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Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)
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Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CEPE)
-Leuenberg Church Fellowship-

**A Collection of texts on the relationship of the Protestant churches
of Europe to Judaism**

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In recent weeks, sparked off by events in the Roman Catholic Church, there has been a widespread discussion on the relationship of the church to Judaism and the responsibility which accrues to Christianity from the Shoah, the murder of millions of European Jews. The Christian churches have redefined their attitude to the people of Israel after 1945. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe – Leuenberg Church Fellowship has made important statements on these questions both in its foundation document and in two further documents which its member churches have unanimously endorsed. Here we have brought together the most important sections. This should make the position of our churches clear. Precisely because there are still tendencies towards "forgetfulness of Israel" and anti-Semitism in the Protestant churches too, the documents should be studied and their recommendations for action implemented. "In the struggle against all forms of discrimination, racism and anti-Semitism, the Church knows it stands side by side with Israel" (Church and Israel I, 1, 1, 2).

Leuenberg Agreement (1973)

7. The Gospel is the message of Jesus Christ, the salvation of the world, in fulfilment of the promise given to the people of the Old Covenant.

“The Church of Jesus Christ” (1994)

I.3.1 The election as the basis of the mission of the church - the church as the people of God

"Before the foundation of the world God chose us in Christ to be his people, to be without blemish in his sight, to be full of love." (Eph 1:3-6, 9-11; 3:11 together with 1 Cor 2:7; Col 1:12-18; Hebr 1:1f and John 1:1ff.). This election is the basis for the mission of the church: to be the light of the world (Mt 5:14) "to proclaim the glorious deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9) and to make known "the wisdom of God in its infinite variety to the rulers and authorities" (Eph 3:10).

This election of the Church is inseparably connected with the election of Israel as the people of God (Ex 19:5f; 1 Kings 8:53; Ps 77: 16.21; Is 62:12). As his people God has called Israel to faith (Is 7:9) and has shown it through his guidance the way to life (Ex 20:1-17; Deut 30:15-20) and has in this way made it the light of the nations (Is 42:6). This promise to Israel has not been rendered invalid by the Christ event because God's faithfulness upholds it (Rom 11:2.29).

The church as the people of God (1 Peter 2:9f) is the community of believers called by Christ from among Jews and Gentiles alike (Rom 9:24). Faith comes from the Word of God which subjects all, Gentiles and Jews alike, under God's judgement (Rom 3:9), calls them to repentance and promises them grace (Rom 3:28ff). Christians believe that the mission of the church as it is disclosed in Jesus Christ will be fulfilled in such a way that when the Gentiles have been admitted in full strength the "whole of Israel" will be saved (Rom 11:25f together with Rom 15:8f).

II.3.1 Dialogue with Judaism

To be the church means for the churches of the Reformation in biblically rooted priority to examine their relationship to Judaism. Dialogue with Judaism is an indispensable necessity for the Christian churches. For centuries the Jews were persecuted and were faced with pogroms. The anti-Judaism of the churches provided an essential part of the arguments for the persecution of the Jewish people in the Christian West. The persecution and annihilation of millions of Jews were accompanied by the extensive failure mostly of the German churches which did not resist the threat to the Jews early and effectively enough. A thorough analysis of the painful and burdening history of the relationship of Jews and Christians has become a central task for all churches.

Where the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ is abused to justify the "reprobation" of Israel or indifference towards the fate of the Jewish people the gospel itself is called into question as the

foundation of the existence of the church. The relationship with Israel is therefore for Christians and for the churches an indispensable part of the foundation of their faith.

The existence of Judaism is for the church a sign of God's faithfulness to his promises on which the church itself also depends in view of its manifold failures, especially in its relationship to the Jews. Jews and Christians will discover common ground as well as differences in their faith and in the life of church and synagogue in an encounter with the living testimony of the other. The dialogue between Jews and Christians lives from the fact that both do not suppress the testimony to the truth of their faith as they have experienced it but feed it into the dialogue and listen to each other endeavouring to understand one another. ...

Church and Israel (2001)

I.4.8. After the end of World War II, there were attacks on Jews in individual countries of Europe, and in many countries to this day there have been repeated outbreaks of open or hidden anti-Semitism. When the World Council of Churches was founded in 1948 in Amsterdam, a declaration against racism was adopted which also rejected all forms of anti-Semitism. Since the 60's a gradual readiness has been developing in theology and the church to find ways of having dialogue with Jews. This effort respects the fact that there are major reservations within Judaism or even rejection of such conversations. Christian theology has been increasing its efforts clearly to combat all forms of anti-Semitism and, at the same time, to see reflection on the relation between the Church and the people of Israel as a theological task.

I. 4.9. This review of the history of the church and especially the history of Christian theology shows that there were fundamental deficits in theological reflection on Judaism and on the special relation between the Church and Israel. Shortcomings in the church's teaching – in the realm of the understanding of scripture, the doctrine of God and also in Christology – were also a major contribution to the lack of effective resistance in many Reformation churches to the crimes of National Socialism. In view of this experience, irrespective of the special German responsibility, all the churches need to engage in new dogmatic reflection to re-define their relationship with Israel.

II.3.1. What has been said above has consequences for defining the relation between the Church and Israel. The Church understands itself to have been chosen freely by the God of Israel. It believes itself to be the community founded through faith in the revelation of the God of Israel in Jesus Christ; it sees Israel as the people which knows and honours God in the framework of the revelation to which its Holy Scriptures witness but without confessing Christ. Precisely on the basis of the revelation in Christ, it cannot be said that Israel should merely be seen as the past historical context of the Christ event and as "outdated" now. On the contrary, Israel continues to be the unchanging constitutive and far from outdated point of refer-ence for God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. Faith knows that in God's history with his creation, from the beginning to the end of time, the people of Israel continues to have its lasting place.

II.3.2. Christian preaching is public and is addressed to all people. It takes place in the context of dialogue with the religions of the world and in conversation with non-religious ideologies. To all of these Christians witness naturally to their faith in their words and actions.

The same applies to the encounter with Jews. The common features of witnessing to the God of Israel and confessing the sovereign act of election by this One God are a strong argument for the churches to refrain from any activity directed specifically to converting Jews to Christianity.

III.1.1.2. In the struggle against all forms of discrimination, racism and anti-Semitism, the Church knows it stands side by side with Israel. Christian congregations are more convincing if they are prepared to accept social responsibility even beyond their own realm. They will promote the

understanding of humanity and human rights on the basis of the Christian view of human beings. They must make an effort to present history correctly and to reflect critically on the contemporary situation with regard to xenophobia and racism and the attitude to other cultures, religions and ethnic minorities. As a framework for reflection which Christian congregations have already received from their own theological roots, 'Church and Israel' can be an important basis for this.

In their everyday life, congregations will be faced with different situations and thus look for different forms of involvement and communication. The endeavour to make people aware again of the history of Jewish communities which existed in their own setting in the past has awakened a new sensitivity for history and for the present in many Christian congregations.

III.1.1.3. The Church is united in solidarity with Israel for historical and theological reasons. This still applies when churches adopt a critical stand on the Arab-Israeli conflict and on contemporary political decisions by the government of the state of Israel. The churches must counteract all tendencies to denigrate the Zionist movement, which led to the founding of the state of Israel, or describe it as racist. The churches will support all efforts of the state of Israel and its neighbours, especially the Palestinian people, to establish and maintain an established, lasting and just peace in mutual respect. ...

III.1.2.4. The preaching of the Church must resist any kind of "forgetfulness of Israel". It must take seriously the Jews' special emphasis on the importance of the uniqueness and incomparability of God. The call to return to the One God links the Church and Israel. This is expressed especially when the Church's proclamation passes on the message of God's compassion as witnessed to in the Torah and in other parts of the Holy Scriptures of Israel, the Christian Old Testament. The Church and Israel witness in the same way that this compassion includes the entitlement of all human beings to justice and creation's right to integrity.

III.2. The common responsibility of Christians and Jews

In dealing with discrimination, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia in recent years, Christians and Jews in many places have taken a stand together and know that this cause unites them. "Justice, peace and the integrity of creation", the issues which became particularly important for many Christian churches in the conciliar process, are concerns and hopes which speak to both Christians and Jews on the basis of their own specific traditions. Jews and Christians can stand shoulder to shoulder in the struggle for the growing implementation of individual and social human rights. In recent years in Europe many people have experienced such joint commitment. These are encouraging signs that sin and injury must not always have the last word, and that – without forgetting or suppressing the past – common steps can carefully be taken together.

Concluding remarks

The churches of the Leuenberg Fellowship recognise and regret their share of responsibility and guilt in relation to the people of Israel in view of the centuries old history of hostility to the Jews. The churches recognise their false interpretations of biblical statements and traditions; they confess their guilt before God and humanity and ask God for forgiveness. They hold fast to the hope that God's Spirit will lead and accompany them on new paths.

The churches of the Leuenberg Fellowship still face the call of seeking dialogue with Jews in their own contexts and particular situations wherever possible. By listening together to the Holy Scriptures of Israel, the Christian Old Testament, ways to mutual understanding can be sought.

The parallel existence of the Church and Israel will not be replaced in history by their joining together (Rom. 11:25-32). The witness of the New Testament teaches that there are limits to theological knowledge and expression which human beings cannot transcend. In the words of the Apostle Paul (Rom. 11:33-36), the Church confesses,

“O the depths of the riches and wisdom and know-ledge of God!

How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!

For ‘who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?’

Or ‘who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory for ever. Amen.