

# The Power of the Pulpit

*500 years later: Luther in our times*

BY JOHAN M.J. VAN PARYS

THE Martin Luther exhibit at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA) was the first of many lectures, concerts, exhibits, and prayer services that will mark the year leading up to October 31, 2017. This day is the 500th anniversary of Luther's famous nailing of his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. These events offer opportunities to study Luther and Lutheranism against the backdrop of our 21st century and increasingly dynamic political, social, and religious realities.

Occasioned by this anniversary of the Reformation, MIA organized an impressive exhibit dedicated to Martin Luther, the de facto father of the Protestant Reformation. Art and artifacts from around Germany were gathered to shed light on the life of Luther against the background of the very complex political and religious realities of his time. It was a wildly popular exhibit,

especially for the many Lutherans who inhabit our state.

Very prominent in the exhibit was the pulpit used by Martin Luther. I spent quite a bit of time looking at it and listening to onlookers' comments. Some thought it looked very Catholic, which indeed it was at one point. Others wondered if anyone else but Luther had ever preached from that pulpit, which of course did happen. Someone mused if a Rabbi had ever spoken from that pulpit. Someone chimed in, "what about an Imam?" "Probably not," I thought. "But maybe one day."

Pulpits are very important in our houses of worship. Rabbis, priests, imams, pastors, and other faith leaders address their congregations from their pulpits. And when they speak from the pulpit they speak with great authority. It is from the pulpit that all sorts of hatred and divisions have been



preached throughout the ages, a practice which continues even today. By contrast, the pulpit is best used to build bridges, to invite people in to a culture of encounter, to preach love and compassion. Pulpits should be used to unite, not to divide.

I was happy to be a member of the group responsible for the interfaith interpretation of the Luther exhibit. Our group included representatives from Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We had candid and enlightening conversations which enriched our understanding of Luther and one another. We were able to connect with each other on a very profound level without denouncing our own faiths. We built bridges and broke down walls.

Maybe this anniversary can be an occasion to take the next step in the ongoing reform of our faith communities, a step that we can all take together.

Pope Francis has called on Catholics to preach a Revolution of Love and Tenderness and to live it out in our communities. There is nothing exclusively Catholic about this.

On the contrary, all of us — Jews, Christians, Muslims and all people of faith — can and ought to respond to the challenges posed by our divided and broken world with love and tenderness.

Just imagine if all of us preached a shared Revolution of Love and Tenderness from the pulpits in our synagogues, churches, mosques, and temples all around the world.

Now that would be a radical reformation. It is time. Humanity has waited long enough. ✚

*Johan M. J. van Parys, Ph.D., has been The Basilica's director of liturgy and sacred arts since 1995.*