



ICCJ 2014 Conference: Jewish-Christian Dialogue is Thriving in Latin America, and Worldwide

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This week's annual conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) has highlighted in a very vivid way a rich network of interfaith friendship that is thriving in many Latin American countries--and around the world.

Meeting in Buenos Aires between 19th and 21st August, more than 150 members of the ICCJ's international member organizations were welcomed by their Argentine hosts for three days of in-depth conversation, exploration and learning, focussing on the themes of history, theology and identity.

Keynote speakers offered insightful and creative presentations on the history of the Jewish-Christian relationship in South America; innovative methods of interpreting Biblical texts; a recent Jewish-Christian-Muslim pilgrimage to the Middle East, and ways of understanding Jewish and Christian covenantal identity that do not presume a "win-lose" paradigm, but can find place for both faiths in God's plan for humanity.

Conference participants (including Jewish and Christian clergy, scholars and researchers, as well as grassroots local leaders and interested members of the public) shared in a wide range of workshops, including discussions of:

- liberation theology and its implications for Jewish-Christian relations;
- "anti-Jewish" passages in the New Testament;
- the rising tide of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia;
- the value of the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas for interfaith dialogue;
- triumphs and challenges in interreligious dialogue;
- learning to celebrating differences while affirming one's own religious identity;
- perspectives of young religious leaders on the development of religious identity;
- sources for religious humanism found in the Talmud

Late on Wednesday afternoon, the conference attendees were guests of the AMIA Centre, where we learned about AMIA's role as the "heart" of Argentina's Jewish community, providing a broad range of important educational, social and spiritual support services for individuals and groups of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. Twenty years ago this summer, on 18th July 1994, a still-unsolved bomb attack on AMIA's headquarters killed 85 Argentines and wounded hundreds. Together with AMIA staff, ICCJ members marked that sombre anniversary with Jewish and Christian prayers at the monument to the victims, remembering the lives tragically lost, and re-committing ourselves to fighting hatred and violence, and building relationships of mutual respect, understanding and cooperation. Gathered around the richly-coloured and very inspiring monument to the victims, we listened to John Lennon's classic plea for peace, "Imagine," sung for us in Hebrew.

At the conference's closing banquet on Thursday evening, outgoing members of the ICCJ Board were thanked for their generous service, and the ICCJ's Gold Medal was conferred on Dr. Deborah Weissman, who was stepping down as ICCJ President after six years at its helm. Dr. Weissman

was thanked for her passionate commitment to developing the Jewish-Christian relationship, and to serving as a travelling international ambassador for the ICCJ's mission.

On Friday morning, the Council's business was conducted during its annual general meeting. During that meeting, Dr. Philip A. Cunningham (of Saint Joseph's University, in Philadelphia) was elected as the ICCJ's new President. Dr. Cunningham, a highly-respected scholar and leader in Jewish-Christian dialogue, emphasized the ongoing importance of Jewish-Christian relations, especially as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark Vatican Council document *Nostra Aetate* (On the Catholic Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions) in 2015. In addition to Dr. Cunningham, the incoming ICCJ Executive Board includes Liliane Apotheker (France), Prof. Michael Trainor (Australia), Rabbi Ehud Bandel (Israel), Rabbi Samuel Szeinhendler (Chile), and Pavol Bargar (Czech Republic).

As part of the transition to a new Board, Rev Dr John Pawlikowski OSM (of Catholic Theological Union, Chicago) stepped down as Immediate Past President of the ICCJ, after many years of long and devoted service to the organization. The Council's membership voted to recognize Father Pawlikowski's significant contributions to this field by naming him as one of the ICCJ's Honorary Presidents (joining former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr George Carey, Dr. Victor Goldbloom, Rabbi Professor Dr. Peter Levinson, Rabbi Prof. David Rosen, Prof. Dr. Martin Stöhr and Dr. Richard von Weizsäcker).

The broad international representation at this year's ICCJ conference, together with the many constructive conversations it fostered, underscores the continued necessity of interreligious dialogue in general, and of the unique Jewish-Christian dialogue in particular. Founded in 1947, the ICCJ is proud of its many decades of leadership in interreligious dialogue, in fighting intolerance, anti-Semitism and religious discrimination, and in promoting bonds of friendship, respect and cooperation between Jews, Christians and others.

As the 2014 ICCJ conference concludes in Buenos Aires, the ICCJ is already looking ahead with excitement to its next conference, which will be held next summer in Rome, and will celebrate fifty years since the publication of *Nostra Aetate*. As we prepare to mark that milestone, the ICCJ remains a vigorous and creative force in interreligious conversation, and invites Jews, Christians, people of all faiths and none, to stand up against extremism, intolerance and violence, and to contribute to building up a world of greater inclusion, understanding and mutual enrichment.

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