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## Introduction:

# Eco-Reformation and the 500th Anniversary in 2017

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How to observe the 500th anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther's "95 theses" in Wittenberg in 1517 provokes lively debates. This journal has featured several essays on the topic, including the lecture by German Lutheran Special Envoy for the Reformation 500th, former Lutheran bishop Margot Kassmann, "*Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda: Challenges of the Reformation Jubilee 2017.*"<sup>1</sup>

"Eco-Reformation" is the term embraced by Lutheran theologians who foreground the crisis facing God's creation. In an open letter to the ELCA presiding bishop and synod bishops in 2014, these theologians urged that the 2017 anniversary of the Reformation be an occasion "to make climate change and ecological justice major themes in ELCA planning and activities leading up to and following the observance of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation."

"Eco-Reformation in the Context of Climate Change" is the topic of synod resolutions and memorials adopted by a number of ELCA synods in 2015, urging the church to put ecology at the center of our observances. Both the theologians' letter and synod resolutions take inspiration from The Lutheran World Federation's hard-hitting 2017 sub-theme of "Creation—Not for Sale." The Lutheran World Federation urges member churches to extend Luther's insight of "salvation not for sale" also into the realm of economics, human trafficking, and the environment.<sup>2</sup>

The theologians' letter points to the "living nature of the Lutheran tradition" to make the case for eco-Reformation. Just as Luther made a critique of economic abuses part of his sacramental theology, so too the living nature of the tradition requires that we reflect theologically on the abuses of our extractive economy today. Dirty fossil fuels are poisoning God's good creation, with catastrophic consequences especially for the poor. The ecological crisis needs Lutheran theology. We are "waiting for the Lutherans," as Lutheran ethicist Larry Rasmussen described in a 2010 essay.<sup>3</sup>

This issue of *Currents* testifies to the living nature of the Reformation tradition, by exploring the theme of eco-Reformation for the 2017 anniversary. This is a "kairos" moment for environmental action, as ecumenical partners remind us. The Greek Orthodox

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Patriarch Archbishop Bartholomew invokes the term "kairos" to underscore the urgency of the present moment. Pope Francis's encyclical "Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home" has resulted in what some are calling the "Francis Effect," increasing awareness of climate change among U. S. Christians, especially among evangelicals. Some are even calling Pope Francis the reformer of our times.<sup>4</sup>

This issue of *Currents* also comes at an important moment for the church, leading up to the Churchwide Assembly in August 2016. The ELCA will have the opportunity in New Orleans to deliberate on Reformation anniversary actions, including memorials forwarded by synods. These include calls to divest from fossil fuel companies, reinvest in renewable energy, and make eco-Reformation a priority. Symbolic actions such as tree-planting will also be important. If the church is called to be "semper reformanda," as Kassmann argues, then we are called to consider what needs reforming today.

The grass-roots movement "Lutherans Restoring Creation" advocates for creation-care and ecological justice throughout the ELCA. This organization, founded at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago by emeritus professor David Rhoads and others, provides resources for congregations and synods for eco-Reformation observances.

With these essays and sermons, theologians provide theological resources to engage the challenge and opportunity of ongoing Reformation, offering crucial biblical, theological, and ethical grounding for eco-justice in the context of today's world.

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1. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 40/6 (December 2013):413–423.

2. See the 2015 LWF booklet "Creation Not For Sale," downloadable at <https://2017.lutheranworld.org/content/reformation-booklets-creation-%E2%80%93-not-sale-131>

3. *Currents* 37/2 (April 2010): 86–98.

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4. See Leonardo Boff, *Radicalizing Reformation*: "It is the first time in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, that the concerns of Luther and the other reformers are taken up... The Roman Catholic Church under Pope Francis will be a reform church." <http://radicalizing-reformation.com/index.php/en/publications/149-volume-5-church-liberated-for-resistance-and-transformation.html>

Years ago, Krister Stendahl formulated what he called a “public health” reading of the Bible. **Ben Stewart** brings together climate change, public health, and liturgy in his essay “What’s the Right Rite: Treating Environmental Degradation as Sickness or Sin,” making the case for framing environmental degradation as sickness rather than primarily as sin. Stewart suggests ways that the metaphor of healing might help shape vibrant worship and hopeful action in the world.

In “A Beloved Earth Community: Christian Mission in an Ecological Age” **David Rhoads** and **Barbara Rossing** explore eco-Reformation implications for mission. In the century following the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, mission was largely viewed through anthropocentric lenses. Revisiting that missionary conference 100 years later, they argue that God’s mission involves not just humans but the whole cosmos.

In his essay on God’s speech from the whirlwind and the book of Job, ethicist **Stewart Herman** deploys what he calls a “hermeneutic appropriate to eco-Reformation—that is, a hermeneutic which takes science seriously.” Using an evolutionary lens, he argues that we are designed by God to figure things out on our own. The fact that we have evolved to be “designed for survival” can make Job an inspiration for us as we face the dolorous consequences of climate change.

“A love letter” is how **Vitor Westhelle** characterizes the 2014 Swedish “Bishops’ Letter on the Climate.”<sup>5</sup> Westhelle delivered this review at LSTC in May 2014, responding both to the bishops’ letter about climate change and to the commencement address of Archbishop Antje Jackelén of the Church of Sweden. Westhelle underscores the nature of God’s creation as gift, a gift that cannot be returned (Kierkegaard), and a gift that is grace alone. Relating

the Good Samaritan parable to the climate crisis, those who have fallen into the hands of “robbers of the future” include the Earth and its ecosystems, and also future generations and children. Yet love letters do not end on doom and calamity. Westhelle contends that the Bishops’ Letter document offers an eschatology grounded in hope.

Finally, two sermons demonstrate how those who preach may shed light on vital theological themes of creation care and eco-justice. Start your read with the sermon for Earth Day, April 22, by Professor **Linda Thomas**, “A Living Body.” Linking Jesus’ resurrection appearance with environmental justice and Black Lives Matter, Thomas focuses on the body, on Jesus’ invitation to “touch me” (Luke 24:39). Jesus was an earthling like us, with wounds. “Matter matters,” she underscores, bringing an eco-womanist perspective to the scandal of crucified bodies, both in Jesus’ time and today.

**Ben Stewart**’s sermon on the Sanctus, delivered at a Bach Cantata service, shows us the whole cosmos in interspecies song, singing “Holy, holy, holy.” The vision that *heaven and earth are full of God’s glory* comes to life in this sermon. Stewart interprets the coal of mercy that touches Isaiah’s lips as the bread of communion received on our lips. He attunes our hearing to the voices of all who join in praise—including “sequoias and the stars, the dogs and dolphins” as well as angels and archangels.

At a recent conference on “Radicalizing Reformation” at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Reformation historian Christine Helmer issued a challenge to theologians to “put the protest back into Protestant”! This issue of *Currents* seeks to put the “protest” back into one area of theology today, namely by exploring the urgent challenge of eco-Reformation.

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5. <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=114531>

*Barbara R. Rossing, Guest Editor*