



First  
Presbyterian  
Church  
of Waynesboro, Virginia

## The Columns *Online*

October 25, 2023 | Waynesboro, Virginia | *a newsletter supplement*

# RE•FORMATION THEN • NOW • ALWAYS

## Sunday, October 29

*We will celebrate Reformation Sunday  
with our sisters and brothers at*

## Second Presbyterian Church

133 North Delphine Avenue

## Worship begins at 11:00

## Covered Dish Luncheon to follow

*Just drop your dishes off in the kitchen.*

# The Reformation's African roots

*Martin Luther's encounter with Abba Mika'el  
greatly influenced how he expressed his ideas*

By Elena Keppel Levy  
for the *Presbyterian Outlook*

If someone asked you to summarize the history of Western Christianity by naming cities, there are many options: Jerusalem, Rome, Wittenberg and Geneva to name a few. Our focus usually stays on the Middle East, where our faith started, and then Europe, where Western Christianity centered in the following centuries. This is the history I was taught. So I was surprised to learn when writing and researching the Protestant Reformation that Martin Luther was very interested in and inspired by the Ethiopian Church — and he wasn't the only one.

During the time of the Reformation, it was a pretty widespread belief that Ethiopia was the first nation to convert to Christianity. Think about the story from Acts 8 about the Ethiopian eunuch who serves the Queen of Ethiopia. He's moved by the Gospel and baptized by Philip. There are also church legends that the Apostles Bartholomew and Matthew traveled to Ethiopia to share the gospel. Then there are stories about the legendary Christian ruler of the East Prester John and his mythic, ideal Christian kingdom far from the European church.



Michael the Deacon. Oil pastel on pastel paper. Inès Lee, 2018.

Though some accused Luther and other Protestants of tearing the church apart, that's not how the reformers saw it. They were concerned about corruption in the Catholic church (even the pope), about doctrines and practices that ran counter to Scripture as they understood it, and about vulnerable people being harmed. Luther's end goal was to restore the church, ushering in a return to the historic church, the biblical church, the church of the Apostles, but how could he prove it to naysayers? When he heard about the church in Ethiopia, he understood it as a church that was unconnected from popes, a church that developed without the influence of the Catholic church. It held great promise for him.

In 1534, Luther regularly had dialogues and debates with other reformers and Catholic theologians. That year, to his surprise, Abba Mika'el sought him out. He was a deacon from the Ethiopian church, sometimes referred to as Michael the Deacon. He didn't speak Greek or Latin, but he did speak a little Italian. Excited, Luther invited an interpreter to join them. Luther, Mika'el, and several other reformers continued to meet over a period of five weeks. By the end of this time, Mika'el and Luther agreed that they shared beliefs on the most important questions of Christian teaching and theology. They saw eye to eye about the Trinity, about Scripture being translated into the language that regular folks spoke, and about clergy having the right to get married. They believed that everyone present at a church service should receive both bread and wine at communion. In the end, they said that even though they had differences in their liturgies and ceremonies, those differences were not major enough to “undermine the unity of the Church [or] conflict with faith,” as Luther wrote in a 1534 letter. They both believed so deeply in the one church of Jesus Christ that they declared Lutheran churches and Ethiopian churches to be in full communion. Luther wrote Mika'el a letter of recommendation so he would be welcomed by reformers as he traveled on to Strasbourg, hoping to meet German theologian Martin Bucer.

*Continued*

## Reformation, continued

Meeting and speaking with Mika'el had a great impact on Luther. He mentioned it in letters and in sermons, which were then copied and published to a wider audience. Here was confirmation that Protestants were not destroying the unity of the church; they were restoring the church! One copy of a letter by Luther even describes Mika'el as a bishop rather than a deacon, lending his voice more weight.

Over the years, due to racism and nationalism, many Protestants became less than enthusiastic about their legacy of embracing the Ethiopian church. In the late 18 century, new translations of these documents downplayed the encounter and referred to the foreigner as part of the "Greek Church." By the late 18 and 19 centuries, there was a greater emphasis on highlighting Germany's central place in the origins of the Protestant movement. It is only recently that the writings have been retranslated and brought to light.

My takeaway from this history: We choose which stories we tell and how we tell them. Learning about Luther and Mika'el reminds us that Christianity did not spread from one culture, one theology, one human power outward. God's good news is global, shared by people all over the world. We should let go of the idea that our thread of belief and practice is a culmination of a unified path to the present moment. From the beginning, the church has been an intercultural experience of gathering together in the love of Christ. As Luther wrote in his letter of recommendation for Mika'el, "the Kingdom of Christ is spiritual righteousness of heart, fear of God, and trust through Christ." What a great blessing that we find this kin-dom all over the world!



*Elana Keppel Levy is co-pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Bixby, Oklahoma. Elana believes in word, work, and worship that speaks to the whole person - mind, body, spirit. In her sillier moments, she writes goofy plays for worship. She also does Hebrew and Greek word studies of the lectionary texts and posts them on her website, SoMuchBible.com.*

## OUR WORSHIP CHANNELS

CLICK ON THE LOGOS







**BETTER TOGETHER**

*Bible Study*

**MONDAY,  
OCTOBER 30**

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH**

**1:00-2:00 p.m.**

**COME OUT AND JOIN  
WESTMINSTER'S DCE, JOHN TINDALL,  
AND EXPLORE TOGETHER  
THE GREAT STORIES  
AND THEMES OF THE BIBLE.**

# This Week in History.



In a televised address, **President John F. Kennedy** reveals the existence of Russian missiles stationed in Cuba, demanding their removal and announcing a naval "quarantine" of the island. After six days of tension, the Russians would announce their removal, while the U.S. would secretly agree to remove missiles from Turkey.

**OCTOBER 22, 1962**



After years of criminal impunity, Chicago Mobster Alphonse 'Al' Capone is sentenced to 11 years in jail for Federal income tax evasion. He would be incarcerated at the Federal Prison until 1939, when he would be paroled suffering from syphilis. He retired to his mansion in Miami Beach where he died in 1947.

**OCTOBER 24, 1931**



The the first major man-made waterway in America opens. **The Erie Canal** would link Lake Erie with the Hudson River, revolutionizing commercial trade and establishing the viability of major public works projects.

**October 26, 1825**



**Hungarian** students and workers in Budapest, Hungary revolt against Communist rule. Soviet Russians would respond with tanks, putting down the uprising after several days of bitter fighting.

**OCTOBER 23, 1956**



**The Third Hungarian Republic** is established, 33 years after Soviet Russian troops crushed a popular revolt against Communist rule.

**OCTOBER 23, 1989**



**Pablo Picasso** is born in Malaga, Spain. One of the greatest and most-influential artists of the 20th century, he is known for co-founding the Cubist movement, the invention of constructed sculpture, the co-invention of collage, and for the wide variety of styles that he helped develop and explore in his long career.

**October 25, 1881**



Welsh poet and playwright **Dylan Thomas** (1914-1953) is born in Swansea, Wales. His works include *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*, *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, and the drama *Under Milk Wood*.

**OCTOBER 27, 1914**



Helen Anderson is appointed Ambassador to Denmark by President Harry Truman. She is the first woman to serve as a U.S. ambassador.

**OCTOBER 28, 1949**