Jews and Judaism

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A Statement by the Uniting Church in Australia adopted in July 2009

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The Uniting Church acknowledges:

1. that Jesus of Nazareth cannot be understood apart from the Judaism of his time as he was born, lived and died a faithful Jew, looking to the establishment of God's kingdom as the fulfilment of God's promises;

2. that Judaism is a living faith today, and was at the time of Jesus, possessed of its own integrity and vitality within its own developing traditions,

3. that historically, understandings of Judaism have been imposed from without, and that Judaism should be understood on its own terms,

4. that both Torah and Gospel are expressions of God's grace, calling forth a response of thankful obedience;

5. that Christianity stands in a unique relationship with Judaism because:

a. Christianity emerged from Judaism of the first century and cannot be understood apart from it;

b. Judaism and Christianity, as living faiths today, have developed significantly from this common root;

c. Christians and Jews share a common heritage in the unique testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) to the One God;

6. that Judaism, both historically and currently, cannot be understood from knowledge of the

Hebrew Scriptures alone, or from references to Judaism in the New Testament alone;

7. that many of the early Christian writings collected in the New Testament were written in a context of controversy and polemic between the Church and Synagogue;

8. that antisemitism in all its expressions is an affront to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Uniting Church acknowledges with repentance

9. a history of interpretation of New Testament texts which has often failed to appreciate the context from which these texts emerged, viz. the growing separation of Christianity and Judaism with attendant bitterness and antagonism, resulting in deeply rooted anti-Jewish misunderstandings;

10. an anti-Judaism which developed in Christianity creating fertile ground for the spread of antisemitism culminating in the Shoah (Holocaust), and a history of insensitivity with respect to the importance of he Shoah for Jews.

The Uniting Church affirms

11. that Christians in their lives and by their words bear witness to God as known to them through Jesus Christ whom they confess as Lord;

12. that the gifts and calling of God to the Jewish people are irrevocable;

13. that Christians and Jews have kindred ethical frameworks, grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), which impel them to work together for the achievement of a just and responsible society;

14. that Christian self-understanding is enhanced through closer dialogue with, and openness to, Judaism; such dialogue does not preclude opportunities for mutual faith sharing;

15. that the State of Israel and a Palestinian State each have the right to live side by side in peace and security;

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The Uniting Church does not accept

16. Christian teaching that is derogatory towards Jews and Judaism;

17. the belief that God has abolished the covenant with the Jewish people;

18. supersessionism, the belief that Christians have replaced Jews in the love and purpose of God;

19. forms of relationships with Jews that require them to become Christian, including coercion and manipulation, that violate their humanity, dignity and freedom;

The Uniting Church Encourages its Members and Councils

20. to seek opportunities to meet with Jews and to learn about modern Judaism: (this might include, wherever possible, receiving hospitality in Synagogue worship, inviting a Rabbi to speak during a worship service or other gatherings, joining a Council of Christians and Jews).

21. to continue to study the Council of Christians and Jews (Victorian) documents Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth and Re-reading Paul along with the study of other writings of significance to the Christian Jewish relationship. (See Bibliography).

22. to respect the integrity of Jewish festivals, e.g. refraining from use of a Passover Seder in Holy Week worship;

23. to be vigilant in resisting antisemitism and anti-Judaism in church and society;

24. to pray and work for a just and lasting peace for both Israelis and Palestinians.

GLOSSARY

1. Antisemitism and Anti-Judaism. The term antisemitism, derived from Antisemitismus, was coined in imperial Germany during the 1870s by propagandists who did not wish Jews to enjoy equal rights with Christians. Its true political meaning is ‘I am against the Jews’. For this reason, many scholars prefer to spell it without a hyphen. To spell it with a hyphen is to lend respectability

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to racial ideas that they do not deserve.

The term anti-Judaism should contain a hyphen because Judaism is a religion that really exists. However, it should be used with care. It can mean intellectual dissent from Jewish precepts (in the same sense as anti-Christian). Or it can have a pejorative connotation, implying an attack on the Jews themselves. In the latter case, it approximates antisemitism. Anti-Jewish elements are present in the Christian scriptures, but it would be false to claim that the scriptures are antisemitic.

2. Covenant is a pact or bargain between two parties. In the Hebrew Scriptures, covenant refers primarily to the bond between God and the people of Israel initiated by God, and grounded in God's grace and steadfast love. The covenant was made with Moses at Sinai (Exod.19f), reaffirming the bond made with Abraham (Gen. 15:17), reaffirmed later with David (2 Sam.7) and in the restoration from exile (Isa. 40-55). In the Hebrew Scriptures, God also made a covenant link with Noah. In Jewish thinking, this covenant applies to all humanity, requiring only that people respect life and live by a codified rule of law that has integrity (Gen. 9:8-17).

In the New Testament, covenant is used to refer to God's new and renewed bonding of all humanity through the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is seen as fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34. A long history in the church has declared that God has revoked the covenant with Judaism, and this has produced an exclusive view of salvation: 'I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'. (John 14:6) (NRSV) This text, Hebrews 8: 6-13 and others were written in the period when the followers of Jesus were breaking away from Judaism, and so these texts need to be understood in the context of that division.

3. "Shoah" in Hebrew means 'catastrophic destruction' and is often a preferred term to the more familiar 'Holocaust'. This is because the word 'Holocaust' comes from a Greek term which is used in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures) to signify the Hebrew term for 'burnt offering'. Many do not consider it helpful or appropriate to refer to the death of Jews during the Second World War as an 'offering'.

4. Torah is a complex term and cannot simply be equated with the Law of Moses. There developed within Judaism, under the leadership of the Pharisees, the concept of the Oral Torah by means of which the Written Torah of the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the Pentateuch, was interpreted in such a way as to meet the needs of changed times and changing circumstances. Just as Christianity moved beyond its Old Testament in its formulation of a New Testament, so too Judaism moved beyond its Hebrew Scriptures and produced the Mishnah and the Talmuds – Babylonian and Jerusalem. (Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth, page 7.)

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth: Guidelines for Christian Clergy and Teachers in their use of the New Testament with reference to the New Testament's presentation of Jews and Judaism. The Council of Christians and Jews (Victoria) Inc. 1994 reprinted 2007. (This has an annotated bibliography of books related to the issues raised.)

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For further information on Christian Jewish relations visit the website of the Working Group, http://wgcjr.unitingchurch.org.au/

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