

# Celebrating our Lutheran heritage



including ELCA pastor and missionary Arden Haug in particular, to work side-by-side as they strive to renew their church and their congregations.

The ELCA's most recent partnership with this German church started over 12 years ago with the opening of the ELCA Wittenberg Center. The center hosts educational programs for visitors and encourages them to experience historic sites important to Lutheran identity.

Now, the focus is shifting to inviting German Lutherans back to church. Twila Schock, director for the ELCA churchwide missionary sponsorship program, says that the ELCA and the German Lutheran church, like many mainline Protestant denominations, face similar challenges around membership.

The German church has an important story to share with the ELCA, Twila believes. "This is a historic church," she says, "and it's gone through the same cycles that churches in our country have. It's important for us to work together, and especially important that we have an ELCA missionary in Wittenberg, because we can support each other. We have a lot in common and a lot to learn from each other."

Arden says the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 offers a unique opportunity to welcome Lutherans everywhere back to the church. It's also a time to celebrate the diversity of the global Lutheran church. Says Arden, "We have had varied paths, but we have all emerged from the same tradition."

In Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church. It was an act that sparked the Reformation and changed the world.

But fast forward almost 500 years and today only one in five people in Wittenberg, the birthplace of the Reformation, state that they are Christian. The United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany is struggling with declining membership after 40 years of religious oppression.

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