

Kristallnacht Observance 2018, November 6, 2018
University of Louisville Interfaith Center
Bishop Bill Gafkjen, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA

On November 9–10, 1938, Nazi leaders unleashed a series of pogroms against the Jewish population in Germany and recently incorporated territories. This event came to be called Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass) because of the shattered glass that littered the streets after the vandalism and destruction of Jewish-owned businesses, synagogues, and homes.¹ Led by ELCA pastor Austin Newberry and Hillel Director Elana Levitz, Episcopal Lutheran Campus Ministry and Hillel, the Jewish Campus Ministry, at the University of Louisville convened a gathering of students, faculty, and community folk at the university's Interfaith Center on November 6, 2018 in observance of the 80th anniversary of this terrible atrocity. Speakers included Fred Whittaker, a science and social studies middle school teacher at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School and dedicated Holocaust educator, Fred Gross, Holocaust survivor and author of "One Step Ahead of Hitler: A Jewish Child's Journey Through France," students from St. Francis School, and Lauren Kasden, who sang a part of the Kaddish with us. I was honored to speak near the end of the event. This is what I said:

Thank you, Austin. Thank you, Elana. Thank you both for creating this holy space. Thank you to the two Freds and Lauren and students from St. Francis for filling this holy space this important evening. And thank you, all of you, who are here this evening. It's important that you are here. I believe that a Spirit bigger than all of us has drawn us here this night.

In April of 1994, the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – the national governing body, if you will, of the brand of Lutheranism of which I am a part – adopted a statement called the “Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community.” I want to read some portions of that declaration.

In the long history of Christianity, there exists no more tragic development than the treatment accorded the Jewish people on the part of Christian believers. Very few Christian communities of faith were able to escape the contagion of anti-Judaism and its modern successor, anti-Semitism. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America feel a special burden in this regard because of certain elements in the legacy of the Reformer Martin Luther, and the catastrophes including the Holocaust of the 20th century, suffered by Jews in places where the Lutheran churches were strongly represented.

There's a paragraph explaining why we continue to honor Martin Luther in some ways. And then, there is this paragraph:

In the spirit of truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must, with pain, acknowledge Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews. As did many of Luther's own companions in the 16th century, we reject this violent invective. And yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations. We particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day.

¹ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kristallnacht>

Grieving the complicity of our own tradition within this history of hatred, moreover we express our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people. We recognize that anti-Semitism is a contradiction and an affront to the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling. And we pledge this church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and in the society around us. Finally, we pray for the continued blessing of the Blessed One upon the increasing cooperation and understanding between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish community.

In 1994, twenty-four years ago, I was serving as Lutheran Campus Pastor at Penn State University. We had email then, just barely. When this message arrived in my inbox that spring, I printed it off and walked twenty steps down the hallway at Eisenhower Chapel at Penn State University and knocked on the door of my colleague and friend Tuvia Abramson, who was then the Director of Hillel. I knelt before him and I read this statement to him. Tuvia embraced me and we wept.

That terrible atrocity eighty years ago...that quiet moment when two leaders embraced one another in quiet repentance and grace on the campus of Penn State twenty-four years ago...the death-dealing act of terror on the Jewish community just over a week ago...place names like Pittsburgh and Charlottesville, Orlando and Jeffersontown....this moment, right here, this particular night in the life of this nation...even Scripture itself across traditions...all these converge to call us, to compel us, to be active participants in God's own mission to heal the torn fabric of human community.

It starts in our own hearts and moves from there...into our own families...our neighborhoods...our churches and synagogues and mosques...our communities...our nation and our world. But it begins in each of our own hearts, as we live with humility and solidarity and advocacy.

Humility, to me, means standing under or below. It's kneeling before each other, admitting our own complicity, our own silence, and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. Standing below one another, not over one another, in humility.

Solidarity: standing alongside another, standing with one another. As Fred Gross suggested, solidarity means getting to know one another for who we are. It's rejecting and overcoming stereotypes...standing together against fear...honoring one another for who we are and getting to know each other for who God has made us to be. Standing alongside one another.

And advocacy: standing for one another, speaking for one another. Tweeting opposition when the bad stuff happens, yes, but advocacy is more. It's stepping out in every way that we can – with our voices and with our bodies – to stand against the wave of violence and hatred that is upon us. Standing for one another.

Dear sisters and brothers, this is a holy moment. Across our traditions we are called to humility, solidarity, and advocacy. As we do, wonder of wonders and by the grace of God, together we become means by which the Holy One will knit together again the torn community of this world. There is no more holy task. And I'm grateful to be in it with you.

Declaration of ELCA to Jewish Community

The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on April 18, 1994, adopted the following document as a statement on Lutheran-Jewish relations:

In the long history of Christianity there exists no more tragic development than the treatment accorded the Jewish people on the part of Christian believers. Very few Christian communities of faith were able to escape the contagion of anti-Judaism and its modern successor, anti-Semitism. Lutherans belonging to the Lutheran World Federation and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America feel a special burden in this regard because of certain elements in the legacy of the reformer Martin Luther and the catastrophes, including the Holocaust of the twentieth century, suffered by Jews in places where the Lutheran churches were strongly represented.

The Lutheran communion of faith is linked by name and heritage to the memory of Martin Luther, teacher and reformer. Honoring his name in our own, we recall his bold stand for truth, his earthy and sublime words of wisdom, and above all his witness to God's saving Word. Luther proclaimed a gospel for people as we really are, bidding us to trust a grace sufficient to reach our deepest shames and address the most tragic truths.

In the spirit of that truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews. As did many of Luther's own companions in the sixteenth century, we reject this violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations. In concert with the Lutheran World Federation, we particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day.

Grieving the complicity of our own tradition within this history of hatred, moreover, we express our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people. We recognize in anti-Semitism a contradiction and an affront to the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling, and we pledge this church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and in the society around us. Finally, we pray for the continued blessing of the Blessed One upon the increasing cooperation and understanding between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish community.