



Amsterdam 1948 – Berlin 2008

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

A little more than three months after the foundation of the State of Israel, in May 1948, the World Council of Churches (WCC) held its first assembly in Amsterdam at the end of August and the beginning of September.

The Europe that had been bombed to pieces was still in the process of being rebuilt. It was only three years after the war in which six million Jews had been killed in concentration camps in so-called Christian countries. From the Netherlands, 110,000 Jews had been taken away to be murdered in the death camps. It goes without saying that the Jewish question could not be ignored at the meeting in Amsterdam – nor the church's position on Jewish mission.

In the introduction to the statement from the Amsterdam meeting, it is said: "A concern for the Christian approach to the Jewish people confronts us inescapably, as we meet together to look with open and penitent eyes on man's disorder and to rediscover together God's eternal purpose for His Church."

The first paragraph, *The Church's Commission to preach the Gospel to all men*, is a clear call to Jewish evangelism:

All of our churches stand under the commission of our common Lord, "Go ye into all the worlds and preach the Gospel to every creature". The fulfilment of this commission requires that we include the Jewish people in our evangelistic task.

In the second paragraph the following is said: "In the design of God, Israel has a unique position. . . . The Church has received this spiritual heritage from Israel and is therefore in honour bound to render it back in the light of the Cross." But still it is maintained that "in humble conviction" it must "proclaim to the Jews, 'The Messiah for whom you wait has come'."

Paragraph three has the heading *Barriers to be Overcome*. Here it is said, among other things, that "[w]e must acknowledge in all humility that too often we have failed to manifest Christian love towards our Jewish neighbours, or even a resolute will for common social justice." There is a clear dissociation from anti-Semitism: "Antisemitism [*sic*] is a sin against God and man."

Paragraphs four and five have the headings *The Christian Witness to the Jewish People* and *The Emergence of Israel as a State*.

Towards the conclusion of the statement it is said, under the heading *To the Member Churches of the World Council We Recommend*:

That they seek to recover the universality of our Lord's commission by including the Jewish people in their evangelistic work;

That they encourage their people to seek for brotherly contact with and understanding of their Jewish neighbours, and co-operate in agencies combating misunderstanding and prejudice;

That in mission work among the Jews they scrupulously avoid all unworthy pressures or inducements;

That they give thought to the preparation of ministers well fitted to interpret the Gospel to Jewish people and to the provision of literature which will aid in such ministry.

I do not know how the WCC is going to mark its 60-year anniversary. But I do know that concerning Jewish evangelism, their tone has died down since 1948. Already at the WCC's second assembly in Evanston, Illinois, in August 1954, significant contrasts were voiced. The Swede Göte Hedenqvist, then director of the International Missionary Council's Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews, could not hide his disappointment in a report from the meeting, printed, for example, in the journal of the Danish Israel Mission (April 1955):

The experience from Evanston has made it clear that there are still many men of the Church who believe that the difference between Jewish and Christian faith is so insignificant (after all, it is only Christ who is the subject of discord!) that we should instead devote ourselves to more important mission work.

To this we can add: Experience also shows that when mission to the people of Israel is disregarded, it often has a negative impact on Christian mission to other peoples. Now it is often said that the difference between Christian faith and other faiths is so insignificant – "after all, it is only Christ who is the subject of discord!" – that we should refrain from missionizing and instead focus on building a better world together.

Although Jewish evangelism is being criticized severely today, there are, luckily, evangelical individuals and organizations that still support this cause, for example the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). In connection with the recently held consultation in Berlin, David Parker, executive director of WEA's Theological Commission, said the following in his opening statement:

We are met together to consider the Uniqueness of Jesus in relation to Jewish evangelism from an evangelical biblical, theological, historical and missiological perspective. Our aim is to produce a short



but incisive statement for churches, missions, seminaries and other interested people reasserting the importance of and the rationale for presenting Jesus Christ to Jewish people as Saviour, Messiah and Lord. The papers to be presented and discussed here this week will also be published in appropriate ways with the aim of strengthening the cause of Jewish evangelism and the lives of Jewish believers and churches in the light of current issues and in relation to developments since the publication of the Willowbank Declaration in 1989.

Between Amsterdam 1948 and the predominant way of thinking about Jewish evangelism in 2008 there is great discontinuity. But between Amsterdam 1948 and Berlin 2008 there is great continuity. The people of Israel's "unique position" does not eclipse the uniqueness of Christ, according to either the Amsterdam or the Berlin statement.

For Jesus of Nazareth is not a minor matter.