

THE
Episcopal
CHURCH



**Christian-Jewish Relations:
Theological and Practical Guidance for The Episcopal Church
(2021)**

While much has changed since *Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations for use in The Episcopal Church* was issued by the General Convention in July 1988, the need for such guidance assuredly has not lessened. The Episcopal Church is grateful for the careful work of the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission on this matter, the result of which is a book-length document entitled *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations* (Church House Publishing, 2019). Although *God's Unfailing Word* speaks quite directly to the UK context, all Episcopalians are encouraged to read, mark, and digest it in its entirety. However many will appreciate a more succinct set of guidelines.

What follows here is guidance informed by *God's Unfailing Word* and other sources, offered as an aid to our teaching, preaching, daily scripture-study, individual prayer, corporate worship, and lament for past missteps.

1. **Openheartedness.** Our guidance begins with affirmation that, without question, openheartedness toward Judaism and the Jewish people accords with the faith we proclaim through our Baptismal Covenant and the historic creeds.
2. **Our obligation.** Our Baptismal Covenant promise to strive for justice and peace among all people obliges us to treat Judaism and the Jewish people justly.
3. **Bearing truthful witness.** Given the mandate to witness truthfully, Christians are obliged, in teaching, preaching, and informal communication, to present biblical and Rabbinic Judaism accurately.
 - a. In this vein, we can present Jesus as an observant first-century Jew striving to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.
 - b. We can affirm that it is entirely possible to make explicit the substantial theological and scriptural continuities between Judaism and Christianity while also affirming that, in Christ Jesus, God has done a new thing.
 - c. We are obliged to be vigilant, thus to take note 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.
4. **Our acknowledgement.** We acknowledge that unjust stereotyping of Jews by Christians persists, continuing to harm Jewish people in the present day—as it has for centuries. We

acknowledge that anti-Judaism is expressed in a wide array of present practices of The Episcopal Church: our liturgical texts, interpretation of scriptures, preaching, devotional practices, poetry, iconography, hymnody, academic writing, pastoral advice, and educational resources.

5. **Better practices.** Therefore, we commend practices that note, discontinue, and resist new iterations of stereotyping of Jewish people, so that Jewish people will be treated justly.
 - a. **Be mindful of vocabulary matters.** In our efforts to combat behavior harmful to our Jewish neighbors, it is useful to rethink how we name it. To name the problem accurately, speak and write of “anti-Jewish bigotry.” Alternatively, use “antisemitism” (unhyphenated) rather than “anti-Semitism” (a construct that implies the existence of a highly problematic form of pseudo-scientific racial classification that is to be opposed).¹
 - 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 Church liturgy, preaching, and teaching.
 - c. **Eschew supersessionism.** A pernicious theological move often called “theological supersessionism”—the belief that the Church has replaced the people Israel as God’s chosen people—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 core (and, to our mind, 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 people Israel; that the church has replaced Israel as the people in unique relationship with God. The anti-Judaism and supersessionism latent in our 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).²
 - d. **Avoid teaching of contempt.** Supersessionism is linked closely to the practice of “teaching contempt”—manipulation of Christian doctrine and scripture to assert that the Jewish people are guilty of the murder of Christ (who should have been welcomed as the Messiah), hence deserve to suffer. By means of such logic, Christians have justified and perpetuated Jewish suffering. Not only does such teaching foster in Christians negativity, distrust, and hostility toward Jewish people, it has often led to violence. Our Baptismal Covenant promise to strive for justice requires us recognize that, given persistent stereotyping and persecution—especially as manifested during the Shoah—Jewish people are justifiably fearful.³ 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.⁴

- f. **Appreciate; don't appropriate.** Judaism, a living and continually developing religion with its own integrity, has many beautiful traditions. We may be deeply appreciative, yet 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 highly insensitive. However, when a Jewish person issues an invitation to a Seder, it is entirely appropriate for a Christian to accept that hospitality.
6. **Regarding 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. While Jews and Christians organize and read them differently, these shared writings provide a common resource for prayer, study and preaching.⁵
- b. While some Episcopalians consider use of the term "Hebrew Bible" to be a gesture of neutrality and inclusivity, others find it problematic. "Scripture" for The Episcopal Church includes Jewish writings that were composed in Greek. In fact, all Jewish writings now included in the Christian Bible were received by the earliest Christian communities in Greek translation. Furthermore, Jews and Christians organize their shared sacred writings differently. Therefore, consider context when naming this collection: when referring to it as Christian scripture, "Old Testament;" when referring to it as Jewish Scripture explicitly, "Tanakh;" when speaking of it as a collection held in common by Christians and Jews, "Old Testament/Tanakh."⁶
7. **Theologizing dialogically.** When thinking theologically, Episcopalians characteristically draw simultaneously upon scripture, tradition, and reason. Christian-Jewish dialogue can enhance this practice. So can careful listening to a range of Jewish voices.
- a. Indeed, it is worth remembering that in "Jewishness" is great variation: the religion "Judaism" has many movements (somewhat analogous to Christian denominations), each with its distinguishing beliefs and practices; some Jews see themselves as members of "the Jewish people," but have little interest in traditional beliefs or practices; and among those who identify as Jewish, we will find people of every race.
- b. When studying the Bible (whether in preparation for preaching or for some other reason), we 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*.⁷
8. **Israel:** 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.⁸

- a. Dialogue between Episcopalians and Jews about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is difficult but important. We must educate ourselves about this ongoing conflict and recognize that it presents issues that divide Christians and Jews intra-religiously as well as interreligiously.
 - b. Framing of critiques of policies of the nation state of Israel should avoid tropes and stereotypes that were long a part of Christian anti-Judaism.
9. **Making Common Cause:** The kinship between Judaism and Christianity is distinct. By affirming it, we bear witness to God’s abundant grace. Yet we may indeed work together in loving service to God and to humanity. 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.⁹ Our shared sacred texts are the source of common beliefs and values that enable Christians work with Jews in striving toward the public good.

¹ 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>.

² See <https://standingcommissiononliturgyandmusic.org/>.

³ 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>.

⁴ For Barbara Lundblad’s version of the hymn, see <https://maryshaima.wordpress.com/2016/12/03/veni-immanuel/>.

⁵ Of particular value is Marilyn Salmon, *Preaching without Contempt* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

⁶ See “Christian and Jewish Bibles” in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (New York: HarperOne, 2020), 7–13.

⁷ 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 5. See also, Sarah Dylan Breuer, *dylan’s lectionary blog*: Fifth Sunday in Lent, year C, https://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2007/03/fifth_sunday_in.html. 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).

⁸ See The Episcopal Church’s Global Partnerships website: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/global-partnerships/>.

⁹ See The Episcopal Church’s *Covenant for the Care of Creation*, available at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/>