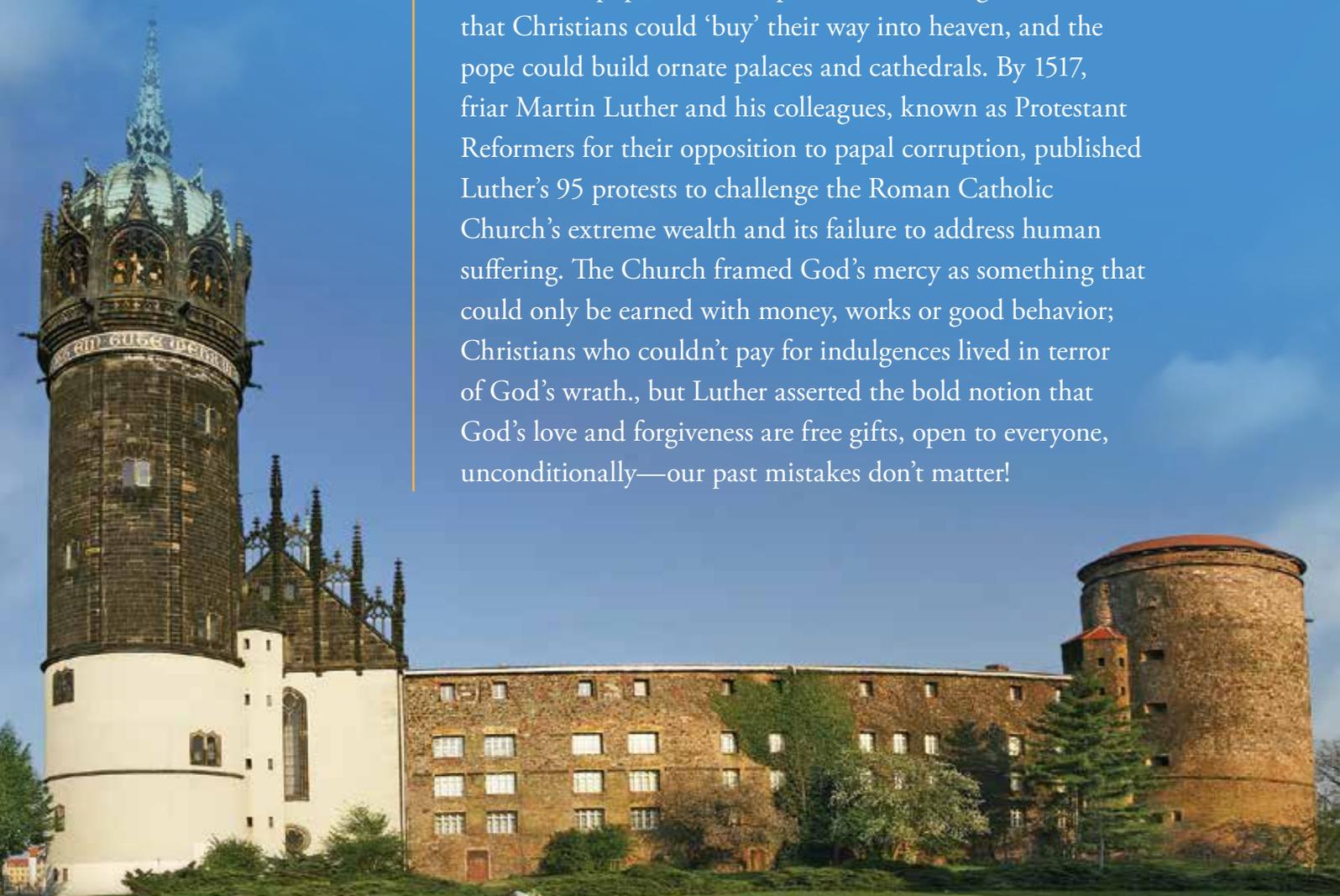




# THE ALWAYS DYNAMIC PROTESTANT CHURCH

by Rev. Monica Weber, Epiphany Lutheran Church, ELCA

A Medieval pope dreamed up the sale of indulgences so that Christians could ‘buy’ their way into heaven, and the pope could build ornate palaces and cathedrals. By 1517, friar Martin Luther and his colleagues, known as Protestant Reformers for their opposition to papal corruption, published Luther’s 95 protests to challenge the Roman Catholic Church’s extreme wealth and its failure to address human suffering. The Church framed God’s mercy as something that could only be earned with money, works or good behavior; Christians who couldn’t pay for indulgences lived in terror of God’s wrath., but Luther asserted the bold notion that God’s love and forgiveness are free gifts, open to everyone, unconditionally—our past mistakes don’t matter!



If you hear the date “October 31<sup>st</sup>,” you may immediately think about the fantastic costume you wore for Halloween. Halloween was known in medieval times as All Hallow’s Eve, the night when lost spirits wander the earth and make mischief for a few hours until midnight and the arrival of All Saints’ Day, a holy day to pray for the dead. But Halloween is significant for another reason: on October 31, 1517, theologian Martin Luther ‘came out’ against the corruption and power assigned to the Church by a small group of human beings.

Luther and his colleagues, known as Protestant Reformers for their opposition to papal corruption, published Luther’s 95 protests to challenge the Roman Catholic Church’s extreme wealth and its failure to address human suffering. The Church framed God’s mercy as something that could only be earned with money, works or good behavior; Christians who couldn’t pay for indulgences lived in terror of God’s wrath., but Luther asserted the bold notion that God’s love and forgiveness are free gifts, open to everyone, unconditionally—our past mistakes don’t matter! Luther’s other radical new idea was that clergy could and should marry; he argued that marriage reveals God’s ultimate love for humanity. This theology assisted ELCA Lutherans (we’re the ‘liberal’ Lutherans!) in 2009 when we voted to ordain gay and lesbian clergy, and validate gay and lesbian marriage. Luther’s insistence that “the Church” needed reform was a new concept but it impacts us every day, as we respond and adapt to an ever-changing society, working to love our

neighbors as ourselves.

This year, Lutherans commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation on October 31, although it’s probably an urban legend that on that date, Martin Luther nailed his 95 protests to a church door in Germany. Scholars agree that the Reformation initiated the Age of Enlightenment—many church reformers before Luther protested and died horrific deaths, but Luther had an advantage—Johannes Gutenberg’s printing press.

The press allowed Luther’s ideas to be published and distributed all over Europe, which fueled a demand for public education and literacy, and a call for separation of Church and State. Martin Luther’s main goal was to educate people that God is merciful and loving, not wrathful and judgmental. He pointed out that everyone has direct access to God: we don’t need a middle-man to interpret or mediate our faith for us. This assertion of individual rights expanded, until thirteen up-start colonies protested unfair taxation and the new nation of America was born.

We also recognize Martin Luther as an early activist who worked tirelessly for another new idea: social justice. Lutheran ministries continue his legacy by advocating for refugees and immigrants; incarcerated persons and the eradication of the death penalty; human rights and equal access to health care; LBGQTQ rights and gender equality; the prevention of racism; global hunger and clean water; and addiction recovery programs. Lutheran Disaster Relief is among the first non-profit agencies to arrive at a natural

disaster site, and often the last to leave; LDR has put helpers on the ground in Houston and Florida, providing hurricane relief after the devastation of monster storms Harvey and Irma. At Epiphany Lutheran Church where I pastor, a five-acre piece of land with poor soil was ‘re-formed’ into a Community Garden that produces nearly 2,000 lbs. of fresh produce annually. Every vegetable we grow is donated to local feeding ministries, and the garden provides a unique way to minister to teenagers who need purpose, and to people in crisis.

ELCA Lutherans understand that we are re-formed, too: everyone is a beloved child of God, made new every day in God’s love. We work to relieve human suffering and care for Creation, not to earn our way into heaven, but in gratitude for forgiveness, despite our mistakes. ELCA Lutherans welcome our LGBTQ brothers and sisters as church members without asking them to change; we ordain LGBTQ men and women as pastors and deacons in joy, without judgment, working side by side for peace, justice and equality.

Creation is always being made new, and the Church is always being re-formed. If you’ve been wounded by a church, we invite you to join us at Epiphany Lutheran—a community—not an institution. You’ll find acceptance, friendly faces, vibrant worship and fun opportunities to serve the world. These are the life-giving reforms we practice every day as people of faith, in the tradition of Reformer Martin Luther. Come re-form your ideas about ‘church’ and nourish your spirituality with us. It’s never too late to be make a new start!

**(at left) Castle and the Castle Church of Luther City Wittenberg in Germany. Wittenberg is UNESCO World Heritage Site. (Credit: Shutterstock)**