

THE  
*Episcopal*  
CHURCH



## **Christian-Jewish Relations Theological and Practical Guidance for Episcopalians**

Episcopalians commit to a posture of respect when dealing with other faith communities. How that respect manifests itself will differ not only from tradition to tradition, but within the breadth of those traditions as well. This document provides succinct guidelines for constructive dialogue with Jewish neighbors.<sup>1</sup> Judaism is a vibrant and complex community with many voices, some quite discordant with each other. It is an understatement to note that the Christian tradition (itself also quite complex and discordant) has not always respected the Jewish people as fellow children of God. This set of guidelines is for Episcopalians seeking a basis for building common ground, especially in joint service and ministry, with Jewish people—a resource for Episcopal teaching, preaching, daily scripture-study, individual prayer, corporate worship, and lament for past mistakes.

1. **Openheartedness.** First, without question, openheartedness toward Judaism and the Jewish people accords with the faith we proclaim through The Episcopal Church's Baptismal Covenant.
2. **Obligation.** The Baptismal Covenant promise to strive for justice and peace among all people obliges Episcopalians to treat Judaism and the Jewish people justly.
3. **Acknowledgement.** Because persistent unjust stereotyping of Jews by Christians continues to harm Jewish people in the present day (as it has for centuries), it is imperative to acknowledge that anti-Judaism is expressed in a wide array of present practices of The Episcopal Church: liturgical texts, interpretation of scriptures, preaching, devotional practices, poetry, iconography, hymnody, academic writing, pastoral advice, and educational resources.
4. **Truthful witness.** Given the scriptural mandate to witness truthfully, Episcopalians are obliged, in teaching, preaching, and informal communication, to present biblical and Rabbinic Judaism accurately. We can begin by presenting Jesus as an observant first-century Jew striving to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Even while affirming that, as we see it, in Christ Jesus God has done a new thing, we can make explicit the substantial theological and scriptural continuities between Judaism and Christianity. We can be mindful of implicit or explicit references to Jews or Judaism in liturgy, in the public reading of Scripture, in hymnody, and in artistic representations that can reinforce prejudices.

5. **Better practices.** It is imperative that Episcopalians strive for practices that note, discontinue, and resist new iterations of stereotyping of Jewish people so they will be treated justly. Here are six recommendations.
- a. **Be mindful of vocabulary.** In our efforts to combat behavior harmful to our Jewish neighbors, it is useful to rethink how harmful behavior is named. To label the problem accurately, we can use “anti-Jewish bigotry” or “antisemitism” (unhyphenated).<sup>2</sup>
  - b. **Stress God’s continuing covenant.** A strong theology accounting for God’s continuing covenant with the Church and the Jewish people alike is the best corrective for unjust portrayal of historical and contemporary Jewish people in Episcopal liturgy, preaching, and teaching.
  - c. **Eschew supersessionism.** A pernicious theological move often called “theological supersessionism” is the root of anti-Judaism (be it overt or unintentional) sometimes expressed in Christian life and thought. Supersessionist theology feeds the stereotyping of Jewish people by making three erroneous assertions: that Judaism is obsolete; that, because of their role in the passion and death of Jesus of Nazareth, God has ended the covenant with the Jewish people; that the Church has replaced the Jewish people in unique relationship with God. The anti-Judaism and supersessionism latent in Episcopal Passion Sunday and Holy Week liturgies raise many concerns. For help in understanding the issues and considering solutions, see essays by Louis Weil, Ruth Meyers, and Susan Auchincloss archived on the website of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music of the Episcopal Church (2012–2015 triennium).<sup>3</sup>
  - d. **Avoid teaching of contempt.** Closely linked to supersessionism, the practice known as *teaching of contempt* involves manipulation of Christian doctrine and scripture to denigrate Jewish people and Judaism in a variety of ways: interpretation of passages of the New Testament particularly in John’s gospel to blame Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus; preaching salvation by grace using language in the Pauline epistles that maligns “the Law” and suggests that those who practice their religion through adherence to “the Law” as revealed to the Jewish people at Sinai are somehow misguided or ignorant; suggesting that the Jewish people have missed the mark because they do not believe Jesus to be the Messiah. By means of such logic, Christians have justified and perpetuated Jewish suffering. Not only does such teaching foster negativity, distrust, and hostility toward Jewish people, it has often led to violence. The Baptismal Covenant promise to strive for justice requires Episcopalians to recognize that, given persistent stereotyping and persecution, manifested during its most extreme form in the genocide of the Jews during the Shoah, Jewish people are justifiably fearful.<sup>4</sup> Because we have so promised, we are obliged to eschew the teaching of contempt.
  - e. **Mitigate latent anti-Judaism.** Latent anti-Judaism in our hymnody can be mitigated by making use of revisions that preserve the theological depth and purpose of particular hymns while excising supersessionist themes. The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad’s reworking of the hymn *O come, O come, Emmanuel* is an excellent example.<sup>5</sup>
  - f. **Appreciate; don’t appropriate.** Judaism, a living and continually developing religion with its own integrity, has many beautiful traditions. Episcopalians may be deeply appreciative; yet they should resist any inclination to transpose Jewish ritual and tradition into Christian liturgical contexts. “Christian Seders” offer a case in point. Although

Jesus's last supper may have been a Passover meal of some sort, it assuredly was not a Seder in the modern sense, since the Passover Seder was introduced into Jewish ritual life in late antiquity, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Attempts by Christians, even if well intended, to make this ritual their own are insensitive. However, when a Jewish person issues an invitation to a Seder, it is entirely appropriate for a Christian to accept that hospitality.

6. **Respect our shared scripture.** We do well to remember that Jesus himself drew upon the collection of writings that are canonical for Judaism to this day. These writings comprise more than half of the Christian Bible—an acknowledgment of common affirmation by Christians and Jews of God as revealed through patriarchs and prophets.
  - a. Just as second-century Christians resisted moves to set these writings aside, so too should we refrain from marginalizing them. It is helpful for Christians to be aware of the Jewish practice of reading the Torah in conversation with the Talmud (a multi-volume collection of Torah commentary, law, and more). Although Christian and Jewish people read them differently, these shared sacred writings provide a common resource for prayer, study, preaching, and dialogue.<sup>6</sup>
  - b. While Episcopal use of the term “Hebrew Bible” may seem to be a gesture of neutrality and inclusivity, it is not without its problems. All Jewish writings now included in the Christian Bible were received by the earliest Christian communities in Greek translation. For Episcopalians, “Scripture” includes several Jewish works that were composed in Greek. Furthermore, Jews and Christians organize their shared sacred writings differently. Therefore, consider context. When referring to this collection as Christian Scripture, call it “Old Testament;” when referring to it as Jewish Scripture explicitly, call it “Tanakh;” when speaking of it as a collection held in common by Christians and Jews, call it “Old Testament/Tanakh.”<sup>7</sup>
  - c. When studying the Bible, Episcopalians can guard against unintentional anti-Judaism by making good use of resources such as *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, or Marilyn Salmon’s *Preaching Without Contempt*.<sup>8</sup>
7. **Embrace theological dialogue.** When thinking theologically, Episcopalians characteristically draw simultaneously upon scripture, tradition, and reason. Christian-Jewish dialogue can enhance this practice, as can listening carefully to a range of Jewish voices.
  - a. It is worth remembering that in “Jewishness” is great variation: the religion “Judaism” has several movements (somewhat analogous to Christian denominations), each with its distinguishing beliefs and practices; some see themselves as members of “the Jewish people,” but have little interest in traditional beliefs or practices; and among those who identify as Jewish, can be found people of every race.
  - b. The Jewish tradition of “midrash,” through which the rabbis and sages of the tradition have wrestled with the Torah and continuously re-interpret it for new contexts and eras, offers a way for Christians and Jewish people to engage in fruitful dialogue—each drawing upon their unique interpretive traditions to discover new ways of understanding

the world through their respective religious lenses. Jewish midrash and Christian contextual theology can find fascinating places of convergence and divergence.

8. **Israeli/Palestinian Conflict:** Attitudes toward the contemporary nation of Israel and responses to its actions are complicated by questions regarding the status of the Palestinian residents within its borders and in territories it occupies. These issues are complex and demand caution, mindful of our Baptismal Covenant promise to strive for justice and peace. The Episcopal Church’s Office of Global Relations has worked on these matters for many decades, thus has resources for use by dioceses and parishes.<sup>9</sup>
  - a. Dialogue between Episcopalians and Jews about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is difficult but important. Participants must educate themselves about this ongoing conflict and recognize that it presents issues that divide Christians and Jews intra-religiously as well as interreligiously.
  - b. When framing critiques of policies of the nation-state of Israel, it is imperative to avoid tropes and stereotypes that have long been a part of Christian anti-Judaism. For example, statements that conflate the Jewish people worldwide with the nation state of Israel or blame all Jews for the actions of the state of Israel; depictions of the State of Israel, either in words or visual images that draw on old stereotypes of Jews as demonic, or greedy, or as controlling the world; making assumptions about any given Jewish person’s attitudes or beliefs about the state of Israel or how that person’s Jewish identity is or is not aligned with support for the state of Israel.
9. **Make common cause:** The kinship between Judaism and Christianity is distinct; our shared sacred texts are the source of common beliefs and values. The Jewish ethic of *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) and The Episcopal Church’s own statements on ecology and creating Beloved Community provide foundations by which Episcopalians and Jewish people can participate collaboratively in God’s mission: mitigating human need, challenging structural injustice, and caring for creation.<sup>10</sup> By affirming this, Episcopalians bear witness to God’s abundant grace and acknowledge that they may indeed work together with Jewish people in loving service to God and to humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> This document—which is informed by the Church of England Faith and Order Commission’s *God’s Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives in Christian-Jewish Relations* (2019) and is a thorough revision of a set of a document memorialized by the Eightieth General Convention (2022)—updates *Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations for Use in the Episcopal Church* adopted by the Sixty-Ninth General Convention in 1988. A companion document offers guidance for Episcopal-Muslim relations.

<sup>2</sup> For an explanation of what is at stake, see “Spelling of antisemitism” by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance: <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/antisemitism/spelling-antisemitism>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://standingcommissiononliturgyandmusic.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> See *Facing History & Ourselves*, Lesson 6: “The roots and impact of antisemitism,” <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-holocaust-and-human-behavior/roots-and-impact-antisemitism>.

<sup>5</sup> For Barbara Lundblad’s version of the hymn, see <https://maryshaima.wordpress.com/2016/12/03/veni-immanuel/>.

<sup>6</sup> Of particular value is Marilyn Salmon, *Preaching without Contempt* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> See “Christian and Jewish Bibles” in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus*:

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*How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (New York:HarperOne, 2020), 7–13.

<sup>8</sup> Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); also, other works by Amy-Jill Levine. See Marilyn Salmon, *Preaching without Contempt*, mentioned in note 6. See also, Sarah Dylan Breuer, *dylan's lectionary blog*: Fifth Sunday in Lent, year C at <https://www.sarahlaughed.net>. Also, Thomas E. Breidenthal, "Neighbor-Christology: Reconstructing Christianity before Supersessionism," in *Cross Currents* (Fall 1999): 320–48. Also, Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> See The Episcopal Church's Global Partnerships website: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/global-partnerships/>.

<sup>10</sup> See The Episcopal Church's *Covenant for the Care of Creation*, available at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/>