



# Jewish Community Welcomes United Church Report

17.09.1997

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**By Melanie  
Collison**

The Jewish community is welcoming a ground-breaking report by the United Church of Canada on improving its relationship with Judaism.

Entitled "Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church-Jewish Relations Today," the report seeks to recast interpretations of passages in the New Testament that have been used to support anti-Semitism.

The report states clearly that Judaism is an equal sibling of Christianity, and that evangelism and conversion are to be abandoned.

The New Testament  
was written by  
frustrated Jews  
criticizing their own

but  
passages have  
been taken out of  
context since  
Christianity split off  
as a separate  
religion, says Rev.  
Clint Mooney,  
Minister of St.  
Matthews United  
Church, who pulled  
together the writing  
of the report.  
"There was a lot of  
hurt and struggle  
recorded in the  
Christian text in the  
context of the times.  
The language  
should be  
understood in that  
context," Rev.  
Mooney said.

The report has been  
favourably received  
by the Jewish  
community. We  
welcome the paper  
and look favourably  
at the fact that it  
was initiated, and  
that people have put  
a lot of research,  
understanding and  
goodwill into this  
project," said Riki  
Heilik, community  
relations director for  
Calgary Jewish

Community Council,  
in a recent  
interview.

"It's an intelligent  
and sensitive  
document, a well-  
meaning document.  
There is a very  
explicit rejection of  
any kind of  
missionizing among  
the Jews," said Dr.  
Eliezer Segal, a  
University of  
Calgary Religious  
Studies professor.

"The United Church  
is very open to  
learning from other  
cultures and  
respecting them,  
and that comes  
across."

The United Church  
does not have a  
history of anti-  
Semitism, and  
Segal sees its  
speaking up now as  
particularly timely, in  
view of the growing  
number of  
conspiracy theorists  
in the right-wing  
Christian movement  
in the United States.

The United Church  
may have some  
influence outside  
Canada, in part  
through a Calgary-  
based Web site at  
[www.jcrelations.net](http://www.jcrelations.net).  
The site, which is  
run by Calgaryian  
Fritz Voll, is an  
excellent resource  
on all aspects of  
Jewish-Christian  
relations, Segal  
said. Among several  
relevant church

documents that are included or linked there is the United Church paper.

The paper was written in response to a request at the 1988 General Council -- the policy-making level of the United Church -- for a study on the origins of anti-Semitism, on the heels of the Keegstra affair.

Jim Keegstra is a former high school teacher in Eckville, Alberta, who was eventually convicted of promoting hatred of Jews, 12 years after his students told their parents what he was teaching them.

"A lot of American evangelical movements that are looking at the Cold War in the '70s and '80s need a new enemy. A lot of the stuff Jim Keegstra was saying is becoming more mainstream. The only element that's missing is naming the Jews as being behind the conspiracy," Segal said.

"Keegstra was a conspiracy theorist more than a Holocaust denier. He's a representative of the ideology that is very powerful in the

States, that there is this shadowy force that controls history. "I think Keegstra's teachings are going to become much more current than they have been."

Rev. Mooney, and the other contributors to the report, Rev. Don Koots, Linda Payne, Rev. Bill Phipps, Carolyn Pogue Phipps and Fritz Voll, "were looking for disrespectful parts of the New Testament, to improve relations," Mooney said, "and we wanted to acknowledge our silence during the Holocaust."

The report proposes that the Church accept its contents as a resolution at its next General Council in the year 2000. At the moment, a study paper is being produced to make the report more accessible to lay people. "United Church people were very pleased on the whole," Rev. Mooney said. "One praised it as "a gift" to the Church, but some thought we were so considerate of Jewish points of view that we might be undermining Christian claims."

As a Christian who believes he can learn a great deal by talking with Jews, Rev. Mooney is excited at the growing dialogue between the communities.

"For the first time ever, a significant body of the Christian church is interested in hearing what Jews have to say on the older testament, God, and the Second Temple period, and there is a significant segment of the Jewish community that's willing to speak with us.

"There's also been the discovery of many texts that were written in those times and awareness of the proliferation of groups at the time of Jesus. Judaism was very diverse in those days.

"If an ethos can be created where more people know that there really is no basis within Christianity, and there is no need, for Jews to be converted, then maybe it would have an influence on everybody. Prejudice is contrary to the spirit of the teachings of Jesus."

Riki Heilik is

pleased with the way the report deals with evangelical Christianity and groups such as Jews for Jesus.

"I really like what they have to say. They acknowledge the fact that only the Jewish community can say who we believe we are, and they're saying evangelism and conversion should be abandoned in favour of dialogue and mutual witness," she said.

"I think it is important to acknowledge the fact that, overall, the history of anti-Semitism is one that few would defend today. Through the Crusades, the Inquisition, vicious pogroms, and the Holocaust, millions of Jews were killed by Christians. We have a long history of animosity, so it is very fitting that the church is initiating a change in those attitudes.

"We welcome the report, we hope it passes through the resolution, and we hope we can learn from each other and live together in peace, harmony and mutual respect."

Rev. Mooney puts the paper in the

broader context of community relations. "We are starting with Judaism, before moving to heal our relations with other faiths," he said.

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Source: *Jewish Free Press*, September 18, 1997. With kind permission. Melanie Collison (melaniec@cadvision.com) is a freelance writer and editor, and principal of Write Right Communications.