



Jewish Community Welcomes United Church Report

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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.
The site, which is
run by Calgarian
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.

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.