

ARTICLE FOR SIXTEENTH CENTURY JOURNAL
REPORT ON A REFORMATION ANNIVERSARY EVENT
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“Still Shifting @ 500: The Reformation for Today”

On the Saturday before Reformation Day over forty people gathered at the Trost Center in De Forest, Wisconsin for lectures, liturgy and lunch. This event was organized by the Historical Committee of the Wisconsin Conference, United Church of Christ, and most attendees were clergy of that denomination.

Two historians provided the main input for the event during lectures in the morning and afternoon, but the day began with a liturgy, including the singing of “A Mighty Fortress” in the rhythm as Luther likely wrote it instead of the “squared up” more modern form, a responsive reading of Psalm 46, prayers from Luther and Calvin, a Taizé response, and a sermon by the Rev. Franz Rigert, Wisconsin UCC Conference Minister, in which he stated that “God calls us to an ever forming faith.” There was also a visual report from a group of “pilgrims” who had made the trek to Germany in the summer and viewed the door where Luther may or may not have posted his 95 theses for debate.

Lee Palmer Wandel, Professor of History, Religious Studies and Visual Culture at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, used a variety of projected images to offer her “new history” of the Reformation in which she affirmed that the actions of one man mailing (not nailing) 95 propositions for debate did not fully explain a movement that caused disruption throughout the western world. She also helped listeners to enlarge their conceptions of symbol and offered an appreciation of Zwingli’s struggle with language to articulate what happens in the Eucharist.

Margaret Bendroth, Executive Director of the Congregational Library in Boston, addressed the role of history in the 21st century mainline church and asked: “How do Christians remember?” She encouraged those in attendance to go beyond simply using history as a resource or commodity and not trivialize it. Finally she stated that Christian remembering is an antidote to loneliness and that the past can be deeply humbling.

The audience was engaged with each lecturer and offered many comments, questions and in at least one case challenges. Participants went away with a better appreciation for the Reformation in the “still shifting” church and world.

The pastors in attendance may have used insights from this day for their Reformation Sunday sermons. I was privileged to role play Luther at my local church and engage in a dialogue between the 16th and 21st centuries with my pastor. Then on the eve of All Saints’ Day I donned a robe and beret to distribute candy to about 200 trick-or-treaters traipsing up and down the main street of our county seat town. Most didn’t comment on my Halloween costume, but one high school student remarked that I must have been the fellow responsible for the Lutherans today and we bonded as fellow “historians.”