

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:

Jewish Voice for Peace

We have the greatest respect for the Presbyterian Church-U.S.A. in its deliberative, conscientious process of seeking to serve the cause of reconciliation and peace in Israel and Palestine and elsewhere in the world. An important part of your work over many years has been building relationships with Jewish leaders and institutions in the United States. These relationships are clearly important to the Presbyterian Church and to us as American Jews.

What may be less clear is that, by maintaining an allegiance to certain mainstream Jewish organizations who have traditionally been your dialogue partners, you are—as are these organizations—less and less representative of the actual American Jewish community, which is much broader and more diverse than these organizations. They no longer represent the vision of the Jewish people for its own future, and, by adhering to their political agenda with regards to Israel and Palestine, you will increasingly be viewed as they are: out of touch.

Our organization, JVP, is a national organization comprised of 37 chapters, 140,000 supporters, and over 50,000 “likes” on Facebook. Our members and supporters are from all corners of the Jewish world--secular, traditional, progressive. We are clergy, young people, parents, and professionals. We are growing daily.

The Jewish world is changing fast. We would highlight the fact that a significant percentage of our membership is under 50 years old. The recent Pew study showed that the majority of the younger generation of American Jews does not support the “Israel first and only” positions of the leadership of the mainstream Jewish organizations who guide your position against selective divestment. There is a lively student movement on campuses across the country calling for boycott of settlement products, just as the church has done, and calling for divestment from companies profiting from the Israeli occupation, just as the church is now considering.

We within the Jewish community are moved and motivated by the courage of the PCUSA to engage the question of selective divestment of your shared resources from companies that advance the occupation of Palestinians. By taking this step you may lose friends you already know in Jewish communities (though you may also be surprised by how many Jews will be supportive)—but you will gain many other Jewish friends and allies anxious to collaborate with your Church towards a goal we share with all our hearts, on the question of Israel/Palestine and beyond.

Your paper speaks of the complicated nature of the conflict between the State of Israel and Palestinians. No geopolitical conflict is uncomplicated; but fear of engaging complications eliminates all but the most strident and single-agenda actors from being involved. You have clear guidance from Church leaders in Palestine in Kairos Palestine. To thwart the modest and thoughtful next step of MRTI is not to be cautious; it is to actively side with the status quo of occupation and disenfranchisement.

As Jewish leaders ourselves, we are of course sensitive to the charge that Israel is singled out among the countries of the world and held to an unrealistic standard of moral purity. For this reason we feel that the PCUSA—exactly because of its long history of applying consistent standards to the stewardship of its own investments through the years of apartheid in South Africa and with regard to myriad other issues such as tobacco, workers’ rights, and political conflicts in other countries as that in Sudan and Burma-- is a credible voice in holding the state of Israel to the same moral standards as it has other governments and private corporations that support their policies. What is being considered here is selective divestment from three American-based multinational corporations. This is distinct from the larger Palestinian call for boycott, divestment and sanctions and is a process consistent with PCUSA policies and procedures that have been applied in places of political

oppression across the world over many years.

We agree with your statement that the current situation in Israel and Palestine is *tragic*, that it has real *ambiguities* and calls for a dose of *realism* in organizing our own responses. And we strongly agree that the PCUSA, by investing in companies whose products and profit enables this tragedy, has a measure of *moral responsibility* for the present state of oppression.

Where we disagree is in the steps you recommend to exercise your responsibility. They are necessary but in no way sufficient without supporting selective divestment of your own funds:

“Supporting Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers” means supporting selective divestment at the very least—the most energized and widely supported engine for change in the region;

“Seeking partnership with those working together for a just peace” means partnering with those like ourselves who support these measures;

“Humanizing the other” means hearing the call of those who are tormented daily by HP-engineered surveillance, by Motorola Solutions-empowered checkpoints and by specially-designed Caterpillar tractors;

“Establishing relationships locally” means expanding your partnership within the Jewish, Muslim and broader Christian communities beyond the most conservative forces within these communities;

“Getting information first-hand from those working for just and peaceful reconciliation” means asking your fellow Christians living under occupation today what actions they commend. We believe it means attending with particular care to the call of Kairos Palestine. It also means challenging your present partners in the Jewish community as to how they are advancing (or thwarting) peace and justice in Israel and Palestine;

And finally, we strongly support your call to visit the West Bank and Gaza with Jews and Palestinians. Nothing is more compelling than witnessing first-hand the injuries of occupation. Many of us in JVP have had our hearts broken open and our preconceptions shattered by visiting the West Bank and Gaza and seeing for ourselves how urgently what we saw needs to be healed.

This statement is available online at:

<http://www.rabbisletter.org/jewish-voice-for-peace-responds-to-the-discussion-paper-drafted-by-the-ecumenical-and-interreligious-work-group-of-the-presbytery-of-chicago/>