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Jewish Relations Document Approved

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A report on United Church-Jewish relations that emphasizes the Jewishness of Jesus and respect for the continued development of the Jewish tradition has been authorized as a study document by the church.

The United Church 36th General Council meeting in Camrose, Alberta, voted Tuesday, 19 August, 1997, to affirm the document, "Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church-Jewish Relations Today," and authorized study of it throughout the church.

The Council called for the preparation of educational documents to accompany the report, a process by which responses might be sought and an interim report to be presented at the next General Council.

A final report will be presented to the 38th General Council.

Allison Norberg of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Conference, a member of the committee that recommended approval of the document, called it a "gift" to the church.

"We feel it invites us and provides us an opportunity for better understanding our Jewish sisters and brothers who are closely related to us in our respective faith traditions," Norberg told commissioners.

"It also forces us penitently at our Christian tradition, our Christian use of power and our anti-Judaism," she said. "Therefore we concluded that this report deserves to get out to our people to give them courage to discover the Jewish community as we discover our own heritage, even if some would feel the report does not represent our understanding of the faith."

The document received strong support from the Council but concerns were raised by several commissioners, including two who worried that the church would be abandoning its traditional understanding of who Jesus Christ is by agreeing to study the document.

Lynn Bradley of London Conference said the report concerns her because it gives her the impression "that we are putting Jesus Christ on a shelf and putting him aside right now. I think we need to understand our own faith and that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior."

Ian Sutherland of Newfoundland and Labrador Conference raise a concern about the fact that the report, in answering the question "Is Jesus the Messiah?" says only that "many" Christians believe this. "I feel that for all Christians it (the answer to the question) is yes and I feel this document misrepresents the Christian use of the word Messiah."

The document states that the United Church has from time to time revised its theology, saying that God's covenant with the Jewish people has not been revoked through the ministry of Jesus Christ.

"There is now wide recognition that the church's rejection of Jews was an act of disobedience to God," says the document. "A number of churches have made changes in their confessional statements and in their constitutions to reflect this awareness."

While the church has opposed antisemitism in its own ranks and in the wider community, "we have never made a theological statement about our relationship to Judaism," says the document. "We have not made an apology to the Jewish community; we have not amended our constitution through changes to the Basis of Union.

"Due to the lack of theological guidance there is still the danger of anti-Judaic teaching and preaching in our church," it continues. "The United Church need to begin to address these concerns through adopting theological guidelines to guard against anti-Judaism. The United Church, in its support of multiculturalism, pluralism and a more inclusive ecumenism, has an interest in interfaith dialogue with all religions. However, no other religion is as closely related to Christianity as Judaism. The Christian God is the God of Israel. Jesus and all the apostles were of Israel, Christian scripture includes the scriptures of Israel. The New Testament extends the concepts, forms and even the content of the scriptures of Israel. The hope of Israel is the Christian hope, too: Earth under God's rule in peace prosperity and justice for all."

The study document does not recommend either an apology to the Jewish community nor changes in the church's Basis of Union statement at this time. Rather, it offers "guidelines for the relationship with Jews and Judaism."

See: "Bearing Faithful Witness:" United Church-Jewish Relations Today.