



THE LUTHERAN
WORLD FEDERATION
GERMAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE



LUTHERAN – REFORMED – UNITED

A Pocket Guide to the Denominational Landscape in Germany

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PREFACE

»Möbelwagenkonversion« – the poetry of German administrative language can be clearly heard in this word. Yes, with indeed only one word the German language is able to describe the astonishing process that a Lutheran Christian might suddenly find him or herself being converted into a Reformed Christian (and vice versa) simply by relocating within Germany. The phenomenon of »removal van conversion« – solely by an administrative act, without the person intending it – is special to the German Protestant church system with its 20 regional churches. Also, as often falsely perceived abroad, not all Protestants in the motherland of the Lutheran Reformation are Lutherans. Indeed, among the mainstream Protestant churches in Germany there are Lutheran and Reformed churches as well churches which are United – a confessional adjective uncommon among to the churches around the globe.

So what does the German Protestant landscape nowadays look like? How did United churches come into being and are they more Reformed or more Lutheran? How did the Lutheran Reformation, started 500 years ago in Wittenberg, develop into a global communion and how is this filled with life in contemporary German Lutheran churches? And what has the EKD to do with all of this?

This booklet tries to answer these and many more questions by giving a brief but not superficial description of the Protestant churches in Germany. It starts with an analysis of the three church families – Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Germany – then looking at their present situation,

their historical theological foundation, and casting an eye on their worldwide connections.

In a second part, the focus lies on what brings the churches together in Germany: the intra-Evangelical understanding and their common structure. Finally, it addresses ecumenical relations within Germany and with the churches and communions from around the globe.

This book is published by the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation (GNC/LWF). Its intention is to give visitors to Germany and colleagues from around the world a guide to German church structures. We know that from an outside perspective the German system often enough is perceived as complicated. It is indeed complex, even viewed from the inside. However, it is rare that anything in the system is irrational and cannot be explained either by looking at the historical process or the present-day effects. We hope that this book will help you to gain a better understanding – not only of the »Möbelwagenkonversion«.

Florian Hübner and Oliver Schuegraf

LUTHERAN – REFORMED – UNITED

A POCKET GUIDE TO THE DENOMINATIONAL LANDSCAPE IN GERMANY

The Evangelical Regional Churches in Germany

One main characteristic of the denominational landscape in Germany are the Evangelical¹ Regional Churches (*Landeskirchen*). They are territorial churches that arose from the Reformation in the 16th century and are either Lutheran or Reformed by confession, or United (*uniert*). Roughly a third of the German population or 22 million people belongs to one of those regional churches (about another third is Roman Catholic). Furthermore, about 300 000 people belong to one of the historic Protestant free churches like Methodists, Baptists or Mennonites, but also to small independent Lutheran and Reformed free churches. These *Freikirchen*, very much smaller in size, have also significantly different forms of organisations than the regional churches. This booklet therefore focuses on the regional churches.

Among the important theological achievements of the 20th century is the discovery that differences emerging within the Reformation itself no lon-

¹ The term *evangelisch* is rendered as Evangelical, reflecting the German word used in the full name of the regional churches under discussion. It indicates their origins in the Reformation period and is not meant in the more personal or narrowly theological sense of »evangelical« (*evangelikal*), with all its different expressions in the English-speaking world. For that reason it was preferred to the frequent translation of *evangelisch* as »Protestant«, which could cover a broader range of denominations than those dealt with here.

ger need to be church-dividing. In doctrinal conversations the Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches of Europe, and thereby also the German regional churches, can recognize that, despite all differences in theological thought and church action, they agree on basic central positions and together live from the liberating and reassuring experience of the Gospel. Therefore, on the basis of the discovery that these churches share a common understanding of the gospel, along with the insight that the doctrinal condemnations made in their confessional writings do not apply to the current state of doctrine, they in 1973 declared and realized church fellowship by signing the Leuenberg Agreement. It states that church fellowship means:

that, on the basis of the consensus they have reached in their understanding of the Gospel, churches with different confessional positions accord each other fellowship in word and sacrament and strive for the fullest possible co-operation in witness and service to the world. (Leuenberg Agreement, § 29).

At the same time, the German regional churches, like all the other churches in the Leuenberg Fellowship (since 2006 called the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe), remain committed to their confessions and confessional traditions:

The Agreement does not affect the validity of the confessions of faith to which the participating churches are committed. It is not to be regarded as a new confession of faith. It sets out a consensus reached on central points that makes church fellowship possible between churches of different confessional positions (Leuenberg Agreement, § 37).

Hence the Leuenberg Agreement was able to contribute to clarifying the question of how church fellowship is possible between churches that are committed to non-identical confessional traditions.²

Lutheran churches

The present

The following Lutheran churches exist on the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany:

- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria (approx. 2,430,000 members)
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brunswick (approx. 347,000 members)
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover (approx. 2,677,000 members)
- the Evangelical Church in Central Germany (approx. 747,000 members)
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany (approx. 2,103,000 members)
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Oldenburg (approx. 424,000 members)
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony (approx. 714,000 members)
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Schaumburg-Lippe (approx. 53,000 members)
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg (approx. 2,081,000 members)³

² The Leuenberg Agreement and other older documents translate the German term *Kirchengemeinschaft* as church fellowship. Today it is mostly and more adequately translated as communion or church communion.

³ Figures are based on the latest survey of the Evangelical Church in Germany (2015), published in 2016.

This short list in itself makes it clear that, due to their history, the regional churches may vary considerably in their number of members and geographical extension: from the Church of Hanover with its over 2.6 million members in almost 1,400 congregations to the Evangelical Church in Central Germany with 747,000 members in about 1,900 congregations with over 4000 churches and chapels (!) or to the Church of Schaumburg-Lippe with its 53,000 members in 22 parishes. Moreover, the landscape of Lutheran churches has changed in the last decade due to two mergers. In 2009 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thuringia and the Evangelical Church of the Province of Saxony merged to become the Evangelical Church in Central Germany.⁴ At Pentecost in 2012 followed the merger of the North Elbian, Mecklenburg and Pomeranian Churches to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany.

The Lutheran churches are organized along synodal and episcopal lines, i. e. the central decision-making body is a synod, and they are represented by a bishop. Structures and terminology may vary, yet the regional Lutheran churches are roughly similar: their basic units are the church parishes, which cover the whole territory of the church.

The Church of Jesus Christ is realized at the local level in the parish (Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, Art. 20(1)).

⁴ According to its constitution, the Evangelical Church of Central Germany is »a church of the Lutheran Reformation and has its special character in the church community with the Reformed congregations in its territory« (Art. 4). These Reformed congregations are located on the territory of the former church province of Saxony.

The parish is led by a board (or parish council or presbytery) which is elected by all members of the congregation and by the minister/pastor. Pastoral positions are filled by consultation between the parish and the regional church. Several parishes form a deanery or superintendentship headed by a dean/superintendent. In the larger regional churches the next higher level of organization is the church district. A regional bishop (or regional superintendent or provost) assumes the episcopal ministry at this level; his/her duties include ordaining new pastors and visiting the parishes. Finally, the regional synod is made up of elected lay people and ordained persons (in most cases two thirds to one third). It is a forum for developing objectives in the regional church and it incorporates unity and diversity in the church. According to its constitution, the Bavarian synod, for example, has the following responsibilities:

1. It shall have the right to pass church laws;
2. It shall elect the bishop;
3. It shall adopt 'guidelines of church life';
4. It shall decide on the introduction and amendment of liturgies, hymnbooks and catechisms;
5. It shall approve the establishment of pastorates, of positions for pastors with general church responsibilities and the establishment of institutions and agencies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria;
6. It shall draw up the budget and the annual financial statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria and formally approve the activities of the church office ...];

7. It shall decide on petitions and independent motions;

8. It shall hold the elections which are its responsibility.

(Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, Art. 43(2)).

All the regional Lutheran churches belong to the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD, see below) and seven of them to the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD). This communion of regional Lutheran churches, founded in 1948 in Eisenach, understands itself to be *one* church, which through its institutions and bodies ensures

the preservation and deepening of Lutheran teaching and administration of the sacraments through upholding Lutheran theology and advising the member churches in questions of Lutheran doctrine, worship and congregational life (Constitution of the VELKD, Art. 7(1)).

Furthermore, VELKD represents its member churches to the outside world, in particular in the ecumenical movement. VELKD's governing bodies are the General Synod, which passes laws, the Church Executive Council, the Bishops' Conference and the Presiding Bishop. The VELKD office is in Hannover. Organizations run by VELKD are the Theological Study Seminary in Pullach, the Centre for Congregational Renewal in Neudietendorf, the Institute for Liturgical Studies at Leipzig University and the Martin-Luther-Bund, which is an agency to support Lutheran churches in diaspora, co-sponsored by VELKD and the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation.

Communion with Lutherans worldwide is an important concern of the Lutheran churches in Germany. Consequently, all regional Lutheran churches are members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF, see below). Additionally, two further churches, the Lutheran Section of the Church of Lippe and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baden, a free church, are members of this worldwide Lutheran communion. In total, there are eleven member churches in Germany. They relate to the LWF via the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation (GNC/LWF). The GNC/LWF is the German hub for the communications between the LWF and its German member churches. It supports and co-ordinates the activities of the German Lutheran churches for the LWF. Via the GNC/LWF the German Lutheran churches financially support the LWF in its ecumenical, theological and missionary engagement as well as in the international development and humanitarian work. At the same time the GNC/LWF promotes the work of the LWF in Germany. Especially in the field of ecumenism, the activities of the German Lutheran churches are strongly influenced by and related to the ecumenical work of the LWF (see below). Here the GNC/LWF acts in close connection to the VELKD. The GNC/LWF is headed by a Chairperson who is a bishop of one its member churches. The Assembly of the GNC/LWF, its highest governing body, meets twice a year. The church office of the GNC/LWF is located in Hanover. Besides the work of LWF, the GNC/LWF runs a scholarship programme for German and foreign university students, supports the LWF Wittenberg Center, and co-operates with different church partners in Germany.

Table 1: Member churches of the LWF and the GNC/LWF:

- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baden
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brunswick
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover
- the Lutheran Section of the Church of Lippe
- the Evangelical Church in Central Germany
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Oldenburg
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Schaumburg-Lippe
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg

The past

The Lutheran churches emerged during the 16th century from the Reformation inspired by the teachings of Martin Luther (1483-1547), Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) and their associates. This ›Wittenberg Reformation‹ did not come from nowhere: the late medieval church of the West had at times produced people and movements who sought to overcome the wrongs within the church. At first, Luther was concerned to renew the church at the wellsprings of the Word of God and not by introducing a new teaching or founding a new church. However, when it became clear that this reform of the Roman church was doomed to fail, confessional groupings and then churches began to form – also stimulated by the complicated political developments.

How can I get a merciful God? – this question haunted Luther and was at the origin of the Reformation. Having being raised with the picture of a

severe, judgmental God, the young monk found no consolation for his tormented soul in the Erfurt-based Order of Augustinian Hermits. Luther's meditation on a verse from Romans was to bring about the decisive change: »For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law« (Rom 3:28). Whether, when and how this ›tower experience‹ may have taken place, is not the issue here. The key point is that, when looking back, Luther discovered for himself the liberating power of the gospel of Jesus of Christ in this statement of Paul:

I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners [...]. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, »In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ›He who through faith is righteous shall live.« There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith [...]. Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. (Luther's Works 34, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1960, 336–37)

Luther thus came to the conviction that we become righteous before God not by what we do, achieve or possess, but through God's free gift of grace. We are redeemed without having to do anything ourselves, without being able to earn our recognition by God in any way. We must believe that with our whole hearts.

From studying Scripture this teaching of justification by grace alone (*sola gratia*), by faith alone (*sola fide*), for the sake of Christ alone (*solus Christus*) became for Luther and Lutheran theology the article »by which the church stands and falls«. And since this faith insight led Luther into the centre of his understanding of the church, the question soon arose about authority in the church and its role in mediating salvation. Wherever the *sola gratia* was contradicted and additional conditions imposed for salvation Luther knew he had to object firmly. Likewise when he saw the *solus Christus* and *sola fide* threatened in the claims raised by the pope. Although Luther still assured the pope of loyalty in the 1518 preface to his Ninety-five Theses on indulgences, the conflict between them flared up regardless. While the Wittenberg professor wanted to have an academic debate with the pope about what he considered a central theological question that only touched the power of the pope indirectly, this opponents immediately pushed this question into the center of the debate. The dispute about indulgences thus inadvertently developed into a conflict about the authority of the pope. In the process Luther saw himself forced to opt for Scripture and thus against the pope. At the Diet of Worms in 1521 Luther refused to recant, arguing that the pope and councils could err. He and his conscience were bound solely by the Word of God.

Despite the imperial edict outlawing Martin Luther and his followers, his reforming efforts were not to be stopped. The new technique of printing enabled the rapid dissemination of his ideas on a vast scale. Luther's writings were published in large editions, and the key ideas were distributed at high speed as tracts and hymns. The concern for reform found an open ear with many priests, monks and nuns, likewise with Humanists. The Reformation cause was likewise supported by some of the German princes, albeit not only

for theological reasons. In 1526/27 Elector John of Saxony und Landgrave Philip of Hesse were the first to introduce the new teachings, rules for visitations and German-language worship on their territory. More principedoms like Brandenburg followed, also imperial cities such as Nuremberg. The trend was not to be stopped. When, at the Diet of Speyer in 1529, the Catholic estates decided by majority vote to take - ultimately unfeasible - measures against the Protestant territories (6 electors and 14 free imperial cities), the latter staged a formal ›protestation‹, from which the term ›Protestantism‹ arose. The renewed attempt to save the unity of church and empire at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 also failed. With his Augsburg Confession drafted for this occasion, Melanchthon wanted expressly to underline the orthodox faith of the Lutheran estates; instead, the Diet only advanced the development of confessional feeling. The *Confessio Augustana*, although intended to be an ecumenical document, became the most important confession of international Lutheranism. Luther was engaged in theological debates with Andreas Karlstadt, Thomas Münzer or Huldrych Zwingli at about the same time, and Protestantism was already falling into different camps.

We cannot pass over the dark sides of Luther's writings, although they may not differ greatly from similar statements of his time: his harsh utterances against the rebellious peasants (1525), his anti-Judaism that came out with increasing clarity the more he published (particularly in »On the Jews and their Lies« of 1543) or his advocating for the state authorities to impose the death penalty on Anabaptists.

The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 and later the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 finally established the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*: the territorial rul-

ers decided on the confession of their subjects. They had to bow to this or emigrate. That gave stability to the Lutheran Reformation, but also to the confessional division of Germany: northern, central and eastern Germany became broadly Lutheran, while southern Germany remained mainly Roman Catholic. In those territories whose rulers had adopted the new doctrine, new church structures emerged with the rulers as »emergency bishop«, or *summus episcopus*. Church councils supported the sovereigns in administrative matters. The Lutheran churches thus established themselves as territorial churches.

The development of Lutheran doctrine ended with the Book of Concord in 1580. This corpus of Lutheran confessions completed the demarcations towards Old Believers, Anabaptists and Reformed and settled the theological disputes within Lutheranism. The collection begins with the three Ecumenical Creeds and thus emphasizes the claim of the Lutheran Church to be in continuity with the early church. There follows the *Confessio Augustana* with its Apology, Luther's Smalcald Articles, Melancthon's treatise on the power of the pope, Luther's two catechisms and the formula of concord. Old Lutheran orthodoxy, pietism, the Enlightenment, idealism and 19th century »Neo-Lutheranism« appealed to and/or engaged with the confessional writings in their own way. While e. g. orthodox Lutheran theologians in the 17th century sought to systematize Lutheran theology into a complex, consistent set of doctrine (e. g. Johann Gerhard, 1582–1637), Pietists attempted to break out of this formal straitjacket and to renew personal piety and the Christian life. They drew inspiration from Philipp Jakob Spener with his *Pia desideria* of 1675. Pietism took characteristic forms in Halle (August Hermann Francke, 1663–1727), Württemberg (Johann Albrecht Bengel, 1687–1752) and Herrn-

hut (Nikolaus Ludwig Count Zinzendorf, 1700–1760). During the Enlightenment, by contrast, topics like sin, redemption and eternity, as presented in the confessions, received less attention. The reception of philosophical rationalism by Enlightenment Protestant theology led to critique of the orthodox understanding of biblical inspiration and to the emergence of a historical-critical interpretation of Scripture.

In the German Empire (from 1870) the territorial church structures remained until the end of World War I. However, the collapse of state structures in 1918 forced the Lutheran churches to organize themselves independently of the state. The obsolete regional church borders were mostly not affected, but it was necessary to rewrite church constitutions and put them into practice. In 1933 the National Socialists seized power but the church did not present a united front in opposition to the Nazi regime. Even Confessing Christians who resisted the state's encroachment on internal church matters were able, at the same time, to support the Nazi party and anti-Semitism. The regional churches of Bavaria, Württemberg and Hanover succeeded in avoiding integration into the *Reichskirche* with its nationalist ideology propagated by the German Christians. The consequence, however, was that they had to engage in more tactical maneuvering in relations with the Nazi state than did the alternative leadership structures (*Bruderräte*) of the Confessing Church within the synchronized regional churches. The non-synchronized Lutheran churches and their *Bruderräte* intensified their cooperation across regional church borders from 1936 in the »Luther Council«. At the same time the work of the Confessing Church led to a hitherto unprecedented cooperation of Lutherans with Reformed and United churches. The times of trial and resistance were even able to bring Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians together in friendship and

spiritual fellowship, as illustrated in the case of the Lübeck Martyrs (three Roman Catholic priests and a Lutheran pastor), who have since always been commemorated together.

The Lutheran Church worldwide

Lutheran teaching took root mainly in Scandinavia as early as in Reformation times, leading to church planting; later it spread worldwide thanks to emigrants and mission societies. Their differing ethnic and national origin led, in some cases, to a strong fragmentation of Lutheranism into many church groupings on the same territory. In all, the Lutheran churches can be structured as state, national or free churches. They can also be governed in various ways; they mainly have synodal and episcopal constitutions, even though the episcopal ministry need not be carried out by a »bishop«. Furthermore, the Scandinavian churches have retained the historic episcopate and the apostolic succession. This structural pluralism is today not regarded as a hindrance to church communion. Rather the confessional family is held together through the Lutheran confessions (particularly the Augsburg Confession) and the central gospel message of justification for sinners.

Nevertheless, it took the Lutheran churches until the mid-20th century to achieve church communion at the global level. Prior to that, there had been little readiness to take joint responsibility across national borders and to share financial and theological resources. In many churches national feeling still prevailed – not least in the German ones. However, the disaster of the Second World War fundamentally changed this attitude and the churches soon founded a joint organization for Lutheranism. In 1947 the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was founded in Lund (Sweden), in order to give com-

mon witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to seek unity in faith among the Lutheran churches. It also aimed to foster bonds of fellowship among Lutherans, their sense of mission and their involvement in the ecumenical movement. For a long time they avoided the idea of defining more precisely the ecclesial quality of the LWF and the relationship of the member churches to one another. The LWF therefore defined itself solely as a free association of Lutheran churches. It was only the course of further intra-Lutheran conversations that the idea arose of moving on from the common reference to the Lutheran confession towards more far-reaching church commitment. The conviction began to ripen that the LWF was more than a purely functional federation. At the Eighth Assembly in 1990 in Curitiba the relationship of the LWF member churches was thus redefined as a communion.

The Lutheran World Federation is a communion of churches which confess the triune God, agree in the proclamation of the Word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship. The Lutheran World Federation confesses the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church and is resolved to serve Christian unity throughout the world (Constitution of the LWF, Art. 3).

Now the LWF bears the additional designation »A communion of churches«.

At present the LWF represents 145 churches in 98 countries with over 74 million members (2016 figures). The biggest LWF member churches are the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus with nearly 7.9 million members and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania with 6.5 million members, both growing considerably in recent years, followed by the Church of Sweden with some 6.3 million members. By contrast, member churches like the Evan-

gical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land or the Christian Lutheran Church of Honduras have, respectively, only 3000 and 1700 members. The LWF's highest governing body is the LWF Assembly, that generally takes place every six years (most recently, in Hong Kong in 1997, in Winnipeg in 2003, in Stuttgart in 2010, and in Windhoek in 2017). The LWF Communion Office is located in Geneva. Besides fostering inner-Lutheran unity, the current responsibilities of the LWF include encouraging worldwide inter-confessional dialogue, theological reflection, mission and development, along with refugee and disaster relief. In recent years, there has been growing realization of the importance of *context* for a church's theology and diaconia. This awareness of contextuality has led to a strengthening of the regions within the LWF (Africa, Asia, Central Eastern Europe, Central Western Europe, Latin America & the Caribbean, Nordic Countries, North America), in order to create forums in which the member churches can develop and contribute their specific church profile to the worldwide communion.

Other Lutheran churches, with a particular loyalty to the confessions and a conservative tradition of their interpretation, joined together in 1993 to form the International Lutheran Council. It has about 35 member churches with approx. 3.3 million Christians. In Germany the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) is a member church.

Reformed churches

The present

Only two of the German regional churches are Reformed by confession:

- The Church of Lippe (without its Lutheran Section; approx. 138,000 members)
- The Evangelical Reformed Church (approx. 177,000 members)

The Evangelical Reformed Church is the only EKD member church that is not a territorial church. Its 140 parishes are mainly in East Friesland, Emsland, Bentheim County and Bavaria. Its constitution states:

No parish or congregational member may claim priority or dominion over another. All church leadership shall be through presbyteries (church councils) and synods (Article 4(1)). The parishes shall order their affairs independently (Constitution of the Evangelical Reformed Church, Art. 4(4)).

One consequence of this is that pastorates are filled directly by the bodies responsible in the parishes and not by the higher church executives. Only if parishes cannot settle certain questions by themselves does the principle of subsidiarity come into play and the decision fall to the next higher level. This is, first, the nine synod associations who, in turn, elect representatives for the General Synod. An executive board (*moderamen*) manages church business between sessions of synod.

Denominational affiliation in Germany



Based on a map by VELKD

Table 2: German member churches of denominational bodies

| | LWF and GNC/LWF | WCRC | VELKD | UEK | EKD |
|---|-----------------|------|-------|-----|-----|
| Bremen Evangelical Church | | | | X | X |
| Church of Lippe | X* | X | | X | X |
| Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia | | | | X | X |
| Evangelical Church in Central Germany | X | | X | X | X |
| Evangelical Church in the Rhineland | | | | X | X |
| Evangelical Church of Anhalt | | | | X | X |
| Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck | | | | X | X |
| Evangelical Church of Westphalia | | | | X | X |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baden | X | | | | |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria | X | | X | | X |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brunswick | X | | X | | X |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany | X | | X | | X |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Oldenburg | X | | | | X |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg | X | | | | X |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover | X | | X | | X |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony | X | | X | | X |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church of Schaumburg-Lippe | X | | X | | X |
| Evangelical Reformed Church | | X | | X | X |
| Protestant Church in Baden | | | | X | X |
| Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau | | | | X | X |
| Protestant Church of the Palatinate | | | | X | X |

* Lutheran Section

The past

Apart from Wittenberg, other cities turned into major centers of the Reformation, notably Zurich with Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) and Geneva with John Calvin (1509–1564). Landgrave Philip of Hesse tried to achieve a closer union between the Lutheran and Zwinglian branch of the Reformation in the struggle against the Catholic Hapsburgers. However, his efforts failed because Luther and Zwingli could not agree on the right understanding of the eucharist in the Marburg religious dialogue in 1529. A generation later, John Calvin, a French-born lawyer, philologist and theological autodidact, left his imprint on the Reformation in Strasbourg and Geneva.

Starting from Zurich, Zwingli's Reformation spread to more Swiss cities, also to Alsace and southwest Germany. In particular, Memmingen, Lindau and Constance became centers of the Upper-German Reformation. Together with Strasbourg, the three cities even presented their own confession at the Imperial Diet of Augsburg in 1530, the *Confessio Tetrapolitana*. The *Consensus Tigurinus* between Bullinger and Calvin, in turn, brought agreement between Geneva and Zurich in 1549. This laid the foundation stone for establishing the Reformed cantonal churches of Switzerland, a process that concluded in 1566 with the *Confessio Helvetica posterior*. However, it was the *Consensus Tigurinus* that led to the breach between the Lutherans and Calvin. It was already becoming clear that the Reformation would divide along Lutheran and Reformed lines.

Ultimately, Calvinism only took root in Germany in certain places. In 1563 Elector Frederick III introduced a Reformed church order in the Palatinate. A number of territories followed, as did Bremen, Anhalt and Lippe. The persecutions in France brought Huguenot refugees to Berlin, Brandenburg or the

Netherlands, where they founded French Reformed communities. Arriving via Holland, Reformed congregations also spread to the Lower Rhine and East Friesland. It was not until the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 that the Reformed achieved equality with the Lutherans under imperial law. When the Brandenburg Elector Johann Sigismund converted to Calvinism at the beginning of the 17th century, the Prussian estates succeeded in ensuring that the Lutheran subjects did not have to follow the principle *cuius regio cuius religio*.

As in Lutheranism, Reformed orthodoxy (particularly in the Netherlands) was committed to setting up a coherent scholastic system of doctrine. The doctrine of double predestination, for example, that is often regarded as a characteristic of Calvinism, did exist with Calvin, but was not fully formulated and adopted until the Dordrecht Synod (1618/19). By contrast, the Canons of Dordrecht were not adopted in Germany and a moderate Calvinism was preserved. Pietism also provided a counter-pole, e.g. in northwest Germany, with the mystic and religious author Gerhard Tersteegen (1697–1769). Through the church unions of the 19th century, the German Reformed tradition continued to lose its independent profile (see below) in the German confederation. After 1945, the Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) exercised a great influence on the theology of his own church and beyond.

The Word of God is ultimately the only foundation of all doctrine in the Reformed churches, which frequently call themselves »reformed according to the Word of God«. That is true of Lutheran churches too. Yet, by contrast with Lutheranism, there is no closed canon of Reformed confessions. Those that have remained influential to this day include the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Dordrecht Confession of Faith, and the Barmen Theological Declaration.

The Reformed Church worldwide

The most important Reformed churches are today found in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scotland, Hungary and the USA, where they are called Presbyterian because of the great importance attached to presbyteries (parish councils).

One of the few Reformed state churches arose in Scotland. In England, Calvinist thinking led to Puritanism, which again split into a group organized by presbyteries and synods and a strictly Congregationalist camp. Through the Pilgrim Fathers, a group of English Separatists, Congregationalism was taken to North America in 1620. That was followed by an extreme fragmentation of the Reformed tradition. By contrast, the 19th and 20th centuries were characterized by efforts towards union among the Reformed, both among themselves and with other churches.

The founding in 1875 of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System marked the first worldwide union of a confession, apart from the Lambeth Conference, which brought Anglicans together in 1867. At first, most of the members came from the English-speaking world. In 1970 this Presbyterian organization united with the International Congregational Council to become the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. In 2010 the latter merged again with the smaller Reformed Ecumenical Council. The new body is called the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and represents around 80 million Christians in over 100 countries from over 225 churches in the Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Reformed and Waldensian tradition. A number of United and Uniting churches also belong to the WCRC.

The WCRC constitution states:

Drawing on the heritage of the Reformed confessions, as a gift for the renewal of the whole church, the World Communion of Reformed Churches is a communion of churches through

- A. Affirming the gifts of unity in Christ through the mutual recognition of baptism and membership, pulpit and table fellowship, ministry and witness.
- B. Interpreting Reformed theology for contemporary Christian witness.
- C. Encouraging the renewal of Christian worship and spiritual life within the Reformed tradition.
- D. Renewing a commitment to partnership in God's mission, through worship, witness, diaconal service, and work for justice, so as to foster mission in unity, mission renewal, and mission empowerment. (Constitution of the WCRC, Art. III)

As in other Christian world communions, the WCRC seeks to promote ecumenical dialogue with churches of other traditions. In addition, it advocates for economic and ecological justice.

The General Council, the WCRC's highest governing body, will convene every seven years in future. Its Executive Committee meets annually. In January 2014 the WCRC moved its offices from Geneva to Hanover.

United churches

Besides the nine Lutheran and two Reformed churches there are also nine United churches in Germany. They are:

- the Evangelical Church of Anhalt (approx. 34,000 members)
- the Protestant Church in Baden (approx. 1,190,000 members)
- the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (approx. 1,001,000 members)
- the Bremen Evangelical Church (approx. 204,000 members)
- the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (approx. 1,602,000 members)
- the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck (approx. 844,000 members)
- the Protestant Church of the Palatinate (approx. 534,000 members)
- the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (approx. 2,629,000 members)
- the Evangelical Church of Westphalia (approx. 2,312,000 members)

The Evangelical Church of Anhalt is the smallest of all EKD member churches and the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland is the second largest.

First a short review of how the United churches came about. Even before this happened, there were preliminary intra-Protestant talks in the 17th and 18th century, e. g. a Lutheran-Reformed »religious dialogue« convened in Kassel by the Landgrave of Hesse in 1661. While this early initiative had no tangible results, the general environment for such talks changed in the 19th century. Absolutism and the territorial changes from 1803 to 1815 led to the emergence of new states where the confession of the population was extremely mixed. It was no longer possible to uphold the principle of *cuius regio cuius religio* in these areas. The only way to keep the pattern of the ruler determining the church dispensation and there being only one Protestant church was

by uniting the Lutherans and Reformed. This led to a new type of church, the »United church«. The process was also favoured by the fact that, thanks to the Enlightenment, many believers no longer found confessional differences to be timely or appropriate. Efforts to achieve union were promoted and theologically motivated by theologians such as Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Ultimately, however, the Union churches were founded by the authorities for primarily administrative purposes. At the same time, some efforts encountered firm resistance and resulted in new splits within the territories involved. Those who stayed out of union included e. g. the Old Lutherans in Prussia or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baden.

The Prussian Union is an example of such a top-down process. The Prussian royal family had become Reformed in 1613, but most of the king's subjects had remained Lutheran. It was only when Prussia gained considerable areas in the West part of Germany after the Congress of Vienna in 1815 that the whole sovereign territory now encompass large stretches of Reformed regions. Union came about in the course of the Reformation anniversary of 1817: King Friedrich Wilhelm III urged Lutherans and Reformed to celebrate Holy Communion together on Reformation Day and also introduced a uniform order of service in Berlin Cathedral on the basis of a liturgy he had devised himself. No doctrinal consensus was presented and the liturgy was only found to be generally acceptable in a compromise form, allowing for possible variations. The Evangelical Church in Prussia was founded in 1821. Instead of obliging all parishes to adopt a United confession, the parishes were allowed to stay with their Lutheran or Reformed traditions. This system, therefore, is described as administrative union. With the end of the ruler-led church dispensations, the church called itself »Evangelical Church of the Old

Prussian Union« and comprised the provincial churches: East Prussia, West Prussia, Brandenburg, Pomerania, Poznan, Silesia, Province of Saxony, Rhineland and Westphalia. After the Second World War, approximately one third of the Old Prussian Union church was now on Polish territory. The remaining provincial churches west of the Oder-Neisse Line established themselves as independent regional churches (Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg, Evangelical Church of Greifswald, Evangelical Church of the Görlitz Church District, Evangelical Church of the Church Province of Saxony, Evangelical Church in the Rhineland and Evangelical Church of Westphalia). In 1953 they formed the church federation »Evangelical Church of the Union« (EKU), which the Evangelical Church of Anhalt also joined in 1970.

Besides the churches that were united for administrative reasons, others chose to unite on grounds of confession or consensus. These include the churches in Baden and the Palatinate. The Protestant Church of the Palatinate goes back to the solemn union of Lutherans and Reformed on the first Sunday of Advent in 1818. The document of union stated,

»that there is no substantial impediment to the real union of the two confessions in teaching, rite, church assets and church constitution. The Protestant-Evangelical-Christian Church has due respect for the general symbols and the symbolical books used in the separate Protestant confessions, but knows of no other grounds for faith or doctrinal norm than Scripture alone« (Document of Union, Art. 2 and Art. 3(1)).

A comparison of the current constitution of the Protestant Church in Baden with that of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland may illustrate the differ-

ence between confessional and administrative union. The Protestant Church in Baden describes itself as follows:

»It recognizes, following the Union document of 1821 [...], namely and expressly the Augsburg Confession as the common confession of the churches of the Reformation as well as both Luther's Small Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism, apart from those parts of catechism that contradict the understanding of the sacraments as set out in the Union document« (Constitution of the Protestant Church in Baden, preface, para. 4).

The Union document of 1821 featured a rewording of eucharistic doctrine. Furthermore, liturgy and congregational rules were unified.

By contrast with this constitution establishing confessional union, the constitution of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland states: The congregations shall follow

»either the Lutheran or the Reformed confession or what they both have in common. [...] The Evangelical Church in the Rhineland shall cultivate church fellowship in its congregations, respecting the confessional status of their congregations and leaves scope for the unfolding of church life in accordance with its confessional status. Those charged with the ministry of the Word in a congregation may only be appointed if they recognized the confessional status of the congregation. This shall also apply to those who only preach occasionally. The sacraments shall be administered in the congregations in accordance with their confessional status« (Constitution of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, Art. 2 and 3).

On the national level, fundamental issues of theology and of church life today are dealt with centrally on behalf of the United churches by the Union of Evangelical Churches in the EKD (UEK). The UEK was founded in 2003 as a merger of the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) and the Arnoldshain Conference.⁵

Table 3: Member churches of the UEK

- the Evangelical Church of Anhalt
- the Protestant Church in Baden
- the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia
- the Bremen Evangelical Church
- the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau
- the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck
- the Church of Lippe
- the Protestant Church of the Palatinate
- the Evangelical Reformed Church
- the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland
- the Evangelical Church in Central Germany
- the Evangelical Church of Westphalia

⁵ The Arnoldshain Conference was founded in 1967 to promote dialogue between the Reformed and United regional churches among one another and with the Lutheran VELKD member churches. A further objective was to promote unity within the EKD. Besides the EKU churches, the Conference included the regional churches of Baden, Bremen, Hesse and Nassau, Kurhessen-Waldeck, Lippe, Oldenburg, Palatinate and the Evangelical Reformed Church.

The chief aims of the UEK are:

1. To propose and advance fundamental theological conversations and studies on the common confessions and on questions of church union;
2. To discuss questions of worship, liturgy, ordination, the understanding of congregation, service and ministry, and to develop organizational proposals.
3. To promote fellowship within the Evangelical Church in Germany, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe and the worldwide ecumenical movement;
4. To draft legal provisions, adopt church laws and strive to have them implemented in the member churches in similar wording (Constitution of the UEK, Art. 3(1)).

The UEK merger took place with the goal of strengthening unity within the EKD and heightening the EKD's understanding of itself as a church. Consequently, areas of responsibility in the predecessor organizations of the UEK were transferred to the EKD. This process is to continue in the future:

The Union will regularly check whether the degree of cooperation between the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Union makes possible a transfer of responsibilities to the Evangelical Church in Germany (Constitution of the UEK, Art. 3(3)).

The general conference is the UEK's highest governing body. Its presidium prepares for the sessions of conference and implements its decisions. The UEK's office is in Hanover. It runs the Protestant Research Academy and the European Bible dialogues. The Wittenberg theological seminary, Berlin Cathedral and the Brandenburg Protestant convent »Stift zum Heiligengrabe« are closely linked with the UEK for historical reasons.

Intra-Evangelical understanding and common structures in Germany

All the German regional churches belong to the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). The EKD was founded in 1948 as a federation of Germany's Lutheran, Reformed and United churches, in order to further deepen their sense of fellowship – after the shared experience of the »church struggle« during the Nazi period from 1933 – and constitute joint representation of the regional churches.⁶ The EKD first constituted itself as a federation of churches owing to the different confessional status of its member churches. The adoption of the Leuenberg Agreement in 1973 (see p. 1) enabled full pulpit and table fellowship among all regional churches and also an understanding of the EKD as a communion of churches:

The Evangelical Church in Germany is a communion of its Lutheran, Reformed and United member churches. It understands itself to be part of the one Church of Jesus Christ. It respects the confessional foundations of the member churches and congregations and presupposes that they put their confession into effect in the teachings, life and order of their churches. Church fellowship exists between the member churches pursuant to the Agreement of Reformation Churches in Europe [i.e. the Leuenberg Agreement] (Constitution of the EKD, Art. 1(1 and 2)).

The EKD's highest governing body is its annual synod, which can adopt church legislation and issue formal declarations. The leading clergy and legal

⁶ The eight regional churches in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1969 founded an independent Federation of the Evangelical Churches in the GDR, in order to better fulfill their church mission under the conditions of what was called »real socialism«. In 1991 this body merged with the EKD.

experts of the member churches meet in the Church Conference to deliberate on the common concerns of the member churches. The two bodies elect the 15-person Council that directs, manages and represents the EKD. The chairperson of the Council – always one of the leading clergy of one of the regional churches – represents the EKD in the public. The EKD Church Office is located in Hanover.

Through their membership in a church congregation and a regional church, every church member equally belongs to the EKD (Constitution of the EKD, Art. 1(4)). Since, furthermore, all regional churches are in communion with one another, the church membership of a member moving within Germany is automatically transferred to the jurisdiction of the church she/he is moving to. For example, if a Reformed member moves from East Friesland in northwest Germany to Saxony in eastern Germany, he or she automatically becomes Evangelical Lutheran; this phenomenon has been dubbed »removal van conversion«.

Upon foundation, the relationship and mutual coordination between the EKD and the confessional organizations were not specified in detail. In the last few decades there have therefore been efforts to clarify these relations and, in particular, to strengthen the cooperation between the EKD, VELKD and UEK. Important steps have been the closer cooperation between the three organizations in the *Verbindungsmodell*, coming into effect in 2007. This will be advanced in 2018, when the church offices of the VELKD and UEK will be merged with the EKD church office. This is another step to consolidate the collaboration between the three institutions in the hope of making a better use of their respective expertise without losing their specific denominational character.

Ecumenical relations

Model of unity

In their relations with other churches, the German churches prefer the model of unity that first brought them together themselves. This is the model of »fellowship in word and sacrament« (Leuenberg Agreement, §29). This preference comes out clearly both in a statement on *Kirchengemeinschaft* of the EKD Council of 2001⁷ and also in a position paper by the VELKD council of 2004 on the Evangelical Lutheran understanding of ecumenism.⁸ The EKD document states:

The declaration and implementation of ecclesial communion is the goal of ecumenical activity from the Protestant point of view (section V).

This »ecclesial communion« calls for precisely those two marks of the church in general: wherever people agree that the pure gospel is taught and the sacraments properly administered there is unity. Accordingly the VELKD document states:

Any additional condition would be a fundamental surrender of the Lutheran understanding of faith and order (page 9, German text).

⁷ A Protestant Understanding of Ecclesial Communion. A statement on the ordered relations between churches of different confessions, EKD Text 69/2001. See full text on EKD website: <http://www.ekd.de/english/texts.html>

⁸ Ökumene nach Evangelisch- Lutherischem Verständnis. Positionspapier der Kirchenleitung der VELKD, Texte aus der VELKD 123/2004.

Unity, i. e. church fellowship/communion, can – like the origin of the church itself – always only be God’s work. Hence the churches can never create it, and can at most note that it exists. So when churches recognize that there is common understanding of the gospel between them, they must act accordingly, by declaring and practicing church communion among themselves.

It is noteworthy that this church communion can only be »expressed responsibly if the churches also present and develop their understanding of the Gospel in their doctrinal teaching«. ⁹ The *consentire de doctrina evangelii* from CA VII calls for a basic understanding on dogma. The union model therefore includes fellowship in confessing. Confessing fellowship, however, need not mean that both sides have the same confessional *texts*. Different confessional traditions can be in communion as long as they agree that their differences are legitimate forms of one and the same gospel. This insight is mostly described in the Evangelical churches as »unity in reconciled diversity«.

Finally, an Evangelical understanding of unity also includes a multi-stage model towards this unity. The consensus achieved must be reflected in a corresponding step towards unity. This process is rooted in the conviction that ultimately the church will discover its God-given unity and be able to prove itself in ecclesial communion.

Dialogues and conversations

Through their membership of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK) or the Conference of European Churches (CEC) the Evangelical regional churches are involved in many

⁹ EKD, op. cit., II,1.

multilateral dialogues and encounters, in which the participants exchange views from their differing confessional backgrounds. The EKD represents its member churches in this context. The famous WCC convergence statement on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry adopted in Lima in 1982 for example was intensively discussed in the German regional churches and many synods of those churches gave an official feedback. The Charta Oecumenica, first signed by the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European (Roman Catholic) Bishops' Conferences and then, in 2003, by all member churches of the federal ACK, was taken up in the German regional churches and its guidelines for binding ecumenical relations were worked through at many different levels.

Besides the participation in multilateral ecumenism, the Evangelical churches also conduct a number of bilateral dialogues and conversations with other confessional families in Germany. Here the relations particularly of Lutheran churches to other churches have always been influenced by the results of LWF theological dialogues. The predominant feeling in Lutheranism that church communion is to be achieved through doctrinal conversations meant that the LWF entered into bilateral dialogues and conversations earlier and more intensively than other Christian world communions. *Dialogues* are generally taken up with a view to entering into church communion. *Conversations* are more exploratory, in order to learn more about the other party. Ongoing or more recent dialogues of the LWF are with: the Roman Catholic Church, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, Orthodox churches, the World Methodist Council, the Anglican Communion, the Mennonite World Conference and the Pentecostal churches. It has also

been in conversation with the Baptist World Alliance and the Seventh Day Adventists.

An outstanding result of these international dialogues is the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification that was solemnly signed by the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Augsburg on 31 October 1999. This does not seek to be yet another consensus document, but rather to link up what has been achieved so far. It claims to show that:

A consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification [...] are acceptable (Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, §40).

This, in turn, allows the declaration to state that the mutual doctrinal condemnations no longer apply (ibid. §41). It should be added that the Joint Declaration met with fierce opposition from a number of professors of Protestant theology in Germany. At the same time, however, it remains the only joint document that has been officially received by the Roman Catholic Church.

A second LWF document should be mentioned. It has proved possible to work through the painful legacy of persecution of the Anabaptists with the **Mennonites**, the spiritual successors of the Anabaptist movement. At the end of several years of dialogue they jointly drafted a description of their common history. On this basis, the Eleventh LWF Assembly in Stuttgart in 2010 addressed a request for forgiveness to the Mennonite World Conference in view of Lutheran guilt about persecuting the Anabaptists. In addition, the

Lutherans pledged to reinterpret their confessional documents in the light of this new understanding. This spectacular request for forgiveness led to a renewed interest in working through the cases of persecution of Anabaptists at the local level.

In 1995, 15 years before the Stuttgart request for forgiveness, in Germany a dialogue had already begun between VELKD and a working group from the Mennonite congregations. Its findings were adopted by all regional churches and led to eucharistic hospitality. In 1996, in two church services (one each according to the Lutheran and Mennonite order) they mutually invited one another to partake in Holy Communion. In these services the results of the dialogues were presented in a short liturgical form; the respective group confessed their guilt before God and asked for forgiveness.

In addition, Evangelical regional churches maintain intensive contacts with the **Evangelical Methodist Church**, a part of the worldwide United Methodist Church. As a result of intensive dialogues, all regional churches are in full communion with the Methodist Church since 1987 when the official declaration of pulpit and table fellowship was signed in Nuremberg's Church of St. Lawrence. This anticipated the official admission of the Methodist churches to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe ten years later.

The EKD cultivates contacts with the **Church of England** through the Meissen Commission, that meets alternately in Britain and Germany. The basis of relations is the Meissen Declaration of 1988, through which the churches involved are in limited church fellowship/ecclesial communion: they recognize one another as churches, there is mutual eucharistic hospitality and their ministries

are recognized, however not fully exchangeable due to existing differences in the understanding of episcopacy. The Meissen Commission is committed to taking »all possible steps towards closer fellowship [...] on the way to full, visible unity« (A Common Statement, §17, B). In addition, a host of partnerships with Anglican dioceses and congregations enliven the existing fellowship.

The results of theological conversations between VELKD and the Catholic Diocese of the **Old Catholics** in Germany led in 1985 to the »agreement on a mutual invitation to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist«. This agreement was signed not only by the Old Catholic Diocese and VELKD but also by all other EKD member churches. An insight into how Lutherans and Old Catholics have developed their ecumenical relations in practice on the basis of the 1985 agreement is given in a recent short publication.¹⁰ Furthermore the churches signed recently an »agreement on the mutual recognition of baptism and confirmation« and adopted a joint liturgy for an Ecumenical wedding.¹¹

The EKD is currently holding three theological dialogues with **Orthodoxy**: with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Romanian Orthodox Church. Conversations with the Moscow Patriarchate go back to 1959. In addition there are contacts with the Orthodox Churches in Germany and the Commission of the Orthodox Churches in

¹⁰ Hände-Reichung. Evangelische und alt-katholische Gemeinden ökumenisch unterwegs, 2nd revised edition, Bonn, 2017.

¹¹ Handreichung für eine ökumenische Trauung, herausgegeben vom Katholischen Bistum der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland, der Vereinigten Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Deutschlands und der Union Evangelischer Kirchen, Bonn, 2017.

Germany. These have led e.g. to an agreement on joint pastoral action with inter-confessional marriages.¹²

Talks between VELKD and the Union of Evangelical Free Church Congregations in Germany showed that the necessary preconditions for church fellowship with the **Baptists** will not be achieved without a common understanding on the sacrament of baptism. Meanwhile a Lutheran-Baptist dialogue commission in Bavaria has presented a proposal for resolving disagreements on the question of baptism and finding a fresh approach to the issue. This proposal led to a new round of an official Lutheran-Baptist dialogue on the national level which started in 2017.

In view of the different sizes of churches in Germany it is not surprising that the most intensive contacts are with the **Roman Catholic Church**. Lutherans and Catholics in Germany have held theological conversations since 1976.

In 1984, this bilateral working group published a study document on church fellowship in word and sacrament.¹³ In 2000 followed a study on the communion of the saints,¹⁴ dealing inter alia with church fellowship and ministry, particularly the papal office, and the communion of the saints beyond death. This study sparked a lively debate. In May 2009 the two churches began a new round of dialogue. The third bilateral working group published

¹² Vereinbarung über das gemeinsame pastorale Handeln bei konfessionsverschiedenen Eheschließungen, 2003, revised in 2011.

¹³ Kirchengemeinschaft in Wort und Sakrament, Paderborn/Frankfurt a.M., 1984.

¹⁴ Communio Sanctorum – Die Gemeinschaft der Heiligen, Paderborn/Frankfurt a.M., 2000.

in 2017 a document on God and human dignity.¹⁵ Besides this dialogue commission, VELKD has one of its bishops as appointed Catholic spokesperson, i.e. to represent VELKD in issues regarding relations with the Roman Catholic Church and the general public.

The EKD also has institutionalized contacts with the Roman Catholic Church, notably the six-monthly contact group of the EKD Council and the German Bishops' Conference. This is an opportunity to discuss central questions of ecumenical relations vis-à-vis the government and the public at large. The »social paper« launching a consultation on »the economic and social situation in Germany« (1994) and the final statement »For a Future Founded on Solidarity and Justice« (1997) raised a huge amount of interest in the general public. The very first of the joint texts issued by the EKD and the German Bishops' Conference in 1989 is no less stimulating today: »God loves all that lives. Challenges and tasks for the protection of life«.¹⁶ The Institute of Ecumenical Research in Bensheim deserves also a mention. It is an EKD associate that, through publications and events sponsored by the EKD and its member churches, is available to provide in-depth knowledge and orientation on the doctrines and life of other churches.

Finally, the preparations for and implementation of the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation have been a surprising and unique opportunity for the Evangelical regional churches to deepen their ecumenical commitment with the Roman Catholic Church. For the first time ever such

¹⁵ Gott und die Würde des Menschen, Paderborn/Leipzig, 2017.

¹⁶ For the full English version of these joint texts see: <http://www.ekd.de/english/texts.html>.

a centennial anniversary has been commemorated in an ecumenical spirit and numberless events on the local, national and international level are witness to this. On the national level, for example, the EKD and German Catholic Bishops' Conference agreed on commemorating the occasion as a »celebration of Christ«. They came together for a service of repentance and reconciliation in Hildesheim on 11 March 2017.

Internationally, the ecumenical highlight of the anniversary was the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation at Lund Cathedral and Malmö Arena on 31 October 2016. The Common Prayer in the cathedral was jointly prepared by the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The General Secretary and President of the LWF co-presided with Pope Francis at this historical service. The liturgy followed the theological findings of the bilateral dialogue document »From Conflict to Communion. Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017«¹⁷ where Catholics and Lutherans for the first time ever came to a common view of the 500 years of history they had shared with each other. In Germany, the GNC/LWF promoted the discussion about this dialogue document with the interactive internet project »2017. Together on the way.«¹⁸ This website also provides liturgical resources to celebrate the Lund liturgy »From Conflict to Communion« on the local level. The broader implications of such an ecumenically anniversary are aptly summarized by Martin Junge, General Secretary of the LWF: »In a world of communication breakdowns the Joint Commemoration tells the story of the worth

¹⁷ From Conflict to Communion. Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017, Paderborn/Leipzig, 2013.

¹⁸ www.2017gemeinsam.de

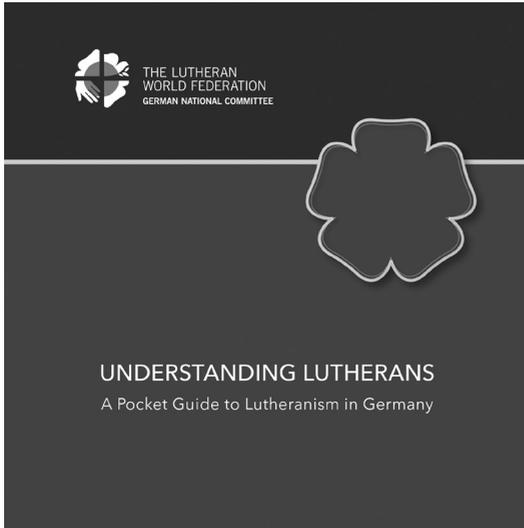
of dialogue. In a world wounded by violence and wars, it tells the story of conflict that can be left behind. In a world often confused about the role of faith and religion, it tells the story of the transformative power and beauty of our shared faith, which leads us to compassionate service and joyful witness.¹⁹

Oliver Schuegraf

¹⁹ See: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/many-ways-take-part-joint-commemoration-reformation>.

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