

J. Michael Parker, Today's Catholic newspaper, San Antonio, TX, Jan. 2017 (for two items by Pope Francis on the 500th anniversary, see the Pope Francis page). Three more articles follow this, below.

Five hundred years ago, when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany, he touched off a maelstrom across Christian Europe that still has divided Christians to this day.

But today, there's agreement among Catholics and Protestants that both church and society need to build bridges of understanding and unity rather than celebrate the 16th-century schism.

Catholic and Protestant leaders in San Antonio presented a free day-long public event beginning at 9 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 14, at Oblate School of Theology's Whitley Theological Center, 285 Oblate Drive, to discuss the progress over the past 50 years in healing their division. "We hope to pack the house," said Dr. Scott Woodward, the school's vice president for academic affairs and dean.

Dr. Mindy Makant, assistant professor of religion at Lenoir Rhyne University, a Lutheran school in Hickory, N.C., delivered the keynote address for the event, titled "Conflict to Communion: Five Hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation." Makant has spoken at similar events for Lutheran audiences across the country.

"Among Lutherans, there's been a lot of excitement for what it might mean," she said, and other denominations that share full communion with Lutherans also feel that excitement, though recognizing that it's not an easy process.

"We are called to be in unity with one another for the sake of the world," Makant declared. With the United States more divided politically than ever, many Christians believe it's absolutely critical that Christians stand together.

"For 450 years after the Reformation, Protestants – particularly Lutherans – celebrated the schism; but for the past 50 years, we've been able to stop seeing schism as something to celebrate and instead to see it as a wound to be healed...we can honor the gifts that have come out of the Reformation without celebrating it as a schism," she explained.

The event featured breakout sessions titled "Luther on Salvation" by Dr. Norman Beck of Texas Lutheran University; "Unity Within Diversity" by Dr. Dan Joselyn-Siemiatkoski; "Believer's Baptism and Peace: The Anabaptist Tradition" by the Rev. Rachel Epp Miller; and "The Book of Romans in the Reformation" (Speaker to be Announced).

The event culminated in an interdenominational Prayer Service for Christian Unity at 4 p.m., led by several denominations leaders, including Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller, MSpS; Bishop Ray Tiemann of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Southwestern Texas Synod; the Rev. Sallie Watson, general presbyter of the Presbyterian Church USA's Mission Presbytery; the Right Rev. David Reed, coadjutor bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas; and Pastor John Garland, head of the San Antonio Mennonite Church. The actual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is observed annually between Jan. 18-25, the dates of the liturgical feasts of St. Peter and St. Paul.

Plans for Jan. 16-20 call for a Pilgrimage of Churches, in which several historic churches of different traditions will welcome visitors from various Christian traditions for prayer services. The churches include St. John's Lutheran Church, 502 E. Nueva St., 7 p.m., Jan. 16; the San Antonio Mennonite Church, 1443 S. St. Mary's St., 7 p.m. Jan. 17, St. Mark's Episcopal Church,

315 E. Pecan St., noon Jan. 18; San Fernando Cathedral, 7 p.m. Jan. 19; and Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, 225 N. Swiss St., noon Jan. 20.

“This brings to the local level the energy that Pope Francis brought last October with Bishop Munib Younan, president of the Lutheran World Federation, in Lund, Sweden,” Dr. Woodward said. “We hope to encourage Christians from all the denominations involved in the Reformation to work together for the benefit of the whole community.”

The Rev. Paul Ziese, pastor of MacArthur Park Lutheran Church, said it’s significant that the initiative to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation ecumenically originated not from Protestants but from Oblate School of Theology.

“You’d think that Protestants would have suggested it, but OST asked if we could do something and could bring in other faith communities that were involved in the Reformation. We’re excited that the event will be at OST,” he said.

Ziese said the problems that divided Catholics and Protestants in the 16th century no longer separate them. “There is probably more openness among Catholics to the need for reformation, and more Protestants recognize the wound of the Reformation. Catholics are more comfortable today with the idea of salvation by grace through faith and Protestants are sensing more now than in previous times that the Reformation was tragic.