



THE ISRAEL/PALESTINE MISSION NETWORK
of the PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)
www.theIPMN.org

Response to the protest pamphlet

Reformed and Reforming: A Word of Hope

Greetings!

As many of you are aware, a pamphlet was recently sent to all PC(USA) congregations entitled *Reformed and Reforming: A Word of Hope*. The basic message in this pamphlet is that PC(USA) General Assembly procedure is seriously flawed and needs to be changed. The “presenting problem” was the 2014 decision of the 221st General Assembly (GA) to divest its portfolio from financial assets in Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard and Motorola Solutions for profiting from the illegal occupation of Palestine.

Prior to the pamphlet’s release, there was a telephone conference to announce it to the press. I listened in, as did IPMN Communications Chair, Rob Trawick. The conference call was designed for the media with three Presbyterian speakers: one commissioner serving on the 221st GA Middle East committee, one commissioner to that GA not on the committee, and one GA observer who is a Presbyterian pastor. After the initial presentation, the call was opened for questions from reporters. From what was heard, only two press organizations seemed to be on the call: *N.Y. Jewish Week*, and *The Christian Post*. Each reporter was given the opportunity to ask an initial question, and afterwards allowed to ask a follow-up question. For that follow-up, the reporter from *N.Y. Jewish Week* was still on the call, while the one from *The Christian Post* had dropped out. Rob Trawick tried to ask a question, but was not permitted to participate. The press conference then concluded with closing statements. Two days later the pamphlet was in my church mailbox.

While the Office of the General Assembly can and should provide its own refutation of the charges, I write as the current moderator of the Israel Palestine Mission Network to share our perspective, and my own observation, of how this moral engagement with the church has gone

forward, propelled by direct experiences with Christian and Muslim Palestinians struggling to survive under Israel’s military occupation. Whether or not you wish to follow every detail, our prayer is that we keep to the heart of this issue and the responsibility of our church not to be silenced or have its voice—and the voice of Christians on the ground—suppressed. Let not that pamphlet distract any of us from the call of Christians and civil society to end the occupation and bring freedom and dignity rather than violence and terror.

Because the pamphlet is critical of General Assembly process, I would like to rehearse for you my role in the divestment process since 2004 when the first divestment overture went to the 216th General Assembly in Richmond. I was on the floor of the Presbytery of St. Augustine when the overture was first approved. I had been in Palestine for the first time during the Second Intifada in 2001 and, having known almost nothing about the conflict, could not believe what I was seeing in the way of oppression. I came home very concerned and thought about what I could do. When the recommendation came to my presbytery from our Bills and Overtures Committee, I was on my feet to express what I experienced and my wholehearted support for the overture. Many spoke in favor because they too had been there and saw the same thing. In my estimation, this is honest Presbyterian process at its best: a small congregation bringing an overture to its presbytery and sending it up the line to General Assembly. I did not go to GA that year, but learned that the overture to divest wound up in the hands of the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) for further review and recommendation.

I served as a commissioner for the 217th General Assembly in 2006 and expected to hear an MRTI recommendation to complete what was started in 2004 and divest. Instead, because of blowback to the 2004 action, the GA voted to take out the word “divest” from the action, but stay the course of corporate engagement as shareholders, in the hope of changing corporate behavior. By 2008 I had become the advocacy chairperson of the national Israel Palestine Mission Network (IPMN), and sat in the Peacemaking Committee meeting room at the 218th GA listening to everything that was said about Israel Palestine overtures. For the 2010 GA meeting in Minneapolis, due to the high number of items dealing with the Middle East, there was a new Middle East Committee, which remained in place for 2012 in Pittsburgh and 2014 in Detroit. Again, I sat in all those committee rooms for every bit of

conversation that took place in the meetings that were open to the public.

In 2008 and 2010, MRTI recommended to continue corporate engagement rather than divestment with the companies they had identified as “profiting from non-peaceful pursuits.” Our mission network was opposed to those recommendations because we saw a pattern in which the corporations in question would say constructive things to MRTI in the run up to GA only to stop cooperating after the meetings concluded and divestment had failed to pass. By 2012, after years of unsuccessful dialogue with three American companies, MRTI had voted to bring a recommendation to divest from them to GA; MRTI and IPMN were now on the same page. That year, even though the committee voted to divest by a 2/3rds margin, in plenary, the minority report became the main motion and divestment failed by 3 votes out of 667. Finally, in 2014, the MRTI report and recommendation prevailed by a 7 vote margin. A fuller history is available in a paper I wrote on the IPMN website: theIPMN.org.

In light of this knowledge and experience, *Reformed and Reforming* seems to be a very creative description of General Assembly process. I take seriously the fact that only 4 members of the Mideast Committee, made up of more than 70 commissioners, actually signed the protest document, and only 15 more out of over 700 commissioners to that GA did so as well. Only 16 GA observers signed it, names we recognize as coming from those who have staked out their anti-Palestine positions, come what may. So out of the hundreds, and even thousands who were in Detroit in June 2014, only 35 people signed the document expressing their concern that present Presbyterian GA process is now fundamentally flawed. Moreover, although their name does not appear on the pamphlet, the public relations firm, Bluelight Strategies (bluelightstrategies.com), organized the press conference and served as the media contact for it. Bluelight Strategies has also promoted such organizations as Thank Israeli Soldiers, Israel on Campus Coalition, Israel Policy Forum, and the Times of Israel, among other anti-BDS institutions. As Presbyterians who value an open and transparent process, we have to ask, who funded this anti-Presbyterian pamphlet and who paid the PR firm Bluelight Strategies to do this advocacy work? IPMN’s funding is an open book and we are funded annually by Presbyterians who pledge as members.

The protest document *Reformed and Reforming* will be parsed in many ways in the lead-up to the 222nd meeting of the GA in Portland. Those well-

versed in Presbyterian polity as well as *Roberts Rules of Order* will most certainly debate the accuracy of claims made in this document. As one who has been present for most of the General Assembly debate over divestment for a decade, I would like to make these observations about the protest:

1 Committee Leadership

- A. I agree with the pamphlet that the vice-moderator of the 2014 GA Mideast Committee overstepped her bounds and took positions while she should have stayed neutral. I was taken aback by that
- B. The original 2014 committee moderator was asked to step down by the Office of the General Assembly because he had taken a trip to Israel/Palestine paid for by an anti-divestment Jewish group. This was a clear conflict of interest. Claims about “divestment advocates” being responsible for pressuring a change in committee leadership prior to GA are false and belittle our process. I speak as having been one of the chief advocates for divestment heading into Detroit; it stands to reason I would know if that kind of pressure was actually taking place. It was not.

- 2 **A decade of successive GA Debates -** The protest document itself lacks a good sense of the heart of Presbyterian process, which begs the question who really wrote it. For those who do not have that sense, complaining about the same issue coming back to General Assembly year after year is at best whining and at worst disingenuous. I was ordained in 1981. In 1978 while in seminary, the issue of gay ordination first came before a General Assembly (the old UPCUSA). Until the language in the Book of Order was finally changed to allow for it, I heard about this issue for the entirety of my tenure as a teaching elder until it passed decades on. Even as one who supported the initiative, at times I got sick of hearing all the debate. Important issues of justice do keep coming back to the General Assembly because it takes a long time to educate the whole church. That’s the way it is supposed to work. Even Jesus Christ often needed time to enlighten the unenlightened.

3 Floor time at GA - The document makes the argument that there were hours upon hours of pro-divestment debate that overwhelmed the very short period of time given to those who opposed divestment. This is a cynical misrepresentation of committee process. The fact of the matter is that for every overture that comes to a GA committee, time is given for "overture advocates" from the presbytery of origin to state their case before that committee. Recently, in a desire to improve General Assembly process, it was decided to require all overtures to be endorsed by a second presbytery in order to be considered by the GA. This doubles the amount of time advocates for that particular overture have before the committee. Additionally, a good number of diverse overtures seeking justice for Palestinians came before the committee in 2014, again each having at least two overture advocates speaking in accordance with new General Assembly policy. This only points to the fact that across the church, there is serious concern about the injustice of the decades-old Israeli occupation. In 2014, except for one overture in favor of divestment, one against, and one recommendation from MRTI, no other overtures actually addressed the issue head on. The rest pertained to a myriad of different struggles and injustices caused by the illegal occupation. But the facts on the ground in Palestine only get more dire, so every time a different overture was before the committee, the commissioners did hear over and over again, in different ways, the same facts on the ground. For the inattentive, and those in the room believing that only one issue was being discussed, it sounded as if proponents of divestment had all the floor time. If you were part of the group who wanted to minimize the injustices being discussed, then you would have been very frustrated by the number of times they were mentioned.

4 Plenary Speakers on Mideast issues - It is both uninformed and disingenuous to say, "a Palestinian leader spoke to the entire General Assembly on the morning of the divestment vote," without pointing out that this leader was actually an Ecumenical Advisory Delegate who, in accordance with General Assembly rules has the privilege of the floor in the same way that is true with Young Adult Advisory

Delegates, Theological Student Advisory Delegates, and Commissioners. What was not mentioned, however, are the following two speakers over the last two General Assemblies:

- A. In 2012, one of those who offered the morning "interfaith greeting" to the plenary on the scheduled day of the divestment vote was Rabbi Gil Rosenthal. Interfaith greetings are to be exactly that: interfaith... and a greeting. Rabbi Rosenthal used it as an opportunity to threaten dire consequences regarding PC(USA) relationship with the Jewish community if divestment passed that day.
- B. In 2014 Rabbi Rick Jacobs delivered the interfaith greeting and in reference to the upcoming divestment vote, said: "There is nothing to worship in a God who wants such a thing from you." In addition to that, he offered the plenary a weird deal: If they would vote divestment down, he would arrange a meeting for Moderator Heath Rada and Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons with Prime Minister Netanyahu. The New York Times reported that Jacobs' offer "appears to have backfired, with some saying afterward that it felt both manipulative and ineffectual, given what they perceive as Mr. Netanyahu's approval of more settlements in disputed areas and lack of enthusiasm for peace negotiations." (NY Times article: <http://bit.ly/PresbyDivest>).

It is truly hard to believe that key, influential Presbyterians leading the cause against divestment were not aware of what these speakers were going to say in successive General Assemblies. In fact one of those who signed the protest pamphlet got to the microphone and said Rabbi Jacobs' offer to meet with Netanyahu was "a game changer," as if such a meeting would stop the settlement building and occupation and make divestment moot.

5 Informed Commissioners - It is a great disservice to commissioners and the spirit of General Assembly to describe those elected by their presbyteries to serve the

larger church as if they were sheep being led to slaughter. I have served as a commissioner for two General Assemblies and have always taken my responsibilities very seriously. Even though it involved a huge time commitment, I always prepared by reading everything that was coming before the committee to which I was assigned, as well as researching where necessary, and reading most of what would come to the plenary from other committees. A wise soul, after reading this protest pamphlet, sarcastically asked the question: "Where are these presbyteries that elect so many ignorant commissioners?"

- 6 **Obfuscation** - Plenary process can be difficult to follow at times, especially when there are amendments upon amendments put forward. And opposition voices are not innocent; we clearly saw a strategy on the plenary floor aimed at confusing matters and obstructing process by bringing forth minority reports, amendments and actions that muddied the waters and sought to prevent an up or down vote on divestment as had already occurred in 2012.
- 7 **Propaganda labels** - Finally, the protest pamphlet could not be complete in its distortions without labeling those who seek true justice in Palestine as "anti-Israel." That term is part of the propaganda campaign that comes from those who believe that the Israeli government can do no wrong. IPMN has said this since its inception: we are against racism in any form, and against those who seek to demonize Judaism and Islam, along with their communities and culture. We believe our GA-mandated advocacy work is pro peace, pro Israel and pro Palestine.

Given the uneventful press conference to launch the protest against our GA process, and the relatively small number of individuals who actually put their names on the document, part of me wondered if I should even address this matter at any length at all. But I am Presbyterian enough to know that when faithful tradition and process has been unjustly attacked, a response needs to be made by those who have had the opportunity to observe the process longer than those who have made the false charges. It is my firm belief that the authors of this document in fact know very little about our process, except for what they would wish it to be. It can be said that in our polity, process IS theology; we take pains to run

our disagreements through an open, fair and thorough process.

The PC(USA) is but a human institution (the church) called out by Christ in spite of all its flaws. It is alright to critique and challenge those flaws on a regular basis. What is not alright is to denigrate the process because it did not yield results you wanted. In our church's confession entitled, "A Brief Declaration of Faith", this historic witness proclaims that "God is faithful still."

In that we do trust.

Jeffrey DeYoe, Moderator

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