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Church Together

My Two Weeks in Germany with the Lutheran World Federation

by the [Rev. Rob O'Berg](#), Trinity Lutheran Church, Fresno

On the heels of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I attended an International Lutheran Pastors' Seminar in Wittenberg, Germany. The seminar is offered by the Wittenberg office of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) twice a year and is open to Lutheran Pastors from all over the world. Prior to the seminar, my only contact with the LWF had been the occasional greeting brought from the dais of a Synod Assembly. That would change in profound ways during the seminar.

For two weeks, I studied "Luther as Preacher and Teacher" with colleagues from Angola and Zimbabwe, Singapore and Botswana, Estonia and the Holy Land and many places in-between. I didn't even know there was a Lutheran presence in Botswana, let alone Botswanan Lutheran pastors! But there are. And the LWF, with its global field of operation, works intentionally to invite all Lutheran pastors-especially those in emergent churches-to the birthplace of the Reformation.

The Wittenberg office consists of three people who are tireless in their efforts to invite a broad representation of world Lutheranism to each seminar. This

often involves assisting applicants through tortuous visa processes and paperwork, especially for those from the global south, whom the German government tends to view with some suspicion as to their true motives for entering the country. LWF's work is most often successful, resulting in a seminar like mine: 20 participants representing 16 countries.

Our primary teacher was Prof. Theodor Dieter of the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France. He is considered the foremost authority on Luther's theology vis-à-vis Aristotle and was recently awarded the Ratzinger Prize by Pope Francis for his contributions to the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue.



Professor Dieter is 3rd from left

Able assisting him was Dr. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson. Dr. Wilson serves as a visiting professor at the Institute for Ecumenical Research and was recently featured in the January issue of *Living Lutheran* as co-editor of a collection of stories written by and about Tsehay Tolessa, known as the "Ethiopian Bonhoeffer." She and her husband, Dr. Andrew Wilson, published a book in 2016 chronicling their retracing of Luther's 1511 journey on foot from Erfurt, Germany to Rome. It's cleverly titled, *Here I Walk*.

In addition to first-rate teachers and careful readings (sometimes line by line) of Luther's key texts, we were treated to field-trips and excursions designed to convey the distinctly German character of Luther's Reformation. The seminar included tours of Luther's and Melancthon's homes and churches in Wittenberg, the Erfurt monastery where Luther entered religious life, the monastery's chapel where Luther celebrated his famously fraught first mass and the Wartburg Castle overlooking Eisenach, where Luther translated the New Testament into German.

To convey a sense of more recent history, we were invited to participate in a shared meal-observed since GDR times-where Lutherans and Catholics formed and continue to celebrate strong ecumenical bonds forged during their shared oppression under Communism. This was a perfect counterpoint to our last meal at the seminar, where all the foods and tableware were presented in a style true to Luther's time.

My two weeks in Wittenberg with LWF are too full of highlights and significant moments to sort them in terms of impact on my faith or usefulness to my ministry. Like most of life, I suppose, individual components are woven together and resist efforts to unravel and analyze. There are, of course, the curriculum covered and insights gained. There is the cultural immersion-both of Germany and of the countries whose many languages and accents enriched our conversations. But what I carry with me most gratefully are the relationships I formed with Lutheran pastors from all over the world. We shared our hopes and our struggles, our joys and our disappointments-

discovering both widely divergent ministry settings in countries and cultures different from each other's and yet a common call to announce the one universal gospel of Jesus Christ.

This Christmas I shared greetings with seminar friends from 11 countries. I expect to do the same in the Christmases to come. Of all the gifts of the LWF and of the seminar, this is the gift I treasure the most. The one I will always treasure.



The 16th LWF International Pastors' Seminar Participants
The author is 7th from right, in the far back row.

Do you have a story that you would like to share? Send any Church Together story requests to mic@spselca.org.

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