



June 1, 2006

Concerning Actions of the 216th General Assembly to Promote Peace and Justice in Israel and Palestine

Recognized by the 208th General Assembly (1996), the NATIONAL MIDDLE EASTERN PRESBYTERIAN CAUCUS brings together all PCUSA Middle Eastern congregations, fellowships, Bible study groups, and mission personnel serving in the Middle East. As Christians who trace their faith origin to the apostolic age, and our Reformed roots to Presbyterian missions in the Middle East in the 19th Century, we feel that we have a particular responsibility to be faithful disciples of Christ; to actively support the mission and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA); and to be a voice of justice, peace and reconciliation in the United States and in the Middle East. As such, we have appreciated PCUSA's position and long-standing commitment to peace and justice in the Middle East. This statement is our contribution to the dialogue that is taking place within our denomination regarding actions taken by the 216th General Assembly (2004) to promote peace and justice in Israel and Palestine.

First, we find it necessary to briefly comment on the roots of, and the tragedy that has become, the Israeli-Arab conflict. We recognize, with great distress and grief, the horrific suffering of the Jewish people over the past two millennia (particularly in Europe at the hands of Christians), which wretchedly culminated in the Nazi persecution and Holocaust. Further, having been ourselves minorities in the Middle East, we are acutely aware of the discrimination suffered by Jews in the pre-World War II Middle East. We recognize the importance and legitimacy of the efforts to ensure an end to Jewish suffering after the Holocaust. Yet, we regret that the solution was implemented with little regard to the rights of resident Palestinian Muslims and Christians as the state of Israel was established in mandated Palestine. Given the development of events over the past few decades, however, we recognize the state of Israel as the expressed right of the Israeli people for self-determination. At the same time, and with equal conviction, we recognize the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, a right that has been given much lip service and little genuine support, a right that is yet to be officially recognized by the state of Israel, which has been created on Palestinian land and at Palestinian demise.

We condemn all forms of violence, be they terrorist activities or state-sponsored. We especially condemn attacks against civilians, Palestinians and Israelis, be they suicide bombings or indiscriminate military strikes. We condemn all forms of injustice, including destruction of homes, confiscation of property, illegal appropriation of territories, and the illegal occupation of Palestine.

With that said, we commend the actions taken by the 216th General Assembly, which were clearly intended to address the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories as the core cause (though not the only cause) of violence and continued hostility between the state of Israel and many Middle Eastern countries. After numerous statements by the previous GA's since the

beginning of the Israeli-Arab conflict went unnoticed or ignored, it was imperative for the Church to take active measures to promote just peace, as the Church's witness and peacemaking efforts should not be in words only, but in deed as well.

It has been suggested that PCUSA should take a neutral stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We strongly argue that the Church is called to take a principled, ethical stance, based on Christ's example and the teachings of Scripture. Yale professor Miroslav Volf contends that: (1) neutrality gives tacit support to the stronger party, regardless of whether that party is right or wrong. (2) Neutrality shields the perpetrators and frees their hands precisely by the failure to name them as perpetrators. (3) Third, neutrality encourages the worst behavior of perpetrators and victims alike. If one party can get away with atrocities without offsetting neutrality, the other party, especially since it sees itself struggling for a just cause, will resort to atrocities too (*Exclusion & Embrace*, p. 219). The Church should not take a neutral stance toward Palestinian suicide bombers; and should not take a neutral stance toward the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Rather, the Church needs to be a prophetic voice for justice and peace. Divestment is a nonviolent active strategy that has produced positive results in past conflicts.

Although the 216th General Assembly's actions evoked some negative responses, the Church should not be apprehensive or made reluctant by reactions to its principled positions and active witness. Moreover, the Church should not fail to speak out and act on behalf of the victims in this conflict (Palestinian and Israeli) for fear of upsetting those who do not share our perspective and values.

Many Jewish organizations (such as Gush Shalom, Jewish Voice for Peace, Tikkun, Not in My Name, and European Jews for a Just Peace) as well as other Christian denominations and ecumenical bodies (including the World Council of Churches, as well as many American, European, and African denominations) agree that a carefully thought-out divestment process could have positive effect in persuading Israel to change policies toward the Palestinians that are contrary to international law, formal resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, and biblical principles of justice.

Both investment and divestment are needed strategies to bring about justice and peace in this conflict. While a positive investment strategy can be constructive and beneficial, it fails to identify and address the causes of the perpetuation of the conflict, and does not actively oppose the expansion of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. Investment strategies would encourage good neighborliness between the Israelis and Palestinians, and may help sustain Palestinian economy for a while, but fail to stop the Israeli government from confiscating Palestinian property and expropriating Palestinian land. Divestment has proven effective in similar situations in the past.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has committed itself to socially responsible investment. As it stands, however, our denomination literally profits from its stocks in companies – such as Caterpillar and Motorola – that have demonstrated little regard as to how their business activities in Israel/Palestine aid the continuation of the violence-breeding occupation of Palestinian territories. These companies appear to turn a blind eye to the fact that the technology and equipment they provide the Israeli army are being used in violation of human rights and

international law to subjugate a population against their will. This alone is sufficient reason for PCUSA to divest from these companies, if we are to be true to the ethical principles we profess. **We, therefore, encourage the 217th General Assembly (2006) to reaffirm the 216th General Assembly's decision to initiate a process of phased selective divestment from companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.**

It is our hope and prayer that the Presbyterian Church (USA) will continue to be a faithful witness to the Gospel of God's love and a voice for just peace and reconciliation in the Middle East.

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