

Ceremony of 3 November 2016

Address by Gottfried Locher, president, Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and Community of Protestant Churches in Europe

The spoken text shall prevail

How does one celebrate 500 years of Reformation? In the spirit of freedom.

(greeting according to protocol)

Esteemed representatives of the World Council of Churches, of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe and of the Evangelical Church in Germany;

Ladies and gentlemen:

As Protestants, we are generally reluctant to pleasure and especially to celebrations of all sorts. Such is our reputation. But I can assure you that these are groundless prejudices! Protestants know perfectly well how to celebrate special occasions – above all here in Geneva. So, in this spirit, welcome!

I am delighted to see so many guests here, both from Switzerland and abroad, men and women representing the worlds of politics, business and culture. The diversity of our guests shows: Reformation means movement – not only for the church but mainly for the Protestants.

We have every reason to celebrate. But we are not placing any individuals in the limelight – not Zwingli or, as would be fitting for Geneva, Calvin. We are not even paying homage today to Martin Luther, who is said to have nailed his theses on the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg 500 years ago, giving the Reformation a symbolic starting date.

No, these anniversary celebrations are neither retrospective nor effusive in praising individuals. The Reformation inspired hearts and minds and changed the world. And that is what we are celebrating.

The Reformation rocked both society and state. It established the reflect for the ideas of the Enlightenment to build upon. The Reformation took the first steps towards the development of modern society. All people are equal before God: this insight from the Reformation spurred the triumphant global march of democracy. And we in Switzerland and throughout Europe have benefited from this movement.

The Reformation was a renewal of church and faith. At a time when people feared purgatory and indulgences were a flourishing trade, people could reflect on the “good news”, the gospel of Jesus Christ. God reveals himself in the form of a man from Nazareth, and everyone can read about it for themselves, in their own language: hence the translations of the Bible, hence the strengthening of the laity and the women, hence the concentration of the Word of God, and hence, also, the Lord's Supper for all.

At the time, 500 years ago, these ideas were an immense breakthrough and liberation. We are celebrating today the message of freedom for people, in their lives and in their beliefs. This is what we want to remember today, and not just those of us gathered here today, but all of society which traces part of its present form back to the Reformation.

The fact that a representative of the Bishops' Conference is in attendance at our celebration today shows that we are also using this anniversary year for an ecumenical purpose. The reformers wanted to renew the existing Catholic and Apostolic church. They did not set out to create a schism or divide the church. We therefore seek to strengthen the unity of the one church of Jesus Christ during this anniversary year.

Much has changed over the past 500 years. The questions of life and faith that arise today are different. But one thing remains constant: we all carry within us a longing for freedom, for release from everything that burdens and oppresses us as people and makes us small before God and our fellow human beings.

As Protestants, we are a community of freedom. When one considers the current state of world affairs, one can see how fragile and threatened this freedom is. Freedom is not a possession. It must be lived, preserved, protected and defended. Only those who protect other people's freedom can credibly defend their own.

True, we are celebrating 500 years of the Reformation, but this is not a celebration of the past. It is a promise for the future. As Protestants, **our community ultimately serves a greater good: freedom.** Society today is threatened by extremism and religious intolerance. Our own history clearly shows where that can lead. In Europe alone, millions of people lost their lives in the Christian Wars of Religion. We cannot celebrate today without remembering and reflecting on that fact.

We seek to defend the freedom for which we have struggled. The Christian churches and the rule of law in free and democratic states have grown and evolved hand in hand. As Protestants, we have always fostered close relations between the Christian community and the civic community. We recognize fundamental rights and, as a church, we stand for fundamental and human rights under the rule of law. We respect the ground rules of freedom and are unafraid to call upon others to conform to them. Churches make a specific contribution to our democracy, to the free society of Switzerland, Europe and the world. That is what we mean when we speak of "hope made free".

We can only bear witness to what actually lives within us. In this anniversary year, we seek to highlight the significance and power of the Reformation today. Our anniversary message is "think open – act free – believe anew". We want this to inspire everyone, not just as the message of one year, but as a life-affirming approach for every year: "think open – act free – believe anew".

Ladies and gentlemen

500 years ago, a movement took off which has changed the world. The Reformation questioned the church of the time, identified malpractice and laid fundamentals bare.

Much has changed since then. 500 years are a very long time, and yet, in reality, we are still in the "Reformation era". "Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda" – "the church is always to be reformed." This was the rallying cry of the Reformers, and it's still true to this day. *Our* generation must cast a critical eye on *our* own church. We, in turn, must not be afraid to question everything that has become questionable. This applies both in terms of the church and the political realm.

In the ecclesiastical sphere, Reformation still means removing all barriers to a direct, personal relationship with the risen Jesus Christ. The meaning of Reformation remains unchanged: to translate the Word of God into the language of the people. If we succeed only half as well as the Reformers did in their days, we shall still have cause to be thankful.

We want to use the anniversary of the Reformation to listen to the people, because we are all a part of the church. We see the storymobile, which is currently parked in front of our marquee, as a means to this end.

It will shortly set out from Geneva on its journey, making over 67 stops in 19 countries. The truck, the storymobile, symbolizes “our eyes and ears”. It will gather the stories of the people it meets, and carry them on to Wittenberg.

As for the power of the Reformation, that power extends beyond the church. Let us draw inspiration from the will to renew – that which changed the world 500 years ago will presumably continue to move people forever. It is the longing for freedom, for liberation from inner and outer constraints. Let us take this longing seriously. Let us renew our society in the spirit of personal freedom and responsibility, both here and now, and in the future. Our anniversary year is a call for conscious renewal. Let us respond to this call, not only in the church, but also in the state and political spheres. Perhaps our recollection of past events will yield valuable insights for our future. **“Five hundred years of Reformation”: let us turn our commemoration into a new outlook for our church, our society and our country.**

Thank you.