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Prepared by the Consultative Panel on Lutheran–Jewish Relations of the office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Your ideas about these topics are very welcome and will be considered by the Panel in its further work. To submit personal reflections or the results of a group discussion, please use the accompanying Response and Evaluation form or simply send a letter to the ELCA office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations at the address below, or send an email to erinfo@elca.org.

Further information on Jewish-Christian relations, including a downloadable form of these “Talking Points,” may be found at www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations/Christian-Jewish-Relations/Talking-Points.aspx. See also the comprehensive set of resources on the ecumenical web site www.jcrelations.net.

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TALKING POINTS

#6

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

JEWISH CONCERN FOR THE STATE OF ISRAEL

The State of Israel holds a special place in the life and thought of the Jewish people. The need for Christians to understand the depth of Jewish concern for Israel is especially urgent as we seek to participate faithfully in the quest for peace and justice for all peoples in the Middle East.

For much of its existence, the Jewish people has lived in diaspora, that is, dispersed among the nations. Although the land of biblical Israel was home to some Jews throughout this history, most lived as minorities within other nations. At times they enjoyed cordial relations with the majority population, but often they became scapegoats for social problems and were subjected to vilification and violence. Always they kept alive the memory of their biblical homeland, and classic Jewish liturgy makes repeated reference to the Land of Israel, even concluding its two major festivals – Passover and the Day of Atonement – with “Next year in Jerusalem!”

This hope bore new historical fruit in the 1880s and 1890s, when Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe moved to the Holy Land. Their movement was connected to the scriptural promise of a return to Zion, Jerusalem’s holy mountain. (Hence the term “Zionism” is attached to various Jewish nationalist movements, though they have interpreted the scriptural promise in

“Talking Points” is a set of eight leaflets issued by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations to set forth propositions for discussion and debate on topics in Christian-Jewish relations. These “Talking Points” are not intended as position papers, but as discussion starters, with the hope of eliciting a broad range of responses to the point as stated in the box above. See back page for information on how to offer feedback.

different ways.) In many places, Jewish and Arab neighbors lived in harmony, but tension and conflict were present from the first and grew over time. A plan developed by the United Nations to partition the land was accepted by the Jewish leadership but opposed by the Arab governments, and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was met with an invasion by the surrounding nations. In this and later conflicts, Israel defended itself and, in the process, expanded its territorial control. Palestinian aspirations for an independent state and Israeli concern for national security have been the themes of both continuing conflict and approaches to peace. However, extremist elements, mutual distrust of intentions, and cycles of resentment of Israeli policies and Palestinian responses have repeatedly undermined initiatives from both sides. Efforts to achieve a just and peaceful coexistence in the region have also been complicated by the dynamics of the Cold War and other international conflicts.

Contemporary American Jews have differing views regarding the policies of the Israeli government, but the continued existence of the State of Israel is very important to them. The ability of Jews anywhere in the world to claim Israeli citizenship is especially valued as a safeguard against the tactic used by the Nazis of declaring Jews “stateless” and thereby removing them from the protection of international law.

Christian hope has not usually focused on any specific land, but on a new heaven and a new earth where God’s rule will bring peace and justice to all people. This vision sets the standard for all nations; governments serve under God’s blessing or judgment depending on whether they promote such peace and justice or undermine it. From this standpoint, the State of Israel, with its democratic ideals and cultural achievements, has been a blessing and a haven for Jews in a world where one-third of their people were annihilated in the Holocaust. At the same time, as a sovereign state, Israel has the moral obligation to use its power responsibly in a situation in which a displaced Palestinian population also seeks independence, security, and a peaceful future in its own land.

Assessments of the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian situation will differ, not only between Jews and Christians but also within each group. Both Israelis and Palestinians can at various times be especially vulnerable, eliciting appropriate Christian concern, advocacy, and action. Efforts to contribute to peaceful coexistence will be most effective when they are grounded in serious study of the history of

the conflict, respect for the rights and grievances of all parties, and prudent concern for the use of power in a highly charged and delicately balanced situation. Solutions will not be found by the direct application of biblical prophecies or apocalyptic scenarios, but by prayerful reflection on practical possibilities, guided by an ethic of faith active in love. In the quest for a just peace, Christians will seek to maintain open dialogue with all participants and to help bear the pain of more than a century of conflict.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What similarities and differences would you see between a Jewish love for the land of Israel and such phenomena as the nostalgic regard that many Americans have for their ethnic homelands; respect for the sacredness of church buildings; patriotism and concern for national security; reverence for the physical elements of the sacraments? What are other possible analogies?
2. What is the relation between seeing the modern State of Israel as a nation “like all the nations” and the idea of Israel as “a light to the nations?” By what standards should Israel determine its actions and policies?
3. Is the use of violence ever justified as a means to social and political ends? Under what circumstances? How can a continual cycle of retaliatory violence be broken, or avoided in the first place?
4. The conflict in the Middle East is sometimes interpreted in terms of religious warfare, with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim factions arguing polarized positions on the basis of fundamentalist readings of history and scripture. Thus religion may be used to justify and even escalate contempt and violence. How can one envision religion playing a more constructive role?
5. How do we bring concerns for Palestinians, and our special relationship with Palestinian Lutherans in Jerusalem and the West Bank, into our dialogue and cooperation with Jews? How can we support joint Palestinian-Israeli initiatives, for peace and justice?