



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
following the opening service of the 26th General Council
of the World Communion of Reformed Churches
in Leipzig
on 30 June 2017**

I am delighted to welcome you here to Leipzig today. It is wonderful that you are all here. I am aware that a General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches is a very special type of gathering, one that does not take place every day or even on an annual basis. It will thus come as no surprise to you to hear that it has been many, many years since you last held a council in Germany.

You have now gathered here in the year of the great Reformation anniversary – here in the country that was the birthplace of the Reformation. However, it really was only the birthplace, as reformed ideas were soon articulated in other European countries, too – in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and other places. At first, Martin Luther mainly had an impact on the German-speaking countries. It was through the work of Zwingli, Calvin and many other people that the Reformation then became a powerful European movement. The reformed churches were a potent international movement from the start; and it is therefore in keeping with the early days of these churches that the World Communion of Reformed Churches now also represents parts of the world that people knew little, if anything, about at the time of Luther, Calvin or Zwingli.

Christianity is indeed vibrant worldwide. But it also has different denominations around the globe. Christian beliefs will become less credible in today's world if they are expressed in such different ways. That is why I can only welcome the agreement reached between the World Communion of Reformed Churches with the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church on the Doctrine of Justification. This is a major step towards ecumenism in all Christian beliefs.

You have gathered here in Leipzig and we celebrated a service here in the Nikolaikirche. And as you already heard, this church has

witnessed so many important events over the course of its history – we Germans of today have particularly vivid memories of what was sparked here in 1989. Modern German history, or at any rate the peaceful revolution, might have turned out differently without the prayers for peace in the Nikolaikirche and what they subsequently inspired on the streets of Leipzig.

At the time, this church's lively Protestant reformed beliefs gave a home to those seeking shelter. This is where people found the audaciousness to stand up against oppression and lies. This is where people experienced the freedom that empowers them to stand upright in the first place. Yes, the freedom! Freedom is perhaps the most beautiful outcome of reformed beliefs – religious freedom, freedom of conscience, political freedom and political self-determination.

In many countries around the world, people can only dream of the freedom that was fought for in 1989, particularly here in Leipzig, on behalf of Germany and Europe as a whole. We should therefore take a clear stance and say that our ongoing aim as Germans and Europeans is to see freedom achieved where censorship, repression and violations of fundamental human rights still occur or are happening once again.

We should also take a stance when people are persecuted because of their faith and convictions. People of many religions suffer persecution, but Christians in the Middle East are currently particularly severely affected. Our awareness of this cannot prevent each and every injustice. However, we can and we must state clearly that intimidation or, worse still, violence, are wrong. Freedom of belief is an inalienable human right!

The other large church in Leipzig, the Thomaskirche, stands for another precious legacy of the Reformation – the beauty of faith, the inwardness with which it moves our hearts and repeatedly lifts and comforts our souls. One can state definitively that the beauty, inwardness, consolation and joy of faith are expressed more sublimely than anywhere else in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. His greatest religious works, the cantatas and passions, were performed for the first time here in Leipzig. We have just heard a selection of them. No, the Protestant faith is not ascetic or austere. It also knows the elation of the heart and soul. It knows faith arising from "the joy in God" as Eberhard Jüngel says. One might say that Bach in Leipzig is our witness to this.

Your council will discuss various political and social issues and make several important decisions on church policy. However, one task seems clear to me – especially at a time when religion is often exploited as a means of isolating and distancing oneself from others, indeed as a pretext for the most brutal acts of violence, now more than ever the reformed churches must make particular efforts to foster

peaceful dialogue and to very consciously underline the power of religion to promote peace and reconciliation and most importantly, to be an example of this themselves. I wish you every success in all this, for the good of the churches and the people whom they all serve.

However, we have already done the most important thing together – we have prayed, sung and worshipped together. Whatever else we do within our churches, whatever we do as Christians in the spheres of politics, the economy and ecology, the most important thing is and will remain that we give thanks and praise to the creator who has our welfare in mind. As a Protestant and a member of a reformed church, this is my profound conviction. And it is equally important that we ask for God's help in a spirit of trust, as we just sang:

“Be our light in the darkness of this age,
Be the path we can follow with hope and faith, (...)
Be our door to a graceful and better world,
Be a table with space for young and old,
Be the bread and the wine for an open feast,
Come and lead us to justice and peace!”
Thank you very much!