

Steven Mah

500th Reformation Anniversary

A Catholic priest got a lot more than he bargained for during this year's 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

Msgr. Robert Tucker, pastor at Seward's St. Vincent de Paul Church, was in disbelief when a parish member told him someone posted the 95 theses on their church door. An act similar to what Martin Luther did back 1517, to which what many view as the start of the Reformation. An act viewed by many Catholics as a disunity with the Church, but to Protestants as a new beginning.

The parish member ended up taking the document down and showing it to Tucker, who was even more surprised to find out this was a regular occurrence.

"She said 'yeah they do this every year,'" Tucker said in a phone interview. "I mean that's pretty low."

To some, it might seem like a harmless prank. But for someone like Tucker, who was recently assigned to St. Vincent de Paul this past year after serving at Cathedral of the Risen Christ in Lincoln, wasn't prepared for it.

The Rev. Andrew Ratcliffe, pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church in Seward, understands Tucker's concerns.

"I think it's poor taste," Ratcliffe said in phone interview. "I do think it diminishes the importance of what it is."

Ratcliffe describes the Reformation as the “kickstart” to their Lutheran identity engrained in the components: *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, and *sola fide* which is Latin for grace alone, scripture alone, and faith alone.

“With some of the things that had maybe gone astray in Luther’s day that he identified in the 16th century, he kind of drew attention to that and try to bring us back to the foundation,” he said. “Bring us back to the basis of what should be what we base our beliefs, and our practices and our teachings off of, which would be those three solas.”

He believes there are other ways to embrace the anniversary, but most importantly doing it in a light-hearted way within the congregation. For example, Ratcliffe explains in different Christian communities where members would give each other a sign a peace, and some in celebration of the Reformation would have giant foam fingers making a peace sign.

“That’s something you do in your own setting. You’re not throwing it at another denomination or throw it at their face,” he said.

Besides foam fingers, St. John’s and other Lutheran churches around the area had their own special way of celebrating the 500th anniversary. In partnership with Concordia University, St. John’s help promoted an event where they brought in a special speaker, had a special choir and topped it off with a German meal.

UNL’s Lutheran Center of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Lutheran Chapel of the Missouri Synod denomination, held events months before leading up to the Halloween anniversary.

“One of the ways we celebrated was we started over the summer and we had a weekly gathering called Gospel basics,” Pastor Bill Steinbauer of the University Lutheran Chapel said. “It’s basically helping students understand the power of the Gospel and what the Gospel is.”

The goal for Steinbauer was to remind students the true meaning of the Reformation.

“A big part of that is revisiting the Reformation theme that I’m saved by what Christ has done for me on the cross,” he said. “It’s a gift that changes my life, changes me from the inside.”

Pastor Adam White at UNL’s Lutheran Center, says this year’s anniversary is especially special not only because it’s been 500 years, but because of the shift in tone.

“If you look historically at these anniversary celebrations they’ve invariably been in times of conflict and kind of over-againstness in the Protestant church in its relationship to Rome,” White said. “For the first time in 500 years, there’s more of a conciliatory tone, where instead of throwing rocks at one another we’re actually engaging in meaningful dialogue and talking to one another at the level of we recognize one another as Christians.”

One of the ways White and the Lutheran Center commemorated the Reformation was engaging in those dialogues this past semester with the Newman Center, UNL’s Catholic church on campus.

The dialogues consisted of an eight-week session where students from both the Lutheran and Newman Centers could come together and discuss the theological differences between the two denominations. However, the goal wasn’t aimed at just discussion.

“First it was to build a relationship and trust,” White said. “Second, for me, it was to kind of get rid of caricatures. I think it’s easy for Protestants to narrate Roman Catholics unfairly, and for Roman Catholics to narrate Protestants unfairly.”

Rev. Robert Matya, chaplain at the Newman Center and co-organizer of the event, agreed with White.

“I think the good thing was that we came to a better understand of each other and who we are, also acknowledging that there’s a lot of differences between us at the same time,” Matya said.

Pastor Steinbauer, who didn’t participate in the dialogues, understands the value that can come from discussion, but ultimately it won’t change things in the long run.

“I feel like there’s not a moment of like unity that comes from it, because there just isn’t,” he said. “But it can create the ability for us to have goodwill for each other and to be more respectful in how we describe and talk about each other’s theology.”

Back in Seward, Msgr. Tucker is still setting in, but he’s hoping to work with Catholic students at Concordia to understand the differences between Lutheran and Catholicism and maybe start a dialogue in the community, much like the one at UNL.

However, he still has some unfinished business with the local Lutheran pastors regarding a certain paper attached to a certain door.

“Once I get to know some of the pastors here, I’m going to ask them about this,” he said.