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Church Together

Reflections on the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation spent in Wittenberg, Germany

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The day began with a whiff of wood smoke emanating from one of a dozen braziers. The Germans love to celebrate holidays with festive markets (think Renaissance Faire meets Oktoberfest) and those dressed as medieval minstrels and merchants were kindling fires against the morning cold. Around the town church and spreading into side streets, stalls and booths began opening their doors, preparing to dispense sausages and joints of roasted pork, beer and mulled wine. But sampling these would have to wait.

My destination was the first worship service of five to be held in Wittenberg on Reformation Day. It would be in the Castle Church made famous as the site of Luther's publishing of his Ninety-Five Theses. We arrived an hour early to go through security (Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, would be worshiping there later in the day) and were met with a sizable line. Once inside the church, we took our places on a bench along the south wall of the nave. My German friends were a little deflated at the unexpectedly rearward seats. I was just happy to be there.

Before I managed to get my coat off, someone with a credential motioned us forward to the choir (one of my hosts is a well-known and popular tour guide),

where we were equidistant between the altar and Luther's grave. The service was in English. The sermon offered a call to continue the reforming work Luther had begun in that very place. The liturgy was capably chanted. The singing, especially - you guessed it - A Mighty Fortress, was like nothing I had ever heard before.



My friends (left foreground) with high altar in background

After the lush introduction from the magnificent 19th century Ladegast organ had finished reverberating across the vaulted ceiling of the nave, the whole congregation, in unison it seemed, took a deep, collective breath. What followed was the sound of a several-hundred voice choir. This congregation had come to sing, each voice contributing the melody or harmony part it knew best, as clearly and as robustly as it could. The composer, I'm sure, would have been proud.

Later, my friends and I attended a drizzly outdoor service in the courtyard of the old Wittenberg University where Luther taught. The preacher was a key architect of the "Peaceful Revolution," who attached Luther's reforming spirit to reform movements of all times and places. We would attempt to worship a third time but were turned away due to capacity-plus crowds. We attended a magnificent medieval music concert at the lone Catholic church in Wittenberg instead.



Outdoor Reformation service in old Wittenberg University Courtyard

Having worshipped all we could in the morning, we spent the afternoon walking among the 40,000 people crowded into the "old city" section of modern Wittenberg. There we sampled the various wares available while listening to music being performed and watching plays and demonstrations of medieval combat. For many it was a family day (Reformation Day is a holiday in Saxony). For me, of course, it was a day marked by a sense of place and history. I often imagined myself standing where the reformers themselves stood. Who knows?



Market stands outside the Town Church

The day came to a close with Angela Merkel's state helicopter flying over the house where I was staying as it shuttled her back to Berlin. My hosts and I raised a glass of wine to her and waved. I'm sure Mrs. Merkel took no notice of us. But, as I stood with my friends staring into the gray afternoon sky, I took notice of the day and what it meant to me and to the world—and gave thanks for the chance to be where it all began, 500 years ago.

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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