

What is the Lutheran Church?

Contributed by the ELCA
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Lutherans are Christians who accept the teachings of Martin Luther (1483 – 1546). Luther was a German theologian who realized that there were significant differences between what he read in the Bible and the practices of the Roman Catholic church at that time. On October 31, 1517, he posted a challenge on the door of Wittenberg University, titled “95 Theses” (to debate 95 theological issues). His hope was that the church would reform its practice and preaching to be more consistent with the Word of God as contained in the Bible.

What started as an academic debate escalated into a distinct separation between the Roman Catholic church of the time and those who accepted Luther’s suggested reforms. “Lutheran” became the name of the group that agreed with Luther’s convictions.

Today, nearly five centuries later, Lutherans still celebrate the Reformation on October 31 and still hold to the basic principles of Luther’s theological teachings, such as Grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. These comprise the very essence of Lutheranism:

- We are saved by the grace of God alone -- not by anything we do;
- Our salvation is through faith alone -- a confident trust in God, who in Christ promises us forgiveness, life and salvation; and
- The Bible is the norm for faith and life -- the true standard by which teachings and doctrines are to be judged.

Over the years, different Lutheran church bodies have been established and organized to meet the needs of Lutherans in communities and nations all over the world. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the largest Lutheran group in North America, founded in 1988 when three North American Lutheran church bodies united: The American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the Lutheran Church in America. Learn more about the History of the ELCA.

Lutherans are part of a reforming movement within the whole Christian church; as a part of practicing their faith, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its predecessors have engaged in ecumenical dialogue with other church bodies for decades. In fact, the ELCA has entered into cooperative “full communion” agreements (sharing common convictions about theology, mission and worship) with several other Protestant denominations, including

- the Moravian Church
- The Episcopal Church
- the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- the Reformed Church in America
- the United Church of Christ
- the United Methodist Church

The ELCA has an ongoing dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, and in 1999, representatives of the Lutheran World

Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This represented a historic consensus on key issues of faith and called for further dialogue and study together.

To learn more about these ecumenical relationships, visit [Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations](#).

Lutheranism is a faith tradition that is open to all, regardless of background. The ELCA alone is almost five million members strong, with nearly 10,500 congregations across the U.S., Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

For much more information please see the website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:
www.elca.org/Faith/ELCA-Teaching