Opening Session of CTE Forum 2015: **About the Lutheran Churches**

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Following my brothers and sisters, there is much that I have heard with which I would agree and echo, that I would have said – and it is good to say it again, to underline in this Forum that there is much that is common and unites us in appreciating community amongst diversity for example, or *diakonia* and social service.

The Lutherans in this country have a particular history, founded in a desire for theological purity and social change but not to establish a new Church: Martin Luther, when he posted his 95 Theses in Wittenberg, Germany on 31 October 2017, desired to reform the Catholic church where he was a monk. (By the way, keep that date in mind: you will hear more about it in the next two years as we prepare for the 500th Anniversary and remember 500 years of reformation and renewal which continues today – as Karl Barth said, *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* – “the Church is always being and needs to be reformed”). So in many countries we find ourselves close to the Catholics in relations and in look and feel. In this country Lutherans are also close to the Anglicans, and almost all of our Council’s member churches are in full communion with the Church of England.

But Lutheran churches are not native to England, and we are all immigrant or expatriate – whether with German merchants and Scandinavian sailors in the 17th and 18th centuries, or fleeing communism in central Europe after World War II – and we find things in common in our Lutheran churches around the doctrine and also the practices that help us to belong. We are confessionally united, but linguistically and ethnically diverse. We are a wide communion and find a close community in this diversity. Our members come because they are welcomed and feel that they belong in this community, whoever they are. A value that I have always appreciated is that Lutherans seek to find, and believe it is each of our life’s mission to find the unique identity and value that lies in ourselves and in others, that God has created each of us as individuals, uniquely known and loved and with a unique purpose.

There are some visual and practical elements that help us to recognise Lutheran community and worship, such as standing to pray and sitting to sing. Music in particular plays a large part in Lutheran services and tradition: Luther believed strongly in the power of songs, psalms and hymns to teach as well as to worship, sometimes using folk and dance tunes that would have been known to the people and so to bring the word of God to the people, in a language that we can each understand. There is a great musical tradition in Lutheranism, including hymns and also sung services which are not a high mass but sung prayers as well as hymns.

Finally and fundamentally, Luther was known for his focus on the Word, on going back to the source and making it available to the people. He translated the Bible and championed education, to put the Bible in the hands of the people rather than the institutional hierarchy of the established Church. This Biblical basis of Lutheran churches has been codified in three *sola*s (to which two were later added: *sola Christus* and *sola Deo gloria*). These three are *sola scriptura* – only through the Word of God, the scriptures, can we know Him; *sola gratia* – only by grace does God justify, not by our instigation; and *sola fide* – only by faith are we justified, not by works or anything else. And so we come to one of the fundamental tenets of Luther and Lutheran Churches that we can surely all agree with: of justification by faith through grace, to the glory of God. Amen.