



# Jewish Community Welcomes United Church Report

17.09.1997

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

## **Jewish Community Welcomes United Church Report**

**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 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.