
REFORMATION 500 COMMITTEE

Our Calling

President Mark Schroeder appointed the Reformation 500 Committee in 2009 in order to guide the celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. Our goals were to prepare educational materials that helped educate WELS and others on the important truths the Reformation brought to light and to prepare for the celebration without using funds from the WELS ongoing ministry. The Committee has completed its tasks and conclude our service with this final report.

Material Prepared

We created a poster and distributed the poster to all congregations at district meetings, and prepared a website to post Reformation events and information around the country including a daily quote from Luther's writings. We prepared materials to educate the pastors, teachers, laypeople and children. Those materials include:

- a Lenten kit for 2017 with sermons based on a Reformation theme, *Repent! Turn to Jesus!*;
- a Christmas kit, *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*;
- three series of bulletin inserts;
- *Luther at the Manger*, a translation of some of Luther's Christmas sermons that can be used for devotional purposes;
- a new Reformation history, *Luther's Protest*;
- a book of new essays celebrating the Reformation, *Reformation 500: The Enduring Relevance of the Lutheran Reformation*;
- a translation by John Montgomery of a French work entitled *In Defense of the Lutheran Faith*;
- *The Word Endures*: two studies on Reformation themes
 - Lessons from Luther: Yesterday and Today (kit and download)*
 - Lessons from the Lives of Powerful Politicians (kit and download)*

Northwestern Publishing House also reissued earlier published books that are still important for various audiences. They include:

- *The Life and Faith of Martin Luther* (Fehlauer);
- *Martin Luther, Reformer in the Making* (Scharf);

- *Martin Luther and the Jews* (Tjernagel);
- *Martin Luther and the Long Reformation* (Kiecker);
- *Studies in the Smalcald Articles* (Meyer/Brenner);
- *In Defense of Martin Luther* (Montgomery); and
- Luther's *A Simple Way to Pray*. One version of this included Luther's Small Catechism (Enciridion)

NPH also published two projects that are related to the celebration of the Reformation:

- a new version of the exposition to Martin Luther's Catechism. This new exposition was developed with the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Education Department and includes several new features.
- the Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV) of the New Testament with Psalms.

With the financial help of Thrivent and the creative expertise of Boettcher/Trinklein, the company that does our *WELS Connection* videos, we created a new 105-minute Luther film entitled *A Return to Grace: Luther's Life and Legacy*. The film was shown in Grimma, Germany, at the meeting of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC). It is available for individual purchase through Northwestern Publishing House (NPH).

In September 2017, 360 public television stations have shown a version of the film on a Tuesday night primetime slot. Those stations reached nearly every household in America. The film was also available in Canada and many Caribbean countries the same night. Viewership on PBS doubled the network's usual ratings, and Nielsen ratings reported that more people watched the Luther film that night than watched anything on CBS, NBC, or Fox. PBS stations have been re-airing the film since and will rebroadcast the film over the next 5 years.

Congregations were able to show the film in neighborhood theaters with the help of TUGG. TUGG has placed 500 independent films in theaters and said the Luther film was the most-screened movie of them all. Over 1,000 WELS churches and others around the country hosted screenings in local theaters.

Netflix began streaming a version of the film in January 2018 and will continue to make it available through 2020. Netflix has more than 110 million subscribers in 190 countries. Working with Netflix, subtitles and foreign language dubbing have been added

to ensure maximum viewership. The film has aired in most major European countries including the UK, Germany, Poland, Ireland, and others.

NPH sales of *Return to Grace* are 4,224 DVDs.

Two Bible studies, available through NPH, for congregational use were prepared using video footage from the Luther film.

- The first, *A Return to Grace Bible Study*, a four-lesson Bible study, makes use of 10-minute segments from the Luther film to augment the class discussion.
- The second, *Reformation: Grace, Faith, Scripture*, is a 12-lesson Bible study using 12 short film vignettes (3-4 minutes each) to enhance the lessons. The lessons can be adapted as 15-minute Bible studies or as a longer Bible study.

A children's version of the Luther film, entitled *Luther Then—Lutherans Today*, was created also using video footage from the Luther film. It included a curriculum for children that teaches the meaning of Luther's work for their lives today.

Together with the Commission on Evangelism and Home Missions, material was prepared for four outreach events for congregations. These materials were created to assist congregations to invite their prospects and neighbors to visit and learn the importance of the Bible's teachings. The resources included:

- Special worship liturgies friendly to visitors to our churches
- Sermon studies for these special days
- Promotion, invitation, and follow-up materials with an emphasis on encouraging members to invite their friends and relatives.

Other activities

- Special music was commissioned by the Commission on Worship and presented at the National Conference on Worship Music and the Arts in June 2017. A chart of the commissioned works is at worship.welsrc.net/worship-conference-2017/. Several settings, accessible for congregational use, have been published. Eight settings appear on a double CD, "A Mighty Fortress," available from NPH.
- We encouraged congregations to extend loving and caring hands to those in need. We suggested that congregations pursue food pantries, domestic abuse safe houses, money management seminar, disaster relief, elderly care, prison ministry,

assistance to strangers, parenting seminar and resources, among other things.

We hope that congregational leaders will look for opportunities to show compassion and love to their communities.

- We praise God and remain grateful for all the time and energy that planned and carried out local events in congregations and larger Reformation gatherings across the country. God has richly blessed those who planned and those who participated in all these events.

A Time to Praise and Rejoice

Rejoice and praise God that he has preserved the truth of his Word to us 500 years since Luther sparked the Reformation and brought the church back to grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, and Christ alone. We had a special historic opportunity to celebrate the blessings God has preserved to us through the Reformation. It was more than the celebration of history. It was even more an opportunity to help the members of our congregations and the communities in which God has placed them to proclaim again of God's grace in Christ.

We note with gratitude the contributions of Professor A. Koelpin, whom the Lord called home shortly after October 31, 2017.

The committee members include: J. Braun (NPH and Chair), C. Jahn (NPH), B. Gerlach (C/W), A. Koelpin (MLC), P. Koelpin (MLC), and J. Korthals (WLS).

Rev. John Braun, reporter
