



For I am not ashamed of the gospel;
it is the power of God for salvation
to everyone who has faith

– Romans 1:16

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

On Oct. 31, 1517, 500 years ago, Martin Luther posted his “Ninety-five Theses” in Wittenberg. This resulted in a debate about Christian teaching and practice that led to significant reforms that shaped the course of Western Christianity. As we gather to meet in synod assemblies during the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it is a good time to reflect on what it means to be Lutheran.

Neither culture nor behavior define what is distinctive about the Lutheran movement. It's our understanding of the gospel. We proclaim Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead for the life of the world. It is this gospel word that creates faith and sets us free to serve the neighbor.

We are freed and renewed in Christ.

The church's proper work is to proclaim the gospel word. “We are to fear and love God, so, that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear it and learn it” (Small Catechism).

I have invited and encouraged all of you to engage in reading Luther's Small Catechism together. This is to be done in a way that is most promising for your community of faith and most fitting for the relationships in your community. Resources are available at [ELCA500.org/withnewvoices](https://elca500.org/withnewvoices).

As a church deeply rooted in Scripture and in Christ, this church continues to be shaped by the changing face of our communities, by new migration patterns and national and global trends affecting religion and society. We are a community of faith that is always forming and being renewed, and as a church we engaged in a process, Called Forward Together in Christ, to help us tell the story of the church we are becoming. Through that process, we developed ELCA Strategic Directions 2025. This strategic framework identifies goals and priority areas for the ELCA as a whole church.

What is the church we are becoming?

- A thriving church spreading the gospel and deepening faith for all people.
- A church equipping people for their baptismal vocations in the world and this church.
- An inviting and welcoming church that reflects and embraces the diversity in our communities and the gifts and opportunities that diversity brings.
- A visible church deeply committed to working ecumenically and with other people of faith for justice, peace and reconciliation in our communities and around the world.
- A well-governed, connected and sustainable church.

As we observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I pray that ELCA Strategic Directions 2025 will guide and foster ELCA church unity in the years ahead. To learn more about these strategic directions, visit ELCA.org/future.

One of the ways we are achieving our goals together as a church is through *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*. Throughout 2017, the campaign will emphasize ministries supporting Global Church. The ELCA is known as a faithful partner in the work to build up Christ's church throughout the world and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, risen for the life of the world.

If you don't have the date on your calendar already, be sure to note that Sept. 10 is our suggested date for the 2017 dedicated day of service. If your congregation cannot participate on this date, please consider another day. "God's work. Our hands." Sunday is an opportunity for us to explore one of our most basic convictions as Lutherans: that all of life in Jesus Christ – every act of service, in every daily calling, in every corner of life – flows freely from a living, daring confidence in God's grace.

As we gather in our synod assemblies, let us remember that together in Jesus Christ we are freed by grace to live faithfully, witness boldly and serve joyfully. I pray that God blesses your time together.

I give thanks to God for each of you, for our more than 9,300 congregations, for our 65 synods and our churchwide ministries. As a church freed and renewed in Christ, may we bear witness to a world experiencing the difference God's grace and love in Christ makes for all people and creation.

With gratitude,



Elizabeth A. Eaton
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