



ICJS History & Accomplishments

When Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel visited Baltimore to speak on behalf of ICJS in 1989, he urged the crowded audience:

"Can we disarm religious hatred? We must!"

This simple statement still captures the bold mission of ICJS.

Below is a brief history of a remarkable organization, anchored with key milestones and important stories from the past forty years.

Early Years

When ICJS was founded in 1987, the Institute focused on the history of Christian teachings and practices regarding Jews and Judaism and the tragic impact they had on leading to the Holocaust (or Shoah). In this period, positive relations between Christians and Jews were just beginning to evolve. The Second Vatican Council's adoption in 1965 of *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"). This statement reversed foundational teachings of the Church on Judaism, Islam, and other non-Christian faiths, making historic changes to church policies and theology. With this unprecedented renunciation of its "teaching of contempt,"¹ the Roman Catholic Church ushered in a period of reexamination and reform by Christians on its teachings on Judaism and its relationship with Jews and people of other faiths.

In Baltimore, Christian and Jewish clergy formed a study group together with lay leaders to consider the revolutionary implications of *Nostra Aetate*. The group gathered support from local business leaders to raise funds to host the 9th National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations in Baltimore in May 1986.² More than 1,200 people came for four days of lectures, workshops, and discussions by renowned religious scholars discussing the tragic relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

Both clergy and business leaders in Baltimore were inspired by to build new relationships among Christians and Jews, and they formed the 9th the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies (ICJS).

¹ French-Jewish historian Jules Isaac coined the term in *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964.)

² Key clergy leaders in this group included Bishop Frank Murphy (Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore), Rev. Robert Patterson (Episcopall Church of the Redeemer), and Rabbi Mark Loeb (Beth El Congregation). Business leaders were Rick Berndt, George Bunting, David Hirschhorn, Leroy Hoffberger, Bernie Manekin, and Charlie Obrecht.

The institute's first major initiative was the Maryland Interfaith Project. About 200 clergy and lay leaders in Maryland from 10 Christian denominations met regularly within their denomination to consider how each portrayed Jews and Judaism in teachings and sacred scriptures. The results in each case were significant. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America adopted a statement calling for a new and respectful relationship with Judaism, representing a sea change from past Lutheran teachings. Their statement was of such significance that it was added to the film on antisemitism at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which was seen by nearly two million visitors each year.

As leading Jewish religious leaders and scholars became aware that change was underway among segments of Christianity, they believed that Jews needed to be aware of this unprecedented theological Christian shift. Thus, with the leadership of Rabbi Joel Zaiman (prior chair of the Synagogue Council of America and leader of Baltimore's Chizuk Amuno Congregation), ICJS launched the National Jewish Scholars Project (1996-2000).

After four years of work, a working group from the Project issued *Dabru Emet* ("Speak Truth"): *A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*, published as a paid, full-page ad in the *New York Times* (9/10/2000). It is considered a significant, as well as contested, moment in Modern Jewish Thought, Jewish-Christian relations, and Interfaith/Interreligious Studies. More than 220 rabbis and intellectuals from all branches of Judaism signed the statement.

Other highlights include:

- **Hosted the Christian Scholars Group**, which met regularly for 10 years to redefine the church's relationship to Judaism and its commitment to pluralism.
- **Wrote the study guide** for producer Bill Moyers' 1996 PBS series, *Genesis: A Living Conversation*. ICJS then tested the guide in interfaith educational events in Baltimore.
- **Sponsored the Educators' National Forum** for Christian and Jewish educators with funding from the national Lilly Endowment.
- **Hosted a national essay contest** with 4000 entries to respond to the problematic presentation of Jews in Mel Gibson's 2004 movie, "The Passion of Christ."
- **Developed and tested (with a Jewish and Christian congregation in Atlanta) teaching units** confronting interreligious challenges facing Christian, Muslims, and Jews.
- **Published** six books, two TV documentaries, and two NPR programs on the interreligious encounter. (See next section for additional books by ICJS authors.)
- **Conducted "Scripture Forum,"** interdenominational study programs for clergy and educators on preaching and teaching about misunderstood sacred texts.
- **Inaugurated the annual Manekin-Clark Lecture** (2012) to bring prominent religious leaders or academics to Baltimore to speak on interreligious issues and pluralism.

“The work of the ICJS, which connects across religious and ethnic borders, is providing America with an example of the conversation of democracy at its best.”

— Bill Moyers (1996)

Later Years

The most significant change in the organizational life of ICJS was the decision to include Islam in its mission. In 2013, the board unanimously voted to expand the ICJS mission to include Muslim engagement and the study of Islam, and the first Muslim scholar was hired. In 2016, the board approved the formal name change to the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies (but retained the same abbreviated moniker, ICJS).

ICJS spent the following decade building relationships and trust with the Muslim community and developing new programs that incorporated the Muslim community.³

In the late 2010s, ICJS made another move to expand its mission; this time to more directly explore the intersection of religion and public life.

With the violent death of Freddie Gray in April 2015 at the hands of Baltimore City police, Baltimore entered the national conversation on justice and community-building in the United States. ICJS leaders and partners asked an important question: what role should and could religious diversity play in justice-making? ICJS began initiatives with nonprofit & civic leaders in the region to explore how interreligious learning and dialogue could foster creative interreligious collaboration among leaders trying to build resilient, connected communities.

In 2018, high school teachers—from public, private, and religious schools alike—began asking ICJS for help with questions about religion in the classroom. With little to no guidance or support from professional teachers associations, ICJS realized that America’s teachers needed help to create interreligious classrooms that equip students for a multireligious democracy.

Other highlights in the previous decade include:

- **Reached beyond clergy.** Launched two a cohort-fellowship for nonprofit and community leaders to consider how religious teachings can frame local justice issues. To date, 132 people have participated as Fellows.
- **Supported teachers.** Launched the ICJS Teacher Fellowship (2018) to equip secondary teachers to confront religious bias in their classrooms, while gaining skills and

³ For a reflection on the expansion of ICJS’ mission to include Muslims and the study of Islam, see Heather Miller Rubens’ chapter (pp. 68-73), “Interreligious Origin Stories: To Begin, and to Begin Again,” in *With the Best of Intentions: Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes*, (Editors: Lucinda Mosher, Elinor J. Pierce, Or N. Rose), Orbis Books, 2023.

confidence to teach interreligiously. To date, 93 people have participated as Fellows, impacting as estimated 22,000 students.

- **Host religious leaders-in-training.** The ICJS Emerging Religious Leaders Intensive (ERLI) gathers 24 future Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders from across the nation for a 5-day experience of learning, discovery, and relationship building.
- **Created online library.** During the Covid pandemic, ICJS began offering virtual programming, creating a rich library of minicourses, conversations, lectures, and events available free of charge on the ICJS YouTube channel. (See the catalog at [ICJS.org/discover-and-learn](https://www.icjs.org/discover-and-learn).)
- **Produced media.** Authored five books and three chapters (in edited volumes); produced one original documentary (*Spiritual Warriors: Decoding Christian Nationalism at the Capitol Riot*); and created and recorded three short educational films.
- **Offered national commentary.** Provided commentary and background for stories on the rise of Christian Nationalism and its impact on multireligious democracy to 32 major news outlets, including CBS, NBC, CNN, PBS, The Atlantic, The Guardian, New York Times, The Nation, The Economist, Wall Street Journal, and many others.
- **Signed a publishing agreement** (2024) with Georgetown University Press to publish the Silber-Obrecht Lectures, the premier international lecture in the field of Interreligious/Interfaith Studies, created and produced biennially by ICJS.
- **Led tough conversations.** Hosted more than 500 people in facilitated dialogue sessions or interreligious workshops on the Israel-Gaza war since October 7, 2023 to confront antisemitism and Islamophobia Baltimore.

“The ICJS sessions went a long way toward developing initial trust and disarming faculties’ concerns about what to do, as well as some paralysis around how to engage in conversations.”

— Travis Henschen, dean of students at the Friends School of Baltimore, who called on ICJS for help after Oct. 7th, 2023.