

# REFORMATION 500 REPORT



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## COMMITTED TO UNITY IN CHRIST

*The Rev. Jonathan Linman*



**THE YEAR 2017 SAW THE SINGULAR PRIVILEGE OF COMMEMORATING THE 500TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE REFORMATION.** We in the Metropolitan New York Synod made the most of this opportunity, rising to the occasion to offer a significant number of events, initiatives, and resources. During the year-and-a-half of Reformation 500-related events (from June 2016 to November 2017), there was an average of an event every week-and-a-half during that time, over 52 events or initiatives either sponsored by our synod and/or taking place in our local ministry settings and elsewhere, in which I and others on Synod staff participated. There were also any number of

other Reformation 500-related occasions—Luther movie nights, ecumenical services, hymn-sings, trips to Germany, and more—hosted by our local ministry settings, which are not included in this particular report. I had the privilege of serving as the synod staff liaison for our synodical commemorations, helping to shepherd our initiatives, even as a large number of persons were involved in planning and leading our events. These numerous occasions enabled us to fulfill the hoped-for outcomes or goals of our Reformation 500 commemorations that were articulated by a visioning group early in the planning stages for the **REFORMATION 500 YEAR.**

**These are the people former Bishop Rimbo invited to serve on a Working Group to cast the vision for our Reformation 500 commemorations:**

- Joe Chappel
- Maria del Toro
- Amandus Derr
- Mark Erson
- Miriam Gross
- Jonathan Linman
- Ulf Lunow
- Daniel Peter
- Terra Rowe
- William Rusch
- Samuel Silaban
- Jerome Taylor



**Additionally, there were any number of persons who did the leg work to put the vision into action, with further planning, and leading events and initiatives. There are too many to list here, but very special thanks go to the following persons for their particular leadership:**

- Jared Stahler
- Mieke Vandersall
- MNYS Staff

## LUTHERAN IDENTITY

One of our Reformation 500 goals was to nurture a deepened, renewed, and joyful sense of global Lutheran identity for the 21st Century. So much of our Lutheran identity is summed up in what we chose as our Reformation 500 tagline: "Faith, not Fear." That is to say, since we are saved by grace effective through faith in Christ alone, what do we have to fear when it's all said and done? "Faith, not Fear," was the theme for Synod Assembly 2017 and was reflected in plenary sessions, via testimonies, in worship, and in workshops. "Faith, not Fear" also served as a focus for some of our synodical retreats, especially both our Synod Council and Bishop's Retreats in 2017, when several of our pastors, deacons, and other leaders told the stories of "faith, not fear" in their lives.

Synod retreats and other events also featured Luther's 95 Theses, that little document which got the Reformation started in the first place, and which begins to articulate the genius of Lutheranism's unyielding focus on the gospel of God's grace in justifying sinners. **[Click here to find resources we developed for engaging the 95 Theses.](#)** ▶

**Here's a listing of other synodical events and some in local ministry settings that focused on the 95 Theses:**

- Deans' Retreat (Sept. 14-15, 2016)
- Adult Forums at Saint Peter's, Manhattan (Dec. 18, 2016 and April 30, 2017)
- Candidacy Retreat (March 11, 2017)
- Lenten Study Day with pastors of the Peconic and Western Suffolk Conferences (March 30, 2017)
- First Church, The Bronx 95th Anniversary and Reformation 500, where I preached for this celebration (Oct. 22, 2017)

Other retreats and occasions engaged Luther's Small Catechism and its get-back-to-the-basics of faith themes. Presiding Bishop Eaton invited everyone in the ELCA to find new ways of engaging the Small Catechism during the Reformation 500

Anniversary year. Our approach focused on creating a resource for occasions for us to engage the Small Catechism worshipfully and conversationally, so that Luther's words of explanation become integral to our spiritual experience. The resource we developed effectively gets people talking about their faith in Christ. So it occasioned faith-deepening and not just a new way to learn the catechism. This is a great resource for new-members classes and other occasions for people to experience the wisdom of the Small Catechism, apart from classroom settings—thus, this resource has a life beyond 2017! **[Click here to find the resource we developed on the Small Catechism.](#)** ▶

**Here's a listing of other occasions that focused on the Small Catechism (or in one case, the Large Catechism):**

- Synod Council Retreat (Oct. 21-22, 2016)
- Synodical Deacon Study Days (March 24, 2017 and Sept. 30, 2017)
- Deans' Retreat on Luther's Large Catechism (Sept. 13-14, 2017)
- Lutheran Men in Mission Day-long Retreat (Oct. 21, 2017)
- Staten Island Diakonia group on Small Catechism and Luther's Spirituality (Nov. 18, 2017)
- Adult Forum at Saint Peter's Church (Dec. 3, 2017)

Another important feature of Lutheran identity for the 21st Century involves looking more closely at **Luther's and Lutheranism's Spirituality**, since we live in an age when people are hungry for experiences of God, claiming that they are "spiritual, but not religious." I had the privilege of delivering a lecture on Luther's Devotional Writings at Grace Lutheran Church, in Bayonne, New Jersey, on March 4, 2017, and likewise led Adult Forums on Luther's Spirituality at Trinity Lutheran Church, 100th Street (September 24, 2017) and Saint Peter's Church in Manhattan (December 17, 2017).

Other Lutheran Identity highlights in 2017 included the major **lectures by Professor Thomas Kaufmann, from Germany**, on Sept. 6 and 9, 2017, held at Saint Peter's Church in Manhattan. One lecture explored in detail Luther's Christology as it pertained to Judaism and Islam. The second lecture focused on Dr. Kaufmann's personal articulation of the relevance of Luther and the Reformation for a global community of the 21st Century.



Our synod's Multicultural Committee also hosted a **Reformation 500 Multicultural Festival** on Oct. 14, 2017, revealing that Lutheran identity is global in extent, embodying a rich diversity of national and cultural identities, alongside our core theological commitments, thus breaking open a persistent stereotype that Lutherans are principally only of European descent.

The culmination of our Reformation 500 year, which witnessed to our Lutheran identity, of course, was the unforgettable **Commemorative Eucharist and Festive Reception at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine on All Saints' Day (Nov. 1, 2017)**, attended by some 1200 persons. This capstone event beautifully featured and celebrated so much of who we are as 21st century Lutherans—musically, artistically, multi-culturally, ecumenically, and theologically—and inspired us to lean forward into the next years of God's promised future for our church in reconciling mission, as we are ever committed to unity in Christ.



## LUTHERAN IDENTITY RESOURCES:

**MNYS Reformation 500 Webpages** – Links to local observances, links to ELCA Churchwide, Augsburg Fortress, Lutheran World Federation resources, notices about synod events and resources, bibliography, videos, blog

## Making the most of Reformation 500 in Your Congregation

**"No Typical Lutheran, but Common Themes,"** a summary statement of Lutheran themes distilled from Pastor Meditations at the Bishop's Retreat 2016, "Exploring Lutheran Identity for the 21st Century."

**"Exploring Paradoxical Christian Freedom in 2017,"** published in the June 2017 edition of "The Living Pulpit."

A Sampling of Other Lutheran Identity Events:

My Conversations with Martin Luther, by Tim Lull, MNYS Staff Retreat (June 21-23, 2016)

Grace Gathering at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in New Orleans featuring speakers, worship, workshops and resources to aid in planning Reformation 500 events – several MNYS members attended this event (August 9-13, 2016)

Bishops' Retreat: "Exploring Lutheran Identity for the 21st Century"—testimonies from pastors, plus the bishop's "solos" sermons (Oct. 25-27, 2016).

Reformation 500 Hymn Sing at Advent Church in Manhattan (Feb. 22, 2017).

Workshop on "Lutheran Identity for the 21st Century," featuring testimonies by pastors representing the God-given diversity we enjoy in our Synod and Synod Assembly (May 13, 2017).

Workshop on the Global Extent of Lutheranism, led by ELCA Ecumenical Director, Kathryn Johnson, at Synod Assembly (May 13, 2017).

Dorothea Wendebourg Breakfast Talk on the History of Reformation Anniversaries, at the Union League Club (May 26, 2017).

Bishop Eero Huovinen, former Bishop of Helsinki, Church of Finland, and leader in international Lutheran Catholic Dialogue, Lecture at Saint Peter's Church (June 1, 2017).

Sunken Meadow Beach Bible Studies on the "Solas." I led one on "Christ Alone and Scripture Alone" (July 19, 2017).

"Reflecting on the Reformation: A Symposium on Martin Luther's 500 Year Legacy," Wagner College, Staten Island. Former Bishop Rimbo was among the featured speakers. (October 23, 2017)

"Impact of Lutheranism on Asian Christian Spirituality," sponsored by the Center for Christian Spiritual Renewal and supported by a synodical Leadership Development Grant, featuring Asian Lutherans of various backgrounds, St. Paul's International Church in Floral Park (Dec. 2, 2017).



## BOLD PUBLIC WITNESS

Another Reformation 500 goal was to make **bold and public witness in various formats and media, communicating what the Reformation means, to audiences outside of the church.**

To this end, our synod contracted with the Rubenstein Group to assist us in leveraging attention in the greater New York City media markets. **Click here for an example of our synodical Reformation 500 press coverage, New York Lifestyles Magazine, December 2017.** Perhaps our boldest offering, again, was the Commemorative Eucharist and Festive Reception on November 1 at Saint John the Divine, a feast for the eyes and ears, our hearts and minds.

**Click here for connection to the video of this wonderful occasion. ▶**

In addition, our synod made itself known in relation to Reformation anniversary initiatives sponsored by secular organizations. For example, both the Morgan Library and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Room at Butler Library of Columbia University had excellent Reformation-related exhibits during 2016 into 2017 – events related to these exhibits featured some of our Synod's leaders. Vassar College also sponsored a

Reformation anniversary symposium on October 29, 2017 at which former Bishop Robert Rimbo appeared as a panelist.

## EVENTS AND INITIATIVES

*MNYS staff and other leaders attended the advance, private viewing of "Word and Image: Martin Luther's Reformation," at the Morgan Library, which was sponsored by Lutheran Social Services of New York (Oct. 5, 2016).*

*Our MNYS Staff and Officer Christmas Party featured a visit to the Morgan Library Luther Exhibit. Prof. Tim Wengert gave us a guided tour of the exhibit, which attracted the attention of many who drew close to our group to hear his encyclopedic wisdom and knowledge (Dec. 16, 2016).*

*I served as panelist for a lecture by Dr. Daniel Jeyaraj from Liverpool Hope University in England, on "Lutherans in South India," a Reformation 500-oriented event sponsored by the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Barnard College and the Institute for Religion, Culture and Public Life at Columbia University (Oct. 30, 2017).*

*MNYS Pastor Heidi Neumark was among panelists for "500 Years and Still Counting: Luther's Reformation and Its Legacy for the Churches, the Academy, and Society" as part of the Luther manuscript exhibit at Columbia University's Butler Library Rare Book and Manuscript Room (Oct. 31, 2017).*

## ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH RELATIONSHIPS

**A third crucial and central Reformation 500 goal focused on nurturing strengthened, reconciling ecumenical and interfaith relationships.** Nationally in the ELCA and internationally in the Lutheran

World Federation, 2017's Reformation commemorations were the first in history that had a truly ecumenical focus, and which featured, in particular, Lutheran – Catholic relationships.

Internationally, a kickoff for Reformation 500 was the **visit by Pope Francis to Lund, Sweden, on Reformation Day, October 31, 2016**, during which he and leaders of the Lutheran World Federation jointly led a Common Prayer service. Locally, we live-streamed that event on the big screen at the Sheen Center in lower Manhattan, which was followed by a discussion of current Lutheran – Catholic relations. We then held our own version of the Common Prayer liturgy on the stage at the Sheen Center, featuring former Bishop Rimbo and Bishop John O'Hara, one of the auxiliary bishops of the Archdiocese of New York. This event concluded with a reception so that participants could get to know each other better.

On Jan. 18, 2017, our synod hosted an ecumenical observance of the **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**, which had as its focus the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. The observance convened several leaders of churches in the New York City area, each of whom spoke briefly about the nature of ecumenism



today. This liturgy was held at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan.

**The major ecumenical milestone for us in 2017 was the Ecumenical Leaders Dinner on Oct. 31, 2017**, co-sponsored by Cardinal Dolan and former Bishop Rimbo, which convened almost 50 leaders of churches representing the wide extent of Christian traditions in the greater New York City area. Archbishop Donald Bolen, member of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was the keynote speaker for that dinner, which, we pray, will serve as a spark to reinvigorate ecumenism in New York and beyond.

Many of those same leaders also joined us for the **Commemorative Eucharist on All Saints' Day**, when former Bishop Rimbo pledged our commitment to renewed efforts to embody the visible unity of the church in the coming years.

In terms of **interfaith efforts**, Thomas Kaufmann's lecture in early September 2017, on Christology in relation to Judaism and Islam, was of major importance, in that many Lutherans do not know the extent of Luther's vitriolic writings against both Jews and Muslims. Saint Peter's Church in Manhattan was host for an interfaith observance of Yom HaShoah on April 23, 2017. Pastor Heidi Neumark, who recently discovered her Jewish background, offered a workshop on May 13, 2017, regarding her experiences at the May Synod Assembly. Additionally, I addressed a multi-faith event in Westchester on "Luther and Love of the Stranger," which also featured prayers for Christian unity in the Lutheran, Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions (Oct. 30, 2016).



## REFORMATION 500 ECUMENICAL EVENTS:

*Week of Prayer for Christian Unity service in Queens, with words of greeting on behalf of former Bishop Rimbo (Jan. 22, 2017).*

*“From Reformation to Renewal: Lessons from the Past to Point us to the Future,” featuring presentations by Dr. Philip Krey, sponsored by the Long Island Lutheran-Anglican – Roman Catholic Dialogue, supported by the MNYS Leadership Development Grant Program, and held at the Mercer School of Theology in Garden City (May 4, 2017).*

*As part of the Reformation 500 Anniversary year, former Bishop Rimbo was honored by the Church Club of the Episcopal Diocese of New York (May 16, 2017).*

*Pastor Heidi Neumark preached at a Lutheran – Catholic Reformation 500 liturgy at Holy Name of Jesus Church on the Upper West Side. I offered remarks on behalf of the Bishop (May 17, 2017).*

*I was a presenter and ecumenical respondent at the “34th Craigville Theological Colloquy – The Reformation at 500: Is Grace Still the Answer?”— Craigville Colloquy is a continuing education event of the United Church of Christ, held at a conference center on Cape Cod in Massachusetts (July 10-14, 2017).*

*Our Small Catechism resource and a Lutheran – Methodist Reformation 500 Eucharist were features of the ELCA-UMC Full Communion Coordinating Committee meeting held in Chicago (Sept. 21-23, 2017).*

*I was a panelist at “Luther and Ignatius: Two Reformers, Faith to Faith,” an ecumenical dinner, talk and panel discussion at St. Rose of Lima Church in North Wales, PA (Oct. 14, 2017).*

*MNYS planned and held a version of Luther’s German Mass in Commemoration of Reformation 500 at The General Theological Seminary in Manhattan. Former Bishop Rimbo preached and I presided (Oct. 24, 2017).*

*“500th Birthday of the Reformation: Luther’s 95 Theses for Today,” hosted by New York Theological Seminary and featuring, as speakers, two pastors from our synod, Dr. Nelson Rivera and Chryll Crews (Oct. 30, 2017).*

*“Martin Luther’s Spirituality: A Driving Force of Reform,” featuring me as keynote speaker at an ecumenical event and lecture series at Holy Innocents Church in Pleasantville, NY (Nov. 12, 2017).*

*“Continuing a Journey Together in Faith: Commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Beginning of the Reformation,” an ecumenical liturgy of choral evening prayer sponsored by the Long Island Lutheran – Anglican-Roman – Catholic Dialogue, and held at Saint Killian’s Church in Farmingdale (Nov. 19, 2017).*

## ADDRESSING SOCIETY’S NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Finally, we sought to use Reformation 500 themes as a means to address current societal needs and opportunities. Just as the 95 Theses generated the spark that marked only the very beginning of the Reformation, so, too, our Reformation 500 commemorations, the “Faith, not Fear” theme, and now our synodical “Bridges, not Walls” theme serve also as the theological springboard from which we, as church together, can address current needs and opportunities in our nation and world. Our advocacy for the LGBTQIA+ community, our commitments to anti-racism, our support for immigrants and their needs, our ongoing ecumenical and interfaith initiatives—each one of these efforts springs forth from the realities of the gospel’s claims on us, claims which Luther rediscovered 500 years ago. Namely, that because we are saved by grace, effective through faith in Christ alone, we are free to be radically supportive of all God’s children, working for full inclusion in our life together, tearing down walls that divide, and building bridges that unite.

As my own personal response to what is going on in our nation and world, I was drawn to offer my own “theses,”—59 of them, as it turns out—that articulate values contrast statements, outlining what Lutherans believe and hold dear in contrast to the values seen in the world today. **Click here to read my 59 Theses.** ▶

## COMMITTED TO UNITY IN CHRIST

In one way or another, our many Reformation 500 events, resources, and initiatives have served our vision to deepen global Lutheran identity for the 21st century, enable some bold public witness to non-church audiences, further ecumenical and interfaith relationships, and begin to address society’s needs and opportunities. My prayer is that the reverberating effects of 2017 will continue in our life together, as we journey into the coming years, walking in “faith, not fear,” “building bridges, not walls,” all the while committed to unity in Christ.

***On behalf of, and with thousand thanks to, the scores of people who shared in the work of commemorating Reformation 500 in our synod.***