

## The United Church of Canada

Submission to the Canadian Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism

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### **The United Church of Canada**

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The United Church of Canada welcomes the work of the Canadian Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism and is pleased to contribute this submission. We share with the committee deep concern that antisemitism still exists in Canada and around the world. We wish to stand together with all who envisage a Canada in which all such expressions of hatred are rejected. But more than that, we hold forth the vision of a Canada that welcomes differences of race, culture, and faith as gifts to be shared and nurtured in the building of a truly intercultural society.

### **Antisemitism and the Church**

Antisemitism finds its roots in the early history of the church, when it came to see itself as the new Israel, displacing and superseding the Jews as the people of God. It took this stance from a narrow interpretation of its gospels and especially from its passion narratives. The Jews were portrayed as the enemies of Jesus, blind to his fulfillment of God's promises, stubbornly rebellious in the face of his work, and responsible for his death. The new religion of Christianity, emerging from its Jewish roots, developed a tradition of teaching contempt of Jews, and laid a foundation for millennia of anti-Judaism and antisemitism.

In the later part of the 20th century, most larger Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church made statements revising their theology, saying unequivocally that God's covenant with the Jewish people was not revoked through the appearance of Jesus. There is now wide recognition that the church's rejection of Jews was an act of disobedience to God. The United Church, in its own statement titled "Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church – Jewish Relations

Today”<sup>1</sup> rejected: all teaching of contempt towards Jews and Judaism; the belief that God has abolished the covenant with the Jewish people; supersessionism, the belief that Christians have replaced Jews in the love and purpose of God; and proselytizing that targets Jews for conversion to Christianity.

The United Church acknowledges its own complicity in anti-Judaism and antisemitism. In a report in the church’s 1927 Yearbook, Jews are accused of wielding inordinate power and causing problems wherever they settle. Pro-fascist letters and articles appeared in the church’s magazine during the 1930s. In 1972, the United Church *Observer* published an antisemitic article titled “How the Zionists Manipulate Your News.” Significant tension between *The Observer* and B’nai B’rith through that decade resulted in threatened lawsuits of libel on both sides and affected the relationship between the United Church and the Jewish community in Canada for decades following.

The passion of many in the church for justice for Palestinians continues to contribute to tensions with the Jewish community. This was evidenced this past summer in background material to a series of motions forwarded to the General Council from a regional body of the church. The church’s decision to “reject and repudiate” these background materials was a reflection of the experience in 1972, and an indication that passion for a just resolution to the conflict in the Middle East can “cross the line” into antisemitic language.

The war years and the Shoah (Holocaust) are clearly the bleakest part of the world’s history of antisemitism. During this time, the United Church in fact evidenced a deep concern for the safety of Jewish people. Two months before *Kristallnacht*, the General Council voiced its concern for the Jewish people. Following the Nazi pogrom, the church was filled with denunciations and forwarded scores of pro-Jewish, pro-refugee resolutions to the government of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King. *The Observer’s* predecessor attacked the Canadian government for dragging its feet and criticized the church for its earlier silence. In a 1939 editorial it said, “To keep out others, when our house is largely empty, is to be guilty of a political immoralism as grave in its implications as the crude immoralism of the Nazis.” That

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<sup>1</sup> The full study document can be found at <http://www.united-church.ca/files/partners/interfaith/bfw/bfw.pdf>

year, pro-refugee resolutions were passed by virtually every Conference of the church from coast to coast.

In the document *Bearing Faithful Witness*, the church acknowledges insensitivity to the importance of the Shoah to Jews. In Canada, most Jews have a direct experience to this tragic history through the loss of family members. The church therefore recognizes that the existence of Israel for most Jews is tied to the conviction that if Israel had been in existence, Jews would have had a place of refuge. As it was, Canada, like many countries in the world, adopted a stance toward Jews seeking refuge that “none is too many.”

No one is free from guilt for the Shoah. The church in particular must recognize the connections between Christian theology and the Nazi rationale that underlay the Holocaust. If the church believes that never again must this be allowed to happen, then the church’s beliefs must be examined for their complicity and changed.

The development of the statement (2003) “Bearing Faithful Witness” and the accompanying 80-page study document sought to address this history and begin a new chapter in the relationship of the church and the Jewish community in Canada.

The writing process was undertaken with the support and guidance of members of the Jewish community who accompanied the work of a task group, participated in a number of consultations and shared in the presentation of the document as it was adopted by the General Council.

The rationale for the work acknowledged there is increasing anti-Judaism, antisemitism, white supremacy, and neo-Nazism in Canada and other countries that is often perpetrated in the name of Jesus Christ. Equally important, however, were the following recognitions: that rarely in the church is Jesus ever referred to as a Jew; that no other religion is as closely related to Christianity as Judaism; that the Christian God is the God of Israel; that Christian scripture includes the scriptures of Israel; and that the hope of Israel is the Christian hope, too: earth under God’s rule of peace, prosperity, and justice for all.

The United Church believes a pervasive antisemitism exists around the world and finds expression both within and outside the Christian community. Most predominantly, this is

evidenced in the desecration of Jewish sites, attacks on Jewish individuals, and other patterns of behaviour seeking to extinguish Jewish identity. For many churches, antisemitism continues to find expression in theological beliefs, in liturgy, and in public statements.

Anti-semitism is also present, the United Church believes, in beliefs that Jews must ultimately be converted to Christianity. This belief is often expressed as part of the fulfillment of end-time prophecies. Coincident with many of these theologies is the related belief that Israel must occupy the 'greater Israel' (i.e. Judea and Samaria or the West Bank) in order for the prophecies to be fulfilled. Since these prophecies generally contain the expectation that Jews will ultimately convert and choose to follow the Christian messiah, Jesus, the United Church believes that this is a continued form of ancient patterns of antisemitism. In other words, antisemitism (and anti-Judaism) in its essence believes that the Jewish faith and existence will end either through conversion or violence. While these millennialist theories are not part of theology of the United Church, they exist within most churches.

The United Church has affirmed in many statements its awareness and understanding that the existence of Israel is intimately connected to the survival of the world Jewish community. The church has formally stated that peace in the Middle East will require "the recognition by the emergent State of Palestine and other neighbouring Arab States of Israel's right to exist as a **Jewish** State within safe and secure borders." The church has chosen to separate its position from that of the Israeli government concerning Israel as a Jewish State by further stating that peace in the region will require "the recognition by Israel and Palestine of equal citizenship rights, protections, privileges and responsibilities for all of their respective citizens regardless of religious or national origins." Nevertheless, the church believes this and other affirmations represent a significant affirmation of both the continued existence of the Jewish faith as part of God's plan for the world, and the continued existence of Israel as a Jewish homeland.

### **The United Church and Interfaith Relations**

The United Church has been a leader in building respectful relationships between faith communities in Canada and around the world. In 1970, the church appointed the first full-time interfaith officer of any Christian church in the world. For almost forty years, the church has worked both at a national staff level, and through numerous volunteers around the country, to

build relationships of understanding and respect between communities of faith. While working generally in support of multi-faith organizations, it has focused in particular on relationships with Judaism and Islam.

In a similar manner to “Bearing Faith Witness: United Church - Jewish Relationships today,” the United Church adopted the statement (2006) “That We May Know Each Other: United Church Muslim Relations Today.”<sup>2</sup> Accompanying the 80-page study document was a statement that acknowledged “from Islam’s very beginnings, Muslim-Christian relationships have presented profound theological and social challenges to Christians. Islam confronts us with the meaning of a later revelation and the question of differing interpretations of core faith stories.”

The statement further said: “We believe that the prediction of the Qur’an that Christians and Muslims can be the ‘nearest among them in love’ (Surah 5:82) is possible and preferable to an alternative path of increasing tension, mistrust and violence. We believe, furthermore, that the task of reconciliation between Muslims and Christians is at the heart of what the church needs to be about as we seek to be faithful participants in God’s mission today.”

The document further stated: “We believe the church can continue to affirm its own distinctive self-identity while affirming that other faiths and traditions have their own self-understanding. The Bible teaches that the Word and Wisdom of God are not limited to Christians, and the Spirit of God is free and faithful. We therefore cherish the differences between traditions as gifts of God, which can be life-giving and transformative.

Therefore the document among a number of affirmations and statements said that the United Church:

“Affirms that God is creatively at work in the religious life of Muslims and Christians.  
Acknowledges the prophetic witness of Muhammad, and that the mercy, compassion, and justice of God are expressed in the Qur’an, which is regarded by Muslims as the word of God.

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<sup>2</sup> The full study document can be found at [http://www.united-church.ca/files/sales/publications/400000126\\_report.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/files/sales/publications/400000126_report.pdf)

Encourages all people of the United Church of Canada to seek out opportunities to work together with Muslims to seek justice and resist evil for the sake of the world we all inhabit.”

The United Church is committed to walking respectfully and hopefully with both Jewish and Muslim communities. We believe Canada can show the world it is possible not only to live in peace, but also to live with respect and the mutual valuing of the gifts that each community brings to the formation of our emerging country. Antisemitism, therefore, must be addressed primarily through a vision of the country in which all peoples are valued and affirmed.

As a Christian church, we believe this extends to articulating a theology that both affirms differences in understanding and experience of God as part of God’s design for the world, and rejects the assumption that all other faiths will ultimately convert to one true faith. This theological affirmation of difference and diversity at the heart of God’s creation is central to the United Church’s practice of faith.

Finally, we wish to briefly reference the United Church’s history of relationship with Middle East partners. In summary, we hope that it offers context to the committee for our engagement with complex and at times controversial issues.

### **United Church Partnership in the Middle East**

The United Church’s engagement with the search for peace in the Middle East, and particularly between Israel and Palestine, has always been embedded within the context of the church’s understanding of partnership. This has been described as “becoming involved with others in God’s mission for wholeness of life, especially with those who suffer the effects of systems of injustice.” The United Church is involved in about 130 global partnerships and shares approximately \$5 million yearly in grants to these partners. Global partnership has also involved United Church people serving God’s mission with partners around the world.

The presence of the United Church in the Middle East goes back to the 1940s, when Bob McClure, who later became the first lay Moderator of the church, served as a medical missionary in Gaza. Recent overseas personnel appointments involved support of the creation

of the Jerusalem Ecumenical Office (United Church staff working with the Heads of Churches of Jerusalem representing most of the Palestinian Christian Community) and numerous short-term placements under the Ecumenical Accompaniment program for Palestine and Israel.

Partnership has also involved the church directly with organizations such as the Middle East Council of Churches, and various branches working with and representing Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; Sabeel, an Ecumenical Centre for Palestinian Liberation Theology; and several Jewish organizations, Bat Shalom, and B'Tselem. These relationships have assisted the church in understanding the situation of Palestinians and in the belief that peace in the region will require a just resolution to the conflict.

This half-century history of partnership in the region involving numerous personnel of the church, many visits of its people, and a deep concern across many members for a just resolution of the conflict has resulted in numerous resolutions over many decades to the church's governing bodies.

Statements and resolutions concerning the Middle East have been before the General Council of the church in 1971, 1977, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1994, 2003, 2006 and 2009. Each of these responded to a particular situation and context, but there is a pattern that is evident.

The church has in various forms:

- Expressed care for all peoples in the region affected by violence and has condemned violence in all its forms.
- Stated support for adherence to United Nations resolutions as the necessary path to a just peace in the region.
- Called for an end to the occupation of Palestinian territories as the critical step towards that peace.

### **For the Parliamentary Committee's Consideration**

Antisemitism has a distinctive character and history and needs to be addressed on its own, in no small part because the Shoah is a unique event in world history. However, the prevalence of questioning the legitimacy of "other faiths" is pervasive in religious belief and reflective of the religious roots of antisemitism.

The United Church would welcome conversation with the Committee on the specific question of how Canada might encourage its diverse and growing multiplicity of faiths to build relationships of respect and trust.

#### Attachments

Bearing Faithful Witness: Statement on United Church – Jewish Relations Today

<http://www.united-church.ca/partners/interfaith/bfw/finalstatement>

That We May Know Each Other: Statement on United Church – Muslim Relations Today

[http://www.united-church.ca/files/sales/publications/400000126\\_finalstatement.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/files/sales/publications/400000126_finalstatement.pdf)