



Building New Bridges in Hope

14.12.1996 | General Conference of the United Methodist Church (U.S.A.)

1996. The document recognizes a special relationship between Christians and Jews because of shared roots in biblical revelation.

Building New Bridges in Hope

Adopted by the 1996 General Conference of the United Methodist Church (USA)

"God whom Christians have come to know in Jesus Christ, has created all human beings in the divine image and...God desires that all people live in love and righteousness...

"While we are committed to the promotion of mutual respect and understanding among people of all living faiths, we as Christians recognize a special relationship between Christians and Jews because of our shared roots in biblical revelation."¹

A QUEST FOR NEW UNDERSTANDING

What is the relationship that God intends between Christianity and Judaism, between Christians and Jews? In The United Methodist Church, a search for understanding and appropriate response to this important theological and relational question has been under way for some time. A significant step in the development of United Methodist understanding of and intention for Christian-Jewish relations was taken in 1972 when the General Conference adopted a position statement under the title Bridge in Hope. This denominational statement urged church members and congregations to undertake "serious new conversations" with Jews in order to promote "growth in mutual understanding."² As it has been studied and used, Bridge in Hope has served as a strong foundation for United Methodist-Jewish dialogue in many settings.

Since 1972 other Christian denominations, as well as ecumenical bodies in which The United Methodist Church participates, such as the World Council of Churches, have also made statements on Christian-Jewish relations. Those voices have contributed to our further knowledge, reflection, and understanding. At the same time, we have learned much from the many relationships and dialogues that have flourished between Jews and Christians locally, nationally and internationally.

Especially crucial for Christians in our quest for understanding has been the struggle to recognize the horror of the Holocaust as the catastrophic culmination of a long history of anti-Jewish attitudes and actions in which Christians, and sometimes the Church itself, have been deeply implicated. Dialogues with Jewish partners have been central for Christians in our process of learning of the scope of the Holocaust atrocities, acknowledgment of complicity and responsibility, repentance, and commitment to work against anti-Semitism in all its forms in the future.

We are aware, however, that the Christian-Jewish bridge of understanding has only begun to be constructed. The United Methodist Church is committed to continuing clarification and expansion of our knowledge of Judaism and to strengthening our relationships with Jewish people. We seek

mutual exploration of the common ground underlying Christianity and Judaism as well as that which makes each faith unique. This statement is an expression of the principles of that commitment.

FOUNDATION FOR UNITED METHODIST UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

As expressed in its Constitution, The United Methodist Church has long been strongly committed to the unity of the Church: "As part of the Church Universal, The United Methodist Church believes that the Lord of the Church is calling Christians everywhere to strive toward unity..."³ For many years The United Methodist Church has devoted itself at all levels of church life to building partnerships with other Christian denominations in striving to reveal the reality of the One Body, the whole Church of Jesus Christ. "We see the Holy Spirit at work in making the unity among us more visible."⁴

By its Book of Discipline The United Methodist Church is also dedicated to "serious interfaith encounters and explorations between Christians and adherents of other living faiths in the world." We believe that "scripture calls us to be both neighbors and witnesses to all peoples . . . In these encounters, our aim is not to reduce doctrinal differences to some lowest common denominator, but to raise all such relationships to the highest possible level of human fellowship and understanding."⁵ In an interdependent world of increasing awareness of the vitality and challenges of religious pluralism, we are called to "labor together with the help of God toward the salvation, health, and peace of all people."⁶

As with all theological questions, United Methodists approach the issues of interfaith relationships, including Christian-Jewish dialogue, by seeking understanding of God's will in scripture in the context of tradition, reason, and experience. In that spirit and with that intention, we affirm the following principles for continued study, discussion, and action within The United Methodist Church, with other Christians, and especially with Jews.

UNITED METHODIST GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

In order to increase our understanding of and with peoples of other living faith traditions, of ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ, and of God and God's truth, The United Methodist Church encourages dialogue and experiences with those of other faiths. For important and unique reasons, including a treasury of shared scripture and an ancient heritage that belong to us in common but which also contain our dividedness, we look particularly for such opportunities with Jews. United Methodist participation in Christian-Jewish dialogue and relationships is based on the following understandings:

1. There is one living God in whom both Jews and Christians believe.

While the Jewish and Christian traditions understand and express their faith in the same God in significantly different ways, we believe with Paul that God, who was in Christ reconciling the world to God's own self II Corinthians 5:18-19, is none other than the God of Israel, maker of heaven and earth. Above all else, Christians and Jews are bonded in our joyful and faithful response to the one God, living our faith as each understands God's call.

2. Jesus was a devout Jew, as were many of his first followers.

We know that understanding our Christian faith begins by recognizing and appreciating this seminal fact. Neither the ministry of Jesus and his apostles, nor the worship and thought of the early church, can be understood apart from the Jewish tradition, culture, and worship of the first century. Further, we believe that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is unintelligible a part from the story of what God did in the life of the people of Israel.

Because Christianity is firmly rooted in biblical Judaism, we understand that knowledge of these roots is essential to our faith. As expressed in a statement from the Consultation on the Church and Jewish People of the World Council of Churches: "We give thanks to God for the spiritual treasure we share with the Jewish people: faith in the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; knowledge of the name of God and of the commandments; the prophetic proclamation of judgment and grace; the Hebrew scriptures; and the hope of the coming kingdom. In all these we find common roots in biblical revelation and see spiritual ties that bind us to the Jewish people."⁷

3. Judaism and Christianity are living and dynamic religious movements that have continued to evolve since the time of Jesus, often in interaction with each other and with God's continual self-disclosure in the world.

Christians often have little understanding of the history of Judaism as it has developed since the lifetime of Jesus. As a World Council of Churches publication points out: "Bible-reading and worshipping Christians often believe that they 'know Judaism' since they have the Old Testament, the records of Jesus' debates with Jewish teachers and the early Christian reflections on the Judaism of their times...This attitude is often reinforced by lack of knowledge about the history of Jewish life and thought through the 1900 years since the parting of the ways of Judaism and Christianity."⁸

As Christians, it is important for us to recognize that Judaism went on to develop vital new traditions of its own after the time of Jesus, including the Rabbinic Judaism that is still vibrant today in shaping Jewish religious life. This evolving tradition has given the Jewish people profound spiritual resources for creative life through the centuries. We increase our understanding when we learn about the rich variety of contemporary Jewish faith practice, theological interpretation and worship, and discover directly through dialogue how Jews understand their own history, tradition, and faithful living.

4. Christians and Jews are bound to God through biblical covenants that are eternally valid.

As Christians, we stand firm in our belief that Jesus was sent by God as the Christ to redeem all people, and that in Christ the biblical covenant has been made radically new. While church tradition has taught that Judaism has been superseded by Christianity as the "new Israel," we do not believe that earlier covenantal relationships have been invalidated or that God has abandoned Jewish partners in covenant.

We believe that just as God is steadfastly faithful to the biblical covenant in Jesus Christ, likewise God is steadfastly faithful to the biblical covenant with the Jewish people. The covenant God established with the Jewish people through Abraham, Moses and others continues because it is an eternal covenant. Paul proclaims that the gift and call of God to the Jews is irrevocable (Romans 11:29). Thus we believe that the Jewish people continue in covenantal relationship with God.

Both Jews and Christians are bound to God in covenant, with no covenantal relationship invalidated by any other. Though Christians and Jews have different understandings of the covenant of faith, we are mysteriously bound to one another through our covenantal relationships

with the one God and creator of us all.

5. As Christians, we are clearly called to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in every age and place. At the same time, we believe that God has continued, and continues today, to work through Judaism and the Jewish people.

Essential to the Christian faith is the call to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to all people. Through the announcement of the gospel in word and work comes the opportunity for others to glimpse the glory of God which we have found through Jesus Christ. Yet we also understand that the issues of the evangelization of persons of other faiths, and of Jews in particular, are often sensitive and difficult. These issues call for continuing serious and respectful reflection and dialogue among Christians and with Jews.

While we as Christians respond faithfully to the call to proclaim the gospel in all places, we can never presume to know the full extent of God's work in the world, and we recognize the reality of God's activity outside the Christian Church. It is central to our faith that salvation is not accomplished by human beings but by God. We know that judgment as to the ultimate salvation of persons from any faith community, including Christianity and Judaism, belongs to God alone.

It is our belief that Jews and Christians are co-workers and companion pilgrims who have made the God of Israel known throughout the world. Through common service and action, we jointly proclaim the God we know. Together through study and prayer, we can learn how the God we believe to be the same God, speaks and calls us continually into closer relationship with each other as well as with God.

6. As Christians, we are called into dialogue with our Jewish neighbors.

Christians and Jews hold a great deal of scripture, history and culture in common. And yet, we also share two thousand painful years of anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews by Christians. These two apparently discordant facts move Christians to seek common experiences with Jews, and especially to invite them into dialogue to explore the meaning of our kinship and our differences. Our intention is to learn about the faith of one another and to build bridges of understanding.

While for Christians, dialogue will always include testimony to God's saving acts in Jesus Christ, it will include in equal measure listening to and respecting the understanding of Jews as they strive to live in obedience and faithfulness to God as they understand the conditions of their faith.

Productive interfaith dialogue requires focused, sustained conversation based on willingness to recognize and probe genuine differences while also seeking that which is held in common. We are called to openness so that we may learn how God is speaking through our dialogue partners. As stated in the World Council of Churches Guidelines on Dialogue, "One of the functions of dialogue is to allow participants to describe and witness to their faith on their own terms...Participants seek to hear each other in order to better understand each other's faith, hopes, insights, and concerns."⁹ Fruitful and respectful dialogue is centered in a mutual spirit of humility, trust, openness to new understanding, and commitment to reconciliation and the healing of the painful wounds of our history.

7. As followers of Jesus Christ we deeply repent of the complicity of the Church and the participation of many Christians in the long history of persecution of the Jewish people. The Christian Church has a profound obligation to correct historical and theological teachings that have led to false and pejorative perceptions of Judaism and contributed to persecution and hatred of Jews. It is our responsibility as Christians to oppose anti-Semitism whenever and wherever it

occurs.

We recognize with profound sorrow that repeatedly and often in the last two thousand years, the worship, preaching and teaching of the Christian Church has allowed and sometimes even incited and directed persecution against Jews.

The Church today carries grave responsibility to counter the evil done by Christians to Jews in the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms of Eastern Europe and elsewhere, carried out in the name of Jesus Christ. In the twentieth century there is the particular shame in the failure of most of the Church to challenge the policies of governments that were responsible for the unspeakable atrocities of the Holocaust.

Historically and today, both the selective use and the misuse of scripture have fostered negative attitudes toward and actions against Jews. Use of New Testament passages that blame "the Jews" for the crucifixion of Jesus have throughout history been the basis of many acts of discrimination against Jews, frequently involving physical violence. There is no doubt that traditional and often officially sanctioned and promulgated Christian teachings, including the uncritical use of anti-Jewish New Testament writings, have caused untold misery and form the basis of modern anti-Semitism.

Misinterpretations and misunderstanding of historical and contemporary Judaism continue, including the mistaken belief that Judaism is a religion solely of law and judgment while Christianity is a religion of love and grace. The characterizations of God in the Hebrew Bible (called the Old Testament by Christians) are rich and diverse; strong images of a caring, compassionate, and loving deity are dominant for Jews as well as for Christians. Further, there are parallels between New Testament Christian understandings of the "spirit of the law" and contemporaneous theological developments in first century Jewish theology.

The Church has an obligation to correct erroneous and harmful past teachings and to ensure that the use of scripture, as well as the preparation, selection, and use of liturgical and educational resources, does not perpetuate misleading interpretations and misunderstanding of Judaism.

It is also essential for Christians to oppose forcefully anti-Jewish acts and rhetoric that persist in the present time in many places. We must be zealous in challenging overt and subtle anti-Semitic stereotypes and bigoted attitudes that ultimately made the Holocaust possible, and that stubbornly and insidiously continue today. These lingering patterns are a call to Christians for ever-new educational efforts and continued vigilance, so that we, remembering and honoring the cries of the tortured and dead, can claim with Jews around the world to be faithful to the post-Holocaust cry of "Never Again."

8. As Christians, we share a call with Jews to work for justice, compassion and peace in the world in anticipation of the fulfillment of God's reign.

Together Jews and Christians honor the commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, and might. It is our task to join in common opposition to those forces--nation, race, power, money--that clamor for ultimate allegiance. Together we honor the commandment to love neighbor as self. It is our task to work in common for those things that are part of God's work of reconciliation. Together we affirm the sacredness of all persons and the obligation of stewardship for all God has created.

Jews still await the messianic reign of God foretold by the prophets. Christians proclaim the good news that in Jesus Christ "the kingdom of God is at hand;" yet we, as Christians, also wait in hope for the consummation of God's redemptive work. Together, Jews and Christians long for and anticipate the fulfillment of God's reign. Together, we are "partners in waiting." In our waiting, we are called to witness and to work for God's reign together.

9. As United Methodist Christians, we are deeply affected by the anguish and suffering that continue for many people who live in the Middle East region which includes modern Israel. We commit ourselves through prayer and advocacy to bring about justice and peace for those of every faith.

Within The United Methodist Church, we struggle with our understanding of the complexity and the painfulness of the controversies in which Christians, Jews and Muslims are involved in the Middle East. The issues include disputed political questions of sovereignty and control, and concerns over human rights and justice. We recognize the theological significance of the holy land as central to the worship, historical traditions, hope, and identity of the Jewish people. We are mindful of this land's historic and contemporary importance for Christians and Muslims. We are committed to the security, safety, and well-being of Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East, to respect for the legitimacy of the State of Israel, to justice and sovereignty for the Palestinian people and for peace for all who live in the region.

As we join with others of many religious communities in wrestling with these issues and searching for solutions, we seek to work together with other Christians, Jews, and Muslims to honor the religious significance of this land and to bring about healthy sustainable life, justice and peace for all.

NEW BRIDGES TO CHRISTIAN-JEWISH UNDERSTANDING

The above statements of principle and affirmation offer a foundation for theological reflection within The United Methodist Church and with other Christians on our understanding of our relationships with the Jewish people. They are meant to be the basis of study, discussion, and action as we strive for greater discernment within the church.

Further, we hope that the statements of guiding principle will be important as bases of cooperative efforts, and especially for dialogue between United Methodists (sometimes in the company of other Christians) and Jewish communities, as we mutually explore the meaning of our kinship and our differences.

Using the foregoing foundation and principles, The United Methodist Church encourages dialogue with Jews at all levels of the church, including and especially, local congregations. It is also hoped that there will be many other concrete expressions of Jewish-Christian relationships, such as participating in special occasions of interfaith observance, and joint acts of common service and programs of social transformation. These offer great opportunity to Christians and Jews to build relationships and together work for justice and peace (shalom) in their communities and in the world, serving humanity as God intends.

We dare to believe that such conversations and acts will build new bridges in hope between Christians and Jews, and that they will be among the signs and first fruits of our sibling relationship under our parent God. Together, we await and strive for the fulfillment of God's reign.

Notes

1. ["The Churches and the Jewish People](#), Towards a New Understanding," adopted at Sigtuna, Sweden by the Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People, sponsored by the World Council of Churches, 1988.
2. Bridges in Hope, Jewish-Christian Dialogue, adopted by the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1972.
3. The book of discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1992, The Constitution, Division One, Article 5, p.22.

4. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1992, Doctrinal Standards, Our Theological Task, p. 84.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. "[The Churches and the Jewish People...](#)"
8. [Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue](#), 1992, World Council of Churches, Par. 1.6.
9. Guidelines on Dialogue, Par.3.4, World Council of Churches, 1981.

The United Methodist Church in the USA – www.umc.org/

General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of the United Methodist Church