
THINKING AND WORKING TOGETHER

Study and Action Suggestions
for Jewish and Christian Congregations
Prepared by
The Union of American Hebrew Congregations
The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
The National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

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Introduction

Many Jews and Christians meet one another in daily life, but only infrequently do they establish relationships that bring the synagogue and the church into their common life. Even those who seek to know one another as people of faith find that inter-religious understanding deeper than that promoted by annual pulpit exchanges or occasional lectures remains a rarity.

These materials have been developed to encourage Jews and Christians to engage one another through searching conversation and/or joint community action/reflection. The aim is to bring a small group from two neighboring congregations together over a period of six to twelve weeks for ongoing involvement and relationship building. Three model emphases are offered for use. Each includes opportunities to share patterns of living, explore roots in theology and faith traditions, and engage in common work. Sustained conversation, reciprocal hospitality, and shared activity are intended to be basic elements in the encounter.

Initiative for beginning these study or action plans may come from any of a variety of sources. In every case, it is hoped that a minister and a rabbi will become part of the planning group and will be facilitators. To these two, it will be helpful to add two laypersons, one from the synagogue and the other from the church. These persons will adapt the materials to their

local situation and will schedule, recruit for and lead group sessions. Joint leadership is essential not only to ensure adequate attention to the needs and interests of both congregations but also to encourage the participation of both communities.

The materials for the group sessions are modular in design. Any of the three emphases can be used in the form in which the model is presented, or parts from more than one emphasis can be tailored into a locally-designed plan. A set of guidelines on the Middle East will help groups facing questions on the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian situation together.

The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the National Council of Churches and many of its member communions stand ready to provide specialized resources and counsel to groups, as requested.

Particular thanks go to Rabbi Zari Weiss, the Rev. Robina Winbush, and the Rev. Dr. Jay Rock for their work on these modules.

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Preface

Why Is This Encounter Important Now?

1. Jews and Christians constitute two communities of faith, each called into existence by God and each uniquely gifted by God. God's call to both communities makes them partners in the hope and the day-to-day work of redemption. Through engaging one another in mutual conversation, we can participate in God's work of breaking down walls of separation and come to a new awareness of our shared vocation.
2. Jewish-Christian relations need to move beyond agreeableness and tolerance to a genuine theological and practical grappling together with concrete contemporary issues in our communities and our world. Jews and Christians live in the same world; we are subject to the same human pressures and responsibilities; and we are committed to the same human struggle for freedom, justice and peace for all people. Out of intentional engagement with each other and with the realities in which we live, we can discover ourselves and each other as human beings; we can develop a unity based on careful listening and response.
3. If we are to live and work together for the common good, we need to meet each other person to person. Such encounters can result in frank sharing of likenesses and differences; they can lead to an understanding of our diversities, to mutual trust and to intercommunal integrity.
4. Spiritual renewal and fresh commitment to the human scale in society may well come to both Christians and Jews as together we discover the theological and ethical heritage we share and as we apply it to social, economic and political issues of our time.
5. The growing religious pluralism of our time makes it increasingly important for us to understand each other in depth. Dialogue will not weaken the faith of those who participate but can be a vehicle for strengthening religious self-understanding and even personal faith.
6. The love of God is intolerant of all barriers that separate people – whether these barriers be racial, religious, economic, national or cultural. This love, so integral a part of the spiritual heritage of both Jews and Christians, makes us part of one family. God calls us to celebrate our common humanity, to seek mutual acceptance, and to become involved in the service of God's people together.

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Alternative Modules for Study and Action

1 Spiritual and Theological Emphasis

Planning

Schedule	Six sessions, expandable to a maximum of eight 90 minutes per session
Facilitators	Rabbi, minister, one Jewish and one Christian layperson
Group Size	Equal representation from each tradition 10 to 20 participants
Assignments	Objects to be brought to Session I Visits recommended before Session V (Optional reading suggestions possible, if prepared by facilitators)
Goals	Participants will gain an understanding of <ul style="list-style-type: none">• each other's spirituality• the theologies of our respective traditions. Participants will consider <ul style="list-style-type: none">• how our lives and relationships with one another are impacted by our spirituality and theology.

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Gathering Together

Session I: <u>Telling Our Stories</u>	Advance assignment: Bring an item that reflects or tells some important part of your spiritual journey (e.g. candlestick, picture, Bible, personal cross). Share – individual stories, making use of what you have brought.
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A facilitator will offer a brief synopsis of the stories at the end of the session.

Overview:

At some point in the session, a facilitator will outline general plans for the following five sessions.

Assignment after Session I:

- Write down what you believe others' stereotypes of you are (as a Jew or as a Christian).
- Write down the stereotypes you hold of others (as Christians or Jews).

Keep what you have written. It is not for immediate sharing.

Session II:
Looking at
Our Stories

Analyze and Discuss:

- What realizations or questions arose for you as a result of listening to each other's stories?
- How has your faith developed over the years?
 - What was your concept of God when you were a child? -
 - What is your concept of God now?
 - What changes have occurred? Why?

The facilitators will summarize, noting similarities and differences.

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Session III:
Revelation

(At the discretion of the group, this session may be expanded to two. Each session should allow at least 45 minutes for group discussion.)

Study:

The facilitators will lead a brief study on each tradition's understanding of revelation, using Hebrew and Christian scriptures (see Bibliography).

Discuss:

- What does the text say happened?
- What are the implications?
- Specifically, how do we understand God's revelation to humankind?
- How does this influence our understanding of our relationships with God and with one another?

Facilitators will summarize, noting similarities and differences.

Session IV:
The Messiah/the
Messianic Age

(At the discretion of the group, this session may be expanded to two. Each session should allow at least 45 minutes for group discussion.)

Study:

The facilitators will lead a brief study on each tradition's understanding of the Messiah/Messianic Age, using Hebrew and Christian scriptures (see Bibliography).

Define —

Messiah and Messianic Age.

Discuss:

- Who or what in each tradition represents the Messiah or Messianic Age? What are the implications?
- What does the Messiah/Messianic Age bring and/or promise to bring?
- What is the individual's responsibility toward bringing about the Messiah/Messianic Age?

Facilitators will summarize, noting similarities and differences.

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Session V:
Our Liturgies

Recommended advance assignment:

Prior to this session, it is strongly recommended that participants attend each other's services.

- Preferably, Jews will attend a Christian service that includes the Lord's Supper. (Note that some congregations celebrate the Lord's Supper once monthly. Plan ahead.)
- Preferably, Christians will attend a Saturday morning Shabbat service.

Examine —

your respective liturgies. (Use appropriate written materials for reference.)

Of what do our liturgies consist?

- From the Christian tradition, look at the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Supper liturgy.
- From the Jewish tradition, look at the Shema and the Torah service.

Discuss:

- What do the prayers/parts of the liturgy tell us about our beliefs about God?
- What do they tell us about the role of scripture?
- How do we/can we translate the spiritual experience back into our own individual and communal lives?

Session VI:
New Insights

Advance assignment:

Bring the list of stereotypes made after the first session. Contents will only be shared as participants choose to do so.

Look at your lists.

See in what ways your stereotypes have been challenged or have changed.

Discuss:

- What insights did you gain from studying/discussing aspects of another community's faith tradition?
- What insights did you gain about your own tradition?
- Is such dialogue on these issues helpful? In what way?
- What are the possibilities for future study/dialogue together?

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2 Religion and Social Action Emphasis

Planning

Schedule	Six sessions, expandable to seven 90 minutes per session
Facilitators	Rabbi, minister, one Jewish and one Christian layperson
Group Size	Equal representation from each tradition; 10 to 20 participants
Assignments	Visit or interview service/advocacy project for Session IV (Optional reading suggestions possible, if prepared by facilitators)
Goal	Participants will gain an understanding of <i>how the theology of each tradition informs each's participation in society.</i> Participants will consider <i>the possibility and meaning of joint social/political action.</i>

Gathering Together

Session I:

Getting Acquainted

Discuss:

Who are we?

- I feel most a part of my religious tradition when _____.

- One of my major concerns/involvements in our society (nation, community, neighborhood) is _____.
- I feel closest to God when _____.

Overview:

At some point in the session, a facilitator will outline general plans for the following five sessions.

Session II:

Scripture and Social Involvement

Discuss:

Archbishop Desmond Tutu asks what Bible it is that people are reading when they say that religion and politics don't mix. Do you think that our scriptures mandate that we be involved in response to social and political issues? How?

- What scriptural bases are especially significant to you in your involvement? or
- What do you think the following passages are asking of us?

Deuteronomy 5:4-9 Deuteronomy 30:11-19
 Exodus 22:20-23:3 Luke 6:32-49
 1 Kings 21:1-22 Isaiah 58:1-11
 Leviticus 19:1-18 Matthew 25:31-46
 Mark 12:28-34

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Session III:

How Our Traditions Shape Our Responses

Discuss:

• In shaping our engagement with the issues and problems of today, we are guided not only by scripture, but also by the history and traditions of our communities. How do historical influences and elements of the Jewish and Christian traditions affect our points of view and our choices?

- What effect on our engagement do the following have?
 - the experience of being members of a cultural minority or majority
 - the memory of the Holocaust
 - understanding the human role of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world)
 - the idea that allegiance to God in some cases can call us to confront or even defuse the authority of the state
 - the experience of exile
 - our searches for religious freedom

(At the discretion of the group, this discussion may require more than one session.)

Session IV:
Looking At a Project

Advance assignment:

Arrange for one of the following, during or prior to this session:

- Visit or serve as a group in an ongoing service/advocacy program/project sponsored by a religious community.
- Meet with leaders from such a project for a thorough briefing concerning
 - its aims
 - what it does to achieve them
 - who is involved
 - the actual and potential role of local congregations and people

Discuss:

- What caught your attention in what you saw or heard?
- Do you think this project makes a difference? Does it meet its aims? Does it do something you think is important?
- What biblical or traditional teachings are given concrete expression in this work?
- Is one of our communities more comfortable than the other with this kind of project? Is it a practical or prophetic service that both of our traditions can affirm?

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Session V:
Principles for Political Action

Discuss:

- How do we balance the challenge to voice strongly held commitments in the political arena with the need to affirm and include a diversity of viewpoints within and between our own communities?
- On what issues would you be willing to support a strong stand by your congregation/national body, even though some members will be offended, disaffected, or feel unrepresented? When, if ever, do divisions within the community make it necessary not to take a stand?
- In regard to support of a political appointment or candidate —
 - Is it appropriate for the synagogue or church to be involved?
 - Is it right that support or non-support should hinge on an appointee's or candidate's position on one particular issue (e.g., abortion, arms control, Israel, integration)?

Session VI:
Wrap-Up

Brainstorm —

thinking back on the previous sessions:

- What kinds of political or social action might the group consider joining together to do in the future?

Discuss:

- In what ways do Christians and Jews standing together—perhaps with

members of other religious communities, as well-potentially have a more profound impact on the political process together than separately?

•What are the issues or areas in which we have found agreement?

Disagreement?

How was this time?

– What was most valuable?

– What was most repeatable?

– What should be skipped?

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3 Action Reflection Emphasis

Planning

Schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intensive study/action over eight weeks, six weeks for action and two for discussion• Times and meeting lengths for Week One group meeting and Week Eight final meeting to be set in advance
Facilitators	Rabbi, minister, one Jewish and one Christian layperson
Group Makeup	Generally equal participation from each tradition
Goals	<p>Participants will gain an understanding of <i>each other, through working together on a jointly selected community project.</i></p> <p>Participants will reflect on <i>this cooperative work through the lenses of their respective religious traditions.</i></p>

Gathering and Acting Together

Often, when two or more religious communities gather with the hope of dealing with an issue of social justice, much time is spent in study; plans to embark upon a project become mired. This model encourages the communities to start doing something first and then to spend some time studying the religious mandates behind the agreed action.

Volunteer Service Project

In this model, it is expected that the congregations agree upon an issue of social justice that must be righted in the community in which they are resident. Within the broad topic of economic justice, a myriad of projects suggest themselves; for example:

- soup kitchen
- food pantry
- evening shelter
- daytime drop-in shelter
- transitional housing
- sandwich distribution
- job counseling
- job training
- emergency day care for children of working parents

It is advisable that the congregations investigate the many projects already existing in their communities. Once they have agreed upon a specific area on which to work, they should set aside one evening or day per week for six weeks during which to send a volunteer team to assist in the agreed community project. For example, if there is a food pantry in the community, the two congregations might put together a volunteer team that would go to the pantry once a week to bag and distribute foodstuffs. This would allow the congregations the opportunity to see if they can work together. Further, the congregations would be able to determine if this time-limited action is a prelude to the establishment

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of a long-term joint project. Even if there is no desire to carry on a project beyond the suggested six-week time period, the experience will enable the volunteers to study the experience and discuss the religious mandates that support the action.

Advocacy Project

It is also possible that, for a six-week period, the two communities might dedicate their time to advocacy rather than direct service. This could include:

- analysis of legal and social services available to the poor in the area
- consultations with elected officials on pending legislative actions to benefit the poor
- meetings with social service agency heads regarding areas that the private sector can assist
- town hall meetings with the poor, to see if there are areas of need not being addressed by present governmental and social service agencies, but where assistance could be provided by the religious community.

Long-term Planning

Should the experience prove fruitful and the congregations jointly agree that a long-term response to the community's ills is necessary, this module will serve as a starting point for long-range planning. The congregations must, in concert, identify a possible project that will have immediate benefits for the community and that is feasible for them to mount. Requirements for persons to handle the

project must be analyzed and their availability determined. Possible governmental regulations must be investigated. Further, a step-by-step plan of action must be constructed, complete with names of individuals who will be responsible for completion of each step.

Schedule

The following time schedule is suggested for an eight-week period:

Week One: Discussion and Planning

- Discuss possibilities for joint action.
- *Make arrangements and assignments* for volunteer activities and/or advocacy opportunities.

Week Two to Week Seven: Action

- *Carry out* your agreed plan.

Week Eight: Discussion and Evaluation

- Discuss religious mandates behind your action:
 - Reflect on your work and study the religious issues that compel your action.
 - Use Source Material for Discussion (below) for discussion, guided by a facilitator, in light of the actual experiences of the participants in the project.
- *Evaluate* the results of your service/advocacy planning and experiences together.
- *Discuss* possible follow-up activities or long-range plans.

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Source Material for Discussion

Vyikra Rabbah, the Midrash on Leviticus:

The poor person is the lowliest of God's creatures,
not only in the eyes of others but in his or her eyes as well.

Proverbs 10:15:

M'chetat dalim raysham-

The ruin of the poor is their poverty.

Exodus Rabbah (Mishpatim 31:14):

If all of the afflictions in the world were placed on one side of a scale
and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all.

Isaiah 58:5-7:

Is this the fast I look for?

A day of self-affliction?
Bowling your head like a reed?
... Is this what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to God?
Is not this the fast I look for:
to unlock the shackles of injustice,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every cruel chain?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and to bring the homeless poor into your house?

Talmud Shabbat 102b:

There is no poverty in a place of wealth.

Isaiah 58:9-12,14:

If you remove the chains of oppression . . . ,
if you make sacrifices for the hungry,
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then shall your light shine in the darkness,
and your night become bright as noon;
God will guide you always;
the Holy One will stave your thirst in drought
and renew your body's strength;
you shall be like a watered garden,
like an unfailing spring.
Your people shall rebuild the ancient ruins,
and lay the foundations for ages to come.
You shall be called, "Repairer of the breach,
Restorer of streets to dwell in" . . .
This is God's promise to you.

Talmud Betza 32b:

The world is darkened for one who has to look forward to the table of others for sustenance.

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Luke 14:12-14:

When you are having guests for lunch or supper,
do not invite your friends, your brothers or other relations, or your rich neighbors.
They will only ask you back again and so you will be repaid.
But when you give a party, ask the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.
That is the way to find happiness,
because they have no means of repaying you.
You will be repaid on the day when the righteous rise...

Matthew 7:7-12:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives,
and everyone who searches finds,
and for everyone who knocks,
the door will be opened.

Is there anyone among you who,
if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?
Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?
If you then, who are evil,
know how to give good gifts to your children,
how much more will your Father in heaven
give good things to those who ask him!

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you:
for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew 25:34-40:

Then the king will say [to the righteous],
“You have my Father's blessing;
come, enter and possess the kingdom
that has been ready for you since the world was made.
For when I was hungry, you gave me food;
when thirsty, you gave me drink;
when I was a stranger you took me into your home,
when naked you clothed me;
when I was ill you came to my help,
when in prison you visited me.”
Then the righteous will reply,
“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you,
or thirsty and gave you drink,
a stranger and took you home,
or naked and clothed you?
When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?”
And the king will answer,
“I tell you this: anything you did for one of my kindred here, however humble, you did for me.”

Guidelines for Discussing the Middle East — Assistance for Christians and Jews in Dialogue

When Jews and Christians gather together, they pledge to maintain an atmosphere of trust and often find themselves talking about the Middle East, respect in which discussion will be open and even when it has not been a part of the agenda for a particular meeting or discussion. Some guide-lines may be helpful in anticipation of this possibility.

1. Keep in mind the original agreement about the basis for your discussion or dialogue.

If you have agreed on a particular purpose, do not allow a small group, an individual, or people of only one of the two faith communities to redirect discussion to a different purpose without prior agreement of the whole group. For example, if you planned to talk about Jewish and Christian spirituality, do not begin discussion of the political situation in the Middle East without a conscious group decision to do so.

2. If you decide to have a serious discussion about the Middle East, make available useful materials for the whole group.

For materials, you may refer to [the office of your religious community] that facilitates your work in interfaith relations. You may have other things you would like the group to use.

3. Do not expect agreement.

Christians and Jews have different theological traditions, community membership, histories, and expectations about the Middle East. Work toward greater agreement, as possible. Place emphasis on peace and justice and self-identity of all parties before you begin to speak prematurely about “reconciliation.”

4. Pledge to maintain an atmosphere of trust and respect in which discussion will be open and honest.

Maintain styles of speaking which demonstrate respect. Do not ask questions or make statements in a way that intimidates others or makes them feel they are being judged. Express judgments toward ideas but not persons.

5. Agree that you will not use statements made in trustful, respectful discussion to speak harshly or take action against others after your meetings are finished.

6. Study information from various positions.

In addition to sharing facts, talk about personal experiences. Respect experiences of one another as having integrity.

7. At times of disagreement, state what you have heard being said by the previous speaker who has expressed a different viewpoint before you respond with your own ideas.

Do not proceed until the previous speaker has agreed that your re-statement reflects his/her statement accurately. Wait for clarification, if necessary.

8. Indicate points of agreement before beginning to describe points of disagreement with those who have spoken earlier.

attempt to persuade others to your particular viewpoint.

9. It will be more valuable to clarify your concerns, experiences, and convictions than to

Seek the same clarity from your dialogue partners.

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