

Op.Ed. Piece for the Monitor and friends, etc.

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### On the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation

On October 31, 2017 the Lutheran church in its many expressions throughout the world will celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On this day in 1517 Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany protesting what he believed were erroneous teachings of the Roman church. By posting these arguments on the church door he was inviting his community to read and debate them with him. He had no idea that this would be the spark that would ignite what would become known as the Protestant Reformation. It was largely due to the invention of the Gutenberg Press that his ideas spread like wildfire throughout Europe and the rest as they say is history.

Martin Luther did not intend to start a new church that would be named after him. He simply wanted to reform the church to make it a better witness of the grace of God. What he did not expect was a splintering of the church catholic or universal church that led to a multiplicity of ecclesial expressions throughout the world. Many have argued that the Reformation divided the church and destroyed the unity that was at the heart of the prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John (17:21), "that they may be one as You and I are one." This unintended division was the result of disagreements over theological arguments that the church has been debating ever since.

In recent years these diverse ecclesial expressions have entered into ecumenical agreements in an effort to overcome this division and make a witness towards unity. In 1999 the Roman Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, the theological argument that was at the heart of the conflict of the Protestant Reformation. This agreement on our mutual understanding of Justification by Faith was seen as a major milestone in healing the division that began in 1517. The work towards unity continues as we strive to agree on matters of substance in an effort to make a unified witness of the love and grace of God for all people. Earlier this year Pope Francis met with representatives of the LWF in Lund, Sweden for a prayer service to mark this occasion.

During this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Reformation both Roman Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) bishops as well as bishops and representatives of the various ecclesial bodies have held joint prayer services at various venues throughout the nation in an effort to end the condemnations and make a public witness of repentance and forgiveness for the grievances that led to the division of the church. Even though we do not agree on all theological matters we can agree to serve and love the neighbor as a foundational principle of the Christian faith. This love and service is at the heart of the Gospels. This public witness of faith active in love is what the followers of Jesus of Nazareth were commissioned to proclaim. This October the church universal in her varied expressions will be commemorating not just a moment in history that gave birth to the Reformation. The church universal will be granted an opportunity to proclaim a witness for unity in service of others that is at the heart of the prayer of Jesus for his disciples. May we boldly proclaim this witness for the Glory of God!