"Preaching and Teaching With Love and Respect for the Jewish People."

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has published on its website a 56-page guide to "Preaching and Teaching With Love and Respect for the Jewish People." The title quotes a key phrase from the church's 1994 Declaration to the Jewish Community. Coming from the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations and endorsed by the Conference of Bishops, it constitutes an important teaching document and guidance on behalf of the denomination. Below you find the introduction and link to download the full document.

INTRODUCTION

Christian engagement with Jews and Judaism has transformed in remarkable ways since the middle of the 20th century. Bible classes often include references to the Jewishness of Jesus. Outbursts of anti-Semitic rhetoric or violence draw Christian solidarity and support for the Jewish people. Jewish writers appear in book group studies. Faith formation classes draw on the spiritual insights of rabbis and Jewish scholars, even Jewish scholars of the New Testament. Congregational calendars include pulpit exchange with neighboring synagogues, and confirmation classes schedule visits to Shabbat services.

In more formal ways, church bodies have acknowledged the continuing identity of the Jewish people as covenanted people of God. A Lutheran World Federation consultation on anti-Semitism in 2001 wrote in its concluding statement: “We affirm . . . the validity of God’s covenant with the Jewish people, which has never been superseded.” Many have also acknowledged Christian anti-Judaism as a tragic contributor to the wider Western cultural anti-Semitism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The ELCA in 1994 rejected the invective in Martin Luther’s violent recommendations regarding the Jews and expressed its “urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people.” The church and its leaders have come a long way.

Building on these developments, the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations offers this guide to support preachers and teachers in reflecting and embodying these commitments in congregational life. Progress in understanding the Bible, its first communities and the development of Christian theology provides many resources for creating a foundational framework for moving forward. Such a framework can inform many aspects of our preaching and teaching. It will equip us better to deal with the legacies that more negative approaches have left in Scripture, theology, broad cultural attitudes and the shape of the Sunday lectionary.

In Scripture and theology, one of those legacies is a powerful theme of conflict that asserts Christian truths and virtues as the opposite of what Judaism holds. This has given rise to ideas such as the following:

a) Since Jesus is the light of the world, Jews are portrayed as being in the dark.
b) Because the gospel is freedom, Judaism is characterized as legalistic.
c) Jesus argued with Pharisees and scribes and the Jewish priests, so everything they taught and stood for has been invalidated.

d) Jesus fulfills the hopes of biblical Israel and its prophecies; therefore, Judaism is outdated and misguided and fails to understand the meaning of its own Scriptures.
e) Jesus shows us that God is loving and merciful, unlike the image of God in the Old Testament as angry and violent.
f) The promised land has become a spiritual home or exists wherever Christ is, so Jews are mistaken when they invest themselves in an earthly homeland and its well-being.
g) Christians learn about justice from the prophets of biblical Israel; surely, then, Jews should have a higher sense of justice and a deeper commitment to it than other people.

These images yield strong rhetoric, but it is unfair to those who come out on the “wrong” side of the contrast.

Common stereotypes of Jews and Judaism are another legacy that can distort the Christian message as people hear it. Because stereotypes operate unconsciously, even among people who explicitly reject them, we need to be alert to images that can activate them. For example:

> a) It is a stereotype that Jews are wealthy and focus on money. How might this influence people’s hearing of the parables of “the rich fool” (Luke 12:16-21) or “the Pharisee and the publican” (Luke 18:10-14)? When John’s Gospel says that Judas “was a thief” (John 12:6), do we hear the indictment of one person or a familiar — and false — portrayal of Jews in general?
> b) It is a stereotype that Jews are arrogant about being chosen, separate and exclusive. The stereotype does not help us understand the actions of the priests in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). It can also influence what people hear in stories about conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over dining companions and handwashing, or in discussions of “the promised land.”

The church treasures Scripture, tradition and confessional theology as both sources and norms in its ongoing life and work. We cannot simply remove from our heritage the images and formulations that have given rise to these troubling legacies. By understanding more fully and clearly what is essential to the heritage and what has attached to it or grown out of it in troubling ways, we can fashion more generous, constructive, gospel-informed patterns of theology to guide our thinking and practice in the church and in the world.

Pastors, academics and interfaith professionals, both Jewish and Christian, have devoted decades of research and dialogue to addressing these legacies. Their work is the indispensable basis for everything we present here. We recognize their contributions in the sectional bibliographies and a collated set of basic resources at the end of the guide.

The guide presents ten topics in two broad categories. The first six topics address issues that derive directly from Scripture in its development and interpretation. These are:

1. Prophetic language.
2. Pharisees, scribes, priests and Jewish elders.
3. Jesus and the Jewish law in the Gospels.
4. The historical settings of the Gospels.
5. Paul among Jews and Gentiles — and later readings of Paul.
6. Judaisms of the first century and 21st century.

The last four topics address issues that emerge from the theological elaboration of Scripture’s witness, with particular attention to themes in Lutheran theology and to the structure and dynamics of the Revised Common Lectionary. These are:

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7. Law and gospel; promise and fulfillment.
8. Where sin divides.
9. The old/new rhetoric of the Letter to the Hebrews
10. Misleading lectionary dynamics

Throughout the discussions here, two events emerge repeatedly as central to the approaches to these topics. First, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE had a powerful impact on the Jewish communities of Judea, Galilee and the wider world, including early Jesus communities. Understanding that impact affects our insights into the writings of the apostle Paul and the shaping of the Gospels. Second, Christianity's ascendancy as it became the official religion of the Roman empire over the course of the fourth century CE led the church's theologians to reframe their understanding of Jews and Judaism. It also shifted the way they understood "kingdom of God" and laid a foundation for religious, political and cultural antagonism toward Jews and Judaism that has influenced Western ideas to our own day. When we set the church's heritage more explicitly within the context of these decisive events, we gain a useful perspective for discerning the gospel at the heart of that heritage. We are then better able to emphasize the gospel as we work to move beyond problematic reshapings of it.

In each of the ten topic areas, there is a brief articulation of the "problematic" way of understanding the topic. This is followed by a summary of a "better" understanding. The discussion that then follows provides evidence and argument that undergirds the better understanding and, often, examples of how it applies to specific biblical texts and points of theology. Call-out boxes like the one at right provide more focused information and the citation of biblical texts. Finally, a summary of "what we can do" concludes each section, to which a relevant bibliography is added for reference.

We have shaped each topic area so that it can be accessed individually; the guide does not need to be read as a complete work from front to back. Indeed, it is not complete; the issues involved extend beyond what we have included here. With the help of the Scripture and lectionary indexes at the back, readers can pinpoint within the guide topics and Scripture passages that may be of particular interest for a given sermon, class or discussion, and turn directly to the section that addresses the relevant material. For this reason, certain key themes recur throughout the guide. Where this may become tedious or redundant, we ask your indulgence.

In developing this guide for living out our faith in Jesus Christ "with love and respect for the Jewish people," we have become more aware of the ways in which the church's legacy of negative attitudes toward the Jewish community relates to wider patterns of relationship to others. The guide points to habits of awareness, caution and discernment that we can develop to support efforts to portray Jews and Judaism more accurately and to relate to the Jewish community more graciously. The same habits can often smooth our engagements with other communities that are in some way different from our own. We would hope that the approaches we present here might in some small way also contribute to the church's life in those other settings, as well.

The Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations has enjoyed the encouragement and partnership of dozens of Jewish and Christian colleagues from many quarters who have reviewed portions or complete drafts of this guide. We are grateful for their investment in the effort and for the many improvements that their counsel has yielded. The staff for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations and Theological Discernment in the Office of the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA have been steadfast in their support and advocacy for the project, contributing both to its substance and to the process of development.

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