

The following document is one of several critical responses to “Perspectives on Presbyterian Church (USA) Support for a Just and Peaceful Compromise of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” issued as a discussion paper on May 9, 2014, by the Ecumenical and Interreligious Work Group (EIWG) of the Presbytery of Chicago.

RESPONSE:

Middle East Task Force (METF) of Chicago Presbytery

The Middle East Task Force of Chicago Presbytery was formed in 1974, responding to a call by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA, (PC(USA)) to “encourage study and foster dialogue in response to the current Middle East conflict.” The first “Middle East Traveling Seminar” was held that year, to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine, and traveling seminars continue to this day. Returning travelers share their experiences in churches of the presbytery. We have established partnerships with churches and organizations, both religious and secular, throughout the Middle East. Three of our members serve on the steering committee of the newly formed Syria Lebanon Mission Network of the PC(USA).

Members felt it important to visit the region for four reasons: our concern for all Christians of the Middle East; our denomination’s involvement since the 1820’s in Lebanon, Syria and neighboring countries; the conditions under which Palestinian refugees have lived in those countries since 1948; and the deepening injustices present, especially in Israel and Palestine.

METF began writing overtures to the General Assembly of the PC(USA) in 1978, to express its concern over these injustices. Many of our overtures have been adopted and are now denominational policy statements. In 2004, we sent an overture opposing all expressions of Christian Zionism; it was adopted. Also adopted that year was an overture sent from St. Augustine Presbytery that listed a number of Israeli government policies that violated international law; the overture directed the denomination to divest funds from any companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. The overture was adopted and the process of “morally responsible investing” was pursued, resulting in the recommendation to divest that is coming to GA this summer. The 2004 action by GA also led to the creation of the Israel Palestine Mission Network (IPMN) of the PC(USA). Funded entirely by its members, IPMN’s mission states the following:

In joyful obedience to the call of Christ, and in solidarity with churches and our other partners in the Middle East, this network covenants to engage, consolidate, nourish, and channel the energy in the Presbyterian Church (USA) toward the goal of a just peace in Israel /Palestine by facilitating education, promoting partnerships, and coordinating advocacy. Our network speaks TO the Church not FOR the Church. (See www.theIPMN.org)

METF is pleased to be a part of this national network. Our “reach” has also broadened over the years to include similarly concerned people in the Chicago area who are members of other Christian denominations, other religious groups (the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, American Muslims for Palestine, Arab American Action Network, Jewish Voice for Peace, J Street, and Students for Justice in Palestine), and numerous local groups such as the Committee for a Just Peace in Israel and Palestine (CJPIP), the Arab Jewish Partnership. Together, we have offered educational events, speakers and films in our area.

We lament with you the lack of trust between mainline Jewish dialogue partners and Presbyterians. However, the trust between the growing numbers of Jewish groups that differ with Israeli policies and Presbyterians is at an all-time high. Likewise, the bond between Presbyterians and Middle East Christians and Muslims has also grown. The 2004 G.A. actions (cited previously) meant that Christian groups in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel/Palestine greeted the 2005 METF Traveling Seminar with expressions of thanksgiving; they told us their Muslim neighbors could see that not all Christians were indifferent to their cries for justice. Now, each approaching General Assembly is watched with great interest to see if our denomination will continue to lift up the injustices they suffer.

We welcome EWIG's entry into this broader discussion. In your work on interfaith dialogue you have dealt solely with the "mainline" voices for a religious group, and have not wanted to engage in the contentious political realm, fearing that dialogue partners would be offended. That has intensified the split between EIWG and METF in this presbytery. It is time for that to end. *The concerns of Jews other than mainstream, Muslim and Palestinian organizations in Chicago must be part of the "dialogue of life" you propose.*

We find much of your paper to be helpful. We agree that the current situation is "intolerable for Palestinians, and unsustainable for Israel." We agree that "Presbyterians must listen to and honor the tragic histories and cherished aspirations of each people, *as they understand it themselves.*" We agree that the final compromise "will only be achieved through the actions taken by, and decisions made by, the two peoples directly involved." We especially agree that "Presbyterians actively support on-the-ground efforts for self-determination, human rights, and respectful co-existence in order to create the conditions for an achievable, just and peaceful compromise, and ... the harder task of communal reconciliation, undertaken by, and for, both Israelis and Palestinians."

But the paper's conclusions do not follow from its premises.

- Your paper holds out for a two-state solution as the "most practical expression of self-determination for both peoples." We hear that the conditions in the occupied land of Palestine have gone beyond the possibility of a two-state solution. Many voices are now calling for a one-state solution, *with equal human rights and honest democracy for all.* But whether it is one or two-states doesn't seem to matter, as long as human rights and real democracy are upheld. *That is what they are saying.* By ignoring this, you do not leave room for others at the dialogue table.
- Your paper supports the mainline Jewish call for a "Jewish State." The phrase, "Jewish democracy" is used repeatedly. We find that to be an oxymoron. A "democracy" promises and upholds equal treatment for all citizens. Further, the call by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for a "Jewish State" in the current negotiations is fairly recent. It was not required of Jordan or Egypt in their agreements with Israel.
- Your paper says "pursuit of a two-state compromise will not work if... tactics such as boycotts, divestment, or sanctions are used to undermine the legitimacy of Israel's right to exist, rather than to leverage reform of the policies and practices of Israel as a nation state."

We find it astounding that opponents of the BDS movement continue to claim that BDS supporters are calling for the abolishment of the state of Israel. Their mission statement says:

- *The campaign for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) is shaped by a rights-based approach and highlights the three broad sections of the Palestinian people: the refugees, those under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Palestinians in Israel. The call urges various forms of boycott against Israel until it meets its obligations under international law by:*
 - *Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall;*
 - *Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and*
 - *Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.*

The BDS call was endorsed by over 170 Palestinian political parties, organizations, trade unions and movements. The signatories represent the refugees, Palestinians in the OPT, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. (<http://www.bdsmovement.net/BNC>)

Nowhere does Palestinian civil society call for the destruction of Israel. Yes, it could lead eventually to the possibility of a majority Palestinian population. We presume that is the concern of those who support current Israeli policies, while at the same time they actively seek out Jewish populations to immigrate to Israel and

simultaneously prevent Palestinians from returning to families who are living there. Isn't it time for Israeli Jews to get to know their neighbors, help them build their economy, and establish trade relations with Palestinians as a way of living with one another, instead of worrying about who is in the majority?

The BDS call has caught the attention of the world and has a chance of changing the dynamics of the conflict. ***It is a non-violent form of resistance.*** We welcome that non-violent stance. Sixty-six years have passed and several generations of Jews and Palestinians are suffering because of current policies. We have met many Palestinians in both Palestine and Israel who are ready to live together.

- You say “we must listen to the tragedies of Israelis and Palestinians” but you name only the Holocaust and centuries of anti-Semitism. Until you mention and deal with the Nakba and the continuing catastrophe today, the discussion is still slanted in favor of one party at the expense of the other.
- Rather than calling for groups to travel with “*mainstream* members of all four communities” we call for mainstream members to travel with METF leaders (and others, such as “Interfaith Peace Builders”) to see what the mainstream would prefer not to address. We welcome your participation.
- Please add to places to seek further information: the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions, Zochrot, Al Haq, Adalah, Palestinian Human Rights Commission, B'Tselem, OCHA, UNRWA.

This statement is available online at:

<http://www.chicagopresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/METF-response-to-EIWG.pdf>