniversary, the Lutheran anniversary. Understood this way, it seemed to pose a challenge to our ecumenical relationships. What would our ecumenical partners make of an in-house, navel-gazing event?

But the seminar speakers claimed 2017 as “ours” in a much broader way. Scholars from seven other Christian traditions—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Reformed, Methodist, Mennonite, and Pentecostal—shared their perspectives. In addition, the major presentations by Lutheran scholars came not from

¹Editor’s note: Anticipating the anniversary is the purpose of this issue of *Word & World*. Another issue on the Reformation will follow in 2017.

²The Institute for Ecumenical Research was founded in 1963 at the initiative of the Lutheran World Federation.

North America and Europe but from theologians from Brazil and Zimbabwe. All affirmed that 2017 was their anniversary, too, because 1517 is also part of their history. Given that Martin Luther consistently made the lists of the top ten figures of the second millennium of the Common Era and that Luther's posting of the Ninety-five Theses consistently made the lists of the top ten events of the millennium, perhaps this should not come as a surprise. Still, to hear the claim made explicit by representatives of such a wide range of Christian traditions was striking.

What the seminar made clear was that as we look back to 1517 and look ahead to 2017, who "we" are has changed dramatically. We are living in an ecumenical age and in the age of global Christianity. When Lutherans recognize the five hundredth anniversary of what God was doing in the world through Martin Luther and the Reformation, we need to do so together with other Christians from across traditions and from around the world.

REFORMATION AND REPENTANCE

There is much to celebrate about the Reformation: a renewed emphasis on the Scriptures, a focus on the gospel as God's promise, the uplifting of the vocation of all Christians in the church and in the world, and more. But there are also things to regret: divisions, condemnations, and wars of religion. The first of Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses is "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." No observance of the five hundredth anniversary of the posting of the Ninety-five Theses and the beginning of the Reformation will be authentic unless it takes repentance seriously.

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In the Gospel reading for Reformation Sunday, John 8:31–36, some of Jesus' Jewish followers claim, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone." Jesus rejects their misplaced assurance, but Lutherans and other Protestants sometimes commit the same offense. Reformation Day celebrations can all too easily convey the sense that "we are descendants of Luther and the Reformation and have never been slaves to anyone."

It's important to remember that Luther never wanted his followers to be called Lutherans. It is Christ whom we follow, not Luther. In many countries, churches do not identify themselves as "Lutheran" but as "Evangelical" or as churches "of the Augsburg Confession." These denominational labels rightly put the emphasis on the Lutheran confession of faith rather than on Luther himself. Similarly, our observances of the Reformation call us to renewed faithfulness to Christ, not to our own past.

Our repentance must be more than an attitude of regret. In the third point of his Ninety-five Theses, Luther insists that inner repentance is worthless without outward change. For the church, genuine repentance calls for concrete acts of reconciliation with those whom we have offended over the years. In 1994, the ELCA Church Council adopted a Declaration to the Jewish Community firmly rejecting Luther's harsh writings against the Jews. In 2010, the Lutheran World Federation asked for—and received—forgiveness from the World Mennonite Conference for past offenses against the Anabaptists, including both verbal condemnation and physical persecution. These actions remind us that as we celebrate the many positive accomplishments of the Reformation, we also need to repent for our sins against others.

The need for repentance has also been a theme in Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, both nationally and internationally. In the history of relations between Lutherans and Catholics, the need for repentance is mutual, since both sides have spent centuries vilifying each other. This is well expressed already in the 2013 report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, "From Conflict to Communion." The foreword to the report insists, "In 2017, we must confess openly that we have been guilty before Christ of damaging the unity of the church." The report "describes a way 'from conflict to communion'—a way whose goal we have not yet reached."³ While we are still on the journey, we have—by the grace of God—come a long way from the conflict of previous generations.

In the Prayers of the Church for Reformation Sunday, we would do well to include a petition confessing the sin of division. In a society that is increasingly secularized and privatized, the divisions between Christian denominations are not only an ecclesial concern but a scandal in our witness in the world. A contemporary Reformation emphasis might well incorporate themes of healing, of witness, and of Christian unity.

AN ECUMENICAL REFORMATION

Martin Luther's goal was never to start a new denomination. He wanted to restore the gospel to its central place in the church's preaching and teaching and to awaken among Christians a trusting faith in Jesus Christ. He wanted to reform and renew the church, not to divide it.

Consistent with this understanding, the ELCA has from its beginning taken an ecumenical posture in relationship to other Christian denominations.⁴ It has adopted full communion agreements with six Christian denominations: the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of

³The Lutheran World Federation and The Pontifical Council for Promoting Ecumenical Unity, *From Conflict to Communion* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013) 7–8, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/From%20Conflict%20to%20Communion.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2016).

⁴"The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/The_Vision_Of_The_ELCA.pdf?_ga=1.187117992.1610192281.1386698294 (accessed January 4, 2016).

Christ, the Moravian Church, the Episcopal Church, and the United Methodist Church. It is also engaged in formal bilateral dialogue with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Mennonite Church USA, the Orthodox Church, and the Roman Catholic Church.

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How widely known are these agreements and these dialogues? The answer varies according to one's context. Some congregations, in both rural and urban settings, are actively involved in partnerships with one or more full communion partners, including sharing clergy. Others are unaware of these ecumenical relationships, which is not surprising given that surveys show a significant number of ELCA members have little or no sense even of belonging to the ELCA beyond their local congregation.

Matters to Consider

Reformation Day and the Reformation quincentennial can be opportunities not only for honoring our Lutheran identity but also for renewed engagement with our fellow Christians of other denominational families.

Consider a pulpit exchange for Reformation Sunday. Do Lutherans dare let a Presbyterian or Episcopalian colleague preach to their congregations about the meaning of the Reformation, and vice versa? Think of how much we have to gain from seeing ourselves and our traditions through the eyes of other Christians.

Consider inviting other congregations in your community to plan an ecumenical Reformation service, to embody the reality that we are joint heirs of the Reformation. This could take place on the afternoon of Reformation Sunday or as a midweek service on October 31 itself. It is essential that the planning be ecumenical. A Reformation event should not be a Lutheran occasion to which we then invite others as guests. To be genuinely ecumenical, there must be ecumenical involvement in the leadership and throughout the planning process.

Consider educational opportunities focusing on one or more of our ecumenical agreements. Consider inviting members from those faith communities to a joint study of our ecumenical agreements. Texts of all of the full communion documents are available for download on the ELCA website, as are study documents and statements from the ongoing bilateral dialogues.⁵ One needn't be limited to

⁵<http://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations> (accessed January 4, 2016).

study with just one other conversation partner at a time. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed by representatives of the Vatican and of the Lutheran World Federation in 1999, was also signed by the World Methodist Council in 2006. Ecumenical conversation seems to be contagious!

Host an ecumenical panel discussion, in which representatives of the Christian traditions in your community speak about their own identity and explore similarities and differences in a spirit of openness and Christian unity. How might such conversations foster shared witness and service in your community?

A GLOBAL REFORMATION

While church membership and church attendance are declining in North America and Europe, Christianity is growing rapidly in the Global South. Within the Lutheran family, the fastest growing churches in the world are in Tanzania and Ethiopia. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), of which the ELCA is a member, is a global communion of 145 churches with over seventy-two million members in 98 countries. (Another three million Lutherans worldwide, including the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, are part of the International Lutheran Council.) When the LWF holds its next assembly in 2017, it will not be in Wittenberg, where the Reformation was born five hundred years ago, but in Windhoek, Namibia, where the Reformation is alive and well today.

What traditions from your global partners might you incorporate into worship, not only on Reformation Sunday but at other times as well?

We have much to learn from our global Lutheran partners. Lutheran churches in the United States were established by and have grown primarily through immigration; as immigration from Europe has declined, so too has Lutheran church membership in the United States. But in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and elsewhere, Lutheran churches are growing not passively, through immigration, but actively through evangelism. In the United States, congregations that share a pastor often do so as a result of fiscal necessity rather than shared vision. In other countries, a pastor serves multiple congregations and preaching points, and much of the work of ministry is done by trained evangelists, not due to limited finances but because the demand for the gospel far exceeds the supply of full-time church leaders. What can we learn from these churches about how to speak the gospel in a lively way that engenders faith?

Each of the sixty-five synods of the ELCA has a companion relationship with at least one other synod or church body in the Lutheran World Federation; all told, there are 120 such companion synod relationships. Even the name “companion synod” conveys a marked difference from the traditional model of “mother” churches and “daughter” churches. Companion synod relationships are based in a

model of “accompaniment,” which highlights mutuality among the partners. These companion synod relationships are a natural way to begin to consider the Reformation from a global perspective. What traditions from your global partners might you incorporate into worship, not only on Reformation Sunday but at other times as well? What might you learn from a shared Bible study on a biblical book or theme? Local groups gathering for conversation and then sharing their insights across the miles would enrich both the Bible study and the companion relationship.

One of Luther’s central commitments was the importance of translation into the language of the people. On Pentecost, many congregations read the scriptural lessons in different languages. Consider doing the same thing on Reformation Sunday.

Luther also utilized emerging media (in his case, the printing press) to help communicate the gospel widely. If your congregation has not done much with multimedia, the Reformation anniversary would be an appropriate time to experiment. Remember, we are not celebrating just the events of five hundred years ago; we are continuing that reforming work today. Use electronic media to connect globally. Consider a Skyped greeting to or from a global partner as part of your Reformation observances.

LIVING INTO THE FUTURE

Quincentennial anniversaries don’t come around often, and preparation takes time. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) launched its journey toward the five hundredth anniversary with a Luther Decade beginning in 2008. Each year of the decade has a specific Reformation-related theme. The EKD themes are:

- 2009 - Reformation and Confession
- 2010 - Reformation and Education
- 2011 - Reformation and Freedom
- 2012 - Reformation and Music
- 2013 - Reformation and Tolerance
- 2014 - Reformation and Politics
- 2015 - Reformation: Image and Bible
- 2016 - Reformation and One World

Most of us did not give ourselves a decade-long head start, but that need not be a limitation. These themes are worth exploring in any year, before and after 2017. The themes are also not exhaustive. The Lutheran Church in Hungary, for example, substituted Reformation and Women as one of its annual themes.

The Northeastern Iowa Synod of the ELCA has deliberately crafted a series of theme years leading to and extending beyond 2017 with the overarching theme “Celebrating Renewal.” Each year focuses on a central individual as a model for Christian faith and life. The series began in 2015, with a commemoration of the six hundredth anniversary of the death of Jan Hus, an early Czech reformer who was

burned at the stake a century before Luther. The focus in 2016 will be on another forerunner of the Reformation, St. Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–1231). St. Elizabeth lived at the Wartburg Castle three hundred years before Luther's time and is well known for her works of charity, feeding the hungry, and establishing hospitals to care for the sick. The focus in 2017 will be Martin Luther himself, while the focus in 2018 will be Luther's close colleague, Philipp Melancthon, who arrived in Wittenberg as a university professor in 1518. Katharina von Bora Luther will be highlighted in 2019. The series concludes in 2020 with an emphasis on Johannes Bugenhagen, pastor of the City Church in Wittenberg, as an opportunity to celebrate the life and work of parish ministry.

The Lutheran World Federation has developed a three-part emphasis leading up to its Twelfth Assembly in 2017, which will have as its theme "Liberated by God's Grace." The sub-themes are: Salvation—Not for Sale; Human Beings—Not for Sale; and Creation—Not for Sale. In a world seemingly defined by greater and greater consumption, these emphases are a powerful reminder of two things: first, that God's gracious gifts to us are free and, second, that we are stewards, rather than owners of these gifts. According to LWF General Secretary Martin Junge, they "provide an opportunity to grapple with the central concerns of the Reformation in a framework relevant to our own times."⁶ Pressing contemporary issues like migration and global climate change are not directly addressed in the Lutheran confessional writings of the sixteenth century; the LWF resource materials engage these and other issues with the Lutheran theological tradition in faithful, constructive ways. This models a self-understanding of church as reformed and always reforming.

The refrain "not for sale" hearkens back to the sale of indulgences, which prompted Luther's Ninety-five Theses. Five hundred years later, attempts to commodify the gospel are different but no less prevalent than they were in 1517. Perhaps the crassest form is the prosperity gospel that promises literal wealth to those who are faithful enough. A more subtle form of commodification may be found in those megachurch complexes where the availability of Starbucks coffee seems more compelling than the availability of Holy Communion.

It is not just the gospel that is commodified but the whole creation, including God's human creatures. The language of "natural and human resources" lulls us into thinking of God's gifts primarily in terms of their utility, not their God-given value. The workaholic whose sense of self-worth is determined by salary or accomplishments is on the same spectrum of human commodification that ends in slavery and human trafficking. Christians are not immune to the temptation to equate value with price. Even for those espousing a theology of justification by grace through faith, much of day-to-day life is profoundly shaped by a sense of works-righteousness, although it is usually directed at proving one's worth to others and to oneself rather than to God.

⁶"Liberated by God's Grace," <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-reformation-booklet-liberated-gods-grace> (accessed January 4, 2016).

On the journey toward 2017, two projects of the LWF challenge the church to be open to new voices. The office for Women in Church and Society (WICAS) has launched an initiative called “Women on the Move—from Wittenberg to Windhoek.” One of the projects within this initiative is “Her-Stories,” which encourages telling the stories of women who have been agents of renewal in their churches and communities. An online tool kit provides guidelines for collecting and sharing the stories of these unsung reformers.⁷ Who are the women, both past and present, in your congregation or your synod whose stories should be preserved and shared? How might we encourage women and girls to think of themselves as reformers today and tomorrow?

The LWF has also launched a Global Young Reformers Network, which has adopted the theme “Freed by God’s Love to Change the World.” Working together in international teams, participants in the network are developing Living Reformation projects shaped by the LWF themes. Each member church was invited to nominate two delegates to the Global Young Reformers Network; other young people between the ages of sixteen and thirty are able to participate in Network activities through social media.⁸

How willing are we to let young people shape how we live into the future together? When confronted with new ideas and new voices, one sometimes hears the joke that the seven last words of the church are “We’ve never done it that way before.” But is it a joke or is it a defense against the fresh prompting of the Holy Spirit? Imagine those same words being spoken to Martin Luther five hundred years ago by the leadership of the church. How fortunate that Luther did not give up when his insights and questions were not welcomed by his elders. Surely, one of the gifts of a reformation spirit is freedom and a faithful openness to the future.

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The year 2017 affords a rich opportunity for individuals, congregations, and synods to live out the faith in lively new ways, as part of God’s ongoing reformation of the church and of our world. What we do in preparation for 2017 should pull us into the future, not bind us to the past. October 31, 1517, is not a designation of the Reformation in its entirety but marks the beginning of the Reformation. For almost thirty years, until his death in 1546, Martin Luther was at work implementing and extending the reform that began with the simple act of a university professor posting theses for debate.

In 1518 Luther delivered his Heidelberg Disputation, best known for its for-

⁷“Women on the Move—from Wittenberg to Windhoek,” <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/women-move-1> (accessed January 4, 2016).

⁸“Agents of Ongoing Reformation,” <http://www.youngreformers.net/socialnetwork> (accessed January 4, 2016).

mulation of what it is to be a theologian of the cross. How will we be called to bear—and to bear witness to—the cross in 2018? In 1521, Luther was excommunicated by the church and banned by the Empire. He took refuge for ten months in the Wartburg Castle. Perhaps 2021 is a time to think about ways in which the church lives and witnesses in exile. Let 2022 be a celebration of biblical fluency, marking the five hundredth anniversary of Luther’s translation of the New Testament from Greek into German. Let 2029 be a celebration of education—the lifelong education of the baptized—marking the five hundredth anniversary of the publication of Luther’s catechisms. Let 2030, the five hundredth anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, mark a renewed commitment to the public witness of the church.

Another project of the Lutheran World Federation is the “Luther Garden” in Wittenberg, Germany. When completed, the Luther Garden will include five hundred trees, each one sponsored by a church body or church-related institution. Some are shade trees. Some are fruit trees. There are trees native to five continents. Organizers describe it as a living monument to the Reformation. At the center of the Luther Garden is a Luther rose, from which paths radiate out into the world. The sponsor of each tree in the Luther Garden is asked to plant a partner tree in their own place. In this way, the living monument is not only in Wittenberg but throughout the world. Let our journey toward and beyond 2017 also be a living monument of the Lutheran Christian faith and witness in the world!

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT AND CONVERSATION

What does “reformation” mean to you?

What in your congregation or community needs reforming?

Where is repentance needed in your congregation or community? From whom do you need to seek forgiveness and reconciliation?

What gets in the way of people hearing the gospel today? What can we do to communicate the gospel in ways that overcome these obstacles?

What meaning does the name “Lutheran” have in your community? What reputation does your congregation have in the community?

What ecumenical partners does your congregation have? What partners would you like to have?

Look around. Who are the people in your community, in your country, in our world, who will be remembered as reformers years from now?

Imagine. What do you hope the church will be like one hundred years from now? Five hundred years from now? How will we get there from here? ⊕

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