

Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

Introduction of

A Time for Recommitment

Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians

Philip A. Cunningham

Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations, St. Joseph's University

Volume 4 (2009)

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol4>

The 2009 conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) took place in Berlin on July 5-8. Its theme was *A Time for Recommitment: Jewish-Christian Dialogue 70 Years after the Beginning of WWII and the Holocaust*. On July 5 the ICCJ issued the *12 Points of Berlin: A Time for Recommitment*.

A founding officer and secretary-treasurer of The Council of Centers on Christian-Jewish Relations, Dr. Philip Cunningham, addressed the assembly before the ceremony at which representatives from twenty-three countries signed the document.



The document signatories representing twenty-three countries, with ICCJ President, Dr. Deborah Weissman (front row, far left) and ICCJ Vice-President, Dr. Philip A. Cunningham (second row, far left).

I have been asked to introduce and provide the context for the major new statement of the International Council of Christians and Jews: *A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians*.

This twenty-two page document recalls and updates the historic August 1947 declaration *An Address to the Churches*, more commonly known as the *Ten Points of Seelisberg*. The *Ten Points* were the product of a gathering of about seventy Christians and Jews, who convened an *Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism* in Switzerland in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the atrocity of the Shoah.

In conversation with their Jewish colleagues, the Christian participants sought to reverse the long-standing Christian "teaching of contempt" for Jews and Judaism by urging the churches to remember certain fundamental ideas. Their ten theses, ground-breaking at the time, helped spark a new era of dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Jews and also began the formation of the ICCJ.

Today, just over sixty years later, the ICCJ revisits the work of Seelisberg with its new statement, *A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians*. Now written by both Christians and Jews from about a dozen countries, the statement begins with what we call the *Twelve Points (or Theses) of Berlin*, but whereas the original *Ten Points of Seelisberg* were described as *An Address to the Churches*, the new document addresses in turn Christians, then Jews, and

finally Christians, Jews, and members of other religious traditions.

The *Twelve Points* are followed by a narrative entitled, *The Story of the Transformation of Relationship*, which reviews the long, ambivalent history of relations between Christians and Jews, the developments of the last six decades, lessons learned from the new experience of dialogue, and finally looks ahead to the future continued building of the new relationship.

I would like to thank publicly all of the dozens of people who contributed to the composition of *A Time for Recommitment*. These include its authors, external readers, translators, various consultants, including the ICCJ Executive Board, and institutions that supported our work. I would like to thank in particular the Rev. Dr. John Pawlikowski, immediate past ICCJ president, and Rev. Dick Pruiksma, ICCJ general secretary, for their leadership in conceiving of the project, and to thank them also together with current ICCJ president Dr. Deborah Weissman for implementing and advancing it. Special thanks are also due to the external editor, Barbara King Lord, for her invaluable help in improving the style and wording of the text.

A Time for Recommitment is best understood as a photograph, a snapshot of the current state of Jewish-Christian relations as viewed by the authors—all veterans of interreligious dialogue—and the Executive Board of the ICCJ. Dealing as it does with several very sensitive issues, it was never expected to express total unanimity in

either content or expression. Its telling of the history of Jewish-Christian relations, for example, could have been told differently and equally legitimately by focusing on other countries or persons. As it stands, the document concentrates on bringing the history to the origins of the ICCJ.

Despite such unavoidable limitations, it is the hope of the ICCJ that the statement will inspire study and reflection among the ICCJ's member organizations and many others as well, encouraging everyone, as the title suggests, to recommit themselves to the work of rapprochement between two peoples so long divided by enmity and distrust. We owe it to those voices that were silenced by polemic, persecution, and pogrom to raise *our* voices in dialogue.

The past sixty years have seen an unprecedented level of conversation and collaboration between Jews and Christians. Through sustained dialogue we have learned much that could be helpful in addressing other conflicts between religions. We have learned that substantive dialogue requires an atmosphere of safety and trust and a respect for the religious integrity and distinctiveness of the other. We are convinced that authentic dialogue never seeks to persuade the other of our *own* faith convictions,

but rather to change one's own heart by understanding others on *their* own terms, to whatever degree possible.

We have learned that we each bring different issues, memories, fears, and hopes to the dialogue table. We have learned that substantive dialogue requires the ability to be self-critical, to recognize deep-seated patterns of thinking and prejudice, and a willingness to confront together the hurts and wounds of the past, even at the cost of recrafting our own self-understanding.

The Christian-Jewish dialogue has achieved a stunning measure of success. But the work of building a new relationship has only just begun. The inimical habits of almost two thousand years are not unlearned in a mere six decades. Misunderstandings erupt on a regular basis, members of both communities sometimes seek to revive theologies of disdain or dismissal, and the continuing deepening of true understanding and friendship can at times seem a hopeless dream.

However, we live at a time of unprecedented grace—a time of unparalleled opportunities to build a new relationship together. The International Council of Christians and Jews tonight invites everyone to join with us in seeing this as "A Time for Recommitment."

Thank you.