

## TACKLING TRIUMPHALISM

PTS ALUMS MOUNT GRASSROOTS  
EFFORT TO CURB ANTI-SEMITISM

by Ray Waddle

After the terrorism of September 11, the Rev. Janet Tuck Hilley (M.Div. '88) of Nashville wanted to do something, anything, to reassure herself and her city that the world was not going mad.

On 9/11, religious rage became a force of calculated catastrophe. Was there any hope, now, of challenging the ancient human predilection to do violence in the name of God, and breaking through to a new spirit of peacemaking?

"We were all traumatized on that day—it leaves a longing for all God's people to live as one and end the misuse of religion," Hilley recalled recently. "In Nashville, we were determined to find a positive way to respond."

Hilley and fellow Princeton Seminary alumnus the Rev. Trace Haythorn (M.Div. '92), both Presbyterian ministers, used their interfaith contacts to initiate a historic season of soul-searching for Nashville's broader religious community, mostly Christians and Jews.

Their focus was not Islam, but a perennial conflict closer to their own religious heritage as Christians, unfinished business going back 2,000 years.

For six weeks in the fall of 2002, believers all over town studied, head on, the history of Christian anti-Semitism.

It was a painful encounter with the dark side of church history—anti-Jewish sentiments in the New Testament, violence against Jews during the Crusades, the Nazi annihilation of Jews in the Holocaust.

Yet 1,000 people participated, meeting weekly in small groups, a record number for a local interfaith effort.

"The world is uncertain. So much talk of war, divisions. In such a climate, people are hungry to explore differences and how to handle them," Hilley said.

"They want to explore old hurts, find points of contact, and form new relationships that are warm and mutual."

By the end of the fall, participants emerged with a new understanding—a new language—for expressing mutual religious respect. It led to deeper friendships between Christians and Jews, higher trust levels between clergy, a better exchange of information about faith.

Steered by Hilley, Haythorn, and others, this unusual grassroots experiment in community-building gathered momentum in unexpected ways.

By December, a remarkable public document was forged from the experience. It declared that it is wrong for any religion to claim exclusive access to God and salvation, and has been signed by more than 200 local religious leaders and laypeople. The statement implied, to most of the signers, that Christians should no longer evangelize Jews.

Coming from the heart of the Bible belt, the public declaration made national news—and also inspired a few fierce denunciations from Christians who feel a duty to preach salvation to Jews. But it drew support from Christian and Jewish laypeople and clergy across the state. The Rev. Todd Jones (M.Div. '79), pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Nashville and a member of the PTS Board of Trustees, was involved in hammering out the statement.

"It's an attempt to build a bridge," he said. "Christians and Jews hold so much more in common than what divides us."

He said the statement came after several days of difficult discussion among the Christian leadership. Jones personally tilts to a more conservative position that holds out for the particularity of the gospel, and believes it is still appropriate to share the gospel with Jews. But he said the public statement carries an important message of humility.

"It reminds us there is no cause for arrogance," he said. "It says God knows everything, we don't. All Christians should show some humility and reticence about things only God knows."

The declaration, published in December 2002 as an advertisement in the local daily newspaper, *The Tennessean*, was called "An Advent Affirmation." It read as follows:

"As clergy and members of various traditions of Christian faith, we affirm the centrality to our faith of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we accept as the Christ. This faith is for us life-determining.

"In faithfulness to the gospel, we also affirm that it is wrong—ethically, morally, and spiritually—for anyone, whether individual, group, church, or religion, to claim exclusive access to God or God's grace, blessing, or salvation. That knowledge belongs alone to the one God.

"Claims of exclusivity by Christians and others have played a self-justifying role in causing untold human suffering for many centuries, especially and most consistently to Jews. We deplore these inhumane acts, which violate the gospel, and we are ashamed that so many have been committed in the name of Christ."

The Nashville clergy have since received inquiries on how to start such interfaith interaction in other states.

Haythorn, who is associate pastor of Nashville's Westminster Presbyterian Church, said he's pleased at the interest.

"I think all of us need to articulate to others why we believe what we believe," he said. "So much of our culture is competitively based: At the end of the day, someone has to win, someone has to lose. But God is the one who decides in the end about every one of us. My orientation is to live out the Good News as I know it. If we can't name what our purpose is in the world without defining it over against what the Jews are, I don't think we have a reason to exist."

The anchor of the six-week study group discussions—the assigned reading—was a massive book, *Constantine's Sword* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), the 756-page historical study by Catholic writer and memoirist James Carroll. Carroll is sharply critical of church history and urges Christian repentance for the blood on the church's hands and a new attitude of acceptance toward Judaism.

To kick off the study, organizers brought Carroll to town to give two lectures that outlined his arguments. Several hundred people turned out, a sign that the history of anti-Semitism had struck a nerve with the mostly Christian audience.

Making it all possible was the city's main interfaith organization, the Covenant Association, where Hilley is executive director. About 70 local congregations—Christian and Jewish, mostly mainline moderate or liberal-leaning—are Covenant members. It was Covenant that signed up congregations to host study sessions around the book and invited Carroll to speak. Haythorn helped create a study booklet that outlined Carroll's book in reader-friendly form.

Christian attempts at accord with Jews—formal apologies for anti-Semitism, declarations that God's covenant with Jews is forever legitimate—have been a significant theme in contemporary religious life for 30 years or more. Until recently, however, those truces and entreaties were mostly made at the highest denominational levels, seldom at the grassroots.

In Nashville, though, the network of local congregations—a close-knit group of Christians and Jews sharing many of the same values—rallied around the study.

"These are people in our city who are passionate about talking about important things," Hilley said.

Discussion centered around how to interpret New Testament passages that appear anti-Jewish (for example, John 8:44), and what the Christian theological attitude should be toward Jews. The mood of the meetings was sometimes self-questioning—Is the New Testament anti-Semitic? Is it immoral for post-Holocaust Christians to evangelize Jews?

"The argument that the gospel writers may have misinterpreted Jesus—that took some people by surprise," said the Rev. Chris Dungan, a parish associate at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Nashville.

"You don't hear that every day. But it leads to a discussion of the authority of Scripture. What does our tradition teach about scriptural authority? Does the text under discussion promote love of God and love of neighbor? Carroll's point seems to be: Don't forget the context, you can't look at anything out of context."

Participants were not unanimous in their theological affirmations. Haythorn said he found a wide range of opinion about the church's attitude toward Judaism.

"Should we evangelize Jews? The far-left position was present: That is, if we all believe in God, isn't that enough? But the more conservative viewpoint was there, too: If we're not calling others to Jesus we aren't doing what we should," Haythorn said.

Carroll used his Nashville lectures to argue that the West has done little to face up to the theology it embraced during the Crusades some 900 years ago, a theology that led to fatal hostility to both Jews and Muslims.

The Crusades, launched as a series of military campaigns to wrest the Holy Land from Muslim control, was the first time that violence was defined as a sacred act by the Christian church, he said. Jesus' death on the cross replaced the resurrection as the central image of Christian identity.

"Jews had lived unmolested in Europe for 1,000 years," Carroll said. "When the death of Jesus was put in the center of the [Western] Christian imagination, Jews were at risk as never before."

It set in motion a deadly chain of consequences, he said—new emphasis on converting Jews, new coercion of Jews in the ghettos, new fanatical legends about Jewish responsibility for Christ's death, mutant new hatreds of Jews that led to the Nazis' murderous policies in 20th-century Europe.

"After 1096, Jews would never be safe again," he said.

Carroll said the Crusades had disastrous consequences for the church's relations with Islam, too. The West has had disdain for Islam and its achievements ever since, he suggested. That history festers even now at the heart of the current war on terrorism.

"As this war continues we must understand that God's heart is broken...by the long trail of misbegotten choices. We Christians must confess we have contributed to this..."

Carroll received a standing ovation for his talks, which framed the local discussions over the next six weeks. Many participants affirmed Carroll's point that Christians should respect Judaism on its own terms and acknowledge that Jews remain the chosen people of God. To claim that Christianity supersedes Judaism will only continue the grim history of disrespect and violence toward Jews.

Haythorn's own view is that Jesus the Jewish rabbi came not to replace the Old Covenant but to renew it.

"We are invited into the Old Covenant as gentiles," he said. "What had been an ethnically centered religion became an invitation to the whole world to experience Yahweh."

The formal study ended in November with a plenary gathering where Jews and Christians, in groups of 5–10 each, met at tables for animated, amiable chat about the meaning of Jewish rituals and Christian theology and whatever else came to mind.

"The room was just bubbling," Hilley said. "There were amazing conversations going on. The study sessions had transformed relationships."

Afterward, clergy organizers felt deeply compelled to bring out a public statement that conveyed their sense of new theological possibilities locally, and the Advent Affirmation was born.

Building on that, two gatherings were arranged in February 2003 to give laypeople a forum to ask questions of clergy about Christianity and Judaism—sort of an "everything you wanted to know about the other religion but were afraid to ask" program.

Also in the planning is an annual lecture series that would feature an internationally known speaker on the subject of interfaith relations and mutual respect.

Looking back over an eventful year in local interfaith relations, Hilley said a passage from Genesis 1 comes to mind as a cornerstone of her own motivation.

"The last verse is 31: God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good," she said. "This isn't an opinion; it is a statement. My response is to live my life by taking this seriously, and that means doing what I can to foster relationships in my community. That public declaration was important. We needed to express that we are in a new day, a new alignment of relations between Christians and Jews. And now, we don't want to drop the ball here. We want to continue this spirit." ■



Nashville-area ministers Trace Haythorn and Janet Hilley helped bring 1,000 local religious leaders and laypeople together to confront "the misuse of religion," especially Christian anti-Semitism. The interfaith dialogue culminated in "An Advent Affirmation," which called for a humbler, more inclusive Christian faith.

Photo: Ray Waddle

"In faithfulness to the gospel, we also affirm that it is wrong—ethically, morally, and spiritually—for anyone, whether individual, group, church, or religion, to claim exclusive access to God or God's grace, blessing, or salvation. That knowledge belongs alone to the one God.

Claims of exclusivity by Christians and others have played a self-justifying role in causing untold human suffering for many centuries, especially and most consistently to Jews. We deplore these inhumane acts, which violate the gospel, and we are ashamed that so many have been committed in the name of Christ."

—from "An Advent Affirmation"  
(December 2002)

Ray Waddle was religion editor at *The Tennessean* from 1984 to 2001. He is now a writer and lecturer in Nashville. His book of meditations on the psalms, *Spirit Rising: News from the Psalms*, will be published by *Upper Room Books* in early 2004.