

ELCA500

Reformation Anniversary FAQ

Martin Luther and Lutherans today

Who was Martin Luther?

Martin Luther was a Catholic monk and priest living in Wittenberg, Germany, in the early 1500s. When he began questioning the church teaching that was used to justify selling indulgences, a fierce controversy began over the church's teachings on forgiveness, grace and faith; the content of preaching; and the church's ministry. Luther was eventually excommunicated from the church and outlawed by civil authorities, but his witness of God's forgiving mercy in Christ found many supporters.

What happened on Oct. 31, 1517?

On this date Luther sent a letter to the Catholic archbishop of Mainz that urged renewed preaching of "the gospel and the love of Christ" instead of continued promotion of indulgences (payment for reducing the amount of punishment one has to undergo for sin), which had "silenced" gospel preaching. He did not choose the day at random. Church representatives were actively marketing indulgences in a neighboring area, and the next day, All Saints Day, was a church festival associated with the church's teaching on merits, which was used to promote the selling of indulgences. He also enclosed a copy of his "Ninety-Five Theses," which were also likely posted on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg that same day.

Why was this action important?

Martin Luther believed that God's mercy could not be bought or earned, but only received by faith, thereby setting an individual free from a life of others' judgment. It was this message of freedom he wanted people to understand not only to remove the paralyzing fear and judgement they lived under from the Roman Catholic church, but also to live with joy, hope and confidence. Furthermore, in this freedom one's faith is a mighty, active presence, that inspires a living, daring confidence thereby liberating oneself to contribute to the common good.

Why is this still relevant today?

All of us continue to live in a culture where judgment, guilt and shame are everyday experiences and where bullying words, abusive actions and shaming political discourse permeate our public and private lives. The indulgences controversy may be a relic of the past, but the healing and reconciling message of God's mercy and forgiveness in Christ that Luther and others served is still needed – and still surprisingly contested.

Who are ELCA Lutherans today? What is your teaching and practice?

Whenever ELCA Lutherans gather and are asked for one word to describe who they are, overwhelmingly the answer is "grace." Martin Luther described grace as "God's favor or good will toward us" in Jesus Christ. This liberating experience of who God is for humankind is the heart of Lutheran teaching and practice as Lutherans live and serve in a wide range of contexts in the United States and globally.

Why do you have the word “evangelical” in your name? What does that mean?

“Evangelical” combines two Greek words that mean message and good (news). Martin Luther and others in the 16th century called themselves “evangelicals” because they were committed to proclaiming and serving the message of good news in Jesus Christ – that is, the message of God’s forgiving mercy and compassion. The ELCA continues to use this name for the same reason. (A later group of Christians in England and the United States who emphasized preaching and moral conversion – “Evangelicalism” – also came to be called “evangelicals,” and this label is often used today in popular media to identify a wide range of politically active, conservative American Christians.)

What does the reference to “always reforming” mean for the ELCA?

Because we share a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, we believe we have the gift of freedom and the courage to wonder, discover and boldly participate in what God is up to in the world. For us, this means we are a church that is always “reforming” or being made new, and at the same time, is deeply rooted in Scripture, Lutheran theology and Lutheran confessions. We are rooted in the vibrant, diverse communities and rich histories of our congregations. It’s through these roots that the Holy Spirit guides and nourishes us so that we can be a church that is both resilient and always new.

Lutherans, other Christians and other faiths**What do Lutherans say about Luther’s writings about the Jews?**

Martin Luther’s writings, especially from his last years, include statements composed of a handful of writings that were extreme in their judgments against the Jewish people and their religious practices, even by the standards of his time. The reasons for these writings and their effects on others have been debated, but the condemnations and endorsements of violence in these writings are indefensible. Since the Holocaust, Lutheran church bodies, including the ELCA and The Lutheran World Federation, have acknowledged the great harm done by these writings, repudiated their judgments, and committed to a more responsible relationship with Jewish people.

Learn more about [Lutheran - Jewish relations here](#).

What is the relationship between Lutherans and the Roman Catholic Church today?

In the last 50 years Lutherans and Catholics have been engaged in dialogues both nationally and globally that have led to a remarkable series of agreements on church teaching and practice. The “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (1999) was a milestone in Lutheran-Catholic relations, and “Declaration on the Way” (2015) brings together 32 consensus statements on church, ministry and Eucharist from conversations that still continue today. Another statement, “From Conflict to Communion,” helped shape the Common Prayer liturgy which Pope Francis celebrated with Lutheran leaders on October 31, 2016.

Learn more about [Lutheran - Catholic relations here](#).

What do Lutherans say about Muslims?

In recent years the ELCA and The Lutheran World Federation have been talking with Muslims, both listening and speaking respectfully in gatherings committed to mutual understanding and improved relationships. Both nationally and globally, Lutheran agencies have collaborated with Muslim counterparts in projects that address humanitarian needs. In these activities Lutherans seek to know and understand their Muslim neighbors better so that they can speak more graciously and responsibly in conversations too often filled with inflammatory and hateful speech.

Learn more about [Lutheran - Muslim relations here](#).

The ELCA and the 500th anniversary

Where does the theme “Freed and Renewed in Christ” come from?

In “The Freedom of a Christian” (1520) Martin Luther famously wrote “A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything; a Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.” The ELCA’s theme expresses this message of the Christian faith’s freedom and a renewed life of service to others in Jesus Christ.