The Wittenberg Project: A Window of Opportunity

Dr. Alexa Doebele

The fall of the Iron Curtain (1989) opened a window of opportunity for a clear proclamation of the Gospel, in partnership with our German and European partner churches. Under Communist domination, the history of the Reformation and of Martin Luther was rewritten, watered down and in some aspects, stripped of its true treasures. Luther himself would not recognize his homeland or his namesake theology today after decades of Communism, the impact of post-modernism and the prevailing trend toward secularization. Dramatic changes in government, economic systems, and communications also have modified what it means to be a Lutheran living and worshipping in Germany, forcing and melding competing confessions within the official state church. Today’s world is increasingly hostile to Christianity and the Gospel message.

In spite of this, Germany welcomes the heirs of Luther’s legacy. It welcomes home those who claim Wittenberg and its famed monk as the cradle of their tradition. Visitors, scholars and students journey to Wittenberg to learn the history, culture and affect of the Reformation. In 2006, the Central Illinois District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod purchased an historic structure in Wittenburg’s village center, a four-story building known as the Old Latin School. For the price of back taxes plus one Euro, this purchase makes possible a new era of Lutheran scholarship, witness, service and education. Walking alongside our German partner church, the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK), and the International Lutheran Society of Wittenberg (ILSW), The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod envisions a modern, renovated facility serving as a home for global confessing Lutherans. If there is a time for education and a time for Lutheran teaching, that time is now, and these two cardinal and coveted characteristics of confessing Lutheranism – teaching and education – harmonize perfectly with the history of the Old Latin School.

The Plan

The plan proposed under the name “The Wittenberg Project” will restore the structure to current German building codes while outfitting it to fulfill a new purpose as a center for
scholarship, outreach, and education. It also will serve as a place for Gemütlichkeit—congenial conviviality—between visitors, hosts and the community. In this role, it will welcome home to the fatherland confessing Lutherans and those curious to know the true story of Luther, the Reformation and the Gospel.

Upon completion, the building will provide comfortable, welcoming spaces designed for:

- Educational and cultural programs, such as lectures and small group discussion
- Short-term guest housing for visitors, scholars, teachers and students – especially those from the LCMS Concordia universities and seminaries
- Research and writing areas in close proximity to historic sites and their antiquities
- Historical exhibits
- Dining and fellowship areas (Gemütlichkeit)
- A welcome center, including a gift shop and bookstore

Rehabilitating the highly visible and historic facility is a solid first step toward acceptance as a good neighbor in Wittenberg, establishing a clear and compelling Lutheran presence, and opening doors to further witness and mercy work in the surrounding communities.

Three Key Questions

**Why This Place?**

In Wittenberg, Martin Luther altered the course of history and the face of Christendom. He challenged church teachings of the time in order to declare our justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. Luther’s theology continues to influence the lives of millions of people around the world today. Evidence of this is seen as Protestant Christians in general and Lutherans in particular journey to Wittenberg so they can learn more about Luther and celebrate the Reformation themes of “Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Christ Alone, Scripture Alone” championed by the reformers.

Few places in the world can lay claim to the statement: “It happened exactly here – and what happened here spread from here to influence the entire world.” Wittenberg can make that
powerful and compelling claim. What happened there continues to influence the way hundreds of millions of Christians understand the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and they way they worship the Triune God. The invitation for Lutherans to “come home to Wittenberg” is powerful. Only Wittenberg can extend such a compelling invitation to the world.

Why Now?

The 500th anniversary of the posting of the 95 Theses in 2017 will refocus the world’s attention on Luther and Wittenberg. Since 1817 (the Prussian Union), and especially since the end of World War II, human history has distorted and muddied the truth of Luther and the Reformation. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the International Lutheran Society of Wittenberg have a rare window of opportunity to welcome, confessional Lutherans from around the world as they return to their fatherland and to have a special presence in Wittenberg during the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and for decades to come. Through the Wittenberg Project, the beacon of truth, hope and light found only in the Gospel of Jesus Christ will be raised up. The legacy of Luther and the unique witness of confessional Lutherans – that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone – will strengthen the hearts of believers and be introduced to people who have been left spiritually blind by unbelief, doubt and hostility toward God.

Why the Old Latin School?

The Wittenberg Project’s home in the Old Latin School is at the physical and spiritual center of the community, directly adjacent to the Stadtkirche (City Church) where Luther most often preached and which is the mother-church of the Reformation. The Old Latin School has a rich history: it has served as the place where Lutheran leaders were taught, as a hospital and as a shelter for Napoleon’s armies. Even Peter the Great visited the Old Latin School. From this central location, visitors, students and scholars are within easy walking distance of the university where Luther taught, his home, the SchlossKirche (Castle Church) upon whose doors Luther nailed his 95 Theses. The famous oak tree beneath which Luther burned the papal bull condemning him and his teachings still stands near the Old Latin School. The International
Lutheran Society of Wittenberg already holds title to the historic building. What is needed at this time and in this place is an intentional renovation effort designed to bring the Old Latin School back to life as the place where confessing Lutherans from around the world can “come home.”

Your Invitation

The future of The Wittenberg Project will depend on intentional, significant investments made by a core group of committed, visionary Lutherans.

Rev. Matthew C. Harrison, president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and a member of the Board of Directors for International Lutheran Society of Wittenberg (ILSW), is committed to marshaling such a group of leaders. These individuals will serve as members of a special cabinet, the President’s Wittenberg Project Steering Committee, providing guidance and counsel to the LCMS and ILSW as the long range plan for this facility is shaped.

Harrison declared: "The vision of establishing a distinctly Lutheran presence in the very cradle of the Reformation, in Wittenberg Germany, in time for the 2017 celebration has been on my heart and mind for some time. The renovation of the Old Latin School provides the opportunity to help people learn about Luther in Luther's own context and share the Gospel that Luther helped rediscover in the 16th century -- Gospel that our world desperately needs to hear today. Join me in this vision of having a distinctly Lutheran Presence in Wittenberg."