

## **Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations for Use in the Episcopal Church** General Convention of the Episcopal Church, July, 1988

### **Introduction**

“All real living is meeting.”

These words of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, point to the essence of Jewish-Christian dialogue. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church meeting in Detroit in July, 1988, adopted these Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations. Parishes and church leaders are encouraged to use the guidelines as a means of sharing in conversation with their Jewish neighbors.

As Christians, we should view our encounter with the Jewish people not as a threat but an opportunity. Sharing our faith freely with Jews enables us to view our own religious conviction more clearly, and to gain a new perspective on the faith and practice of those who remain in God's covenant with Israel.

Various means are available to us in our pursuit of Jewish-Christian understanding. The guidelines give suggestions for common work on social and community issues, study of our common scriptures, and common worship.

Help and direction for the practice of Christian-Jewish dialogue is available through the Presiding Bishop's Committee on Christian-Jewish Relations. Contact the Ecumenical Office of the Episcopal Church.

The first step in dialogue is the most vital. With the help of your rector or the diocesan Ecumenical Committee, reach out to your Jewish neighbors or to the synagogue down the street to share the joy of living and meeting in dialogue with the Jewish people.

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Presiding Bishop's Committee on Christian-Jewish Relations

### *The Episcopal Church and Christian-Jewish Dialogue*

Among Christian communities, the Episcopal Church has special gifts to bring to the Christian-Jewish dialogue (see General Convention Resolution on this, Convention Journal 1979, pp. C47-48). It has a tradition of respect for truth wherever found and a critical appreciation of Scripture and historical development. It is, therefore, in a position to make a significant contribution to Jewish-Christian relations.

### *Preface to the Guidelines*

One of the functions of the Christian-Jewish dialogue is to allow participants to describe and witness to their faith in their own terms. This is of primary importance since self-serving descriptions of other people's faiths are among the roots of prejudice, stereotyping and condescension. Careful listening to each other's expression of faith enables Christians to obey better the commandment not to bear false witness against their neighbors. Partners in dialogue must recognize that any religion or ideology which claims universality will have its own interpretations of other religions and ideologies as part of its own self-understanding. Dialogue gives the opportunity for mutual questioning of those understandings. A reciprocal willingness to listen, learn and understand enables significant dialogue to grow.

## *I. Principles of Dialogue*

The following principles are offered to aid and encourage the Episcopal Church to make an increasingly vital and substantive impact on the dialogue.

1. In all dialogue, recognition of marked cultural differences is important. The words employed in religious discussion are not innocent or neutral. Partners in dialogue may rightly question both the language and the definitions each uses in articulating religious matters.
2. In the case of Christian-Jewish dialogue, an historical and theological imbalance is obvious. While an understanding of Judaism in New Testament times is an indispensable part of any Christian theology, for Jews a “theological” understanding of Christianity is not of the same significance. Yet neither Judaism nor Christianity, at least in the Western world, has developed without interaction with the other.
3. The relations between Jews and Christians have unique characteristics, since Christianity historically emerged out of early Judaism. Christian understanding of that process constitutes a necessary part of the dialogue and gives urgency to the enterprise. As Christianity came to define its own identity in relation to Judaism, the Church developed interpretations, definitions and terms for those things it had inherited from Jewish traditions. It also developed its own understanding of the Scriptures common to Jews and Christians. In the process of defining itself, the Church produced its own definition of God’s acts of salvation. It should not be surprising that Jews resent those scriptural and theological interpretations in which they are assigned negative roles. Tragically, such patterns of thought have led Christians to overt acts of condescension, prejudice and even violent acts of persecution. In the face of those acts, a profound sense of penitence is the necessary response.
4. Many Christians are convinced that they understand Judaism since they have the Hebrew Scriptures as part of their Bible. This attitude is often reinforced by a lack of knowledge about the history of Jewish life and thought through the 1900 years since Christianity and Judaism parted ways.
5. There is, therefore, a special urgency for Christians to listen, through study and dialogue, to ways in which Jews understand their own history, their Scriptures, their traditions, their faith and their practice. Furthermore, a mutual listening to the way each is perceived by the other can be a step toward understanding the hurts, overcoming the fears, and correcting the misunderstandings that have separated us throughout the centuries.
6. Both Judaism and Christianity contain a wide spectrum of opinions, theologies, and styles of life and service. Since generalizations often produce stereotyping, Jewish-Christian dialogue must try to be as inclusive of the variety of views within the two communities as possible.

## *II. The Necessity for Christians to Understand Jews and Judaism*

1. Through dialogue with Jews, many, though yet too few, Christians have come to appreciate the richness and vitality of Jewish faith and life in the Covenant and have been enriched in their own understandings of Jesus and the divine will for all creatures.
2. In dialogue with Jews, Christians have learned that the actual history of Jewish faith and experience does not match the images of Judaism that have dominated a long history of Christian teaching and writing, images that have been spread by Western culture and literature into other parts of the world.

3. Jesus was a Jew, born into the Jewish tradition. He was nurtured by the Hebrew Scriptures of his day, which he accepted as authoritative and interpreted both in terms of the Judaism of his time and in fresh and powerful ways in his life and teaching, announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand. In their experience of his resurrection, his followers confessed him as both Lord and Messiah.
4. Christians should remember that some of the controversies reported in the New Testament between Jesus and the “scribes and Pharisees” found parallels within Pharisaism itself and its heir, Rabbinic Judaism. The controversies generally arose in a Jewish context, but when the words of Jesus came to be used by Christians who did not identify with the Jewish people as Jesus did, such sayings often became weapons in anti-Jewish polemics and thereby their original intention was tragically distorted. An internal Christian debate has been taking place for some years now about how to understand and explain passages in the New Testament that contain anti-Jewish references.
5. From the early days of the Church, many Christian interpreters saw the Church replacing Israel as God’s people. The destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem was understood as a warrant for this claim. The Covenant of God with the people of Israel was seen only as a preparation for the coming of Jesus. As a consequence, the Covenant with Israel was considered to be abrogated.
6. This theological perspective has had fateful consequences. As Christians understood themselves to replace the Jews as God’s people, they often denigrated the Judaism that survived as a fossilized religion of legalism. The Pharisees were thought to represent the height of that legalism; Jews and Jewish groups were portrayed as negative models; and the truth and beauty of Christianity were thought to be enhanced by setting up Judaism as false and ugly. Unfortunately, many of the early Church fathers defamed the Jewish people.
7. Through a renewed study of Judaism and in dialogue with Jews, Christians have become aware that Judaism in the time of Jesus was in but an early stage of its long life. Under the leadership of the Pharisees, the Jewish people began a spiritual revival of remarkable power, which gave them the vitality capable of surviving the catastrophe of the loss of the Temple. It gave birth to Rabbinic Judaism, which produced the Talmud, and built the structures for a strong and creative life through the centuries.
8. Judaism is more than the religion of the Scriptures of Israel (called by Christians the Old Testament and by Jews the Hebrew Scriptures or the Hebrew Bible). The Talmud and other later writings provide interpretations that for much of Judaism are central and authoritative with the Torah.
9. For Christians, the Bible (that is, the two Testaments) is also followed by traditions for interpretation, from the Church Fathers to the present time. Thus, both Judaism and Christianity are nurtured by their Scriptures, scriptural commentaries and living and developing traditions.
10. Christians as well as Jews look to the Hebrew Bible as the record of God’s election of and covenant with God’s people. For Jews, it is their own story in historical continuity with the present. Christians, mostly of gentile background since early in the life of the Church, believe themselves to have entered this Covenant by grace through Jesus Christ. The relationship between the two communities, both worshipping the God of ancient Israel, is a given historical fact, but how it is to be understood and explained theologically is a matter of internal discussion among Christians and Jews in dialogue.
11. What Jews and Christians have in common needs to be examined as carefully as their differences. Finding in the Scriptures the faith sufficient for salvation, the Christian

Church shares Israel's trust in the One God, whom the Church knows in the Spirit as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Christians, Jesus Christ is acknowledged as the only begotten of the Father, through whom millions have come to share in the love of, and to adore, the God who first made covenant with the people of Israel. Knowing the One God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit, therefore, Christians worship One God with a trinitarian confession involving creation, incarnation, and pentecost. In so doing, the Church worships in a language that is strange to Jewish worship and sensitivities, yet full of meaning to Christians. Dialogue is a means to help clarify language and to lead to the grasp of what the participants are really saying.

12. Christians and Jews both believe that God has created men and women and has called them to be holy and to exercise stewardship over the creation in accountability to God. Jews and Christians are taught by their Scriptures and traditions to recognize their responsibility to their neighbors, especially the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. In various and distinct ways they look for the coming of the Kingdom of God. In dialogue with Jews, many Christians have come to a more profound appreciation of the Exodus hope of liberation, praying and working for the coming of justice and peace on earth.
13. Jews found ways of living in obedience to Torah both before and after the emergence of Christianity. They maintained and deepened their call to be a distinctive people in the midst of the nations. Jews historically were allowed to live with respect and acceptance in some of the cultures in which they resided. Here their life and values thrived and made a distinct contribution to their Christian and Muslim neighbors. It is a sad fact, however, that Jews living in Christian countries have not fared better than those in non-Christian countries.
14. The land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem have always been central to the Jewish people. "Next year in Jerusalem" is a constant theme of Jewish worship in the diaspora. The continued presence of Jews in that land and in Jerusalem is a focal point for Judaism and must be taken into account in dialogue.
15. Many Jews differ in their interpretations of the religious and secular meaning of the State of Israel. For almost all Jewish people, however, Israel is an integral part of their identity.
16. Jews, Christians and Muslims have all maintained a presence in that land for centuries. The land is holy to all three, though each may understand holiness in different ways.
17. The existence of the State of Israel is a fact of history (see General Convention Resolution affirming "the right of Israel to exist as a free state within secure borders," Convention Journal 1979, p. C-104). However, the quest for homeland status by Palestinians—Christian and Muslim—is a part of their search for identity also, and must be addressed together with the need for a just and lasting solution to the conflict in the Middle East.

### *III. Hatred and Persecution of Jews—A Continuing Concern*

1. Christians need to be aware that hatred and persecution of Jews have a long, persistent history. This is particularly true in countries where Jews have been a minority presence among Christians. The tragic history of the persecution of Jews includes massacres by the Crusaders, the Inquisition, pogroms and the Holocaust. The World Council of Churches Assembly at its first meeting in Amsterdam in 1948 declared: "We call upon the churches we represent to denounce anti-semitism, no matter what its origin, as absolutely irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith. Antisemitism is sin against God and human life." This appeal has been reiterated many times. Those who live

where there is a history of prejudice and persecution of the Jews can serve the whole Church by revealing that danger whenever it is recognized.

2. Teachings of contempt for Jews and Judaism in certain traditions have proved a spawning ground for such evils as the Nazi Holocaust. It has, in this country, helped to spawn the extremist activities of the Ku Klux Klan and the defacement of synagogues, and stimulates the more socially acceptable but often more pernicious discriminatory practices seen in housing patterns and in private clubs. The Church must learn to proclaim the Gospel without generating contempt for Judaism or the Jewish people. A Christian response to the Holocaust is a resolve that it will never happen again.
3. Discrimination and persecution of the Jewish people have not only deep-rooted theological but also social, economic, and political aspects. Religious differences are magnified to justify ethnic hatred in support of vested interests. Similar manifestations are also evident in many interracial conflicts. Christians are called to oppose all religious prejudices through which Jews or any people are made scapegoats for the failures and problems of societies and political regimes.

#### *IV. Authentic Christian Witness*

1. Christians believe that God's self-revelation is given in history. In the Covenant with the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai, the sacred law became part of our religious heritage. Christians see that same God embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, to whom The Church must bear witness by word and deed among all peoples. It would be false to its deepest commitment if the Church were to deny this mission. The Christian witness toward Jews, however, has been distorted by coercive proselytism, conscious and unconscious, overt and subtle. The Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches has stated: "Proselytism embraces whatever violates the right of the human person, Christian or non-Christian, to be free from external coercion in religious matters" (*Ecumenical Review*, 1/1971, p. 11).
2. Dialogue can rightly be described as a mutual witness, for witness is a sharing of one's faith conviction without the intention of proselytizing. Participants are invited to hear each other in order to understand their faiths, hopes, insights and concerns. The goal of dialogue is to communicate truth as the participants perceive it within their own traditions. The spirit of dialogue is to be present to each other in full openness and human vulnerability.
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#### *V. Practical Recommendations*

1. It is recommended that the relationship between Christians and Jews be observed liturgically each year. A fitting occasion would be on or near the observance of Yom HaShoah, the Holocaust remembrance, since Jews and Christians would then have a common, or approximately common, day of observance. Another such occasion for an annual observance might be the Feast of St. James of Jerusalem on October 23, or a Sunday before or after that date.
2. It is recommended that in the services of the Church and in church school teaching, careful explanations be made of the New Testament texts which appear to place all Jews in an unfavorable light, particularly the expression "the Jews" in the English translations of the Gospel of John and in other references (see General Convention Resolution on "Deicide and the Jews," Journal 1964, pp. 279-80).

3. It is recommended that each diocese of the Church not already having a Committee on Christian-Jewish Relations establish one at the first opportunity in order to coordinate efforts and help to avoid haphazard and unrelated activities.
4. It is recommended that each parish situated in an area with a significant Jewish population organize with proper care and oversight an ongoing dialogue with Jews. If the dialogue is to be thorough and productive, it must include basic local exchanges between Episcopal and Jewish congregations.
5. It is recommended that seminaries of the Church undertake programs for their students which promote a greater understanding and appreciation for our common heritage with the Jews as well as for living Judaism today, addressing in particular those matters which eliminate prejudice and the presuppositions that feed it.
6. It is recommended that cooperation with Jewish and interreligious organizations concerned with service and the common good, interreligious programs, cultural enrichment and social responsibility be continued and intensified.

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