Talking Points - Topics in Christian-Jewish Relations

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A series of 8 pages with user's guide and questions for discussion

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Talking Points

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

1. Introduction: Judaism Then and Now
2. Covenants Old and New
3. Law and Gospel
4. Promise and Fulfillment
5. Difficult Texts
6. Jewish Concern for the State of Israel
7. Tikkun Olam – Mending the World
8. Christians and Jews in the Context of World Religions

User"s Guide

"TALKING POINTS" is a set of eight leaflets issued by the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to set forth propositions for discussion and debate on theological issues in Christian-Jewish relations. They are intended to stimulate reflection and response on certain key issues as part of an ongoing study process within the church.

In each leaflet, the basic point or proposition is printed in a box at the top of the first page, followed by several paragraphs of explanation and commentary, and concluding with suggested questions for discussion. These propositions have deliberately been formulated in such a way as to push and test ideas that might otherwise go unexamined.

Most of the topics dealt with are pertinent to Christians generally. Some, such as "Law and Gospel," deal with issues that have been more prominent in the Lutheran tradition. For the most part, the points are intended for discussion among Christians, as part of our "homework" for interfaith encounter, but having a Jewish guest or guests when discussing some of the topics would be likely to add special interest and insight.[1]

THESE POINTS have a historical background, both in Christian-Jewish relations generally and more specifically in the work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The past 40 or 50 years have seen a transformation in the stance of many Christians and many church bodies toward Jews and Judaism. Various factors have influenced this development, including the Holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the continued experience of living together peacefully and productively in a pluralistic American society. Theological developments have also played a major role, including a new recognition of the Jewishness of Jesus and the Jewish roots of Christian worship.

All of this has led to the most substantive re-evaluation of Christian attitudes and behaviors toward the Jews and Judaism since church and synagogue parted ways. Repentance for past injustices and injuries, repudiation of anti-Jewish and antisemitic expressions, and overtures to a new relationship have marked these recent decades.

WITHIN the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, two documents exemplify this remarkable change. The "Declaration to the Jewish Community" of 1994 decisively repudiated Luther"s anti-Jewish views, expressed remorse for the harm they have done, and pledged "to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people." The 1998 "Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations" offered further suggestions for co-operation and dialogue.

Discussion across the church made it plain that there are further questions that need to be explored, questions about the theological relationship between the two traditions. The 1999 ELCA Churchwide Assembly took an action calling for the creation of study materials on theological aspects of Christian-Jewish relations from a Lutheran perspective. The task was undertaken by the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations, the advisory body that had also worked on the two previous statements; "Talking Points" is the result. The Panel appreciates the comments received from Jewish colleagues and ELCA staff during the writing process.

These Talking Points do not constitute an official ELCA statement about Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations. In the Consultative Panel’s judgment, formulating such a statement would be premature, since there is no clear consensus on many of the issues involved. Lutherans need time to live into the new reality in Jewish-Christian relations, open to the Holy Spirit"s continuing work of illumination. We very much desire feedback from your study and discussion, which will help clarify where we are and where we are headed. Information is given at the end of each Talking Point about how to submit your thoughts and suggestions.

Procedural Suggestions

The Talking Points begin with an Introduction dealing briefly with some ways in which Judaism has changed and developed since biblical times, with the aim of trying to understand Jews today not through our stereotypes but as they define themselves. The sequence of topics ends with the question of how Jewish-Christian relations pertains to the broader realm of interfaith relations today. Between those two points, the topics can be taken up in any order.

No special preparation is needed to lead a discussion based on the Talking Points. It may be well first to read the Talking Point aloud, with its explanation and commentary. Clarify any terms or concepts that may be unfamiliar, and then launch into discussion. The suggested questions can guide the discussion, and others may arise from the group.

Most of the Talking Points involve theological questions that are not bound to any particular time or place. Point 6 is an exception, in that it pertains to a topic that is very much in the news day by day. It should be understood that this is not an attempt to shape a comprehensive statement on the Middle East situation in all its complexity. Rather, the point is intended to explicate why the State of Israel is so important to our Jewish neighbors, and some of the factors that make their attachment to it so profound. As with all of the Talking Points, views will differ – among both Jews and Christians – on the issues involved.

Some possible contexts for discussion of "Talking Points" include adult forums in local congregations, conferences of clergy and other church leaders, synodical assemblies, colleges, and seminaries. The Panel’s intention and prayer is that discussion of these topics will foster discernment and growth in our understanding of Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations. We hope that reflection on these and related topics will contribute to contemporary formulations of Lutheran

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theology and practice in light of the new realities of Jewish-Christian relations.

For a sample copy of the printed version of these materials, please contact the Department for Ecumenical Affairs (see contact information below).

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* For use in settings specifically intended to include both Christians and Jews, such as Living Room Dialogues, the Department for Ecumenical Affairs recommends the "Interfaith Circles" program, a set of discussion guides.

To order the printed version of the Talking Points packet, contact the Department for Ecumenical Affairs toll free at (800) 638-3522, ext. 2610 or by e-mail at eainfo(at)elca.org.

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The "Talking Points" are translated into German, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian.