



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck  
at the opening of the Lutheran World Federation Council  
in Wittenberg City Church  
on 15 June 2016**

I'm delighted to be here with you in Wittenberg today. And I'm delighted that you, the representatives of the Lutheran Churches, have gathered here from all over the world. That fills me with a very deep thankfulness and also a certain amount of Protestant pride. Thankful for the fact that we have gathered together in this wonderfully restored City Church, the church where Martin Luther preached, in a free country and in ecumenical solidarity. Proud that you as the Lutheran World Federation have come to us in Germany so soon before the anniversary of the Reformation to see for yourselves where the Reformation began and developed, that foundation of your international community which continues to unite you and your activities throughout the world today.

Sometimes I wonder whether Martin Luther was really aware of the enduring and deep impact his ideas would have when he preached, wrote, passionately debated and passionately communicated the good news of the Gospel here 500 years ago. Here in Germany we are taking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, which is being ushered in by a Reformation decade – prepared with our own inimitable German thoroughness – as an opportunity to examine the rich heritage left to us by Martin Luther and other reformers and to understand how we have actually become what we are.

After all, without the Reformation Germany would be a different country altogether. In fact, Germany would probably not exist at all in its current form without the Reformation.

Allow me to cite some examples. I'll begin with the language. Martin Luther was not the first person to translate the Bible into German. Yet the power of his language, which is at the same time both uniquely poetic and down to earth, succeeded in helping Germans understand one another literally and enabling them, via a common language, to grasp their identity as Germans, which greatly advanced

societal cohesion and remains an integrative force in our current situation.

Here in the City Church, Holy Mass was celebrated in German for the first time, an important step also towards the "priesthood of all believers", which I regard as a step towards ownership, co-determination, even towards the democratic civil society in which we are privileged to live today. An achievement of the Reformation that means a great deal to me personally, for it is also rooted in the recognition of the dignity of the individual before God, which leads to great inner freedom. An irresistible promise of freedom, for the freedom of which Luther spoke is a gift with no strings attached. God accepts humankind unconditionally. And that makes people free, not to focus solely on themselves or make themselves reliant on church authority or any secular power, but free to think and believe independently and above all to act responsibly. And anyone who forgets that last point has not understood what lies at the heart of freedom – incidentally, a tradition that acquired a particular relevance here, in the former GDR. I am aware that this is also true of other places.

Back to Martin Luther: It was in this church that Martin Luther preached the subsequently famous Lenten sermons. He put his life at risk when he returned here from the Wartburg in 1522 out of his concern for peace in the community. The experts know that he was threatened here. And let's go back to 1989, when a movement sprung up in the territory of the former GDR that led to a peaceful revolution: it was mainly Protestant Christians who took a stand throughout the country – from a minority position, as it was no longer a people's church. It was from a minority church that this power proceeded.

The fact that in its 500th year, the Reformation can call itself a "citizen of the world" is testimony to the fact that Luther's gospel of freedom is still relevant today. The Lutheran World Federation is an impressive example of this, comprising 145 churches with 72 million Christians in 98 countries.

The founding of the Lutheran World Federation in 1947 was still strongly marked by the War and its aftermath. Poverty and desperation, material and moral bankruptcy burdened the community when it convened in Lund, Sweden, almost 70 years ago.

The call was to set free the oppressed, as Luke writes in his Gospel. Acute practical and spiritual assistance thus became a central pillar of the World Federation's work and remains so to this day. I am deeply impressed by the fact that the World Federation now supports 1.3 million refugees worldwide and has become a vital partner of the UN Refugee Agency, in places such as northern Iraq, Central Africa, the Sudan and Burundi.

I would like to thank you sincerely for this work. I know how urgent the need is and how important the assistance since my visit to a Jordanian refugee camp, if not before.

Christian love in action demands that we join others in fighting the scourge of war and violence, especially Christians from other denominations who want to fulfil the same calling as we do.

The Lutheran World Federation has maintained its commitment to the unity of the Church. I'm glad to say that it engages in dialogue with the Catholic and the Orthodox Church as well as with Anglicans, Reformed Churches and other Christians. And it regards both the ecumenical movement and interfaith dialogue as key responsibilities.

For this, too, the World Federation, and all of you, deserve thanks. Maintaining open dialogue with one another requires us to recognise the diversity of humanity and counteract intolerance. Currently I can hardly imagine a better form of Christian service.

As the Lutheran World Federation Council you have gathered here in these days to engage in this dialogue. I imagine it isn't always easy to reach a consensus among the many different cultures, nations and generations that are represented in your Council. This calls us to listen carefully to one another and move closer together, compelled by our love for this "one world." For me, that is precisely what it means to act and live in the spirit of the Reformation in the present day.

May you feel the presence of the original Reformation spirit particularly in the coming days in this place where Martin Luther was at work. On that note, I wish you fruitful discussions.