

## Reformation commemoration "day of great joy," says WCC leader



Joint Catholic-Lutheran commemoration of the Reformation. ©Mikael Stjernberg/WCC

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*By Stephen Brown\**

The general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) has hailed a joint commemoration by Catholics and Lutherans of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation as a major advance in dialogue between Christian traditions.

"This is a day of great joy," said WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit in Lund, Sweden, in the city's 12th-century cathedral.

"This is an event for the whole ecumenical family, showing there are ways to take steps forward that can inspire others," said Tveit.

Pope Francis was among the Catholic and Lutheran leaders present for the cathedral service during which attendees repented for past divisions and committed to common action and service in the world.

"To be able to hold this event together is itself a huge step forward," said Tveit, a Lutheran theologian from Norway.

"On both sides, they are very much aware of their own tradition," Tveit said. "But this is a great sign that they are also aware that there is a lot in common."

Tveit was one of the representatives from Christian world communions and ecumenical bodies who attended the Reformation commemoration, the first between Catholics and Lutherans at a global level.

The joint commemoration took place on 31 October, the day in 1517 when Martin Luther is said to have published his 95 theses denouncing church corruption, setting in train the events leading to the Reformation.

After refusing to recant, Luther was excommunicated in 1521 by Pope Leo X.

At the joint commemoration in Lund, however, Pope Francis praised the Reformation for giving greater centrality to the place of the Bible in the church's life.

"The spiritual experience of Martin Luther challenges us to remember that apart from God we can do nothing," the Pope said in his sermon in Lund Cathedral.

The commemoration followed 50 years of official dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

This led to a 1999 joint Catholic-Lutheran declaration on the doctrine of justification, one of the main points at issue between the papacy and Martin Luther and his followers.

Without this declaration on justification and the process of reception that followed, the Lund commemoration would not have happened, said Tveit.

"It is a strong sign that real efforts by theologians are necessary and can bring results," he said.

Still, not all divisions between Catholics and Lutherans have been overcome.

Members of the two traditions are not able to share in the bread and wine distributed at the Eucharist, also known as Holy Communion.

In a joint statement signed during the ceremony, Pope Francis and LWF president Bishop Munib Younan, spoke of their longing for "this wound in the Body of Christ to be healed".

The statement referred to the pain of couples "who share their whole lives, but cannot share God's redeeming presence at the Eucharistic table".

Further theological work is needed to address the issue of the Eucharist, because it is linked to the doctrines of the church and of ordained ministry, said Tveit.

For couples where the partners come from different traditions, however, "we need to address the ecumenical problems from a pastoral and diaconal perspective, which is also the approach of Pope Francis."

Tveit praised an agreement between the LWF World Service and the Catholic agency Caritas Internationalis to strengthen cooperation, saying he hoped it would enable "a common Christian witness in disaster response".

A declaration of intent between the two agencies was signed following the service in Lund Cathedral at a public event, "Together in Hope", at the nearby Malmö Arena.

During the Malmö event, Pope Francis and Bishop Younan heard testimonies by Lutheran and Catholic advocates for social justice and climate issues.

Speaking at "Together in Hope", the moderator of the WCC's central committee, Dr Agnes Abuom, a Kenyan Anglican, called for a "new reformation" to respond to war and violence, climate change, and refugees and migration.

"People are simply running away from conflicts, poverty and oppression, not knowing the direction to take to find shelter," said Abuom, recalling how as a student activist in the 1970s she took refuge in Sweden because of restrictions on free expression in her own country.

"We stand today at a historic moment when we all need a new type of reformation that goes beyond our spiritual weaknesses to address together our global challenges and give hope to the world full of despair and pain," Abuom said.

Rev. Odair Pedroso Mateus, director of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order, highlighted the close connection at the commemoration between celebrating progress in theological dialogue and progress in joint witness and service.

"To the extent that our past divisions prevent us from witnessing together today to God's compassion, they must be theologically addressed," he said.

He recalled how Lund was also the setting for the WCC's Third World Conference on Faith and Order in 1952 which developed the "Lund principle". This proposed to churches to act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.

"By holding together common witness and the overcoming of past remaining divisions," Mateus said, "Lund 2016 illustrates in a remarkable way the spirit of Lund 1952."

*\*Stephen Brown is a freelance journalist.*