

# Investment, Divestment and the Collective Amnesia of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

by

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Since the gavel fell adjourning the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PC(USA) in July 2012, much has been said from all sides regarding the issue of divestment from companies profiting from non-peaceful pursuits in Israel/Palestine, as well as “positive investment” in the region. Unfortunately, a great deal of the spin is far from what has actually occurred since 2004 when the 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (GA) first spoke about divestment, and since the early 1970s when our church first shined a spotlight on Israel’s occupation of Palestine.

In the wake of recent decisions by the 220<sup>th</sup> GA, it is vitally important to have the facts before us, especially since every assembly has new commissioners, meaning there is little institutional memory from one General Assembly to the next. An examination of the record is in order. Let’s first break the history down on a year-to-year basis, citing some of the actual recommendations that were approved.

## ***I. What the Record Actually Says: The History***

2004, Item 12-01:

*The 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly refers (the divestment overture from Presbytery of St. Augustine) to the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) with instructions to initiate a process of phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel, in accordance to General Assembly policy on social investing, and to make appropriate recommendations to the General Assembly Council for action.*

What this means is that General Assembly Committee 11 (Peacemaking and International Issues), upon receiving the overture to divest from Caterpillar, recommended to the plenary *not to immediately divest*, but to call upon MRTI to initiate its usual process of “corporate engagement” that might end in divestment. MRTI brought no recommendation to divest to the next 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 2006. This is important to remember simply because opponents of divestment declared in 2006 that divestment was thwarted. As you will see shortly, no such thing happened.

2006, [Item 11-01](#), #7:

*To urge that the financial investments of the PC(USA), as they pertain to Israel, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank, be invested in only peaceful pursuits, and affirm that the customary corporate engagement process of the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment of our denomination is the proper vehicle for achieving this goal.*

The above action was approved by the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly to replace the language of the previous Item 12-01 (2004). This is in the context of having no divestment recommendation forthcoming from MRTI to that particular G.A. and was actually a strengthening of the direction to continue corporate engagement. Note that the final step of “the customary corporate engagement process” that MRTI follows is divestment, which was never taken off the table. There were also a number of overtures that came before the assembly in opposition to and support of phased, selective divestment, which were all answered by the action of 11-01.

2006 introduced the language of “positive investment” in the following ways:

1. As stated in 11-01, #7, *financial investments of the PC(USA) were to be in only peaceful pursuits.*
2. 11-01, 2b called upon the church to *reflect (its) commitment to positive outcomes.*
3. 11-10, 2d instructed the church to *identify affirmative investment opportunities as they pertain to Israel, Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank.*

Item #3 documents that at least identifying “investing” in Palestine has been a church policy since 2006.

2008, [Item 11-01](#), #6:

*In continuing the process of corporate engagement with companies supporting or profiting from the occupation of Palestine and/or other violence in the region, (the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly) instructs the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee to report regularly to the General Assembly Council on its communication and the compliance, or lack thereof, by Caterpillar, Motorola, and other corporations involved with regard to General Assembly guidelines and concerns for justice and human rights.*

This item reaffirmed the corporate engagement process that was called for in 2004 and in turn revalidated in 2006. The action was taken in spite of Overture 11-23 from the Presbytery of San Francisco calling for the immediate implementation of divestment as the natural conclusion of corporate engagement with Caterpillar and Motorola. As a result, corporate engagement continued.

Other important actions introduced to this ongoing discussion regarding Israel/Palestine from 11-01 were: Section #1 in which the General Assembly affirmed *“the obligation of the church to speak to the governments of the United States and all other nations where it sees these governments violating the commandments of God;”* and Section #4 in which the General Assembly commended *“the nonviolent witness of the Christians in Palestine and Israel with whom we share membership in the one Body of Christ, joining them in prayer and mutual remembrance, advocating for fair treatment for them and their neighbors.”* The former action sent a clear message to divestment opponents that they would not be permitted to silence the prophetic witness of our church in the Israel/Palestine conflict, and the latter was to reaffirm longstanding support for seeking nonviolent solutions for conflicted situations. This was in response to false allegations by divestment opponents that the church had double standards and called for Israel to be nonviolent but looked the other way in regard to terrorism.

Nothing could have been clearer about PC(USA)’s intolerance of violence perpetrated by either side of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict than the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly’s [endorsement](#) of The Amman Call. This statement was issued at the World Council of Churches International Peace Conference entitled, *Churches Together for Peace and Justice in the Middle East*, which took place in June 2007. The document opens with the following words:

*Almost sixty years have passed since the Christian Churches first spoke with one voice about Arab-Israeli peace. For the last forty years the Christian Churches have called for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In the very place where Jesus Christ walked upon the earth, walls now separate families and the children of God—Christian, Muslim and Jew—are imprisoned in a deepening cycle of violence, humiliation and despair. The Palestinian Christians from Gaza to Jerusalem and to Nazareth, have called out to their brothers and sisters in Christ with this urgent plea: “Enough is enough. No more words without deeds. It is time for action.*

In section 5.8, The Amman Call goes on to make very clear:

*There is no military solution for this conflict. Violence in all its forms cannot be justified whether perpetrated by Israelis or Palestinians.*

In 2008, the Israel Palestine Mission Network worked diligently for endorsement of The Amman Call by the General Assembly in San Jose, CA. Our efforts paid off with a full endorsement of this document. We fought for it because it called upon Presbyterians and the whole of Christendom to offer no more words about the crisis without substantive action. And we fought for it because it made very clear that the Christian response to this struggle was to be one of peace and non-violence. It is interesting to note that the same groups and individuals who opposed divestment in 2012 also opposed the passing of the Amman Call in 2008. One must ask how this group could stand against The Amman Call and not fully recognize the brutality of the occupation? What means, if any, do they allow for Palestinians to resist the occupation? International law even allows for violent popular resistance against occupation, so the Amman Call for non-violent actions should be supported by all of us.

The 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, through [Item 11-28](#), also appointed the Middle East Study Committee to bring back a comprehensive study on the conflict in Israel/Palestine to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 2010.

[2010, Item 14-08](#): The 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly approved the recommendations of the Middle East Study Committee, through their report entitled *Breaking Down the Walls*, as amended by Committee 14 (Middle East Peacemaking). In Section 2 of the recommendations the report affirms the following General Assembly policies and statements:

- a) an immediate cessation of all violence, whether perpetrated by Israelis or Palestinians;*
- b) the end of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and diversion of water resources;*
- c) an immediate freeze both on the establishment or expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and on the Israeli acquisition of Palestinian land and buildings in East Jerusalem;*
- d) the relocation by Israel of the Separation Barrier to the 1967 border;*
- e) the withholding of U.S. government aid to the state of Israel as long as Israel persists in creating new West Bank settlements;*
- f) continuing corporate engagement through the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment with companies profiting from the sale and use of their products for non-peaceful purposes and/or the violation of human rights;*
- g) a shared status for Jerusalem;*
- h) equal rights for Palestinian citizens of the state of Israel;*
  - i) the cessation of systematic violation of human rights by any party, specifically, practices of administrative detention, collective punishment, the torture of prisoners and suspects, home demolitions and evictions, and the deportation of dissidents;*
  - j) the immediate resumption by Israel and Palestine of negotiations toward a two-state solution.*

In Section 3c, the approved report “strongly denounces Caterpillar’s continued profit-making from non-peaceful uses of its products and presses Caterpillar to review carefully its involvement in obstacles to a just and lasting peace in Israel-Palestine and to take affirmative steps to end its complicity in the violation of human rights.”

Directly following this denouncement, in Section 3d the General Assembly voted to “call on denominational agencies and entities, presbyteries, congregations, and individual members to invest positively, after due vetting, in sustainable economic development projects for the West Bank and Gaza (that do not support the occupation) sponsored by Palestinians or jointly by Palestinians and Israelis in equitable partnership.” This was a repeat call to invest, echoing the original call in 2006.

## ***II. Our Institutional Amnesia***

In light of the General Assembly actions from 2004-2010 stated above, one can only conclude that the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly participated in an act of collective amnesia, ignoring the slow, careful process of corporate engagement from the time that the call for divestment as a result of Israeli occupation and human rights violations was first made. Here is the language approved by the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly:

### [Item \(15-11\)](#)

*#4 – devise a plan of active investment in projects that will support collaboration among Christians, Jews, and Muslims and help in the development of a viable infrastructure for a future Palestinian state*

*#5 - Instruct the General Assembly Mission Council to create a process to raise funds to invest in the West Bank, and the program will be inaugurated no later than the meeting of the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly (2014).*

If we did not know that General Assemblies have been calling for “positive investment” since 2006, these actions would seem proactive. If we did not know that the greatest impediment to building Palestinian infrastructure is actually a military occupation along with the building of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land using up Palestinian natural resources, these actions would look like game-changers. If we did not know that the Israeli Defense Force routinely destroys “positive investment” initiatives on the ground in Palestine, these actions would not seem so naïve. [Here](#) is but a recent example:

*On Tuesday (July 17, 2012), the Israeli army raided the Al Qanoub area in Sa’ir, eastern Hebron and issued a demolition order on two cisterns used to irrigate land for the benefit of twenty people, of whom more than half are children...The two cisterns were built with the aid of the Improving Livelihood in the Occupied Palestinian Territories Program funded by the Netherlands Representative Office.*

Divestment opponents may like to repeat the mantra, “positive investment...positive investment...positive investment...” but this truth remains: under the present circumstances of apartheid (or segregation or separation, you pick) it is simply not possible. Why have these “pro investment” Presbyterians not been able to “invest” in anything since 2006 when the GA first called for “affirmative investment opportunities”? Six years and they have no investments to show. Is it because it’s not about “investment” at all, but about avoiding divestment, which brings with it bad PR for Israel? Why aren’t these “friends of Israel” saying the hard things that friends sometimes need to say to friends who are doing the wrong thing? Why aren’t they confronting their Jewish friends with the ever-expanding settlements? Or, is this a one-way conversation and Presbyterians only listen?

It is vitally important to hear the rhetoric of divestment opponents in order to recognize how far from the truth their claims have been. The anti-divestment voice in the PC(USA) has mostly been couched in an opaque organization called Presbyterians For Middle East Peace (PMEP). They do not divulge who their members are or where their funding comes from. They work closely with the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) and continually attack our mission network through letters to the staff in Louisville, calling IPMN and its members an anti-Semitic organization and “delegitimizers of Israel” because we dare to criticize Israeli policy.

In a wrap-up article written by PMEP (*220<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian General Assembly rejects Divestment*) they say, “One cannot support a movement that makes demands only of Israel and turns a blind eye to the armed groups openly committed to Israel’s annihilation.” This statement is made in either complete ignorance of or denial of the fact that the 2008 General Assembly (as mentioned earlier) endorsed the non-violent call for action through The Amman Call. It also ignores the PC(USA)’s Middle East Study Committee report of 2010 which calls for the immediate cessation of all violence by both sides in the conflict, and specifically commends the nonviolent witness of Christians in Palestine and Israel.

PMEP also opposed the [Middle East Study Committee Report](#), establishing a clear pattern of opposing any calls for non-violence that would include Israel refraining from violence. The PC(USA) has never made “demands only of Israel” or “turned a blind eye” to violence, as PMEP accuses. This is a bald-faced and harmful attack on the integrity of our denomination. In addition, the IPMN has never made calls on only one side to be held to a higher standard; we have always spoken against terrorist violence while at the same time calling for an end to the violence of occupation.

With that said, we have never stepped away from pointing out that the violence inflicted by the oppressor so overwhelms that perpetrated by the oppressed that it is ludicrous to talk about the violence of the conflict as if both sides are equal. [The facts are clear](#) about how many Israelis have died compared to the Palestinians. While the Israelis talked about their one soldier being held by Hamas, they held thousands of Palestinian political prisoners without charge. While the Israelis grieve the loss of loved ones numbering in the hundreds, Palestinians grieve the loss of thousands upon thousands.

In addition, it should be noted (and divestment opponents never bring this up) that the process of corporate engagement that began in 2004 actually succeeded in helping a corporation identify where its business practices aided and abetted terrorists seeking to do harm to Israel. Citibank was placed on the potential divestment list of five companies named for questionable business practices in Israel/Palestine. In this particular case, Citibank subsidiaries were identified as moving money for terrorist aims. After the PC(USA) through the work of MRTI questioned this, the corporation put an end to those practices. MRTI's engagement was successful in bringing about change and Citibank was taken off the list. Opponents of divestment who accuse PC(USA) of singling out Israel never seem to mention that the first successful engagement was actually about the security of Israel. Those who have been against divestment from the beginning of the process simply because they think Israeli human rights violations should get a pass have continually argued that the process of phased selective divestment can have no impact. They are simply wrong.

One of the chief players at General Assemblies since 2006 has been the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA). This organization has not only been physically present at every assembly, it is active behind the scenes between General Assembly years. Presbyterians for Middle East Peace continually strategizes with the JCPA on the subject of defeating divestment, and they allow the JCPA to do the heavy lifting when attacks step outside the realm of the Presbyterian practice of doing all things transparently, decently and in good order. And so, it is from one of JCPA's 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly wrap-up pieces that we get a statement like this: "Think of the most intense anti-Israel delegitimizers you've ever seen, heard or read. They run the show at the PCUSA." Or, this: "The divestment debate is really about anti-Semitism... the silencing of Israel's legitimate security stance isn't just about choosing sides but about something much deeper."

The JCPA, the American Jewish Committee, The Simon Wiesenthal Center, The Anti-Defamation League, and even J Street and Americans for Peace Now cover their ears and loudly sing, *La, La, La...* every time they are told that opposing Israeli government policy which violates international law is not anti-Israel nor anti-Semitic. The reason for this is because they have come up with their own definition that defies logic: anything in opposition to Israeli policy that seeks to reduce Palestinians to second-class citizenry or cleanse the Occupied Territories of the Palestinian presence is anti-Israel and anti-Semitic. These groups all know that the settlements are the problem and that they are not built to provide security, but they will not speak out against them or call the government of Israel to task when it keeps building them at break-neck pace.

These Jewish groups find themselves in the untenable position of dismissing the voices of some of the very people they say they represent. They are a powerful and loud voice but they do not represent all Jews. What do they say about Jewish organizations who are working against the occupation, like [Jewish Voice for Peace, End the Occupation](#), the [Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions](#), and even [B'Tselem](#), the Israeli human rights group in the Occupied Territories? They say they are "Self-hating Jews." You definitely have to come up with a new lexicon when those within your ranks begin to dissent. Take for example, the testimony of [Hedy Epstein](#) at the 220<sup>th</sup> GA. It is quite instructive to watch a Jewish Voice for Peace Holocaust survivor humbly tell a General Assembly Middle East Peacemaking committee that enough is enough, while rabbis,

JCPA officials and “pro-Israel” Presbyterians look at her like she is from another planet. In one sense, she is; Hedy is from the planet that remembers what their brand of rhetoric and lockstep loyalty to oppressors becomes in its most nightmarish version.

### ***III. Ecumenical Efforts and Partnerships***

#### ***What About the Supposed Ecumenical Meltdown Regarding Divestment?***

One of the arguments put forth by divestment opponents is that the Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, and now Presbyterian churches have rejected divestment and so it should be abandoned as a realistic way to help bring an end to occupation and human rights violations. They often say that in many ways we actually all agree that the occupation must end, but that we differ on tactics. But that is simply false. The anti-divestment crowd is not against occupation, although it pays lip service to it. Being against occupation would mean being for the dismantling of illegal settlement cities; for a two-state solution where all the walls, fences and checkpoints inside the Green Line would have to come down; for a Palestinian economy that can flow freely; for a Jerusalem with free access for Palestinian Christians and Muslims; and for the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees. (Palestinians are the only refugees in the world whose Right of Return is in question).

If they were really for an end to the occupation, it would be over by now. By default and de facto, the Presbyterian anti-BDS crowd has ended up being about aiding and abetting the Israeli government in carrying out its agenda of displacement, land-grabbing and ethnic cleansing in Palestine. They are either supporting that with eyes wide open, or with willful ignorance. In order to accomplish this, they have to deny that the call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) is like other previous grassroots movements, even though they may well have participated in those kinds of movements once themselves. The civil rights movement did not happen overnight, and neither did the cry against South African apartheid. BDS played a role in them. The Presbyterian boycotts of Nestlé and Taco Bell were not sudden acts, but occurred as a last resort when talking to corporations as shareholders didn't work. And the record shows that PC(USA) works with ecumenical partners in all corporate engagement talks.

The truth about our ecumenical partners is that this year was their first serious attempt at shining a light on the Israeli Occupation and seeking to get their communities of faith to begin collectively to take notice. They are not as far along in the process as we are in the PC(USA). The Episcopalians attended several IPMN annual meetings before rolling out their own [Palestine/Israel Network](#). During its formation as a network within the United Methodist Church, the [United Methodist Kairos Response \(UMKR\)](#) was in regular communication with IPMN leadership for advice and counsel and partnership. They also attended IPMN annual meetings. UMKR leadership was reminded by ours that this was a long journey to educate an entire church denomination and they should expect defeats and setbacks along the way. The United Church of Christ (UCC) has been in communication with IPMN for advice on starting and building a network modeled on our Presbyterian one. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) has

regularly sent representatives to be present at IPMN's annual meetings for partnership. As a representative of the IPMN Steering Committee, in February 2012 I flew to Toronto at the invitation of the United Church of Canada, which was beginning to explore how to create its own network that would advocate for justice in Palestine.

The IPMN has been consulted regularly by ecumenical partners because our network has been at the forefront of this struggle for justice. Ecumenical partners have looked to IPMN for leadership, and the achievements of the network are well known at the World Council of Churches, and among Palestinian Christian partners. We have shared copyrights of our publications and co-published educational materials and videos with our ecumenical partners. The fact is that the call for divestment has been growing, not declining, as more and more people get the truth about occupation and the gross violation of human rights in Palestine.

Here is one of the most egregious statements from Presbyterians for Middle East Peace in regard to the BDS movement, as if repeating it again and again will make it true: "It was the secular, international Boycott, Divest, Sanction movement and BDS advocates within the PCUSA that championed divestment... [it is] a movement that recklessly engages in the demonization of an entire people, something that we as Christians can neither accept nor tolerate within our church community." Perhaps leaders of PMEPE believe they are the only Christians on the block and forget that the BDS movement found its voice in the Kairos Palestine Document, a confession of faith that was signed by the leaders of every Christian denomination in Palestine. And in fact, the divestment movement in the PC(USA) began in 2004, long before there was any hint of a BDS movement in Palestinian church or society. If anything, it was our 2004 GA action around divestment that was the shot heard around the world. No other church, and very few secular organizations were even talking about it at that time. For the most part, at least when it came to American Christian attention towards the issue, Palestinian Christians were silently suffering.

Our Christian brothers and sisters were suffering and struggling to be heard while the church continually handed the megaphone to Jewish partners whose agenda was to justify and seek our blessing for anything the Israeli government wanted to accomplish through its occupation agenda. And yet, in 2004 it was the voice of one, lone ecumenical partner elsewhere in the world, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which brought hope, and perhaps even inspiration for the Palestinian church to become more vocal about being Christian in the face of brutal occupation. The PC(USA) was by no means a catalyst to the Palestinian struggle for human rights, but in a small way was able to open a door, globally speaking, whereby those struggling so mightily against oppression could find a larger voice on the world stage.

#### ***IV. The Polity***

The Committee that deliberated for two full days about Middle East peacemaking voted to bring to plenary a recommendation to divest and another recommendation to invest. These were items [15-11](#) and [15-10](#). Their careful deliberation and awakening around these issues had

brought a more than 3:1 vote to do both. When the moderator of the committee presented the work of the committee to plenary, he did not say this and failed to communicate the will of the committee that was entrusted to do this hard work. Rather than present both items at once, he presented divestment first, without making it clear that it was to be followed by a vote on investment.

A minority report, filed by 5 of the 48 in the committee, was presented. It was almost identical to item 15-10 on investment, but because it was not actually identical, it was not ruled out of order. Eight years of work by a 40-year-old committee (MRTI) was summarily dismissed by the minority report, which replaced the majority report by a vote of 333 to 331 with 2 abstentions. There was a delayed and loud gasp from the huge crowd. Not a proud moment for Presbyterian polity.

Actual votes for or against divestment at Presbyterian General Assemblies really never take place. It is always a vote about whether or not to continue engagement, or to replace language. Even this year at the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, the actual measure passed was to replace MRTI's recommendation to divest from Caterpillar, Motorola and HP with "positive investment" language. The later vote to approve the minority report was typical of Presbyterian polity in that it passed with a wider margin, but even the [New York Times reported](#) the meaningful vote as the one that was 333 to 331. In fact, that is how most news outlets, except for our own Presbyterian News Service, reported it: that the 2-vote margin was the one that defined this vote.

## ***V. About "Positive Investment"***

On the matter of "positive investment" we read the following from the opaquely-operating PMEP: "Presbyterians for Middle East Peace has two goals going forward. First, we will do all we can to make positive investment for peace a reality. A strong effort in this direction is already underway at Auburn Theological Seminary, and we will do all we can to expand and advance these important initiatives."

This is pure spin and nothing new. This is the language PMEP has used since 2004 every time it has argued against divestment. It is more of a tactic than a strategy for peacemaking. In one way or another since 2006, every General Assembly has reaffirmed the concept of "positive investment." So why have we now gone six years without having had any substantive announcement about a "positive investment" initiative by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Presbyterians for Middle East Peace, or PMEP's partner, Auburn Theological Seminary? It is simply because there have been no successes. Even the Executive Director of the General Assembly Mission Council, Linda Valentine, reported to Committee 15 that all the high-ranking staff leadership in the denomination has taken a trip to Israel Palestine to see what the possibilities might be. So far, there have been no possibilities found. One trip in six years to make investment happen?

There were rumors in the run-up to the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly this year that Auburn Theological Seminary was ready to roll out a major investment initiative involving Information Technology in

Palestine. PMEP sent out emails directing people to Auburn's website where they could register for a free dinner where Auburn would introduce [The Sadara Fund](#), a joint Israeli/Palestinian venture, which would be the key vehicle through which Presbyterians could do "positive investment" in Palestine. Two weeks before the General Assembly, the dinner was canceled and the announcement was scuttled and replaced with a last-minute breakfast and debate panel, which was then touted by Auburn Seminary as a model to be followed. In their own words, in an email to supporters, they said, "Auburn tried to model what a productive conversation within the Church on this issue might look like. We hosted a panel where diverse voices on the hot button issue of divestment could exchange views." Of course, they did not invite IPMN's voice on the panel, and they had to be convinced by a member of the National Middle Eastern Presbyterian Caucus (NMEPC) to allow a Palestinian Presbyterian on the panel, without whom the panel would have included two Jewish voices and no Palestinian ones. The original dinner was cancelled because the Palestinian who had been invited to speak discovered that Sadara was about to be used as a tactic to defeat divestment; that this investment opportunity was in fact to be presented **instead** of divestment. Sadara refused to attend.

The Israel Palestine Mission Network had already been aware of the fact that Auburn was looking into the development of Information Technology (I.T.) in Palestine as a way into "positive investment." Prior to the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly IPMN made public statements saying that if it was indeed true that there were good inroads towards this kind of investment, we were all in favor of it. We also argued, however, that I.T. does not solve the common Palestinian's commerce problem who is completely at the mercy of the Israeli military in Palestine. Operating in the virtual world, a successful I.T. endeavor does not bring down walls and checkpoints that prevent Palestinian olive farmers from getting to their trees and crops, let alone actually shipping their products. Investment in I.T. does not enable the movement of handmade goods by Palestinian crafters that bring essential income into Palestinian homes. Investment in I.T. does not prevent the [Israeli military from destroying](#) numerous [cisterns](#) built to insure clean water for Palestinian homes and businesses. Investment in I.T. does not prevent that same military from [tearing down solar panel](#) initiatives bankrolled by the European Union.

As [Rami Khouri](#), renown writer for the Daily Star made clear to a number of audiences in Pittsburgh during the G.A., "Palestinians do not want their open-air prison nicely decorated, they want the walls to come down and the occupation to end. Palestinian business people are making it clear that this is all they need because they have a history of being creative and industrious. All they need is freedom to do business and they have no doubts that they will create many positive scenarios in which the whole world can come to invest." From 2005-2007 IPMN was the only Presbyterian organization realistically looking into investment in Palestine, with a university professor of economics taking the lead. After much study and work, and a number of trips, this team concluded that Presbyterian "positive investment" goals were not possible given the state of the occupation; the infrastructure of that occupation has to be dismantled first.

One must be very careful on differentiating between "positive investment" and humanitarian efforts. Are we to make investments or are we to do mission? It is too often the case that in an effort to defeat divestment, the words "positive investment" are used and all those proponents

really mean is more humanitarian mission. Both are good, but they are not the same. The leadership, as well as the rank and file of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are experts at humanitarian relief work. We have engaged in that throughout the world, and in Palestine for a very long time. As a result of humanitarian efforts by ourselves and by our ecumenical partners, schools and hospitals are built, shelters are established, businesses are launched, orphans and widows are cared for. “Positive Investment” is about creating a business environment in which investors can help rebuild a society through major capital funding, but they do so expecting a return on their investments. How can any investor take one look at the walls, the checkpoints, the stealing of land and natural resources for the creation and sustaining of illegal Israeli settlements in occupied territories, and from a business perspective, determine that this is a reasonable risk to take?

The truth is that every time our church has called for positive steps regarding Palestine, we have been staring it in the face. It is called divestment. The act of divestment is what positively shines the light on the gross human rights violations taking place in occupied Palestinian territories thus creating winds of change. An act of divestment by a church or secular organization calls for the playing field to be leveled. Divestment sends a clear signal to corporate human rights violators that the world is watching more closely than ever before and that continued bad behavior is going to affect their bottom line. This is what happened in South Africa, in spite of those who were opposed to divestment arguing for years that divestment was nothing more than an empty gesture. Ask Nelson Mandela. Ask Archbishop [Desmond Tutu](#). Ask the whole of South Africa today whether what the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) did in 1983 was an empty gesture. Divestment helped save South Africa, it didn’t destroy it.

## **VI. Conclusion**

### ***The Big Picture***

In the “Assembly in Brief” publication produced by the Office of the General Assembly after the adjournment of the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly meeting, the following reflection was offered:

*In an interview with Presbyterian News Service just prior to the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, outgoing moderator Cindy Bolbach urged caution, saying: “I’m not sure we can absorb anything that’s another huge change.” ...In each case and many others among the 800+ items of business, commissioners and advisory delegates deliberated carefully and at length... and at the end of the day opted for actions that seemed least likely to plunge the PC(USA) into further turmoil.*

This probably captures the atmosphere in the convention center better than anything else in regard to explaining why the General Assembly commissioners made the kinds of decisions they did.

But one wonders about the set-up. How is it, for instance, that a rabbi (Gil Rosenthal) scheduled to bring “interfaith greetings” (among others of different faiths, including a Muslim speaker) manages to hold court with [an anti-divestment speech](#) just hours before the Middle East Peacemaking Committee report is to come before the plenary? Explanations from denominational leaders afterward varied from saying they did not know about it, nor could predict such a thing ahead of time (really?), to admitting that they knew this was coming but could not prevent a Jewish leader from bringing greetings (No? Well how about precise instructions about what an interfaith greeting is with an understanding that his microphone would be cut-off if he stepped over the line?). The Muslim greeting stayed out of politics and was in fact statesman-like in comparison.

It is a sad day when a mission network of the Presbyterian church, with a mandate to work for Palestinian human rights from the General Assembly, has to work against an opposition within its own family. IPMN’s Presbyterian opposition was more worried than we had ever seen them, and a number of divestment opponents were anticipating a loss this year because finally, MRTI had reached the end of the road. These opponents did lose in the Middle East Peacemaking Committee 15 by more than a 3:1 vote. This is the committee that gets a chance to be educated and reads all the information very closely and listens to hours of advocacy and open hearing speeches. This is the committee that sees the real players, the people who have skin in the game: Palestinian Presbyterians and Christians of other traditions, American and Israeli Jews holding opposite views, rank and file Presbyterians who express very different opinions on the matter.

A very diverse group of people filed through the room presenting their views. It was a telling story to see that those who opposed divestment were mostly older, white men and a few women, while those supporting divestment were a very diverse young group, with a large young Jewish contingent from both Israel and all over the United States, who came to passionately beg the committee to support MRTI’s report. One young Jewish observer’s [reflection](#) calls it like it is: “*A Fresh Coat of Paint for the Rubble: The message the Presbyterian Church (USA) sent to Palestinian Christians.*” [Another said](#), you don’t need our permission to do what is right. There were young American Palestinians who told stories about going back to visit the land of their parents and grandparents; they remembered standing outside ancestral homes that they could not enter. The gender and generational divide between pro and anti-divestment voices was quite jarring. The ground is moving under the feet of the establishment and they are not sure what to do. Indeed, if you listened closely enough you might have heard a refrain from Bob Dylan; *The times they are a-changin’...*

Following the public debate portion of the meeting, when the committee began to deliberate, there was hardly any doubt about which way the committee would vote. Committee 15 members wanted their church to approve the MRTI report and divest from the three named companies. They voted overwhelmingly to do so, and now it was left to a plenary beleaguered with many difficult decisions.

On the plenary floor there were good speeches, some that were incredible, and some that were bad. There were speeches that betrayed terrible ignorance about the facts on the ground and

that were influenced more by fear tactics. Remember, that morning commissioners in plenary had sat while a rabbi scolded them for a decision they had not yet made, and they never heard the voice of a Palestinian or [a young rabbi](#) begging them to have courage and divest.

And the vote to disregard an MRTI report, eight years in the making was oh-so-close. (333-331)

Half the plenary chose, by Presbyterian standards, not to be informed, meaning that according to our system, the plenary is informed by our committee work. We appoint them, and we trust them to faithfully do their work and to inform us with honesty and integrity. MRTI has been doing that for 40 years, and the only occasion the church has questioned this committee's final recommendation has come as the result of inordinate pressure and fear-tactics from pro-Israel, pro-occupation organizations that skew even American foreign policy. G.A. Committee 15 heard the full story, including the threats from worried partners, and yet chose to endorse what the other permanent committee (MRTI) was saying anyway, because it was the right and moral thing to do. For the plenary, without the benefit of being fully informed, the truth escaped half the voting body.

### ***Sign of Hope***

The one shining light emanating for Middle East peacemaking from the 220<sup>th</sup> GA comes in the fact that we approved a sweeping boycott measure. Committee 15's recommendation to widen the language of the overture calling for boycott of Ahava Cosmetics and Hadiklaim Dates to a blanket boycott of all goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements was approved by a 71% vote in the plenary. This is no hollow victory. Was it because the threats and fear tactics did not mention boycotts, so the plenary was able to trust Committee 15's judgment? Maybe.

Now, the General Assemblies the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has voted for [boycott](#) (B) and [sanctions](#) (S). All that remains is divestment (D) in the BDS trio. But with this year's boycott vote, the [PC\(USA\) has boldly stepped into the BDS movement](#). What is interesting is that the arguments made in support of boycott and sanctions are the same arguments that support divestment. It is only a matter of time until Presbyterians do decide to part with tainted profits. Boycotts are at a consumer level, divestment is at a corporate level. The tide is turning and the coming change is inevitable. Presbyterians *will* decide to part from profiteering on the backs of the oppressed, and we will be better for it.

### ***What's next?***

Breaking down the realm of power is a marathon not a sprint. We keep striving for justice. It may not always come quickly, but it comes. We remember those in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and beyond who stood on the wrong side of history in regard to South Africa, and the Civil Rights Movement and we were dismayed for them then. For those who have chosen to stand on the wrong side of history this time around, we feel the same. They will one day see their moral failure in the face of oppression.

But we will press on because we must.

*In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.*

~ Micah 4