On the eve of Pope Francis’ visit to Sweden and the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, a leading figure in the UK Lutheran community considers the state of Lutheranism worldwide / By THOMAS BRUCH

From conflict to commemoration

AFTER FOUR years in seminary in the mid-1970s, I was assigned to a small Lutheran congregation in the south of England for a year of pastoral experience before ordination. The Lutheran pastor there had asked the local Church of England rector if he knew anyone who could provide accommodation for my wife and I during the year, and a churchwarden of his parish obligingly offered some nice rooms.

Bags in hand, we arrived at his address and knocked on the door, introducing ourselves as the Lutherans he was expecting. The churchwarden looked confused and said nothing for a few moments. Then he said that he had not expected to see white faces. He had assumed that Lutherans generally had black faces, like Martin Luther King.

Back then, Lutherans were almost entirely unknown in the UK, even among other Christians. Perhaps that is not surprising, as almost all Lutherans in the UK have worshipped mainly in languages other than English, and still do, so have been on the fringe of the Christian scene. But the words “Luther” and “Lutheran” will be heard more often as 2017 approaches.

Martin Luther, an Augustinian friar in Germany, came to believe that the Church was ignoring or acting contrary to essential Christian teachings. To invite debate and discussion, he wrote 95 theses, focusing, in particular, on the abuse of indulgences. Tradition says that on 31 October 1517 he nailed them to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, where he taught theology; they were soon translated from Latin into German and distributed widely.

This is generally regarded as the act that sparked the Protestant Reformation, which spread rapidly across Europe and soon reached the British Isles. Echoes of those hammer blows still resonate today.

Accurate figures for church membership are always difficult to pinpoint but, globally, there are around 80 million Lutherans - the same figure that is often cited for the number of Anglicans worldwide. Around 25 million Anglians belong to the Church of England; around 25 million Lutherans belong to the Evangelical Church in Germany.

About half of all Lutherans live in Europe (outside Germany, mainly in the Nordic countries), approximately 28 per cent are in Africa (mainly in Tanzania and Ethiopia), 15 per cent in Asia (mainly Indonesia and India) and 6 per cent in North America. In Europe, North America and Latin America, the number of Lutherans is decreasing, while African and Asian churches continue to grow.

FOR CENTURIES, Lutherans from the Scandinavian countries and Germany have worshipped in Britain in their own churches, using their own liturgies and languages. The first Lutheran clergyman came from Germany in 1668, working under the supervision of the King of Sweden and serving both Germans and Scandinavians. Holy Trinity Lutheran Church was established in London in 1672, on a site gifted by Charles II to all “companions of the Augustan profession”, a reference to the Augsburg Confession of 1530 - often called the “Augustana” - which is the classic summary of the teachings of Lutherans. This year, it is reckoned that about 200,000 baptised and
confirmed Lutherans live in Britain, mainly from the Nordic countries; their worship is conducted in various locations and in several languages, including Cantonese, Danish, English, Estonian, Faroese, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Icelandic, Latvian, Mandarin, Norwegian, Polish, Swahili and Swedish.

MORE THAN 90 per cent of Lutherans belong to one of the Churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a communion of 145 autonomous churches, in 95 countries. Established in 1947, the LWF is governed by a council, with its president elected by an assembly that represents all member Churches and meets about every seven years. The current president is Bishop Dr Munib A. Younan, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. There is – not surprisingly – no "Lutheran Pope", nor even an individual with the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury within the Anglican Communion, nor a leader to whom Lutherans look as their spiritual head or a "chief spokesperson.

Some Lutheran Churches remain outside the LWF for various reasons, often because they are more conservative than a number of Churches that belong to it. All Lutheran Churches, however, look to the sixteenth-century Lutheran confessions, the Augsburg Confession in particular, as fundamental expressions of their faith, along with the ecclesiastical creeds. And the writings of Luther himself still have a significant influence on Lutheran thinking and practice.

The touchstone of Lutheran belief is the doctrine of justification by grace, received by faith. The centre of its proclamation is that God offers his eternal love to humans as a gift; it is not something that we can earn. Trusting this gracious promise of God, given in Christ, we are in a right relationship with God and are loved by him, which strengthens our neighbour – as "little Christs", to use Luther's term. Quite a few Lutheran Churches do not have the word "Lutheran" in their names at all; indeed, it can be a bit tricky spotting Lutherans by the names of their Churches. Because many Lutheran Churches have the word "evangelical" as part of their name, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, there is often a false expectation that Lutherans might hold to a literalist interpretation of Scripture and prefer a stripped-down, austere, "low" style of worship.

A symbolic or spiritual understanding of Christ's presence, Lutherans have a strong doctrine of the Real Presence in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In some respects, such as in church order or organisation, Lutherans might seem less Catholic, but most Lutheran Churches have bishops, often, like bishops in the Catholic Church, in historic succession. To other Christians, Lutherans can come across as being a blend of Catholics and Protestants.

The same diversity of belief and occasionally bitter tensions over, for example, the ordination of women and sexual ethics – especially same-sex relationships – found in many other Churches is visible within Lutheranism. Some Churches ordain women as priests (several Lutheran Churches have always used the word "priest", others prefer "pastor") and bishops, others do not. Some Churches ordain people in same-sex relationships and provide blessings for same-sex couples, while for many others these practices are unacceptable. Taking all Lutherans together, views and practices range from the very conservative to the very liberal.

In the past 20 years, international ecumenical agreements have helped to pave the way for the commemorations that will mark the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation. The Porvoo Agreement established full communion between Anglican and Lutheran Churches in Great Britain and Ireland, the Nordic region, Baltic countries and Iberia. Catholics and Lutherans have had formal international dialogues since 1965.

OFF-THE-CUFF remarks by Pope Francis have suggested that there might be occasions when Lutherans could receive Communion in a Catholic Church, leading some to wonder if an even bolder initiative might emerge. The consequences of Luther's actions nearly 500 years ago have been both destructive and regenerative. Whatever happens next year, for the first time Catholics and Lutherans will be marking side by side a major anniversary of the hammer blows that were to trigger the Reformation.

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THE MOST dramatic result was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999), which established a "differentiated consensus" on the doctrine of justification, and affirmed that "remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations". More recently, in the report From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity acknowledged that the loss of unity in western Christendom in the sixteenth century "belongs to the dark pages of church history", adding, "We must confess openly that we have been guilty before Christ of damaging the unity of the Church."

William Kenney, Auxiliary Bishop of Birmingham, took over as Catholic co-chair of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity in 2013. Bishop Kenney served for many years in Sweden, home of one of the world's largest Lutheran Churches. He and the bishop of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain, Martin Lind, know each other well, as Dr Lind was previously Bishop of Linköping in Sweden.

The anniversary will not be a celebration but something altogether more sober and reflective: an opportunity for recollection, prayer and working for Christian unity. Common liturgical materials have been produced for use next year which focus on penitence for the wounds mutually inflicted, joy in the insights arising from the Reformation and shared hopes for unity.

A number of events that will commemorate the anniversary are listed at www.reformation500.co.uk. Among them is a service of Common Prayer at St George's Cathedral, Southwark, on 26 March 2017; based upon the liturgy being used at the service in Lund next week, in which Pope Francis will participate. The officiants and preachers at the Southwark service will be Bernard Longley, Archbishop of Birmingham, and Bishop Martin Lind.

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