AFRICAN AMERICAN AND JEWISH SEMINARIANS JOIN IN A "COVENANT"

On November 5-7, 1989, the Black-Jewish Seminarians Conference was held at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta. The event was sponsored by ITC, the American Jewish Committee, and the National Interreligious Task Force on Black-Jewish Relations.

Seminarians from three rabbinical schools and six Christian seminaries spent two days together in dialogue, study and worship. They explored their self-definition as people and community; the tension between ethnic identification and the Biblical social ethic; how this tension works out in the political arena; and visions of their ministries. Small group discussion, common bible study and informal conversation allowed opportunity for relationships to grow.

During the Conference, the seminarians adopted and issued a "Covenant of Commitment." Among its major points were these:

* "We recognize that as African Americans and Jews, we have certain things in common, among them: a life in the diaspora; a history of oppression; a love of the Bible, and of our peoples and cultures; a commitment to interpreting our sacred texts in our particular socio-historical contexts; a commitment to fighting bigotry, racism, and anti-Semitism."

* "We recognize that there are many differences between African Americans and Jews, and that, consequently, there are bound to be differences in our perceptions, political and economic priorities, and leadership needs."

* "We deplore all attempts—by the media, government officials, and leaders of any religious or ethnic groups—to feed intergroup tensions through distortion and inaccuracy, and through emphasis on points of conflict, potential or actual."

* As seminarians, we propose and encourage: ongoing and serious exchange programs between the congregations of our traditions, including but not limited to pulpit exchanges and involvement in youth and adult education; mutual- and self-education about each other’s cultural and religious histories, development, and current ideology and practice, including exchange of seminary faculty and students and long-term internship programs; development of library and curriculum resources about each other’s traditions at our respective institutions."

As Rabbi A. James Rudin, National Interreligious Affairs Director of AJC, and Dr. James Costen, President of ITC, noted in the closing statement of the Conference, this statement is "a collective commitment to overcoming bigotry and stereotypes. We hope their statement will serve as a model for others to follow."

The text of the covenant is available from conference director Benita Gayle-Almeleh, executive Director of the National Interreligious Task Force on Black-Jewish Relations, and Program Associate in the Department of Interreligious Affairs, AJC, 165 East 56th St., NY, NY 10022. Conference planners included David Blumenthal, Sherry Frank, David Shannon, Zvi Shapiro and Sunny Stern. Seminarians attending came from Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion; Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Reconstructionist Rabbinical College; Gammon Theological Seminary; Charles H. Mason Theological Seminary; Morehouse School of Religion; Phillips School of Theology; Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary; and Turner Theological Seminary.