

Antisemitism FAQ

What are antisemitism and anti-Judaism?

- Antisemitism: The glossary of the United Church's study, *Bearing Faithful Witness (BFW)*, points to the history of the term **antisemitism**: "Literally meaning 'opposed to Semites' (i.e. Jews, Arabs and other Semitic peoples); usually used to mean hatred of Jews. The term was invented in Germany in the late 19th century to give Jew-hatred a scientific ring in the context of a pseudo-scientific study of the human races" (*BFW* 50).
- Appendix B of *Bearing Faithful Witness*, notes that "a strict distinction between anti-Judaism and antisemitism is difficult to make. ... '**Anti-Judaism**' ... is the negative stereotyping of Jews and Jewish beliefs. It is still current in Christian thinking and teaching and found in many approaches to the New Testament. It includes the idea of supersessionism which says that the Jews were rejected by God and replaced by the church. It singles out some Jewish leaders as the killers of Jesus" (*BFW* 75).
- Antisemitism is both overt and implicit attitudes and actions. The church is not immune.
- There is a noticeable increase in acts of antisemitism recently, including destructive acts of vandalism and physical violence. [StatsCan](#) tracks antisemitism and other hate crimes

Didn't antisemitism end after World War II?

- "After World War II, there was a great revulsion in Western society against Nazi-style antisemitism, but ... the power and complexity of the ideology of race, the dominant modern form of antisemitism ... certainly lingers. ... Few would dispute this claim; there is too much evidence to support it. Synagogues still have swastikas painted on them, Jewish cemeteries are still desecrated, Jewish communities are still victimized by terrorist attacks (not only in Israel). A new generation of anti-Semites dedicated to Holocaust denial has arisen" (Alan Davies, *BFW* 80).

When did antisemitism start in history?

- Antisemitism existed in the Classical period, hundreds of years before Jesus was born. It has continued to take varied forms over time and in different empires, although when it might be termed a religious prejudice and when it was a racial prejudice is up for debate.
- The distinctiveness of the Jewish people in relation to Christianity also appears in the earliest Christian scriptures. *Bearing Faithful Witness* notes, "Some scholars have claimed that the theological antisemitism of the church has no basis in the New Testament itself. Others have tried to prove the exact opposite. ... Both sides agree that the church has used conflict between Jesus and his followers and the Jewish leaders of the time to form its language and to justify its historical anti-Judaism" (*BFW* 22). The study carefully examines this issue in each of the gospels and other parts of the Christian testament. The Gospel of John, in particular, holds many difficult passages.

How does antisemitism show up in worship, theology, and scripture?

- When we perpetuate stereotypes or false information about Jews, we break the commandment not to “bear false witness against your neighbour” (Exodus 20:19).
- *Bearing Faithful Witness* enumerates just some of reasons and ways “false witness” happens (*BFW* 3):
 - because many of us grew up thinking that Jesus had invented the Last Supper;
 - because in our churches Jesus is rarely referred to as a Jew;
 - because there is rising anti-Judaism, antisemitism, white supremacy, and neo-Nazism in Canada and other countries in the name of Jesus Christ;
 - because we are finally understanding that Christian denial of Jesus’ Jewishness contributed to pogroms, the Holocaust, the refusal to admit refugees, and other horrors against Jewish people;
 - because a Jewish friend visiting in our churches could feel attacked by some of our scriptures and interpretation of them;
 - because there is little general knowledge of the context in which the scriptures were written and edited, and Bible study is not a priority for most United Church adults;
 - because our language and interpretation of scripture have not kept pace with our evolving faith;
 - because there is little reaction from the Christian community when synagogues and Jewish cemeteries are desecrated;
 - because there is a growing interest in exploring other faith traditions, and Christianity has a special relationship with Judaism;
 - because many of us make the erroneous assumption that, having read the Bible, we know much about Judaism, both historical and contemporary.
- Preaching and the liturgical calendar should be treated with care in light of histories and habits in relation to Judaism. Consider how practices during Advent and Lent have often perpetuated antisemitism and anti-Judaism. Here are some resources:
 - [Holy Week and the hatred of the Jews: How to avoid anti-Judaism this Easter](#) by Dr. Amy-Jill Levine
 - [Getting Ready for Christ\(mas\)](#)
 - [Uprooting Christian Anti-Judaism \(Advent\)](#)
 - [Antisemitism and Lent](#)
 - [Why Should Christians Care about Ongoing Antisemitism?](#)

Why does the Working Group exist?

- As part of The United Church of Canada’s aspiration to become an anti-racist denomination, we are called to continue to learn about how antisemitism is both implicit and explicit in our Christian faith, how antisemitism is experienced, and act against antisemitism as part of our commitment to resist all sins of racism in the Canadian context. The Working Group is taking up the work that was begun with the important study, *Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church-Jewish Relations Today*, which was authorized for study in 1997 by the 36th General Council and approved in 2003. It is

time to continue a church-wide consideration of our own scripture, history, theology, and worship, which too often have defined Christianity over and against Judaism. We focus on this work as Christians so that we can better relate to our Jewish siblings and act in solidarity against antisemitism. We also do this work so that we continue to have informed conversations within the church and in wider society about justice and peace. For instance, we hope this work will continue to inform our witness in worship and liturgy, theological education, and global, ecumenical, and inter-faith partnerships. We know this work comes with a fraught history in Christianity and in Canada, and that it intersects with current, vital justice issues in Palestine and Israel. We recognize that our actions and words have direct bearing on relationships with several global and ecumenical partners, and that many in the United Church carry deep and passionate commitments. And so, we persist in this work with humility and hope, for without countering antisemitism directly, we will be unable to live into all our anti-racist commitments. Let us together explore the opportunities for learning, challenge, and action.