

“We are Lutherans”

Following in the footsteps of Luther
in Seyda and the surrounding area



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Many thanks to Frau Katharina Körting, Reformation representative of the Wittenberg church, for her friendly visit and the inspiration for this booklet. – The picture on the front was drawn by Jasmin Lindemann, Seyda, who is currently attending first grade.

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The man who was instrumental in starting the Reformation began calling himself Luther on

the 31st of October, 1517. That was the first time he signed a thesis with the changed name, following a tradition that was common at the time of Grecizing one's name, just as his friend Melanchthon had done, who had previously been known as "Schwarzerd." "LeUTHERia" stands for "freedom" in the Greek language. Luther's insights into the Holy Scripture brought freedom, the freedom that comes from knowing that God's grace is for me, that can I defy all other authorities, that I can be active in love and can live happily and confidently. (cf. Kaufmann, Thomas: *Geschichte der Reformation* 2009, 186.)

The Reformation took place in our immediate neighbourhood. Seyda lies exactly between Jüterbog, where Tetzl sold his letters of indulgence, and Wittenberg, where the theses "against indulgences" were nailed to the doors of the Castle Church in direct retaliation. This act of defiance impacted the region immediately, during the time of the Reformation, of course, but also in later years. The effects are still noticeable now, 500 years later!

Martin Luther knew of Seyda. He mentioned the small town during his preaching sessions in

Wittenberg as a specification of distance: “Imagine this, dear brethren, Moses went as far as it is from here to Seyda” (WA 25,473,15). He also personally worked to fill the pastor’s position in Seyda. His friend Bartholomäus Rieseberg was the first protestant pastor serving the community of Seyda. Rieseberg worked here between 1527 and 1540. He came to this small town on the advice of Luther after he narrowly escaped the Reformation preachers in Hessen, the stake, and almost certain death.

On November 13th, 1528, on the “Friday after Martini,” it is said that Martin Luther visited Seyda personally. This is mentioned in a “diary” in which Luther’s day-to-day life was meticulously kept (Buchwald). Ten years after the Reformation, the first protestant church visitation within the “electoral circle” was intended to check how much of the Reformation message had arrived in the surrounding communities. The visitation commission came across some frightening experiences – not in Seyda, because Pastor Rieseberg was already active here, but in other places. In some parishes, the residing pastor did not even know the Lord’s Prayer. To

become a pastor during those years, the only requirement was to be able to read, just enough to get through a “Mass.”

The visitation commission made sure to first observe the conditions in Seyda, just as they had done in other places, before they gave any advice. It was decided that a school and a hospital should be built in Seyda. A “common box,” a fund for the general public, especially for the poor, was to be established. Labetz, which previously had belonged to Seyda, was traded with Schadewalde, a village which had belonged to Wittenberg. Mellnitz’s pastor was moved to Seyda, as he did not have enough income due to his very small parish. Even today, if you visit the small fieldstone church in Mellnitz, you can see the door for the local community on the one side and the door for the pastor on the other. If you look closely, you will notice how narrow the pastor’s doorway is, leading one to assume that the ministers of this parish must have been very thin to fit through a door of that size.

In Seyda, the post of superintendent was established. The superintendent was to focus on education and the administration of ten

pastors. The superintendency in Seyda existed until 1877. Seyda actually had two positions until 1919: a superintendent, later known as “rector,” and a “deacon,” the two residing at Kirchplatz 1 and Kirchplatz 2. The present parsonage was not built until 1846.

After Luther visited Seyda, he wrote the catechisms to counteract the lack of education. Short and precise, the catechisms explained the most important aspects of the Christian faith. The Small Catechism was for “home, school and church.” It is still present in hymn books today, in the form of a dialogue, using a simple question-and-answer principle. The “Large Catechism” was initially written for pastors and aimed to give them much-needed background knowledge, for example: “What is God?” – “Where you hang your heart.”

Over the centuries, even to this day, these catechisms are taught, just as intended, for the “home, school and church.” For a long time, there was a Sunday morning church service and then a separate catechism-based sermon in the afternoon. It was expected, as Luther writes, that “a child of seven years of age

should know what the church is and what it stands for.”

The first round of visitations as mentioned above was not to be the last. These visitations took place on a regular basis. The visitors checked on the community in general and their progress according to Lutheran teachings. It was during one of these visitations that the commissioners noticed that although a school had been built, no hospital existed yet. The people of Seyda were apologetic and explained that they had instead donated their money toward the building of the hospital in Zahna.

The visitations are a testament to the strong will of the Reformers, who found solid ground in the local communities. For the Reformers, another important point was the keeping of certain traditions. This is best seen today in the churches in Ruhlsdorf and Arnsdorf. A carving of the “Holy Family,” which is over 500 years old, can be found in Ruhlsdorf. In addition to Mary and Joseph, it shows the woman whom we know from the Bible as Saint Anne, Jesus’s grandmother, mother of Mary. Jesus sits on her lap and she is clearly “under the hood,” which means she is married. In the

background, her three husbands whom she had in quick succession (and who died respectively) can be seen. With the Reformation, these saints lost their importance as mediators of salvation. (The young Martin Luther had still shouted in agony, fearing for his life: “Holy Saint Anna, help me and I will become a monk!”) They were not entirely banished from the church, but simply removed from center stage. Evidence of this can be seen even more clearly in the church in Arnsdorf, where the central part of the altar was removed and, with it, the figures of the saints. They were placed in the wall, and a pulpit was put in the middle of the church instead. The Word of God and Jesus Christ should take center stage, always.

There is a long list of Lutheran pastors who worked in Seyda. Most of them were highly educated individuals who had close ties to the university in Wittenberg. Very prominently displayed, in a large oil painting that can be viewed in the church, is Johannes Zacharias Hilliger, who worked here for more than 45 years, from 1725 to 1770. His erudition is reflected in the numerous books in the background. He himself holds an open book in

his hands which displays the following words in three languages (Hebrew, Latin and Greek): “Commit your way to the Lord, even when things go badly: The Lord sees you still” (Cf.: „Die Vorgänger. Seydaer Pfarrer zwischen stabilitas loci und peregrinatio.“ www.seyda.de/2014-5.htm)

The congregation in Elster is part of Reformation history just by virtue of its name: it was at the Gate of Elster, that is, at the gate in Wittenberg pointing toward Elster, that Luther burned the Papal Bull of Excommunication on October 12th, 1520. The congregation in Elster was “given” their pastor by Luther: Valentine Schwan. Many people had feared this decision, as it was exactly what celibacy was meant to prevent: the “inheritance” of pastoral positions. For Elster, this meant that there were three “Schwan’s” in succession as Lutheran pastors, right from the beginning. (Cf. www.seyda.de/elster.htm.)

In 1521, Luther stood “before emperor and empire” in Worms, where he boldly did not recant, but rather invoked the Holy Bible and reason. A Danish prince attended the event. His name was Christian. He was so impressed with this confession that he himself became a Lutheran. Afterwards, when he had been

crowned the King of Denmark, he invited Bugenhagen to his court for three years to create the Lutheran church orders for his kingdom. “God’s Word and Luther’s teachings shall never be forgotten”: These words can still be heard from Danish pulpits today.

The Lutheran royal households were all related, and it so happened that the Danish princess Hedwig came to Electoral Saxony. She was the granddaughter of Christian. Her husband, Elector Christian, died young, and she was given her own territory around the Lichtenburg in Prettin, which extended up to our area here. They donated the small half-timbered church in Gentha in 1624. During the Thirty Years’ War, the only people who survived in Gentha were two widows and two widowers. They were given farm tools and livestock to rebuild their community. They also had their church for solace and hope. “Was it worth it,” one might ask today? It is all an expression of the Lutheran faith, but it manifests itself especially in Gentha in a special way. Only three years ago, we discovered this: looking closely at the oil painting above the altar, we saw that Hedwig herself is sitting at the table of the Lord. An

apostle has been purposely omitted. This is quite typical in Lutheran thinking: “We have a place there, close to Jesus.” In the City Church of Wittenberg, Cranach had even started to paint people from Wittenberg sitting at the table with Jesus. Sensationally though, in Gethsemane, it was the first time that a woman sat at the table, sharing the Last Supper.

The efficacy of faith in love: it was clear from the beginning, even at the visitation, that it was important to provide education for all, to support the weak and the poor, and to build a hospital for Seyda. In 1708, almost the entire city of Seyda burned to the ground. Even the church was destroyed. A “love tax” and a “love offering” from various Saxon towns helped rebuild the city and its church. Seyda therefore only exists today because of the charity and love of its neighbors. The new church was consecrated in 1711. In 1717, the people of Seyda were recovered enough to hang a bell (previously there had been five) up in the tower again. This bell still sounds today. On the bell, there is an inscription saying that it should “take the happy tone of evangelical Christianity into the future.”

A little later, the typical Lutheran pulpit-altar was installed in the church. On it one can read the whole “Lutheran program.” The most important beliefs are placed right in the center, namely, Word and Sacrament as the means of grace, the pulpit, the altar and the baptismal font. The red curtain helps to clarify; the very scene on the carved image—Jesus sharing the meal with his disciples—is with us here and today, present at the table of the Lord and in the proclamation of His Word. Also noteworthy is the character of the invitation: the bread is already laid out for those who will come. Martin Jentsch, who was born in Seyda, documented this truth in a song which is still present in our evangelical hymnbooks and will be mentioned again later (EC 418). The crucial Lutheran distinction between “law” and “gospel” can be seen at our altar. To the left, we see Moses with the Ten Commandments, also known as the “orders,” and to the right John, who wrote “God is love.” Both point to Christ on the cross. The two large figurines of Peter and Paul, which probably gave the church its name in 1711, were switched at one point. This year, we plan, as a part of the preparations for the Reformation anniversary, to put them back in their correct places. We are still awaiting the

application approval. Paul should point to the cross (not into the air) and Peter wants to invite us to come to the table of the Lord with his gesture, not to go past it, like he does today!

We are reminded of the coexistence of the secular and spiritual realms by the church seats in the gallery with the coat of arms of the Saxon-Polish alliance, which were reserved for state officials, as well as by the epitaph for a state official to the left of the oil painting of superintendent Hilliger. This official served for 50 years. He even insisted on the following inscription on his gravestone, “You follow my example and do what I did, only then can we talk about it!” Even on the old bell we see signs of the secular and the spiritual. The funding for the old school next to the church, which was built in 1881, came in part from the congregation, which raised one-third of the building costs; up to 1918, the church superintendent also had charge of the school.

The oil painting shows the “Luther Robe,” the black cassock with Geneva bands that is familiar to us even today as typical clothing for pastors. That’s the way Luther is said to have dressed as a professor in Wittenberg. However,

pastoral clothing and much more can be classed as the “adiaphora,” trivialities. Luther once received a letter from a concerned pastor from Brandenburg. Even though the prince there was allowing him to preach the evangelical teachings, the prince had stipulated that the pastor should do so while wearing the old garments of the Catholic Church. Was this all right? Luther replied that what was important was the Word he preached; if necessary, he could stand there in his underpants.

Therefore, the old garments remained in use for many centuries, in Gadegast for example; there we found a receipt for the purchase of a new chasuble, which happens about once every 100 years. Only in 1817 did the Prussian king in charge at the time decree the black robe as the only acceptable clothing for pastors. (www.seyda.de/gadegastgeschichte.htm)

Much changed in Seyda around that time. Saxony had fought with the French and lost the war of liberation against Prussia and the Russians. Our area became Prussian, and Saxony became an official province of Prussia. Until recently, this could be seen in name of our church body, the “Ecclesiastical Province of

Saxony,” until it merged with Thüringen and became the “Evangelical Church in Central Germany.” The Prussian king became responsible for the church. His royal household came from the Hohenzollern family, which had its roots in Southern Germany. It was thus “reformed,” influenced by the Reformation that had started in Switzerland. Even his predecessors had tried to unite their mostly Lutheran subjects with the believers of the Reformed Church, but they had failed miserably. The king, however, had learned from this experience, and so he tried a different, smarter method. He founded a union that acted like an umbrella organisation and oversaw the Lutheran and the Reformed churches. In that union, each community could stay loyal to their own beliefs. The king, who incidentally was a hobby liturgist, met the Russian musician Bogatzky through his friend Czar Alexander (who had “Alexander Platz” in Berlin named after him). The two of them created a unified “agenda,” which served as a service book with prayers and corresponding songs. Any community which introduced this type of hymnal voluntarily received a copy with a personal dedication in gold lettering. I myself have found such a book under a pew in

Morxdorf. In Seehausen, however, the farmers demonstrated in front of the parsonage, holding their old hymnals up in the air and shouting: “We are Lutherans!”

In Seyda, in the square in front of the church, there is a Caucasian linden tree, also called the “Liberation Tree.” It commemorates the brothers in arms – Russia and Prussia. The tree is over 200 years old. The other tree is an oak tree called the “Luther Oak” which was planted in 1883 to celebrate Martin Luther’s 400th birthday.

In 1883, a great work of love, which has its roots in the work of the great Lutheran theologian Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, began in Seyda. He founded a workers’ colony in Bethel, following the good Lutheran tradition of charitable work. His relative, Gustav von Diest, did the same in the year 1883 in Seyda. He noticed the many thousands of homeless people who were walking through the land following a terrible depression. In his mind, these “brothers of the road” deserved “work, not charity.” This is a good example of the Lutheran perspective on the individuality

of human beings, the high personal value placed on each person. (www.seyda.de/heide.htm)

“Break your bread with those who are hungry. Those who walk around in poverty and sadness, take them into your house. Take on the burden of others.” This is a poem written by Martin Jentsch in the hymn book, number 418. He was born in Seyda. His father worked in the workers’ colony right from the beginning. He sat before the altar in the church in Seyda: “Break your bread for us hungry people, sinners as well as the devout, and let us us be reunited at your table.”

The missionary efforts in Tanzania at this time, the so-called “German East Africa,” were also led in large part by the Lutherans. In Gadegast one can still see an old missionary flag hanging above the choir loft. In those times, there were regularly held missionary festivals in Gadegast, which meant that for the first time ever, black people visited the community. The people of Gadegast, as well as those from other communities, collected money and donated it to the missionary stations in Africa, to support churches, schools and hospitals. To this day, we receive regular visitors from one such

Lutheran missionary station, from Lugala in Tanzania, a part of the worldwide Lutheran church to which we belong and which our communities helped to build.

The Lutheran church in Leinefelde near Eichsfeld was also built from charity donations from Gadegast, back in 1886. There are archival records of exactly how much each of the families donated. The “Gustav-Adolf-Werk” built the church for the Protestants in the diaspora, which means “in dispersion” or “in the minority.”

In 1886, the church in Ruhlsdorf was built. The patron of the church was Carl Traugott von Hülsens, who donated the money for the church building. The way he lived his life is a great example of Lutheran piety. Not only did the pastor mention, in his funeral oration, that “no threshold” was ever “too low” for him, since he visited his farm workers when they were sick to sing and pray with them. But he also organized a general fire insurance for the province of Saxony and later for the whole of Germany. He saved many people from impoverishment and great distress. He appeared in front of the German parliament in

the Reichstag, to speak against Bismarck in his culture war. He made it clear that he, as a Lutheran, could not approve the measures planned against the Catholic Church. He was the first person who had the courage to speak like this in parliament. As we now know, Bismarck was not able to go ahead with his plans. In the anteroom of the church in Ruhlsdorf, the cross of the grave of Carl Traugott von Hülsens can be seen. It is inscribed with this verse from the Bible: “Jesus Christ says: ‘I live, ye shall live also!’” He purchased the communion ware (in addition to giving the money for the whole church). His descendants helped us last year with a generous donation to cover the costs to replace the huge church roof and in this way are continuing the tradition of their ancestors. (www.seyda.de/2014-2.htm)

The interiors of our churches show, in their own way, what was most important to the communities that built them. For example, the church in Naundorf has a pulpit altar. Gentha, too, had a pulpit altar up until 100 years ago. (It is visible in an old photo of the west side of the church.) In Gadegast, right in the center, stands a picture of Christ who greets us with outstretched arms. In Zernick, the focal point

is a stained glass window showing the Easter story with Maria Magdalena. The contrast might be apparent for the first time when you travel, for example, to East Friesland, where the Reformed churches do not have a single picture on display. There is only a pulpit in the middle and a folding table in the corner which is used for the celebration of Holy Communion.

A sheet of paper from the twenties detailing announcements, found under a pew during the cleaning of the church, mentions the “confession of the youth,” and there is in fact a confessional box behind the altar in Gadegast. Luther did not abolish this form of confession. While renovating the Castle Church in Wittenberg in 1817, confessional boxes were reintroduced. What Luther did criticize, though, was mandatory confession and the misconception that one might somehow be able to name all of his or her sins right there and then.

The fact that the church consists of Word and Sacrament is also visible in the church building in Meltendorf. In the old days, there had been no church in the small farming village on the

edge of the Fläming. The distance to Elster and the nearest church was far. The richest farmer of the village, named Bröse, built a new house mid-19th century and added a large room with a church facility in its midst. Later on, in 1896, the village came together and built a small church of their own accord. It therefore still belongs to the municipality, not the church. There was a lively choir which sang every Sunday in the church for decades. The minister from Elster certainly did not come very often, so the members of the parish had to resort to asking others to act as substitutes, for example from Gadegast, or even from Piesteritz. This took a lot of effort, all so that they could hear the word of God. (www.seyda.de/2014-1.htm)

The anniversary of the Reformation in 1917 coincided with the First World War. In the church in Gadegast, a cross made out of nails is displayed to this day which dates back to that particular anniversary. For each nail, a donation was made to the soldiers. Luther in the service of nationalism: that too was a reality in our communities.

The painted murals created in Seyda in 1935 and restored by a Catholic church painter in

1955, show the emblem of Luther and Melanchthon, the text of the hymn “A Mighty Fortress,” and key Bible verses. Similar murals can be seen in the church in Ruhlsdorf, even though most of it can no longer be deciphered. Images of Luther from the early 1900's can be seen in Gadegast and in Ruhlsdorf (here you can also find Melanchthon), as well as an oil painting of the two from the 18th century, created by Siebenhaar.

The “defiance” of the Lutheran faith is evident in the life and work of Pastor Hagendorf, who worked in Seyda from 1938 to 1954. He received the attention of the Gestapo for the first time when, in his written response to inquiries into church members’ ancestries (to prove whether they were Aryan), he requested a donation for Jewish Christians. Because of his criticisms of the Nazi regime, he was soon taken into custody. After the revolt on June 17th, 1953, two of the leaders of the strike from Wolfen and Bitterfeld knocked on his door, pleading: “You have to take us in! Jesus said so!” The pastor, of course, granted their request and helped them escape, and was therefore detained again. (Cf. „Einer muss uns aufnehmen, das hat Jesus gesagt. Der 17. Juni 1953 im Seydaer Pfarrhaus.“ (www.seyda.de/1953.htm, www.seyda.de/2014-6.htm)

The close sense of belonging within the Lutheran family worldwide became very real to us in 2003. There was a pastoral exchange with Baltimore (USA) right around that time. Pastor Keith Hardy visited us twice, each visit lasting a whole month, and marvelled: “In every village there is a large church right in the center, and all of them are Lutheran!” After the pastor's visit (accompanied by his wife), parishioners of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Baltimore followed. This year they want to pay us a visit again, this time for an even longer period; in total the visit should last three months. In the winter church in Naundorf hangs a cross made of red glass, created in Baltimore.

The group from Seattle, who in 2005 helped renovate the church in Mellnitz as well as the YMCA house in Seyda, came from the “West Side Presbyterian Church.” “Presbyter” is the Greek word for “elder.” They also follow the traditions of the Reformation and searched for Luther's footsteps with us. This common interest was the catalyst for our first encounter, which unfortunately happened precisely on September 11, 2001. Our active interest in the Reformation has helped us to establish various

contacts, the most recent one leading up to the anniversary in 2017. For example, we are regularly visited by a large choir from the largest Lutheran university in the US, from Valparaiso near Chicago. 50 students, male and female, sang at confirmations in Gentha and Seyda, as well as in the chapel in Mark Zwuschen. The choir, which is now associated with the St. Thomas Choir in Leipzig and plans to sing on the Reformation anniversary which the government of Germany has officially planned, first contacted us. It will be a great honor for us to welcome them during the anniversary celebrations in our villages and communities once again. We have welcomed many other Reformation visitors in the past: visitors from Denmark (Bishop Christiansen. during the celebrations of the church renovation in Gentha in 2015), the Czech Republic (Czech Brethrens), and from Poland (Mazury). (www.seyda.de/neuewelt.htm)

At a jubilee celebration in Naundorf, the congregation performed the history of the village in several scenes, following the lead of a guest, Bernhard Naumann, who is also known as the “Luther” from Wittenberg. Because

Luther was naturally part of the community's history!

We have had other special encounters organized by the Lutheran World Federation. Two groups of about 16 guests came for an afternoon and evening to visit two congregations. As is the case in the Olympics, there were delegations from each of the five continents: Lutherans from Zimbabwe, Latvia, Hong Kong, El Salvador, Canada, the United States, Ghana, Zambia, India, Colombia, Sweden, Denmark.... It turned out to be a great experience for all involved!

Finally, the aid efforts for refugees in recent months have included first attempts at tours of Wittenberg in Arabic and, with that, an explanation of the Reformation to people from a completely different culture and faith. The fact that one cannot just get a "ticket" for "paradise" but rather receives it as a gift from Jesus was new to our visitors. That it does not depend on the performance of the individual, but on the love of Jesus for each and every one of us, that thought stands in total contrast to all notions of performance, in Islam as well as in our modern Western society of today.

That Luther's spirit is alive among us is evident by looking at the chapel in Mark Zwuschen. Its spire was attached only in 2011. The waving grave cloth that can be seen on the Cranach paintings, is depicted there, in metal. A "¡Vivit!" has been added, "He lives!" Jesus is alive; this is the Easter message, transcribed from Luther's Rose, which travels through time to make us happy and give us confidence. (www.seyda.de/kapelle.htm)

Much is "Lutheran" that we do not always recognize. Like a fish that does not know the water around it exists, only when it is missing will things become difficult for us.

The reason why we receive presents on Christmas Day and not like they did, in the past, on St. Nikolaus Day (December 6th) goes back to Martin Luther. Even BaFöG, the grant that German university students receive, as well as the Lutheran parsonage which is provided to the pastor (and his wife), came from these beliefs and traditions.

Luther's thoughts have been preserved in Seyda over the years: that we live in God's grace and that this gives us freedom from many other doctrines of salvation (such as

those about money, which Tetzels dealt with); that all people should be able to read the Bible by themselves, in their own language, which is why we strive to educate the people and make the Bible accessible; that our neighbor needs our practical support; that we can find joy in what God provides us; and, maybe most important these days, that we have the hope which helps us plant an apple tree today even if we know the world will end tomorrow.

“God give us all
 The blessing of his grace
 that we may walk in his ways
 in true love
 and fraternal loyalty,
 that the meal not be wasted on us.
 Kyrieleison.
 Lord let thy Holy Spirit
 never leave us,
 he who gives us the strength to keep to the
 right measure,
 that your poor Christendom,
 may live in peace and unity.
 Kyrieleison.”

Song of the last supper by Martin Luther,
sung in Seyda for the past 500 years. EG 214,3