

February 19, 2004

Dear Clergy,

You are no doubt aware of the considerable controversy surrounding the soon-to-be-released Mel Gibson film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Some who saw the early cuts of the film have voiced concerns that the film might lead to a revival and reinforcement of ancient stereotypes and generate religious polarization. Others have found it to be spiritually uplifting. While we all have concerns about the content of the film and the tensions it may create, we are committed to freedom of expression and would do nothing to challenge those who choose to go see it.

As leaders representing several faith communities, we are dedicated to the path of inter-religious understanding and dialogue. Great strides have been made in the area of interfaith relations in the past 50 years, progress that has utterly transformed the relationship between Christians and Jews and has led to greater understanding, compassion and tolerance. Indeed, there are numerous ongoing Christian-Jewish dialogues and partnerships in the Washington area that reflect this spirit of understanding. It is our responsibility as faith leaders to ensure that this progress continues unabated and that our religious community in the Metro DC area serves as a model for inter-religious harmony. While at the end of the day, each of us may come to view this film differently, we sincerely hope that we can use the controversy surrounding it as a vehicle for positive instruction and dialogue.

In that spirit, we would ask that you consider doing the following:

- First, please review the enclosed "Dialogue Guide," which offers a constructive approach to discussing the film between Christians and Jews. We see the dialogue guide as a way of beginning a dialogue and earnestly hope that it will merely be a first-step in a long-term relationship with another congregation. For additional dialogue sessions, see the enclosed "Walking God's Path."
- Second, the dialogue guide presents an extraordinary outreach opportunity to promote our commitment to mutual respect. We urge congregations to reach out to a Christian or Jewish congregation nearby and use the guide as a resource. We have a team prepared to help you identify and reach out to other congregations in your area. Please contact David Bernstein at the American Jewish Committee at (202) 785-4200 x15 or [bernsteind@ajc.org](mailto:bernsteind@ajc.org); Ron Halber at the Jewish Community Council at (301) 770-0881 or [rhalber@jcouncil.org](mailto:rhalber@jcouncil.org); or Rev. Ken Howard at 240-631-2800 or [VicOfNick@aol.com](mailto:VicOfNick@aol.com) for more information or to help identify a congregational partner.
- Third, we are hosting a **special screening of the film for clergy and religious leaders** at the Avalon Theatre, 5612 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, DC (two blocks south of Chevy Chase Circle) on **March 3 at 9 am** followed by a clergy dialogue. Please RSVP to (202) 785-4200 x26 or [rulfn@ajc.org](mailto:rulfn@ajc.org).
- Fourth, we encourage you to speak to your congregation in sermons, through your bulletins and in your teaching in a spirit of reconciliation and inter-religious understanding consistent with the approach taken in the dialogue guide.

Sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Scott Ickert  
Pastor Resurrection Lutheran Church, Arlington, VA

Peter Rosenblatt  
President, American Jewish Committee Washington Chapter

Sophie Hoffman  
President, Jewish Community Council

Mike Goggin  
Director, Congregational Partnerships Project  
Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington

Father Paul Lee  
Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Archdiocese of Washington

Rev. Ken Howard  
St. Nicholas Episcopal Church

Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal  
Shaare Torah

Rev. Dr. Clark Lobenstine  
Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington

Rabbi Warren Stone  
Washington Board of Rabbis

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# Dialogue Guide to The Passion

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## Introduction

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The Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ* has already stirred controversy. Some have voiced concerns that it might lead to a revival and reinforcement of ancient stereotypes and generate religious polarization. Others who saw early cuts of the film found it to be spiritually uplifting. By reaching out to a Christian or Jewish congregation in your area, we very much hope that the film can become, rather than a source of polarization, a catalyst for positive instruction and dialogue. For those interested in the ways that Christian scholars have looked at the historical events surrounding the crucifixion and death of Jesus, we include the following background.

## Historical Background

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This background is adapted from *Facts, Faith, and Film-Making: Jesus' Passion and Its Portrayal, A Study Guide for Viewers and Reviewers*, The Christian Scholars Group ([www.bc.edu/csg](http://www.bc.edu/csg)), and was meant for Christians. We hope that Jewish participants will also appreciate learning how a prominent group of Christian scholars understands these events.

Historically, some things are fairly clear.

- *Jesus* was a Jew with many Jewish followers. Pontius Pilate saw him as a very popular leader who was called “King of the Jews” by some followers. What became modern day Christianity and modern Judaism are descendants of what was at the time of Jesus a diverse Jewish religion and culture with many competing strands. But, under the pressures of the Roman occupation and a decade or two of co-existence as branches of the same religion, they eventually split them apart .
- *Pilate* had a reputation among his contemporaries for being ruthless and brutal. Within his realm, his political and military power was absolute.
- *The high priest* in Jerusalem was a political appointee of the Roman governor, Pilate, and served only as long as he kept the people calm and loyal to the governor.
- *Crucifixion* was a method of execution reserved by Rome for its use especially against political threats – revolutionaries, seditionists, assassins. Jewish leaders were not executing anti-Roman seditionists, least of all by crucifixion.

These facts challenge any portrayal of ‘the Jews’ as fundamentally responsible for Jesus’ death.

Theologically, the church has been clear.

- *Jesus* was a faithful Jew who understood his whole life to be devoted to the will of God, whom he called his father.
- *His life* was occupied with teaching and healing in ways that challenged every power -- Jewish, Roman, or other -- that would not purely embody the will of God.
- *His death* was uniquely undeserved and unjust, since he alone was sinless throughout his life.
- *God* raised Jesus from the dead to make it plain that his devotion is the model for human life before God.
- *All humanity* are the source of the sin Jesus carried on the cross because we assert our power against God’s will, we ignore Jesus’ model of devotion, and we fail to live in the love and peace that he taught.

This teaching challenges us to remember that our spiritual guilt is the focus of Jesus’ death.

# Passion Plays

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## What are Passion Plays?

The Passion Play is a genre of religious drama that tells the Christian story of the suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Passion Plays take as their sources the four Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John in the Christian Bible, amplified by extra-biblical sources. (Mel Gibson's *The Passion* uses the eighteenth-century mystical writings of Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich.) Their intention is that, through the experience of Jesus' suffering and the redemption that comes from his death and resurrection, Christian faith and commitment will be fortified and deepened.

The earliest extant Passion Plays come from the thirteenth century, and later versions flourished over hundreds of years, particularly in France and Germany. The dramas became increasingly elaborate, involving whole villages and towns, and often required several days to perform. The Passion Play remains an expression of Christian faith to this day, performed in myriad settings around the world. Today, there is an entire genre of Passion Plays reviewed by Jewish and Christian scholars that have eliminated any hint of anti-Semitism.

## Why should Passion Plays concern us?

A group of mainly Christian scholars recently expressed "... an awareness of the tragic impact of Christian 'passion plays' on Jews over the centuries. We know that their dramatic presentation of Jews as 'Christ killers' triggered pogroms against Jews over the centuries and contributed to the environment that made the Shoah [Holocaust] possible."

## Divergent Perspectives

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We recognize that between Christians and Jews and even among Christians, there will be a variety of responses to the film. We respect the diversity and provide two examples that will help us think about ways we might engage in dialogue.

"I grew up in a Jewish town and owe much of my own faith journey to the influence. I have a life long, deeply held aversion to anything that might even indirectly encourage any form of anti-Semitic thought, language or actions... In addition to being a masterpiece of film-making and an artistic triumph, "The Passion" evoked more deep reflection, sorrow and emotional reaction within me than anything since my wedding, my ordination, or the birth of my children. Frankly, I will never be the same.... There is not a scintilla of anti-Semitism to be found anywhere in this powerful film. If there were, I would be among the first to decry it. It faithfully tells the Gospel story in a dramatically beautiful, sensitive and profoundly engaging way. Those who are alleging otherwise have either not seen the film or have another agenda behind their protestations."

--Deacon Keith A Fournier, "Catholic Way"

"The movie undermines the sense of community that has existed between Jews and Christians for decades in its unnecessary and destructive imagery of Jews. This film makes it more important than ever for like-minded Christians and Jews to reassert their dedication to promoting interfaith harmony, the hallmark of U.S. religious life."

--Dr. David Elcott, Director, American Jewish Committee Inter-religious Affairs

## Structure of Dialogue

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We are recommending that participating congregations hold one dialogue session before and one after seeing the film. We suggest that each congregation appoint a facilitator—perhaps a member of the clergy—and that the facilitators meet or speak beforehand. The group may decide to see the film together or separately. Because this film tends to arouse emotion, we do not recommend that the group discuss the film immediately after viewing it. Upon completion of the two-part dialogue session, we encourage each dialogue group to discuss the possibility of continuing the dialogue.

## Goals of the dialogue

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- Inter-religious respect is grounded through encounters with people of other faiths.

Create personal relationships between Jews and Christians and congregational relationships between Jewish and Christian congregations

- Learning is the key to understanding another persons' religion.

Generate understanding of each others religious practices and faith, history, and theology

- Religious prejudice endangers our ability to work together for the common good.

Raise awareness of the dangers of religious prejudice wherever it occurs

- Religious polarization creates an “us against them” mentality which undermines our sense of shared community

Serve as a model community to point the way to others on how to avoid dangerous religious polarization

## Some Possible Ground Rules for Dialogue

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Adapted from the Public Conversations Project, 1999 ([www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org))

1. Speak as an individual and not for your entire congregation or organization
2. Avoid assigning intentions, beliefs or motives to others (ask questions instead)
3. Honor each persons' right to pass if he or she is not willing or ready to speak
4. Allow others to finish before you speak
5. Share “air time”
6. Respect all confidentiality or anonymity requests
7. Stay on topic

## Key questions for discussion

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### Session #1: Before Viewing Film

1. What pre-conceived notions and values do we come with to this discussion of the film? What preconceived notions and values do we bring to engaging in dialogue with another faith community on this controversial subject? How might our religious and cultural upbringings impact the way we view the film and the way we approach dialogue about it?
2. The very discussion of the crucifixion can inspire anxiety in many Jews. How can Christians tell a central Christian narrative in a way that does not make Jews feel threatened? How might Jews come to appreciate the Christian religious narrative on its own terms?

### Session #2: After Seeing Film

1. Some well-meaning and thoughtful Jews who saw early cuts of the film expressed profound anxiety that the film contained anti-Semitism and negative stereotypes. There were others concerned that the film divides humanity between the forces of God, as Mel Gibson conceives them, and the forces of evil. There are also thoughtful Christians who found the film to be spiritually uplifting and did not feel that these criticisms are significant. What are the sources of this discrepancy? How did you see and interpret the film? Can we learn to see what the other side sees?
2. Some have expressed concerns that the film uses anti-Jewish imagery and stereotypes. In defense, others have suggested that all artistic expression, and especially film, relies on such simplifications in order to portray a complex subject in a short period of time. How ought we view the possible conflict between concerns we may have about stereotyping with the support we may hold for “artistic license”?
3. How can our religious communities become a force for good and foster understanding?

## Statements about The Passion

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has committed itself to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people. Our guidelines for Lutheran - Jewish relations include reminders that "the New Testament...must not be used as justification for hostility towards present-day Jews," and that "blame for the death of Jesus should not be attributed to Judaism or the Jewish people." In keeping with these commitments, we view with concern recent public reports regarding the forthcoming film on the Passion by Mr. Mel Gibson.

--"The Passion of the Christ": Concerns and Recommendations in Anticipation of the Forthcoming Film, Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations, Department for Ecumenical Affairs, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, January 6, 2004

It is all the more important...that extra liturgical depictions of the sacred mysteries conform to the highest possible standards of biblical interpretation and theological sensitivity. What is true of Catholic teaching in general is even more crucial with regard to depictions of Jesus' passion. In the words of Pope John Paul II..."We should aim, in this field, that Catholic teaching at its different levels . . .presents Jews and Judaism, not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudices and without any offenses, but also with full awareness of the heritage common [to Jews and Christians]."

--Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion, Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988

This film makes it more important than ever for like-minded Christians and Jews to reassert their dedication to promoting interfaith harmony, the hallmark of U.S. religious life

--Dr. David Elcott, Director for Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee