

A Study
Guide
for the
500th
Anniversary
of the
Reformation

The Stillspeaking Writers' Group

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The Protestant Reformation began 500 years ago. None of us lived before it.

Some of the life-threatening, flabbergasting ideas that exploded out of those years are now a part of the air we breathe. 500 years ago people died for them.

But time turns the revolutionary into the everyday. We take key Reformation claims for granted. We can't even see them, they're just a part of who are.

Other Reformation claims are covered in dust, obscured and stuck away in a neglected corner of the church, like a long-forgotten Van Gogh languishing under wraps in someone's attic.

This study guide celebrates the United Church of Christ's Reformation heritage by lifting up some of the Reformation's central claims. There is beauty here. And ugliness too. Inasmuch as ideas can thrill, these ideas are thrilling. Brace yourself.

Matt Fitzgerald, *for the Stillspeaking Writers' Group*

Guide for Leading a Small Group Study

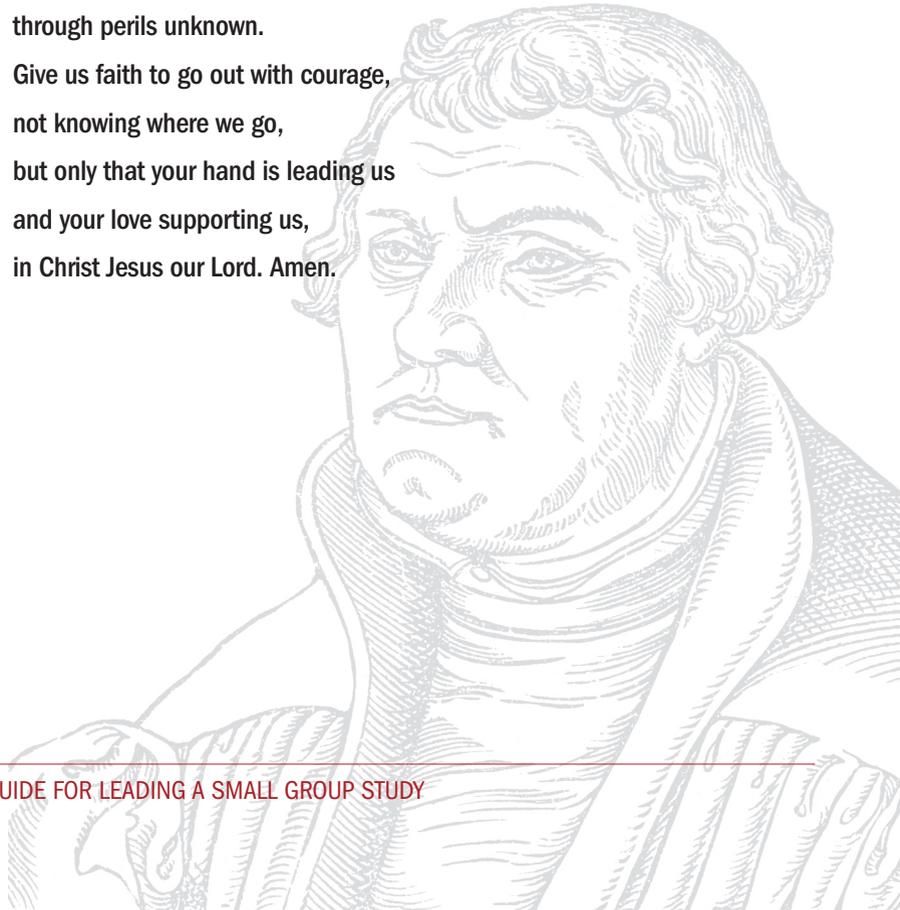
This resource is made up of four sessions, each with 2-3 essays and discussion questions. Each week's session is designed for a 50 minute class, but if time allows, can easily be extended to 90 minutes.

- Begin by welcoming everyone to this conversation and study of great themes of the Protestant Reformation — in celebration of its 500th anniversary.
- Ask people to introduce themselves, inviting them to give a brief response to a question like, “Share something from your last week that made you glad or sad (or one of each).”
- Take the essays for each session one at a time and ask people to share what words or phrases particularly spoke to them and why. Suggest that at this point, people simply listen to one another’s sharing without comment. Each person gets a chance to say, “In this essay, what really spoke to me was this sentence in the third paragraph.” (Read sentence, then say why this spoke to you. The leader may say “thank you,” then move on to the next person without further comment or question from others in the group).
- After each person has had a chance to share in this way, the leader may choose one of the discussion questions at the end of the essay for further discussion. Or the leader may come up with a different question for group discussion.
- Then move on to the next essay for that week, repeating the process and budgeting your time. It is possible, depending on the size of the

group, that you may not have time to cover a discussion question for each essay. If not, return at the end to the essay that seemed to provoke the most response and a discussion question related to it.

- Conclude the session by thanking participants, reminding them of next week's reading and end with prayer. You may wish to use this prayer, attributed to Martin Luther:

Eternal God,
you call us to ventures
of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us,
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.



Introduction

he Reformation was a powerful movement of church reform and renewal – and a whole lot more. It was both cause and effect of sweeping changes in European culture and society. These changes shaped modern Europe and America and influenced the entire world.

The Reformation marked the end of the medieval and feudal world and the emergence of a new world of a rising middle class, greater individual rights and freedoms, the emergence of nation-states, and a worldwide growth of commerce and trade.

As with other historical movements, changes in technology were a key part of a cultural shift. In the late 15th century Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press. For the first time something approximating mass production of books, including the Bible, was possible. The Reformation leader, Martin Luther, seized on the potential of the printing press by pioneering the translation of Scripture, previously in Latin, into the vernacular language of his time and place.

Ordinary people and church laity, increasingly becoming literate as part of their transition from feudal economies to urban middle classes, could for the first time read and interpret the texts of Scripture for themselves. As a result, the priesthood and church power and authority centered in Rome began to lose some of its control. The Reformation was a forerunner of democratic movements, including the creation of the United States.

This study is made up of short reflections that introduce one of the important, and at their time radical, Reformation themes. These are the ideas and convictions that rocked the European world of the 16th century.

Apart from the historical significance of a 500th anniversary, re-visiting these themes has the value that any study of history offers. It enriches our understanding of our past and how we got to where we are today.

Such a study and the conversations we hope it spawns among us also remind us of the very rich theological tradition of which we are part in the United Church of Christ. And it cautions us, as the study of history also always does, to avoid some of the mistakes of our forebears. As we introduce Reformation themes and insights, we will ask about their continuing relevance—or irrelevance—for the church today.

In addition, many people in our day are claiming that the church, and society, are ripe for a new Reformation, even that we are already in the midst of one. Looking back to the Reformation of 500 years ago may help us to consider the urgency of reform and renewal today, and to assess those movements in our own time that promise a new Reformation.

Anthony B. Robinson

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