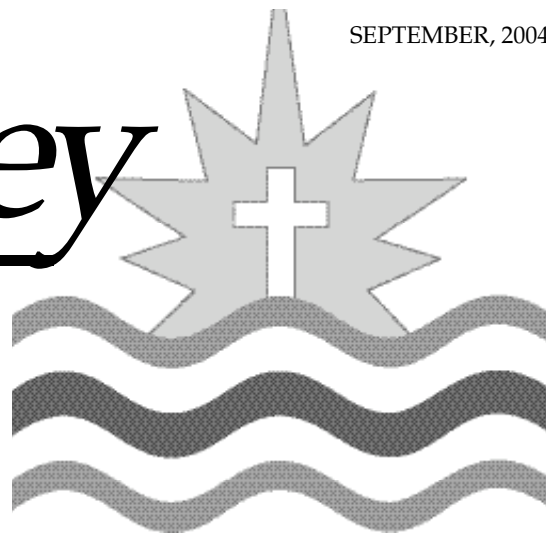


Continuing the Journey



Christian witness to Jewish people

In 2003, the Presbytery of Philadelphia, responding to an application from the long-established "Messianic Ministries," launched Avodat Yisrael. Avodat Yisrael is a new church development that invites unaffiliated Jews,

What did the General Assembly do?

people in interfaith marriages and secularized people of Jewish heritage to explore the Christian faith while maintaining Jewish religious and cultural practices. The new congregation sparked controversy, including concern that this "messianic" form of outreach did not honor the church's commitment to "make joyous witness to persons of other faiths in the spirit of respect, openness and honesty." A regional Presbyterian body requested that the General Assembly re-examine the relationship between Christians and Jews and suspend Presbyterian funding for any additional "messianic congregations" until the study is finished.

Acting on the first part of the request, the 216th GA agreed to commission a study to re-examine and strengthen the relationship between Christians and Jews, with particular attention to its implications for Presbyterian evangelism and new church development efforts.

On the second part of the request—for a suspension of national funding for similar new church development efforts while the study is under way—the Assembly chose not to add a temporary prohibition on "messianic congregations" to its new church development funding criteria.

In 1987, the 199th General Assembly in "A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews," affirmed that "both the church and the Jewish people are elected by God for witness to the world,

Is this consistent with previous General Assembly actions?

and that the relationship of the church to contemporary Jews is based on that gracious and irrevocable election of both." (This action was adopted for study and reflection and distributed to the church "as a provisional understanding of the subject.")

The Assembly noted that dialogue is the proper form of witness with Jewish people, since the same scripture that attests to our relationship with God through Jesus Christ also makes clear God's faithfulness to the covenant with Jewish people.

Four years later, the 203rd GA adopted a policy statement on evangelism titled "Turn to the Living God," affirming our Christian vocation to share good news: "Christians owe the message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ to every person and every people." At the same time, the Assembly called for Presbyterians "to make a joyous witness to persons of other faiths in the spirit of respect, openness and honesty."

The new study will look again at the denomination's theological understanding of Christian-Jewish relations to determine whether outreach through "messianic congregations" is consistent with Presbyterian understandings of those relations. PC(USA)

What happens next?

Evangelism will collaborate to plan and conduct the study and report to the GA in 2006.

national staff from three offices—Theology and Worship, Interfaith Relations, and

Dear Commissioners & Advisory Delegates:

I hope all of you had a good, relaxing summer. Please know how grateful I am for your faithful service both in Richmond and over the next two years.

Some of the assembly's actions have gained considerable public attention, including those concerning witness among Jewish people and seeking peace with justice in Israel and Palestine. You yourselves may have received questions and comments. Since you carry a primary responsibility for interpreting the work of the assembly to the wider church, we want to use this special issue of *Continuing the Journey* to provide information for your interpretation efforts and to update you on steps being taken to implement the decisions you made.

I want to assure you that appropriate steps are being taken to carry out your actions in an orderly and sensitive fashion:

- Dialogues with leaders of national synagogue councils are in place.
- These actions have been shared with our partner churches in the Middle East (and received with great appreciation).
- MRTI has begun background work on a careful process of "phased, selective divestment" (which begins not with divestment, but with dialogue seeking change) to be sent to the General Assembly Council (GAC) for action.
- The GAC offices you designated have begun planning the process to look at policies related to evangelism and Jewish-Christian relations with an eye toward bringing proposals to the 217th General Assembly (2006).
- A new Web site (www.pcusa.org/israelandjewishrelations) is available with many resources, including the Q&A in this issue.

I look forward to being in dialogue with you through *Continuing the Journey* as we all seek to be faithful in our service to the 216th General Assembly.

May God's richest blessings be with you!
Clifton Kirkpatrick
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

In the PC(USA), new church developments are created by regional bodies called presbyteries. Presbyteries typically provide the primary funding, but in some cases, supplementary funds are available from the General Assembly.

Process of “phased, selective” divestment

Several months before the 2004 Assembly, one of our regional bodies called for broad divestment along with an affirmation of the “Geneva Accord” as a practical way forward for the Israel/ Palestine peace process, in light of the failure of the “roadmap” for peace.

What did the General Assembly do?

When the Assembly convened, in June, it found that “the situation and the prospects for a negotiated just peace have so deteriorated that people in the region generally, and particularly the Palestinians, have been driven to the edge of despair and hopelessness.”

After discussion, the Assembly approved an alternate resolution reiterating previous calls for:

- an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands;
- mutual security guarantees;
- a negotiated, equitable peace;
- an end to attacks on innocent people by both sides;
- the United States to be an even-handed broker for peace;
- a United Nations peacekeeping force in Palestine;
- solidarity with our Christian partners in Israel/ Palestine.

In addition, the Assembly modified the divestment request and asked the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) to “initiate a process of phased, selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel, in accordance with General Assembly policy on social investing.”

The General Assembly has approved numerous resolutions on Israel and Palestine through the years, repeatedly affirming, clearly and unequivocally, Israel’s right to exist within permanent, recognized, and secure borders (for example: 1969, 1974, 1977, 1983, 1989). It has deplored the cycle of escalating violence—by both Palestinians and Israelis—which is rooted in Israel’s continued occupation of Palestine. Presbyterians have also expressed concern about the loss of innocent lives of Israelis and Palestinians (see “Resolution on the Middle East,” 1997, and “Resolution on Israel and Palestine: End the Occupation Now,” 2003).

Is this consistent with previous General Assembly actions?

The PC(USA), in particular, and churches of the Reformed tradition, in general, have long grappled with how to be a responsible agent in society. One effective strategy for bringing about positive change in the face of continued injustice is leveraging the economic power of the church through a responsible and deliberate process of phased, selective divestment. This strategy has been used successfully in South Africa, Sudan, Indonesia, and elsewhere. The General Assembly has continued this emphasis through divestment in corporations engaged in military-related production and tobacco-related businesses.

With respect to divestment strategy and South Africa, specifically, the General Assembly said, “While the focus of this policy statement is on economic strategy, the issue for the

church is not just a problem of economics and politics, but of a suffering people who daily experience the added burden of hopelessness and despair.” While the specific contexts and dynamics of South African apartheid were different from those in today’s Israel, where the issue is occupation, selective divestment has been a proven, responsible strategy to address injustice.

The Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) Committee will examine the church’s investment portfolios to identify investments in corporations operating in Israel and the nature of their activities.

What happens next?

This study will involve dialogue with the companies to check facts and to make the companies aware of the General Assembly’s positions on issues related to Israel and Palestine.

Through this process, MRTI will develop goals to guide proposed divestment decisions and establish conditions that could reverse the practice of phased, selective divestment.

An initial plan of action will be developed by the committee before the end of 2004.

Specific recommendations will be brought to the General Assembly Council for consideration and action. The council will meet in September 2004 and again in March 2005.

Christian Zionism and Reformed theology

A regional Presbyterian body asked the Assembly to declare that Christian Zionism is inconsistent with the basic values of Reformed theology. Christian Zionism, as explained in the presbytery’s request, “weds religion with politics and interprets Biblical faithfulness in terms of Israel’s future.” This view holds that God’s blessing of Abraham in Genesis 12:3 is to be applied directly to the modern state of Israel.

What did the General Assembly do?

Christian Zionists believe that the promises of land given to Abraham are irrevocable and that the contemporary state of Israel maintains a divine right to this land. They also believe that the state of Israel will be the catalyst for the “end times,” and that the fates of nations will hinge on their support of Israel. Many Christian Zionists use this reading of scripture to interpret current events and to shape political goals. Most biblical scholars give little or no credence to this interpretation of scripture. Moreover, this school of interpretation (propounded in the “Left Behind” literature) inevitably consigns the Jewish people either to mass conversion to Christianity or to mass damnation to the fire of hell at Armageddon.

The 216th General Assembly (2004) approved the presbytery’s request, declaring that Christian Zionism is inconsistent with the basic values of Reformed theology.

Continuing the Journey is published by the Office of the General Assembly for the benefit of General Assembly commissioners and advisory delegates. It is designed to keep them informed of the progress of work that is a result of actions taken at the assembly meeting.

Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick
Editor Sharon K. Youngs

A number of past Assembly actions support the assertion that Christian Zionism is inconsistent with Reformed theology.

Is this consistent with previous General Assembly actions?

of the Relationship between Christians and Jews" (1987).

These include statements on dispensationalism (1944), eschatology, or the doctrine of "last things" (1978), and the study document "A Theological Understanding

The Stated Clerk will issue a pastoral letter on Christian Zionism to all PC(USA) congregations. This letter will also

What happens next?

be made available on the PC(USA) Web site. The Stated Clerk will also inform government officials that "Christian Zionism does not represent the majority of American Christians and the faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)." The church will continue to educate Presbyterians about Reformed principles for interpreting scripture.

Ending construction of the "separation barrier"

In response to a request from a regional Presbyterian body, this year's Assembly instructed the Stated Clerk to "make known" its opposition to the construction of a wall "and other barriers by the state of Israel, and further to make known the desire of the Presbyterian Church

(U.S.A.) that the United States of America make no monetary contribution to the \$1.3 billion cost of the construction of this wall."

The "wall" or "separation barrier" is a 25-foot-high concrete wall, in many places, with twin fences and trenches in other places, meandering through mostly Palestinian lands. Plans call for this wall, when complete, to extend 447 miles. (As of July 2004, more than 120 miles of the barrier have been built.) About 10 percent of the planned wall follows the 1967 border between Israel and Palestine; the remaining 90 percent will stretch into the West Bank, isolating numerous parcels of land, and will affect the lives of many thousands of Palestinians.

The Assembly has approved numerous resolutions on Israel and Palestine, repeatedly affirming, clearly and unequivocally, Israel's right

Is this consistent with previous General Assembly actions?

to exist within permanent, recognized, and "secure" borders (for example: 1969, 1974, 1977, 1983, 1989). It has deplored the cycle of escalating violence—carried out by both Palestinians and Israelis—that is rooted in Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories (see statements of successive Assemblies since 1967). Presbyterians have expressed concern about the loss of lives of innocent Israelis and Palestinians (see "Resolution on the Middle East," 1997, and "Resolution on Israel and Palestine: End the Occupation Now," 2003).

Because of its deep interest in peace in the area, and concern about how the "separation barrier" is impacting the lives of people on both sides, the Assembly expressed grave alarm at the construction of the barrier. Further, given the long-standing, deeply rooted spiritual and programmatic bonds between the PC(USA) and its partner churches in the Holy Land, it is particularly concerned that the life and ministry of the dwindling remnant of the Christian community will be severely impeded.

In a separate action, the 2004 Assembly also "vigorously urges the U.S. government, the government of Israel, and the Palestinian leadership to move swiftly, and with resolve, to recognize that the only way out of this chronic and vicious impasse is to abandon all approaches that exacerbate further strife, lay aside arrogant political posturing, and get on with forging negotiated compromises that open a path to peace."

Good neighborly relations, rather than mutual isolation and suspicion, are urgently needed between Israel and its neighbors in Palestine and the Middle East.

The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly will communicate this action to the president of the United States,

What happens next?

members of the U.S. Congress, the state of Israel and the Palestinian National Authority. This action will also form a policy basis for advocating to end the wall's construction and to preclude U.S. financial support for the wall, while continuing to work to bring an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

Many of the reports of the General Assembly as well as the *Minutes* can be found on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) web site. Once they are available this fall (2004), the web site will be updated with six reports as approved by the 216th General Assembly, including a study guide for four of the reports, as indicated. They will be found at the following address: <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications.htm>

- *Human Rights Update 2003–2004* (with study guide), 216th General Assembly Item 13-05
- *Iraq: Our Responsibility and the Future*, 216th General Assembly Item 12-05
- *Report and Recommendations on Limited Water Resources and Takings* (with study guide), 216th General Assembly Item 10-04
- *Resolution Calling for a Comprehensive Legalization Program for Immigrants Living and Working in the United States* (with study guide), 216th General Assembly Item 10-05
- *Resolution on Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse Against Educators*, 216th General Assembly Item 10-12
- *Transforming Families* (with study guide), 216th General Assembly Item 10-06

The address for ordering printed copies of PC(USA) material online is www.pcusa.org/marketplace or you can call 800-524-2612.

A Message from the Moderator

It has been more than two months since we gathered in Richmond, and the seasonal rhythm of fall activities has begun. Having been elected to our positions, we continue in our roles until the assembly convenes in Birmingham in 2006. This publication, *Continuing the Journey*, is provided by the Office of the General Assembly to provide updates as well as information that will aid in explaining the implications of actions taken by the 216th General Assembly of the PC(USA).

Many people have expressed both confusion and concern over our actions regarding Israel/Palestine and this issue of *Continuing the Journey* is devoted to that topic. As you interpret our decisions and answer concerns, I ask that you keep the following in mind.

1. We have a long history of standing in support of our Jewish brothers and sisters and of the right of the state of Israel to exist within recognized and secure borders. We also have long supported the Palestinian people and, in response to consistent pleas from our Christian Palestinian sisters and brothers, we have stood firmly against the occupation of Palestinian lands and the growing encroachment of settlements there. Some would suggest that holding those two positions is contradictory, or even, morally untenable. I would suggest the opposite, that we should be proud of our history of upholding both positions.

We are clear: Israelis have a right to live in their country free from fear of terrorism that can strike innocent people anywhere, at any time. Terrorism can never be used as a political tool. The ends never justify the means. Palestinians have a right to live free from the horrors of a military occupation. The occupation is an impediment to the creation of peace, and we are absolutely convinced that it must be ended.

2. I have traveled in Israel and the Palestinian West Bank and have met with Israelis and Palestinians. I am humbled by

the complexity of this issue and the deeply held convictions of all those who desire a peaceful solution. I ask all of us to enter conversations with a willingness to listen and with the conviction that we are, together, children of God.

3. I am troubled by a quickness to talk about the General Assembly as "they" and "their" actions as if they are not us. Too often we accuse "them" of making decisions that don't represent Presbyterians.

One thing I love about our church is the careful way our polity blends a representational form of government and an understanding that our elected representatives are to remain open to a fresh spirit and new understandings from God as they do their work together.

When we disagree, we do our best to protect a space for dissenting voices. When we disagree over actions the General Assembly (GA) has taken, there is a process by which those actions are tested as the cycle begins again with a new round of overtures to the next assembly.

4. I have heard many people express concern over the appropriateness of making "political" statements through an action to divest. The assembly took considerable care to place its decision in the context of existing PC(USA) policy regarding divestment. That policy requires a deliberate and carefully balanced approach through criteria established by the Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) committee, conversation with the affected corporations, and action by the General Assembly Council.

Finally, I'm so proud to be Presbyterian. Let's stay focused on our work and not allow others to sow seeds of division that are built on misinterpretations of our polity, our history, our intention, and our actions.

Blessings to you,
Rick Ufford-Chase, Moderator of the 216th General Assembly (2004)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

*News and updates for commissioners
and advisory delegates to the
216th General Assembly (2004)*

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