



Inviting the members of the Uniting Church in Australia to ongoing dialogue

30.07.1997 | Uniting Church in Australia

Report of a Task Group received by the Eighth Assembly of the UCA July 1997

Statement of the Uniting Church in Australia

July 1997

History

When the UCA was formed (1977), the Rev John Jamieson was "Executive Secretary of the Division of Ecumenical Mission in the Synod of Victoria". Translated, this meant nurturing and guiding the UCA's in "neighbourly" activities, mostly with other Christians.

John Jamieson's theological education in the 1940s had been under Professor Hector Maclean, a close friend of Rabbi Herman Sanger. Maclean and Sanger were then trying to generate interest in a council of Christians and Jews.

John Jamieson approached the Ecumenical Affairs Committee of the UCA Assembly (the national body) and proposed to include in its agenda Jewish-Christian relations. This was a new idea, and took some by surprise.

Jamieson wrote the first "statement" and submitted it to a group of UCA ministers and lay people in Melbourne. The Revs Robert Anderson and George Grant were among those involved from the start.

By the early 90s the group had a statement they believed worthy of bringing to the Church. It was sent to the Assembly working group on relations with other faiths, and several of the group members went to Sydney to defend it – against solid criticism. However, the issue could not be ignored, and the 1994 Assembly agreed to set up a Task Group charged with preparing a statement for adoption by the 1997 Assembly and initiating a process of education within the UCA.

The first draft of a new statement was sent to consultants around the country. There were six versions before a final draft was submitted to the Assembly Standing Committee in August 1996. Further suggestions were taken into consideration before the final text came before the Assembly in July 1997. The Assembly embraced it with minor modifications, and made several resolutions pertaining to its dissemination and consideration of its theological implications. It must be remembered that the statement is addressed to the membership of the UCA. It is an internal statement; the church talking to itself!

I was proud to be associated with the Task Group, and am pleased with what we were able to

accomplish, but must acknowledge that much of the initial stimulus came from John Jamieson, Robert Anderson and George Grant. With such worthies as a cheer squad, one is fortunate indeed to be trusted with carrying the job through to its present stage.

The Rev. Dr. J. Bodycomb

Task Group on Jewish-Christian Relations

Inviting the Uniting Church in Australia

to Ongoing Dialogue with the Jewish Community

PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

In presenting this Statement to the Assembly, the Task Group offers the church *an invitation to ongoing dialogue*. The Statement is not a pronouncement of the nature, "we believe these things". It is, rather, an indication that "we want to talk with one another, and with Jewish people, about these things". The Uniting Church has adopted a consensus model in place of the process of debate and majority decision. In keeping with this approach, this Statement invites the members of the Uniting Church to engage in discussion, to participate in exploring the issues. The Statement is not intended to be a declaration of belief; it is an attempt to be open to new insights, and to act accordingly. It is offered in the spirit of *initiating a process* for the Uniting Church.

1.

Preamble

1.1

The Fifth Assembly of the Uniting Church (1988) resolved to initiate a process leading to dialogue with people of other faiths.

1.2

Since 1992, regular dialogue has continued with representatives of the Jewish community of Australia.

1.3

This has helped both communities to move towards a context of mutual trust, in which to pursue frank and fruitful exploration of one another's faiths, and of common concerns.

1.4

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

1.5

This statement is presented to the Eighth Assembly (1997) as one means of encouraging Uniting Church members throughout Australia to engage more fully in such a process.

2. The context

- 2.1 It is widely recognised that theology is formed as people of faith reflect on their experience. At the same time, it is recognised that a people's theological perspective shapes their interpretation of experience. These two movements belong together
- 2.2 Two 20th century events have been central to the contemporary Jewish experience. Many Jews suffered the horror of the Holocaust (the *Shoah*), either directly or through family and friends. Many Jews also remember the experience of having no homeland and then the establishment of the State of Israel.
- 2.3 On the other hand, most Australian Christians have no direct relationship with Jewish people. They have no direct memory of the Holocaust or of the time before the State of Israel was established.
- 2.4 For a time now, some members of the Uniting Church have been engaging in dialogue with Jewish people on a variety of matters, through membership of the various state Councils of Christians and Jews, through direct bilateral discussions, and as concerned individuals.
- 2.5 Alongside this, the Uniting Church has been developing relationships with Palestinian Christians in the land of Israel.
- 2.6 In spite of this informal dialogue with Jewish people and the remarkable rediscovery and reevaluation of scripture by biblical scholars, theologians and ministers, many Christians are regularly exposed to interpretations of scripture which denigrate the Jewish people and Judaism.
- 2.7 These experiences have an important bearing on the way Jews and Christians regard each other and relate to each other.

3. Our history

- 3.1 For our part, as Australian Christians, our experiences and the teaching of the churches have influenced our perceptions of Jewish people and our attitudes towards them.
- 3.2 When we look honestly at the history of relations between Christians and Jews, we find that churches have consistently shaped a negative perception of Jewish people and Judaism.
- 3.3 For much of our common history, many churches have ignored the Jewishness of Jesus and downplayed the common heritage of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures).
- 3.4 Jews have been persecuted by Christian authorities in many countries, and often depicted negatively (indeed, sometimes vilified) in sermons from Christian pulpits.
- 3.5 The relationship between Christians and Jews has had a sad and tragic history.
- 3.6 Nevertheless, in the midst of this long history, there have been shining examples of deep friendship and warm acceptance.
- 3.7 The step we, as Christians, now need to take, is to recognise the regrettable aspects of our history, and to seek to move beyond these in

4. The relationship we seek

- 4.1 It is therefore necessary for Christians, committed to seeking a new relationship with Jewish people, to face the question: "What is the relationship we seek?"
- 4.2 In doing this, we risk an openness to the questions that will arise, and a willingness to explore and embrace new understandings that may emerge from this process.
- 4.3 This will also mean that we are to be honest with ourselves and with Jewish people, so that we might challenge clichés and stereotypes, and move beyond these to a genuine, open relationship.
- 4.4 In so doing, we will become aware that the relationship we seek will be accomplished through sustained dialogue with Jewish people.

4.5 In engaging in this dialogue, we bring the conviction that there are particular doctrines which are central to Christian faith (namely, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the belief that Jesus is the Christ).

4.6 We are aware that honest dialogue is possible only between people who, whilst holding their own convictions, are nevertheless open to the risk of deep engagement with other viewpoints, and new understanding of their central convictions.

5. The challenges before us

5.1 In this process, there are major questions which have to be addressed.

5.2 "How do you see yourselves as a people?" is a fundamental question for us to put to Jewish people; we need to give careful attention to the answers.

5.3 "How do we see ourselves as a people?" is similarly important for us; we need to share our answers with Jewish people.

5.4 "How do we understand our own history?" is crucial to knowing who we are; this must include the darker side of Christian history, especially in relation to Jews.

5.5 "What have we done by intent or by ignorance?" arises out of the foregoing, is essential to the discussion of our relationship with the Jewish people.

5.6 "What might we learn from the Jewish people and Judaism?" will give us a fuller understanding of Christian history and identity.

5.7 "What might we be able to offer you?" needs to be asked with great sensitivity as to timing and intent.

5.8 "What can we do together now?" is a question which needs to be constantly before us in this dialogue.

5.9 "How do we see ourselves together?" is the question we would expect to develop out of the foregoing engagement.

5.10 The goal of this process is that a deep and

genuine relationship will develop as Jews and Christians together seek reconciliation and justice for all peoples, in the hope generated by the coming kingdom.

6.

A new relationship

6.1

The Assembly does not seek to prescribe specific answers to the above questions.

6.2

Answers will emerge through the process of listening and talking, reshaping understandings and acting together in unity.

6.3

The Assembly does seek, at this point, to signal that involvement in the process outlined above will pose an important question: "What are the implications for us, as a church, when we enter into a new relationship with Jewish people?"

6.4

While we do not know the shape of the future, we believe we are required to enter this new relationship as a faithful response to God who has called both Jews and Christians to be People of God.

7.

Key elements in the process

The Assembly invites members, congregations and councils of the Uniting Church to give consideration to the points listed below and, wherever possible, to explore them in patient and sensitive conversation with Jewish people:

7.1

that Judaism is a living faith possessed of its own integrity and vitality in its own developing traditions;

7.2

that Christians and Jews share a common heritage in the unique testimony of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures) to the one God, Creator and Redeemer;

7.3

that Christians and Jews have kindred ethical frameworks, grounded in the Old Testament (the

- Hebrew Scriptures), which allow them to work jointly for the achievement of a just and responsible society;
- 7.4 that Jesus of Nazareth was born, lived, and died a faithful Jew, looking to the establishment of God's kingdom as the fulfilment of God's promises;
- 7.5 that many of the early Christian writings collected in the New Testament were written in a context of controversy and polemic between Church and Synagogue;
- 7.6 that Christian theology, preaching, and practice have been influenced by the erroneous idea that the Jewish people and Judaism were rejected by God and superseded by Christians and the Church; and accordingly, that it is necessary to propose a new way for Christians and the Church to relate to the Jewish people and to Judaism;
- 7.7 that an anti-Judaism which developed in Christianity created fertile ground for the spread of antisemitism, culminating in the Holocaust (the *Shoah*);
- 7.8 that, just as Jewish faith has been challenged by the Holocaust (the *Shoah*), so Christian theology is challenged when it takes account of the theological issues raised by this event, by questions such as: the nature of God, the presence of evil, the means of salvation, and Christian triumphalism and culpability;
- 7.9 that the Jewish people have a particular historical, cultural, emotional and spiritual bond with the land of Israel, which is a central element of the Jewish faith, and which is inextricably bound to the history of the Jewish People;
- 7.10 that the historic roots, rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people must be properly acknowledged;
- 7.11 that from a properly informed position, and in the light of the moral tradition of Christianity, it can be appropriate for the Uniting Church to have and express a view about both Israeli and Palestinian policies and actions;
- 7.12 that the search for a just and lasting peace for all states and peoples in the Middle East merits prayerful engagement on the part of all Christians.
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RESOLUTIONS OF THE EIGHTH ASSEMBLY, JULY 1997

The Assembly resolved to:

1. receive the report;
2. accept the "Statement Inviting the Uniting Church to Dialogue with the Jewish Community";
3. commend this Statement to the members, congregations and councils of the Uniting Church in Australia and distribute it in the following way:
 - to synod journals, with a request that they publish the Statement;
 - to presbyteries, with a request that they give it consideration and discuss ways in which they might facilitate conversations with Jewish people;
 - to theological schools within the Uniting Church in Australia, with a request that they include it in discussions within their ordinand courses;
4. distribute the Statement to:
 - heads of other Christian denominations in Australia;
 - national and state Council of Churches;
 - appropriate Jewish bodies in Australia;
 - the Council of Christians and Jews in each state where it exists;
5. encourage the following specific action in all sectors of the Uniting Church in Australia:
 - lay preachers, theological students, youth workers and ordained ministers be encouraged to take into account the theological implications of all expressions of anti-Semitism throughout the history of western culture, culminating in the Holocaust (the Shoah) in their reading and interpretation of Scripture;
 - preachers, liturgists, teachers and study leaders be encouraged to be sensitive to the ways they portray Jewish people and Judaism, taking care especially to avoid inaccuracies and distortions, noting particularly the assistance which is given in this task by the Council of Christians and Jews (Victoria) publication "Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth";
6. encourage members of the church to join their state Council of Christians and Jews and participate in its activities;
7. encourage congregations and parishes to arrange visits to a local synagogue and joint meetings to discuss issues of common concern;
8. encourage congregations and parishes to study the commentary material on Section 7 of the Statement, and to use the kit "Understanding Anti-Semitism" and the accompanying video "From the Cross to the Swastika";
9. encourage presbyteries to support and develop programs which bring together members or their churches with members of local synagogues for mutual study and dialogue.