

Churches Together in the Merseyside Region

Presidents reflect on 'Reformation 1517'



Our 6 CTMR Presidents have fully endorsed the Statement of the CTE Presidents regarding the celebration of 'Luther 500' in England. The **CTMR Presidents** are offering a common witness to Churches in Merseyside by each reflecting on one of the 5 Rs: **Rejoicing, Remembering, Reforming, Repenting, Reconciling**. These 500 word-reflections have been circulated in Merseyside are collated in this booklet.

Endorsement of National Statement of CTE Presidents on behalf of CTMR - The Rt Rev'd Paul Bayes, Bishop of Liverpool

Rejoicing - The Rev'd Phil Jump, Regional Minister, North West Baptist Association

Remembering - The Most Rev'd Malcolm McMahon, Archbishop of Liverpool

Reforming - The Rev'd Jacky Embrey, Moderator of the Mersey Synod of the United Reformed Church

Repenting - The Rev'd Dr Sheryl Anderson, Chair of the Liverpool Methodist District

Reconciling - Major Drew McCombe, North-Western Divisional Commander, Salvation Army.

Published

by Churches Together in the Merseyside Region
(Registered Charity No. 519061)

at the Ecumenical Office, Quaker Meeting House,
22 School Lane, Liverpool L1 3BT

Tel: 0151-709-0125 e-mail: office@ctmr.org.uk www.ctmr.org.uk

Endorsement

“Reformation 1517” - a note on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation



The richness and diversity of the Christian people reflects the multi-faceted richness of God. This is not to say that the divisions between the Christian churches are themselves a reflection of God's will – the words of the Lord Jesus in John 17 (“May they all be one”) stand as a challenge, a provocation and a reproach to all of us as we remember the Reformation at this time. We each and all have much to thank God for, and to think on, as we reflect on our history together.

As Presidents of Churches Together in the Merseyside Region (CTMR) we stand together in thanksgiving, honesty, sorrow and peace as we look back on our rich but fractured history. At the same time we look forward with joy, gladly grasping the gifts of unity and of a refreshed friendship which God has given us in our own generation.

Each of my sister and brother Presidents has written a piece underlining one of the five dimensions of this anniversary that the national Presidents have identified – rejoicing, remembering, reforming, repenting, reconciling. We are glad and proud to be in partnership together for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We wholeheartedly endorse the words of the national Presidents of Churches Together in England (<http://bit.ly/2pN29TI>) and we stand with our national leaders when they say “we pray that our churches may honour each other and give thanks for our growing friendship and fellowship in the Gospel.”

May the God of truth and love bless all the churches as they draw lessons from the Reformation. And may that same God, who is also a fountain of sending love, equip and guide us all as we move forward in His name and by the power of His Spirit.

Bishop Paul Bayes, Anglican Bishop of Liverpool – on behalf of the Presidents of CTMR.

Reconciling

‘For Christ’s love compels us.....and gave us the ministry of reconciliation’ 2 Corinthians 5: 14 and 18

This year as we commemorate 500 years since the reformation we need to see the remembrance as a gift to us in the present. We need to contemplate on the division, distrust and discrimination that came out of the reformation and ensure that we do not repeat this attitude, belief and behaviour in our present day and in that sense this commemoration can be a gift, so let us receive this as a gift.

I would also urge us not to forget that reformation is something that the Church needs to do in every generation so that we see the need for reform as a prophetic voice which continues to challenge and change us into the ways of Christ and the Gospel for today. But just as important as the needed reform, is that the way we reform must always be done in love. Paul writing to the Corinthians in his second letter speaks about Christ’s love compelling us and that he has given us this ministry of reconciliation. So the implication is that whatever the reform or change, it needs to be done in love and ensuring it is part of Christ reconciling the world to himself. This was, and still is the contemplation we all need to do in every reform and change.

It is good to see the signs in our present day of the reconciliation and ‘convergence’ of doctrinal difference which is evidence of Christ, through us, reconciling the world to himself. The Rt Revd Christopher Cocksworth, Chair of Faith and Order Commission, said: “The 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which began with Luther's courageous insistence that salvation is not for sale, invites every Christian to join with the whole church to be renewed in the grace of God and share the astounding news of God reaching out to the world, running to meet us in Christ and embracing us into his life by the Spirit with an infinity of love that lifts us into the full stature of our humanity and raises us into the joyful responsibility of being human.”

We still need to continue this reconciliation and allow the prayer of Christ for us all to be one, to not only to be words on our lips but practiced in our attitudes and actions. If the church is to be united and effective, we must believe and confess the gospel, obey it and adorn it, proclaim it and argue it, defend it, and be willing to suffer for it. For ‘oneness’ is where the whole of history is heading and reconciliation in the present is part of preparing us for our future in Christ. If we can do that, then this gift of commemoration can keep us on the right track as we all live for, and look for the salvation of the world.

To conclude, here is my adapted version of a quote from Shane Claiborne – a present day prophet ‘The work of community, love, reconciliation and restoration is the work we cannot leave up to others. This is the work we are all called to do’

Drew McCombe, Major, Divisional Commander – North West England and North Wales



Repenting

When I was a child, growing up in the east end of London, one treat was a trip to Walthamstow Market. The market street was lined with stalls selling exotic fruit and vegetables, or clothing, or brightly coloured fabric, and halfway down was the best ice cream parlour in the world. There was also the old man wearing the placard that proclaimed, 'Repent - the end is nigh!' This would always draw a comment from my mother, who remembered him being there when she was a child. I used to puzzle about the word 'nigh' (near) as it clearly did not mean 'near' like tea-time, but near like Christmas, which was always a long time coming. I knew from Sunday School that the word 'repent' meant saying sorry for something you had done wrong. If I quarrelled with someone at school, sooner or later an adult would tell us we had to say sorry and make up, which we usually did – more or less willingly. Now I am older I understand just how much more there is to repenting than simply saying sorry.

The 500th anniversary of the reformation is a difficult occurrence to categorise. Certainly, we are marking a significant historic event. However, where we would normally celebrate an anniversary, given the violence and suffering that this division in Christian unity initiated, perhaps commemorate is the better word. The question to consider is, what is a suitable tone to adopt in our commemorating? For, as David Cornick points out,

The legacy of Luther's quest for the peace of God and his 're-discovery' of justification by faith led to the invention of Protestantism, the division of Europe into religious blocs, and a consequent series of religious wars which wrecked and scarred almost every European nation for the next century and a half.

Perhaps then, it is appropriate to suggest that a significant part of our commemorations might involve us repenting. Not simply in the sense of saying sorry and making up (although that might be a good start) but in the sense that Jesus intends when he proclaims in Matthew 4:17, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

The word in the Hebrew Bible that we translate as 'repent' – (שוב/shub) – means to turn back or return. Similarly, in New Testament Greek – μετανοέω (metanoéo) – means to change one's mind, to think differently. This is pertinent to our commemorations because, over the last 500 years, the divisions in our unity have permitted us to construct and maintain such caricatures of each other's beliefs and traditions, that we run the risk of becoming as anachronistic as the man in the market with the placard. It is only through a turning back of our prejudices – repenting in the true sense of the word – that we will be set sufficiently free to focus on our primary calling as proclaimers together of the love and mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

The Rev'd Dr Sheryl Anderson
Chair of the Liverpool Methodist District



Rejoicing

One of the resonant themes in Paul's New Testament epistles is his inclination to rejoice with and about the churches to which he is writing. His letters will often go on to highlight significant concerns about those congregations, and at times will outline things with which he simply cannot agree. But for all these earthly flaws, he is able to rejoice in who they are in Christ. As we mark 500 years of Reformation, I believe that we have similar reasons to rejoice.

For many, Reformation may be perceived as an event in history, but I would argue that it is something far more profound than that. As Christians, irrespective of the tradition to which we adhere, we are those who have been transformed, and are being transformed, by the presence of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God is constantly at work, renewing and reshaping His Church – we have every reason to rejoice in a living, dynamic faith that finds expression in a whole range of traditions, creeds and ecclesial structures. None of these have remained unchanged for the last 500 years; God has been at work among all of us.

It would be naïve and unrealistic to suggest that significant differences do not remain. Some of these are cultural and stylistic; others do extend to matters of belief and practice. But like the Apostle Paul, I want to celebrate the fact that I am part of a Church that can be open and honest about those differences, and nonetheless rejoice in who we are together in Christ.

I see 2017 as a milestone in a journey of 500 years of reformation. We cannot deny, particularly in the early days, that the Reformation was scarred with deep-seated division and distrust that too easily erupted into violence, discrimination and bloodshed. But even as we acknowledge this reality, we have cause to rejoice that through the renewing and redeeming presence of God, those same Christian traditions are today able to stand together, speak together, celebrate together - learning from and being enriched by those things that distinguish us.

Sadly, we still live in a world that is marred by division and strife. Recent events in our own nation have revealed how easily human beings can become bitterly divided. We may still have some way to go, but today's Church can stand as a symbol of hope against that reality, that through grace, humility, repentance and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, differences can be overcome and mutual respect, honour and affirmation can emerge. We do indeed have good reason to rejoice, not only in who we are, but in the message of hope that we embody.

These things though are just an outward expression of a deeper reality. If I may return to the writings of the Apostle Paul, while he may have rejoiced in the various Christian communities with whom he experienced deep love and fellowship, he repeatedly expressed an even greater reason. Writing to the church in Philippi he simply exclaimed "*Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say Rejoice*". It is our common identity in Christ and our common hope in the Gospel that will and must always matter more to us than any earthly difference. Perhaps these differences have even served to help us to recognise with even greater clarity what truly defines us as Gospel people – and this common reality in which we rejoice is one that will last for eternity!

The Revd Phil Jump, Regional Minister, North West Baptist Association



Remembering

Remembering the reformation in England does not bring much joy. It was and still remains a tragedy in the history of the Christian Church. Divisions in the body of Christ still persist and are nothing less than a scandal to the world. Many forces at play which resulted in great brutality on all sides. Remembering our martyrs who died for their beliefs can be edifying as it shows how fidelity to one's beliefs and the primacy of conscience are greater than one's own life. On the other hand, the seemingly inhuman way that Christians behaved towards each other is to be remembered with shame. At the reformation the body of Christ was pulled apart, just as our martyrs, both protestant and catholic, were pulled apart on the rack. Their arms and legs were truly dis-membered. Looking to the future, our task as we hold them in our minds and hearts is to re-member the Body of Christ; to put it back together again. That is an enormous task but not impossible, after all we can be sure that Jesus' prayer that we may all be one will be fulfilled one day.

In Christianity remembering has a special function. By recalling the words of Jesus at the Last Supper the heavenly banquet that awaits us is anticipated. Christians call this act the holy Eucharist, because by giving thanks to God for his great deeds throughout history, and thus remembering those deeds, the resurrected Christ is present to us. When we remember we roll up the carpet of time at both ends, and God is present to us now.

So for us remembrance is not nostalgia where we hanker after something that happened a long time ago, nor is it a triumphant act because at the heart of our remembrance is the death of a man who died a criminal's death on the cross. When we follow Jesus' command to do this in remembrance of him, using his words we say, 'This is my body given up for you, and this is my blood poured out for many.' Jesus was anticipating his death and in dying on the cross he showed us that love is greater than death. Remembrance for Christians has present and future dimensions which are for us a promise of future glory.

Five hundred years after the reformation our hatred for each other has turned into love and we actively seek ways in which we can become one. I believe the Eucharist, which was the focus of so much disagreement at the time of the reformation and afterwards will be the driving force to becoming one church again. It is in the Eucharist that many grains become one bread; and so there will be a time when we will be able to remember together not the nastiness of human beings' actions towards one another but the wonderful deeds of our loving God who sent his Son for the forgiveness of sins.

+Malcolm McMahon
Archbishop of Liverpool



Reforming

Great reformers, whether we are talking about Luther and Calvin or Fry and Wilberforce, do not leave the world as they find it, nor do they expect the world to remain as they leave it. Those whose vision drove the Reformation, encapsulated this in the phrase 'ecclesia semper reformanda est': the church should always be reforming.

Each of our denominations has changed a great deal since the start of the Lutheran Reformation, five hundred years ago. I hope that in doing so we have built on the wisdom of our reforming forerunners, but if we are to remain true to their insights, we must continually look to see that we are being as faithful to Christ as we can possibly be.

This is where the other tenet of the Reformation, 'sola scriptura', by scripture alone, comes in. The Statement of the Nature Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church states that 'The highest authority for what we believe and do is God's Word in the Bible, alive for his people today through the help of the Spirit'. That help comes to us in many and differing ways, both personally and through discernment within the councils of the church, including through tradition, reason and experience.

We are called to return constantly to the bible to grapple with what God is saying to us today and then to reform our life together in ways which draw us ever closer to Christ. That is why the Statement goes on to say that 'we affirm our right and readiness, if the need arises, to change the Basis of Union and to make ever new statements of faith in ever new obedience to the Living Christ'.

In this anniversary year, two strands of change stand out as particularly important for the whole Church. The first is the way in which we respond as Christians to the needs of our fast changing world. There are questions today, which Jesus, who knew little of science and technology or of the sheer scale and complexity of today's concerns, could not possibly have anticipated directly. It is up to us to listen to the way in which the Spirit would have us apply Jesus' teaching in our shifting world today.

The second is the way in which we relate together as denominations. This has changed greatly since Luther's day, and particularly in the last hundred years. Within our region, relationships and common working have grown considerably in the recent past. Nevertheless, the way in which the world receives and perceives Jesus' message is still marred by our disunity and for Jesus' sake we need to be willing to re-form our understanding and practice even more.

Jesus is moving on. The world and its cultures, its science and its people are moving on. As Reformed Christians, which we all are, we need to be continually reforming, learning and growing, by listening to the Word, to the Spirit and to one another, that we might be one and the world might believe.

Rev Jacky Embrey, Moderator of the United Reformed Church Mersey Synod

