

Photos of Pastor Tkac's trip to Wittenberg, Germany ~ May 2015
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'Old School' brings 'Lutheran Bluegrass' music to Wittenberg

By Roger Drinnon

WITTENBERG, Germany — You haven't lived until you've heard "A Mighty Fortress" played Bluegrass-style with banjos, guitars and a violin with about 200 Germans enthusiastically applauding afterward.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's musical band "Old School" performed an energetic set of Bluegrass favorites May 2 at the Stadthaus here. In addition to German residents who attended, some Synod leaders and representatives from international partner churches from around the world also attended.

The concert was among weekend festivities in conjunction with the [May 3 dedication](#) of the International Lutheran Center at the Old Latin School in Wittenberg.

"We know the Germans really enjoy American folk music," said LCMS President Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, who also plays banjo and sings for Old School. "We thought this would be a great way to reach into the community and let them know we're here — it worked great."

Despite many Bluegrass songs being framed around simple chord progressions, the instrumental solos within these chords are often complex, high-tempo displays of virtuosity and technique. Examples of such can be heard in songs like "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," "Rocky Top" and "The Ballad of Jed Clampett" (from the 1960s American TV show "The Beverly Hillbillies") — all of which were played by Old School during the evening concert.

Old School was followed by Christian performers "Lost and Found," who are on their farewell tour following 30 years of performing at Lutheran venues large and small. The duo — Michael Bridges on guitar/vocals and George Baum on keyboards/vocals, who blended their unique sound with a clear Gospel message and humor — also took the stage with Old School at the end of the concert to play a couple of songs together.

As he was leaving, one German who attended the concert said he appreciated all the music, especially the hymn "A Mighty Fortress" and "Tennessee Waltz," as performed by Old School.

Harrison said local community support for the event is a sign of the Synod's growing presence in and relationship with Wittenberg — a relationship focused on sharing the Gospel.

"We've been [in Wittenberg] with our partner, die Selbstandige Evangelisch Lutherische Kirche [SELK], for a number of years, working kindly with people — we are part of this community now," said Harrison. "We thank God for this community and the way they've weathered the [Deutsche Demokratische Republik] times under communism and yet preserved the church here."

Harrison said the challenges Wittenberg has overcome now provide the LCMS with a distinct mission opportunity within the cradle of the Reformation.

"Only a small portion of these people claim to be Christian, so if we can make contact with them and grow in our mission to share the Gospel here, it will be all the better," he said.

Bluegrass is an early form of American rural country music with roots in Irish, Scottish and English folk music, due to immigration from these countries to southeastern America during the 18th century. Lyrics are often themed on rural life and the Gospel.

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LCMS President Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, left, joins the band "Old School" for a concert at the Stadthaus on Saturday, May 2, 2015, in Wittenberg, Germany. Band members with Harrison are, from left, the Rev. Russell Tkac, pastor of Peace Lutheran Church, Waterford, Mich.; Rob Bourassa of Wyandotte, Mich.; and Ross Holmes, who grew up attending Christ Lutheran Church in Fort Worth, Texas, and currently resides in Nashville. (LCMS/Erik M. Lunsford)