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Dirk G. Lange

Luther Seminary, dlange001@luthersem.edu

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Five Hundred Years of Reformation: A Joint Commemoration

DIRK G. LANGE

As Lutheran congregations begin preparing for 2017 and the five hundred years of the Reformation, they do so in an environment much different from previous anniversaries. The Reformation anniversary takes place in a pluralistic and secular world. It is also, in the life of the church, a time of ecumenism. The planning for Reformation Day (whether that in 2017 or any other year) requires an attention to this context. The remembrance cannot simply be focused on a particular anniversary but on the trajectory of the Reformation beyond 2017. The date October 31, 2017, is just one marker. It inaugurates the next five hundred years of the ongoing Reformation.

COMMEMORATING THE ANNIVERSARY

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has highlighted three principles for this commemoration: Reformation is global, ecumenically accountable, and ongoing.¹ In this broad perspective, local parishes are invited into a dynamic of rethink-

¹The Lutheran World Federation, *2017—Marking 500 Years of Reformation*, <https://2017.lutheranworld.org> (accessed February 10, 2016).

In the sixteenth century, Catholics and Lutherans frequently not only misunderstood but also exaggerated and caricatured their opponents in order to make them look ridiculous. Now, the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity have produced a liturgy for a joint commemoration of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation.

ing what the Reformation means for society today. Can the celebrations, the worship, study, and engagement leading up to 2017 and flowing from 2017 “focus on how the gracious love of God, through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, opens up opportunities for us as faithful Christians to reach out as healers and reconcilers to a world torn apart by strife and inequality”?²

Luther’s reforming activity was not the construction of a new identity but rather the deconstruction of walls—political, cultural, ethnic, economic, and religious walls

The Commemoration of the Reformation is not simply an in-house affair. It cannot simply be an anniversary celebration. Remembering the Reformation, remembering what Martin Luther sought five hundred years ago, demands an engagement on the part of individuals and faith communities today for the neighbor and the world. Remembering the Reformation challenges us to think about the Spirit-inspired impetus of the Reformation and to live into that Spirit moment again today. Remembering does not mean simply repeating the event, like nailing the Ninety-five Theses on the door of the church again (even though kits are commercially available for just this purpose!). Nor does remembering mean celebrating an identity that is compromised by separation and even violence.

Almost five hundred years ago, Martin Luther felt the pressures of a system in which a person was never sure of God or God’s mercy. In many aspects, the medieval church had become a self-contained fortress. Today as well, every system, every culture, every church, every parish risks succumbing to the temptation of shutting doors and protecting an identity. Despite a Lutheran theology of liberation through faith alone, faith communities still construct an identity, a security, a world around themselves. We construct our own way to “heaven.” Yet, Luther’s search for a merciful God did not seek to create a new identity. Rather, it shook the foundation of an identity that had closed in upon itself. “Luther wanted to renew the church from within, not fragment it. History took a different path.”³

From this perspective, Luther’s reforming activity was not the construction of a new identity but rather the deconstruction of walls—political, cultural, ethnic, economic, and religious walls. Today, in an ongoing reformation, every faith community can ask: What walls have we built up that knowingly or unknowingly confine and reduce our vision? What Lutheran “masks” (buzz words, stories, stereotypes) have we hidden behind? What ways have we remembered the Reformation that tend to close the doors of our faith community rather than opening them to the global and ecumenical challenges of an ongoing reformation?

One significant attempt to tell the Reformation story ecumenically is found

²Ibid.

³Archbishop Antje Jackélen, “Delad Kristenhet reser gemensamt mot framtiden,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, <http://www.svd.se/delad-kristenhet-reser-gemensamt-mot-framtiden>.

in the little book *From Conflict to Communion*.⁴ This book was produced by the International Joint Commission Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue. In this document, Lutherans and Catholics at the global level describe the history and the intentions of the Reformation. It builds on five decades of theological work between Lutherans and Catholics. *From Conflict to Communion* lists the many ways in which both Lutherans and Catholics are thankful for the rediscovery of the gospel in the Reformation. It also laments the division and violence that ensued, division that did not have one single cause but resulted from a confluence of political, economic, and social forces in the sixteenth century. *From Conflict to Communion* concludes with five imperatives, calling Lutheran and Catholic communities together in common witness and service for the neighbor and the world.

Commemoration has been a keyword in describing our remembrance of the Reformation. This is a special type of commemoration that does not simply look back and “remember” but asks, “What does the Reformation mean for us today?”

A *Study Guide* has also been produced for parishes that wish to engage a deeper study of *From Conflict to Communion*. This study guide was prepared by the planning committee of the Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Diocese of Greensburg, the Byzantine Catholic Archeparchy of Pittsburgh and the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod ELCA. The study guide can help congregations prepare five to six sessions (or more if they wish!) on *From Conflict to Communion*, engaging a wonderful process of discovery into the roots of the Reformation and the way we can speak of and live the Reformation today.

Commemoration has been a keyword in describing our remembrance of the Reformation. This is a special type of commemoration that does not simply look back and “remember” but asks, “What does the Reformation mean for us today?” It is not just a celebration oblivious to the diverse impact the Reformation had and continues to have on society, culture, religion, and politics. A commemoration remembers the past with thanksgiving *and* lament; it also looks to the future, engaging how we will live into an ongoing reformation.

COMMEMORATION AND LITURGY

The commemoration can take on different liturgical forms. On October 31, Reformation Sunday in Lutheran parishes, a worshiping community could tell the story of the Reformation from a historical, global, and ecumenical perspective. The following suggestion is based on the classic Sunday liturgy compromised

⁴*From Conflict to Communion* is available through Amazon. A volume will also soon be published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company that will include *From Conflict to Communion*, the *Study Guide*, the *Common Prayer*, plus an important introductory article by William Rusch. See also: <https://2017.lutheranworld.org/content/conflict-communion-lutheran-catholic-common-commemoration-reformation-2017-131>.

of Gathering—Word—Meal—Sending as outlined on pages 92–93 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), but of course common to many traditions and denominations.

The *Gathering* section of a Sunday celebration serves as a bridge, as an entry point into worship. People come with all their personal stories, their various emotional and cognitive states of mind to worship. They come with their concerns and their joys. A transition is effected through singing and praying that leads people into an openness to hear God’s word afresh. In the Gathering section of the Sunday liturgy, the Reformation discoveries for which we are thankful and the division that we lament could be shared.

For example, the liturgy might begin with a classic song of the Reformation that is rooted in Scripture (particularly in a psalm) followed by a short narrative, telling the beginnings of the story (the years around 1517) and giving thanks for the rediscovery of the gospel. *From Conflict to Communion* has several sections that could be read as they summarize well the events of 1517 and following years. For example,

On October 31, 1517, Luther sent his *Ninety-five Theses*, titled *Disputation on the Efficacy and Power of Indulgences*, as an appendix to a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. In this letter, Luther expressed serious concerns about preaching and the practice of indulgences occurring under the responsibility of the Archbishop and urged him to make changes. On the same day, he wrote another letter to his Diocesan Bishop Hieronymus of Brandenburg. When Luther sent his theses to a few colleagues and most likely posted them on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, he wished to inaugurate an academic disputation on open and unresolved questions regarding the theory and practice of indulgences. (#40)⁵

Followed by possibly another reading:

Luther was surprised by the reaction to his theses, as he had not planned a public event but rather an academic disputation. He feared that the theses would be easily misunderstood if read by a wider audience. Thus, in late March 1518, he published a vernacular sermon, “On Indulgence and Grace” (“Sermo von Ablass und Gnade”). It was an extraordinarily successful pamphlet that quickly made Luther a figure well known to the German public. Luther repeatedly insisted that, apart from the first four propositions, the theses were not his own definitive assertions but rather propositions written for disputation. (#42)⁶

Thanksgiving is expressed for the gifts that the Reformation brought again to light. For example,

Lutherans are thankful in their hearts for what Luther and the other reformers made accessible to them: the understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and faith in him; the insight into the mystery of the Triune God who gives Himself

⁵Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *From Conflict to Communion* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt GmbH, 2013) 25.

⁶*Ibid.*

to us human beings out of grace and who can be received only in full trust in the divine promise; the freedom and certainty that the gospel creates; in the love that comes from and is awakened by faith, and in the hope in life and death that faith brings with it; and in the living contact with the Holy Scripture, the catechisms, and hymns that draw faith into life. (#225)⁷

In the priesthood of all baptized believers and their calling for the common mission of the church, “Lutherans...realize that what they are thanking God for is not a gift that they can claim only for themselves. They want to share this gift with all other Christians.” (#226)⁸

“In the sixteenth century, Catholics and Lutherans frequently not only misunderstood but also exaggerated and caricatured their opponents in order to make them look ridiculous.”

Another song of the Reformation or a song from the global church may follow. Then together the assembly confesses, lamenting the division and violence that followed the Reformation. For example,

As the commemoration in 2017 brings joy and gratitude to expression, so must it also allow room for both Lutherans and Catholics to experience the pain over failures and trespasses, guilt and sin in the persons and events that are being remembered. (#228)⁹ In the sixteenth century, Catholics and Lutherans frequently not only misunderstood but also exaggerated and caricatured their opponents in order to make them look ridiculous. They repeatedly violated the eighth commandment, which prohibits bearing false witness against one’s neighbor. (#233)¹⁰

A Kyrie is sung or another song of beseeching and lament. Then a story of the Reformation today from a different part of the world could be shared, focusing on the global and ecumenical characteristics of the Reformation. This would involve giving voice to immigrant communities in our midst, those who have found a home in the local congregation. This storytelling concludes as the congregation sings a song of praise or the Gloria. The Apostolic Greeting and Prayer of the Day then lead the assembly into the Liturgy of the Word.

In the Word section, our stories meet God’s story. If a congregation is using the Reformation texts from the Revised Common Lectionary rather than the usual designated Sunday texts (another option), these texts lends themselves to developing a broader perspective on the Reformation.

First Reading: Jer 31:31–34—speaks to God’s desire for universal salvation,

⁷Ibid., 81–82.

⁸Ibid., 82.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 83–84.

giving a new heart, a new people. This is a call and promise to the whole globe and all peoples.

Ps 46—the psalm highlights faith (“be still and know that I am God”). God alone acts and makes new. This is the heart of the Reformation rediscovery of the gospel.

Second Reading: Rom 3:19–28—faith is at the center of this text. Through faith we are partakers in God’s righteousness. Faith is that which unites all believers. It is at the heart of our ecumenical engagement. Similar ceremonies and traditions and practices do not constitute unity but a common faith.

Gospel: John 8:31–36—God’s truth sets us free to love and serve the neighbor. God’s truth sets us free and sends us forth in an ongoing work of reformation that is seeking to liberate all those who are in bondage to sin and the structure of sin.

One focus for the sermon should be chosen. The primary theme could be liberation and develop the theme of the LWF for the Reformation Anniversary and the twelfth General Assembly to be held in May 2017 in Windhoek, Namibia. The theme of liberation is powerful and speaks to the many forms of control and abuse of power people encounter today. God’s people are liberated by grace. This liberation is very specific reality in our daily lives: salvation is not for sale; human beings are not for sale; creation is not for sale.¹¹

Another theme may be unity. Today, Martin Luther has a dialogue partner he did not have in his own day. Today, Lutherans and Catholics and their ecumenical partners are in dialogue towards a greater unity. The Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in fact also celebrates its fiftieth anniversary in 2017. *From Conflict to Communion* notes,

Lutherans and Catholics have many reasons to retell their history in new ways. They have been brought closer together through family relations, through their service to the larger world mission, and through their common resistance to tyrannies in many places. These deepened contacts have changed mutual perceptions, bringing new urgency for ecumenical dialogue and further research. (#17)¹²

Ecumenical dialogue means being converted from patterns of thought that arise from and emphasize the differences between the confessions. Instead, in dialogue the partners look first for what they have in common and only then weigh the significance of their differences. These differences, however, are not overlooked or treated casually, for ecumenical dialogue is the common search for the truth of the Christian faith. (#34)¹³

The Hymn of the Day follows. A hymn is to be chosen that reflects and expands the themes of the sermon or the day. The Sunday liturgy then continues

¹¹This booklet can be ordered at <https://2017.lutheranworld.org/content/reformation-booklets-liberated-gods-grace-131>.

¹²*From Conflict to Communion*, 16.

¹³*Ibid.*, 22.

with intercessory prayer, the sharing of the peace, the offertory and the Meal. The Words of Institution proclaim God's gift to us "in Jesus' own words of command and promise."¹⁴ This proclamation is part of the Eucharist liturgy or Great Thanksgiving. A Eucharist liturgy may be chosen that expresses the praise and thanks of all creation, remembering Christ present and invoking the Holy Spirit. The assembly is then sent forth with God's blessing to engage the ongoing reformation in the world.

AN ECUMENICAL COMMEMORATION: THE *COMMON PRAYER*

If the occasion for the Reformation anniversary is an ecumenical moment, the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) have produced a liturgy (*Common Prayer*) for a joint commemoration. This liturgy is based on the pattern outlined in *From Conflict to Communion*. The *Common Prayer* expresses the joy and gratitude of Lutherans and Catholics for the positive elements of the Reformation and the gifts that they have both received; it laments and confesses the many ways in which both Lutherans and Catholics condoned violence in the name of faith and the enormous amount of human suffering that followed; then, looking forward, the *Common Prayer* commits the worship assembly to joint witness and service in and for the world, bearing witness to God's mercy and working for reconciliation, peace, and justice for the entire creation. "In this particular and unique ecumenical commemoration, thanksgiving and lament, joy and repentance, mark the singing and the praying as we commemorate the gifts of the Reformation and ask forgiveness for the division that we have perpetuated. Thanksgiving and lament, however, do not stand alone: they lead us to common witness and commitment to each other and for the world."¹⁵

The introduction to the *Common Prayer* outlines the many ways in which this liturgy can be adapted to a local setting. The *Common Prayer* is a template. It will serve for the global joint commemoration in the Cathedral of Lund, Sweden, on October 31, 2016. This is a historic event: Lutherans and Catholic commemorating the Reformation together. Pope Francis has also recently announced that he will participate in this commemoration.

The *Common Prayer* is structured on the pattern of daily prayer: psalmody and prayer. Recent adaptations of this familiar pattern, inspired by Vatican II, have focused on an Opening, Psalmody, Word, and Intercessory Prayer.¹⁶ In this pattern, the gathered people are first immersed in God's word through the psalms and reading of Scripture and then turned towards the world as they engage a fervent intercession for all those in need, especially for those not present at the time of prayer.

¹⁴*Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 93.

¹⁵*Common Prayer: From Conflict to Communion, Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation—2017*, 5.

¹⁶See, for example, *ELW*, 295–297.

The theological rationale of *Common Prayer* mirrors the reality of Christian life: shaped by God's Word, the people are sent out in common witness and service. In this particular and unique ecumenical commemoration, thanksgiving and lament, joy and repentance, mark the singing and the praying as we commemorate the gifts of the Reformation and ask forgiveness for the division that we have perpetuated. The pattern of thanksgiving and lament is characteristic of the psalms. They lead us to a common witness and commitment to each other, with the neighbor, for the world.

it is the hope of the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity that Lutheran and Catholic parishes will get together to think about how they will commemorate the Reformation and continue deeper on an ecumenical journey

The *Common Prayer* is also meant for local parish use. The template is meant to be adapted to the particularities of the local context in terms of the songs/hymns that will be sung and the development of a joint sermon. Sermon notes are provided. It is the hope of the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity that Lutheran and Catholic parishes will get together to think about how they will commemorate the Reformation and continue deeper on an ecumenical journey.

THE OUTLINE OF THE COMMON PRAYER

Opening

- Opening Song
- Open Dialogue
- Reading
- Prayer
- Song Invoking the Holy Spirit

Psalmody: Thanksgiving

- Two Readings: *From Conflict to Communion*
- Prayer
- Song of Thanksgiving

Psalmody: Repentance

- Two Readings: *From Conflict to Communion*
- Dialogue Prayer of Lament (three parts)
- Psalm 130
- Words of Forgiveness
- Sharing of Peace

Prayer: Common Witness and Commitment

Gospel Reading (John 15:1–5)

Joint Sermon (sermon notes are provided in the Introduction)

The Apostles Creed

Song

Commitments: Five Imperatives (all five are read and a candle is lighted after each reading)

Song

Intercessory Prayer

The Lord's Prayer

Thanksgiving and Blessing (four-part dialogue)

Concluding Song⁷ ⊕

DIRK G. LANGE is associate dean for graduate theological education and associate professor of worship at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. He is one of the authors of the Introduction to the Common Prayer for the Ecumenical Commemoration.

⁷The *Common Prayer*, with its introduction, can be downloaded free of charge at: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/joint-common-prayer-lutheran-catholic-common-commemoration-reformation-2017>.