

Building Bridges at ANU: Christian–Jewish Dialogue in a Time of Fracture

At a time when public conversation is often marked by suspicion, polarisation and hostility, a Christian–Jewish Dialogue meeting at the Australian National University offered a different model: careful listening, honest memory and respectful encounter.

The meeting was convened by ANU Chaplaincy and the Canberra Christian Jewish Dialogue Group, and was held at ANU on 29 April, bringing together members of Canberra’s Christian and Jewish communities for an evening of reflection and discussion. The guest speakers were Rabbi Shimon Eddi and Bishop Mark Short, Anglican Primate of Australia. Their opening remarks set the tone for a conversation that ranged from scripture and memory to social cohesion, antisemitism, education and the challenge of communicating across difference.



Figure 1 Bishop Mark Short, Anglican Primate of Australia, and Jewish Rabbi Shimon Eddi

The evening opened with prayer, asking for guidance to act with love, forgiveness and understanding. The setting at ANU was significant. Universities are places where traditions, ideas and identities meet. They can also be places where inherited assumptions are tested and deepened. In that spirit, the dialogue explored how Christians and Jews can understand one another more faithfully while strengthening the integrity of their own traditions.

Rabbi Eddi began with a direct question: why bother with interfaith dialogue? His answer was that the question cannot be given a single final answer, because every person has a distinct relationship with faith, tradition and the divine. He noted that even within Judaism, as within Christianity, there are many views about the value of dialogue. Some people prefer separation, believing that each community should simply “do its own thing”. Rabbi Eddi rejected that approach, saying that it is “not a Judaism that I recognise”.

For him, Jewish life carries a responsibility to be “a light to the nations”, expressed not only in public teaching, but in the ordinary witness of daily life: going to work, engaging with society and showing what it means to live a good and holy life in the world.

Rabbi Eddi also stressed that dialogue is not simply a service offered to others. It is a way of learning. He cited the Mishnah’s teaching that a wise person is one who learns from everyone. He spoke warmly of lessons he had received from Sikh, Muslim, Hindu and Christian communities, including the Sikh practice of Langar, where all sit together to share a simple meal, and the Pope’s title “servant of the servants of God”, which he described as a profound image of leadership.

His conclusion was simple and generous: by observing Christians, he becomes a better Jew, and by showing Christians something of Jewish life, he hopes Christians can become better Christians. “If we can make each other better,” he said, “it’s all worth it.”

Bishop Short took up the theme from another angle, describing dialogue as a way of “helping each other remember together”. He reflected on a recent visit to Spain, where he was struck by how some painful histories were remembered while others were passed over in silence. The Spanish Civil War, the Franco era and the expulsion or forced conversion of Jewish and Muslim

communities in 1492 all raised for him the question of how societies remember, forget and eventually face the wounds of the past.

Memory, he said, is central to both Jewish and Christian faith. Passover and Easter are both feasts of remembrance. Yet memory can be distorted by prejudice, fear and the desire to preserve a flattering image of ourselves. Honest dialogue helps communities remember more truthfully.

Bishop Short also reflected on the shared yet distinct scriptural inheritance of Jews and Christians. The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Old Testament contain deeply related bodies of literature, but they are ordered, interpreted and lived within different communities. Encountering those differences, he said, helps each tradition understand itself more deeply. He named four virtues that make dialogue fruitful: curiosity, humility, clarity and hospitality. Curiosity asks rather than assumes. Humility recognises shared imperfection. Clarity speaks honestly about what matters. Hospitality welcomes the stranger and discovers unexpected riches in that welcome.

The discussion that followed deepened these themes. Rabbi Eddi emphasised that clarity is not achieved simply by saying what one means. Communication depends on what the hearer receives. Misunderstanding can arise even from ordinary words, especially when people assume that another person uses a word in the same way they do. Good dialogue therefore requires clarifying questions, patience and the willingness to check one's assumptions.

The speakers also explored the importance of boundaries. Dialogue does not mean erasing difference. Bishop Short noted that hospitality itself presupposes boundaries: an invitation has meaning because there is a host, a guest and a genuine act of welcome.

A recurring theme was the need to move beyond mere tolerance. Rabbi Eddi suggested that tolerance can mean little more than refraining from harming someone for being different. Respect and appreciation go further. They recognise that there may be real value in another person's belief and practice, even where disagreement remains.

Participants then turned to the wider social context. The rise of antisemitism, the decline of historical knowledge, the influence of social media and the fragmentation of public discourse were all raised as urgent concerns. Several speakers noted that online culture often rewards outrage, ridicule and short clips designed to provoke. Against that trend, interfaith dialogue offers a countercultural practice: courteous and respectful listening long enough to understand. The conversation also touched on the public value of faith communities in a secular society. Speakers discussed chaplaincy, education, social cohesion and the possibility of multi-faith advisory structures. The ANU Chaplaincy was noted as an example of a once ecumenical Christian ministry that has evolved into a multi-faith presence within a largely secular university environment.

The evening closed with a shared sense that dialogue is not a luxury. It is a necessary discipline for communities who wish to live together with truth and generosity. At its best, Christian-Jewish dialogue does not blur distinctions or reduce faith to polite agreement. It allows communities to speak clearly from within their own traditions while learning to see the other as neighbour, teacher and fellow human being.

In a world where walls are often easier to build than bridges, this Christian-Jewish dialogue at the ANU offered a timely reminder: conversation, when grounded in curiosity, humility, clarity and hospitality, can become an act of hope.