

# Task Group on Christian – Jewish Relations

Since World War Two many Protestant Churches around the world, plus the Roman Catholic Church, have adopted Statements on Christian Jewish Relations.

The Seventh Assembly of the Uniting Church (1994) resolved to initiate a process throughout the church of developing understanding and better relationships between Christian and Jewish people, including common action towards a better world.

Prior to the Eighth Assembly (1997) an Assembly Task Group had drafted a Statement on relations between the Uniting Church and the Jewish people for adoption by that Assembly. The Assembly, in adopting it, encouraged members, leaders and councils of the Uniting Church to study it, to view the video **From the Cross to the Swastika**, and to study two accompanying booklets. The first, **Understanding Antisemitism** (written by Dr John Squires and Rev Elizabeth Raine), explored the rise of antisemitism within the church. The second, **Common Ground-Different Perspectives** (written by the Rev Prof Howard Wallace), developed most of the points raised in Section 7 of the Statement. In response, in 1999 the Synod of Victoria appointed a Working Group on Christian Jewish Relations to further the Assembly's request to initiate a program of education in this regard across Australia.

Issues of importance which continued to be studied were: supersessionism, Christian complicity in the growth of antisemitism, the significance of the Shoah ('Holocaust'), the proper interpretation of Christian scripture where there appear to be derogatory statements about Jews and/or Judaism, and the issue of proselytizing Jews.

The Synod of Victoria Working Group then proposed that a statement be drawn up which would be addressed to the general public.

The Standing Committee of the Tenth Assembly (2003) commissioned a discussion paper towards this end entitled **The Uniting Church in Australia Discussion Paper for Presbyteries and Congregations on relationships between Christians and Jews**. Its purpose was to enable congregations and presbyteries to consider the issue of the Uniting Church's ongoing relationship with the Jewish people and with Judaism. It also requested **The Working Group on Christian Jewish Relations of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania** to study the responses to the discussion paper and prepare a position Statement on Christian Jewish relations for the consideration of the Eleventh Assembly (2006).

Following eleven years of discussion since 1994, culminating in many thoughtful and prayerful responses from members, congregations and

presbyteries across the nation to the abovementioned discussion paper, **The Working Group on Christian Jewish Relations of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania** believed that the Uniting Church was ready to adopt a position on many issues raised within the Uniting Church during these recent years.

The Eleventh Assembly (2006) considered the Statement and referred it to Theology and Discipleship for consideration. Out of these discussions a revised Statement has been drawn up, and is presented to the Twelfth Assembly for its consideration.

The Working Group takes this opportunity to thank the scores of Uniting Church members and their leaders who have devoted themselves to examining the stimulating issues raised in discussions concerning Christian Jewish relations, and sending their responses to the Working Group. Although the Working Group could not agree with every point made, each position has been treated with respect and every point has influenced the shape of the Statement in one way or another.

The following is presented to the Assembly for adoption as a Statement to the general public which sets out the Uniting Church's position on Christian Jewish relations.

## JEWES AND JUDAISM: A STATEMENT BY THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

### The Uniting Church acknowledges

1. that Jesus of Nazareth cannot be understood apart from the Judaism of his time as he was born, lived and died a faithful Jew, looking to the establishment of God's kingdom as the fulfilment of God's promises;
2. that Judaism is a living faith today, and was at the time of Jesus, possessed of its own integrity and vitality within its own developing traditions,
3. that historically, understandings of Judaism have been imposed from without, and that Judaism should be understood on its own terms,
4. that both Torah and Gospel are expressions of God's grace, calling forth a response of thankful obedience;
5. that Christianity stands in a unique relationship with Judaism because:
  - a. Christianity emerged from Judaism of the first century and cannot be understood apart from it;
  - b. Judaism and Christianity, as living faiths today, have developed significantly from this common root;
  - c. Christians and Jews share a common heritage in the unique testimony of the Hebrew

Scriptures (Old Testament) to the One God;

6. that Judaism, both historically and currently, cannot be understood from knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures alone, or from references to Judaism in the New Testament alone;
7. that many of the early Christian writings collected in the New Testament were written in a context of controversy and polemic between the Church and Synagogue;
8. that antisemitism in all its expressions is an affront to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

#### **The Uniting Church acknowledges with repentance**

9. a history of interpretation of New Testament texts which has often failed to appreciate the context from which these texts emerged, viz. the growing separation of Christianity and Judaism with attendant bitterness and antagonism, resulting in deeply rooted anti-Jewish misunderstandings;
10. an anti-Judaism which developed in Christianity creating fertile ground for the spread of antisemitism culminating in the Shoah (Holocaust), and a history of insensitivity with respect to the importance of the Shoah for Jews.

#### **The Uniting Church affirms**

11. that Christians in their lives and by their words bear witness to God as known to them through Jesus Christ;
12. that the gifts and calling of God to the Jewish people are irrevocable;
13. that Christians and Jews have kindred ethical frameworks, grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), which impel them to work together for the achievement of a just and responsible society;
14. that Christian self-understanding is enhanced through closer dialogue with, and openness to, Judaism; such dialogue does not preclude opportunities for mutual faith sharing;
15. that the State of Israel and a Palestinian State each have the right to live side by side in peace and security;

#### **The Uniting Church does not accept**

16. Christian teaching that is derogatory towards Jews and Judaism;
17. the belief that God has abolished the covenant with the Jewish people;
18. supersessionism, the belief that Christians have replaced Jews in the love and purpose of God;

19. forms of relationships with Jews that require them to become Christian, including coercion and manipulation, that violate their humanity, dignity and freedom;

#### **The Uniting Church Encourages its Members and Councils**

20. to seek opportunities to meet with Jews and to learn about modern Judaism: (this might include, wherever possible, receiving hospitality in Synagogue worship, inviting a Rabbi to speak during a worship service or other gatherings, joining a Council of Christians and Jews).
21. to continue to study the Council of Christians and Jews (Victorian) documents *Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth* and *Re-reading Paul* along with the study of other writings of significance to the Christian Jewish relationship. (See Bibliography).
22. to respect the integrity of Jewish festivals, e.g. refraining from use of a Passover Seder in Holy Week worship;
23. to be vigilant in resisting antisemitism and anti-Judaism in church and society;
24. to pray and work for a just and lasting peace for both Israelis and Palestinians.

#### **GLOSSARY**

**1. Antisemitism and Anti-Judaism.** The term antisemitism, derived from Antisemitismus, was coined in imperial Germany during the 1870s by propagandists who did not wish Jews to enjoy equal rights with Christians. Its true political meaning is 'I am against the Jews'. For this reason, many scholars prefer to spell it without a hyphen. To spell it with a hyphen is to lend respectability to racial ideas that they do not deserve.

The term anti-Judaism should contain a hyphen because Judaism is a religion that really exists. However, it should be used with care. It can mean intellectual dissent from Jewish precepts (in the same sense as anti-Christian). Or it can have a pejorative connotation, implying an attack on the Jews themselves. In the latter case, it approximates antisemitism. Anti-Jewish elements are present in the Christian scriptures, but it would be false to claim that the scriptures are antisemitic.

**2. Covenant** is a pact or bargain between two parties. In the Hebrew Scriptures, covenant refers primarily to the bond between God and the people of Israel initiated by God, and grounded in God's grace and steadfast love. The covenant was made with Moses at Sinai (Exod.19f), reaffirming the bond made with Abraham (Gen. 15:17), reaffirmed later with David (2 Sam.7) and in the restoration from exile (Isa. 40-55). In the Hebrew Scriptures, God also made a covenant link with Noah. In Jewish thinking, this covenant applies to all humanity, requiring only that people respect life and live by a codified rule of law that has integrity (Gen. 9:8-17).

In the New Testament, covenant is used to refer to God's new and renewed bonding of all humanity through the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is seen as fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34. A long history in the church has declared that God has revoked the covenant with Judaism, and this has produced an exclusive view of salvation: 'I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'. (John 14:6) (NRSV) This text, Hebrews 8: 6-13 and others were written in the period when the followers of Jesus were breaking away from Judaism, and so these texts need to be understood in the context of that division.

3. "**Shoah**" in Hebrew means 'catastrophic destruction' and is often a preferred term to the more familiar 'Holocaust'. This is because the word 'Holocaust' comes from a Greek term which is used in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures) to signify the Hebrew term for 'burnt offering'. Many do not consider it helpful or appropriate to refer to the death of Jews during the Second World War as an 'offering'.

4. **Torah** is a complex term and cannot simply be equated with the Law of Moses. There developed within Judaism, under the leadership of the Pharisees, the concept of the Oral Torah by means of which the Written Torah of the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the Pentateuch, was interpreted in such a way as to meet the needs of changed times and changing circumstances. Just as Christianity moved beyond its Old Testament in its formulation of a New Testament, so too Judaism moved beyond its Hebrew Scriptures and produced the Mishnah and the Talmuds – Babylonian and Jerusalem. (**Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth**, page 7.)

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth: Guidelines for Christian Clergy and Teachers in their use of the New Testament with reference to the New Testament's presentation of Jews and Judaism.** The Council of Christians and Jews (Victoria) Inc. 1994 reprinted 2007. (This has an annotated bibliography of books related to the issues raised.)  
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For further information on Christian Jewish relations visit the website of the Working Group, <http://wgcsr.unitingchurch.org.au/>

Based substantively on "Bearing Faithful Witness" by The United Church of Canada (online). Published February 17, 2004. (Cited January 24, 2006.) <[www.united-church.ca/bfw/finalstatement.shtml](http://www.united-church.ca/bfw/finalstatement.shtml)>. Used with permission.

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*The proposals arising from this report are included in Section C of the Assembly papers.*