The North American Response to Kairos Palestine

a collection of articles reporting on how North American churches have responded to the call for solidarity from Palestinian Christians
from the editor

This collection of articles was published by Ecclesio in a week of reporting on the North American response to Kairos Palestine, a confession of faith written by Palestinian Christians in 2009, which called for solidarity in their hour of need. The document is translated from its original Arabic into twenty languages, and is entitled A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering. With all the heads of churches in the Holy Land signing this confession of faith, it is a unique call to action to the Christian community around the world.

These articles report on some of the actions taken by U.S. denominations in response to this call. The final article reports on the Canadian response. They appear here in the order they were published in May 2013.

As a Presbyterian Elder living in New York City, I was glad and proud to see our General Assembly receive Kairos Palestine for study in 2010, even though some tried to say its call for non-violent economic action should be considered violent because of the long, violent Christian history against Jews. I hope Christians of conscience will take the time to read, reflect, and act on this call from the fast-dwindling Christians of the Holy Land. The Friends of Sabeel North America (FOSNA)* has provided a good introduction online and the full document too. The Israel Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (USA), on whose board I serve, has produced a small and well-used study guide for groups, which also includes the full document. It is available through the denomination’s online store.**

Noushin Framke
The Israel Palestine Mission Network
of the Presbyterian Church (USA)
theIPMN.org

*FOSNA.org -> Resources
**IPMN’s Kairos Palestine Study Guide: http://store.pcusa.org/2646610001

with grateful acknowledgement to Ecclesio.com

Israel’s Separation Wall

The Wall provides a canvas for local and visiting artists who constantly paint and repaint this 25 foot high wall. Even though some will call it the “security” wall, Israel calls it the hafrada wall, which means separation in Hebrew. It is built entirely on Palestinian land - as opposed to the 1967 border - and is considered a land grab by Palestinians.

photos: Bob Ross

front cover: Palestinian faces
photo credits clockwise from top left: Ralph B. Watkins, Carol Hylkema, Bob Ross,
Kairos USA: a movement emerges as a response to Kairos Palestine

Pauline M. Coffman

Responding to the growing need among Christians for an ecumenical and action-oriented response to the Kairos Palestine confession, issued in 2009 by Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem, a group of fourteen clergy, theologians and laypersons met in June 2011 at Elmhurst College in Illinois to inaugurate the movement. The opening of Kairos Palestine cries out: “A moment of truth! Here is a word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering... Why now? Because we have reached a dead end in the tragedy of the Palestinian people.” The urgency of the statement demanded a response.

The organizing group stemmed from a meeting between Mark Braverman, a Jewish writer and retired psychologist, and Cotton Fite, an Episcopalian priest and psychotherapist. Their meeting occurred at a Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) meeting in Washington, D.C. in May 2011. After consulting with Don Wagner, Presbyterian (PCUSA) clergy and longtime Chicago advocate for a just peace for Israel and Palestine, they issued invitations for the inaugural meeting in Illinois.

Mark Braverman, coming from a Zionist background, was transformed on his views on Israel/Palestine during a visit in 2006 as he witnessed Israel’s military occupation and met peace activists and civil society leaders from the Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities. A clinical and community psychologist, Mark returned to the U.S. and wrote the story of his transformation and awakening in Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews, and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land, published in 2010.

Mark was present in Bethlehem in 2009 when Kairos Palestine was launched and was keenly aware of the urgency of the call from Palestinian Christians to Christians around the world asking for solidarity. Accordingly, he opened the 2011 Illinois meeting by emphasizing the need for a grassroots movement in the U.S. to help bring about the end to Israeli apartheid. He cited the role of U.S. churches in the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and the movement to end South African apartheid. He stressed the role of the U.S. church in allowing the urgent human rights tragedy to unfold and noted the recent emergence of Kairos movements in South Africa, Europe and Asia in response to the Kairos Palestine call. The group gathered in Illinois believed it was time we as Americans confessed our complicity and issued a call to action in the U.S.

Several of those attending the June meeting in Illinois, including myself, were among the 10 representing Kairos USA movement at the Kairos for Global Justice conference in Bethlehem, Palestine, in December 2011. The experience of being with delegates from all around the globe impressed upon us the need for and importance of a response from the U.S., and the vision for Kairos USA began to take shape. In addition to participating in the conference, our group planned the next gathering at which work on the Kairos USA confessing statement would begin.

Less than three months later, over 40 people from across the country and the Christian spectrum gathered at the Stony Point Conference Center in New York state in February 2012. The plan was to study, worship and pray together as we reflected and constructed the framework of the Kairos USA statement, “Call to Action: U.S. Response to the Kairos Palestine Document.” It is important to note that delegates came from mainline churches as well as evangelical and Pentecostal ones. There was a good diversity of backgrounds as well as theological opinions present, which made the gathering all the more potent and moving. The confluence of the diverse perspectives was striking, as everyone offered points to include in the statement that emerged as the Kairos USA response to Kairos Palestine.

Kairos USA launched its statement in June 2012, in time to reach those attending the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s General Assembly and the Episcopal Church’s General Conference. A study guide was developed to help American Christians understand what Palestinian Christians are calling on us to do. This includes exploring and understanding nonviolence from a variety of perspectives, both practical and theological. The free study guide can be downloaded from the site.

Since the launch in 2012, hundreds of Christian leaders and lay people representing many different perspectives of Christianity have signed on in support of the movement and call to action; their names can be seen on the Kairos USA website: www.kairosusa.org. The movement is growing and new supporters can sign on at the website. Join us!

Pauline Coffman is a professor and director (retired) of the School of Adult Learning, North Park University, Chicago, IL. She is a member of the Israel Palestine Mission Network of the PC(USA), the Middle East Task Force of Chicago Presbytery, and the Chicago Faith Coalition on Middle East Policy. Pauline attends First United Church of Oak Park, IL (union PCUSA and UCC), and is co-leading a seminar to Israel/Palestine in June 2013. Pauline serves on the Board of Directors of Kairos USA.
Kairos Time: A U.S. Call to Action

Mark Braverman

“This is the Kairos, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action.” So reads the South Africa Kairos document titled “Challenge to the Church.” In their courageous statement of 1985, a group of South African pastors, theologians and activists, black and white, inaugurated the modern kairos era. “It is the kairos or moment of truth not only for apartheid,” continues the document, “but for the Church.”

The South African document set the standard for the historic Palestine Kairos document of 2009, entitled “A moment of truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering.” Also known as “Kairos Palestine,” the document, authored by Palestinian clergy, theologians and societal leaders from across the ecumenical spectrum, sets out the situation of a brutal and worsening occupation and articulates a theology that requires nonviolent resistance to the evil of occupation -- resistance “with love as its logic.” Naming the Israeli occupation a sin, it calls out to the international community, reserving its final call for the church itself: “What is the international community doing? What are the political leaders in Palestine, in Israel and in the Arab world doing? What is the Church doing?”

Like its South African predecessor, the Palestinian call has been a game-changer. It has created a moment of truth for the church, when, in the words of Robert McAfee Brown, “the issues become so clear, and the stakes so high, that the privilege of amiable disagreement must be superseded by clear cut decisions, and the choice must move from both/and to either/or.” Kairos Palestine has been commended for study by congregations and denominations worldwide and has spawned Kairos movements and documents in Asia, Europe, and the U.S.A. “Call to Action: U.S. Response to the Kairos Palestine document,” published in June 2012, is the most recent addition to this global response. Because of the central role of the U.S. government in its support for Israel and the size and power of the U.S. church, the appearance of the Kairos USA document is a significant development. Like the South African document that challenged the *church theology* that had supported the unjust actions of its own government, “Call to Action” directly asks the questions: how have U.S. Christians participated in the injustice that is causing so much suffering for Palestinians and is poisoning Israeli society, and what can the church in the U.S. do about creating real change? The document courageously takes on key issues, including the influence of Christian Zionism, the theological meaning of the land, Christian feelings of responsibility for Jewish suffering, and the impact of Jewish institutional opposition to any perceived threat to U.S. support of Israel.

A Church Confession

Declaring the mission of the newly-formed Kairos “to mobilize the churches in the United States to respond faithfully and boldly to the situation in Israel and Palestine,” the preamble to “Call to Action” describes the background and context for its creation:

In June 2011, a group of U.S. clergy, theologians and laypersons, cognizant of our responsibility as Americans in the tragedy unfolding in Israel and Palestine, and mindful of the urgency of the situation, met to inaugurate a new movement for American Christians. We have been inspired by the prophetic church movements of southern Africa, Central and South America, Asia and Europe that have responded to the call of their Christian sisters and brothers in occupied Palestine. This is our statement of witness and confession—and our response as U.S. Christians to the Palestinian call.

“The tragic realities of Israel and Palestine today,” the document continues, “would deeply trouble Jesus and the prophets. The land in which Jesus lived and was crucified by the Roman imperial rulers is again a place of violence, inequality and suffering. Palestinians and Israelis are trapped in a spiral of violence that is destroying their humanity, squandering their resources and killing their children.” The authors of “Call to Action” confess the tragic legacy of Christian persecution of Jews. Having made this confession and acknowledged the right of the Jewish people to “security…free from the scourge of anti-Semitism,” the document shifts its focus to the urgent realities of the present day, stating boldly that “the State of Israel’s present course will not bring it the security it seeks nor grant the Jewish people freedom from fear.” Even though violence visited against Israel has evoked profound feelings of fear and insecurity on the part of Israelis, the document continues, “the cause of the current calamity is not the result of any historic or natural enmity between the two peoples, or the presence of deep-seated hatred directed against the Jewish people. Rather, it is the overwhelming imbalance of power, Israel’s practices of state violence, the ongoing abridgment of the human rights of the Palestinian people and the failure of the international community to hold Israel to principles of international law.”

The authors of “Call to Action” express a keen sense of responsibility as U.S. citizens for our government’s massive and unconditional support for the historic and ongoing injustice toward the Palestinians. But as Christians they are also aware of how closely intertwined our national policies are with a theology, endorsed by so many American Christians, that has been used to justify these policies.

As individuals and as church institutions, we have supported a system of control, inequality and oppression through misreading of our Holy Scriptures, flawed theology and distortions of history. We have allowed to go unchallenged theological and political ideas that have made us complicit in the oppression of the Palestinian people. Instead of speaking and acting boldly, we have chosen to offer careful statements designed to avoid controversy and leave cherished relationships undisturbed. We have forgotten the difference between a theology that supports the policies and institutional structures of oppression and a theology that, in response to history and human affairs, stands boldly with the widow, the orphan, the poor and the dispossessed.

Noting that the special relationship that has existed between the United States and Israel from the earliest days of the Jewish state “has crossed party lines and transcended political eras,” Kairos USA challenges us to reflect deeply on what this says about our own legacy as a conqueror and an occupier:

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Kairos Time: A U.S. Call to Action

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Our government’s policy toward Israel has at times reflected our own religiously-tinged identity as a privileged society blessed by God. The notion, for example, that the Jewish people have a special claim on Jerusalem and a superior right to the territory of historic Palestine over the other inhabitants of the land bears a resemblance to our historic American notion of “Manifest Destiny”—our nation as the “shining city on a hill.” As Americans and as Christians, we must carefully examine how our own deeply-rooted sense of privilege may affect our commitment to justice and equality in this and other human rights causes across the globe.

The U.S. document is a response to the Palestinian call but it bears most resemblance to its South African predecessor. In both cases, the object of the call to action is not the tyrannous system itself, but “moderating” forces that seek to disable the resistance and to preserve the unjust system, often through the appropriation of language and outright co-opting of religious and political leaders. Certainly this was true in the 1980s, with the Pretoria government’s attempted “reforms” in the form of Bantustan vassal states ruled by black political leaders co-opted by the Apartheid regime. The current U.S. commitment to a “two-state solution” to the Israel-Palestine conflict bears disturbing resemblance to this earlier example, with the proposed Palestinian “state” consisting of fragmented enclaves located within territory controlled militarily and economically by Israel. Like the South African document, Kairos USA calls on American Christians, church bodies, and our own government to remember that above all, our actions and our policies must follow the prophetic instruction to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Call to Action

Kairos USA lays out specific actions for individuals, churches, and organizations:

Visit the land: “Come and see!” say the authors of Kairos Palestine, to “know the facts and the people of this land, Palestinians and Israelis alike.” Congregations and denominationally-organized visits must take care to work with Palestinians and Israelis who will introduce them to the situation on the ground and to those working for peace. When pilgrims are allowed to see the real facts of the situation, they not only “walk where Jesus walked,” they see what Jesus saw. Witnessing the suffering and seeing the injustice, as Jesus did living under Roman occupation and the prophets in their day, Americans are called to speak out and to act.

Learn: Move beyond stereotypes, longstanding prejudices and biased reporting. There is a wealth of study materials and curricula in the form of reading materials, curricula for churches, schools and local organizations in the form of documents, videos, and speakers bureaus. A comprehensive Study Guide for the Kairos USA “Call to Action” is available at www.kairosusa.org.

Enrich worship and congregational life: Be proactive. Pray and preach justice and peace for Palestine and Israel. Pursue opportunities to learn and study about the situation, explore cultural and economic exchange and challenge our congregations to participate in the blessed calling of peacemaking.
Engage in theological reflection: Examine flawed biblical interpretations and theologies that have allowed injustice to continue unchallenged. Pursue open and active theological inquiry and encourage study and reflection, in order to guide our actions in striving to follow Jesus’ injunction to “interpret the present time” (Luke 12:56).

Participate in nonviolent action: Translate concern into action. Support those in Israel, the Occupied Territories and throughout the world who work for justice through peaceful means. We urge Americans to become educated about the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions and to explore this and other forms of legitimate, nonviolent action and other opportunities to become actively involved.

Engage with your government: Advocate with local and national U.S government elected representatives and officials, as Christians who are committed to justice, peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. Support political candidates who do the same.

The challenge and the hope
As Christian denominations, congregations, peace fellowships, mission networks and faith-based grassroots organizations continue their work for justice, we are witnessing an intensification of the reaction from both Jewish and Christian groups who are opposed to a change in the status quo of unconditional support of Israel. The opposition takes several forms, including: (1) charges that the Palestinian and U.S. Kairos documents are anti-Semitic or partake of the so-called “delegitimization” of Israel, (2) calls for the abandonment of divestment, boycott and sanction campaigns as disruptive to Christian-Jewish relations and the peace process, calling instead for a reliance on “positive investment” in Palestine, negotiations, and “interfaith dialogue,” and (3) overt attempts to drive a wedge between Palestinian Christians and Christians globally but especially North Americans, falsely accusing Palestinian Christians of endorsing violence and bringing back archaic anti-Semitic tropes. We will see an escalation of these attacks in the coming years as the church-led movement to end Apartheid in our time gains momentum. As this battle is fought increasingly on theological grounds, this means that not only is justice for Palestinians being threatened, but that Christianity itself and the faithfulness of the church to the message of the Gospels is under assault.

As the movement grows to respond boldly and faithfully to the Palestinian, these voices of opposition will become louder, more strident, and more accusatory. The walls that have been built on Palestinian land to separate people from people, brother from brother and sister from sister will be built thicker and higher. But no one can build a wall in our hearts. “Hope,” states the Kairos Palestine document, “is the capacity to see God in the midst of trouble, and to be co-workers with the Holy Spirit who is dwelling in us.” Standing before the wall in Jerusalem, we hear the Good News: that we can bring down that wall. That it will fall, that in fact it is already coming down.

Mark Braverman is a Jewish American who writes and lectures internationally on the theological and interfaith issues related to the search for peace in Israel and Palestine. He has been closely involved in the growth of the international church movement to support the cause of Palestinian rights. In 2009 he participated in the launch of the Kairos Palestine document in Bethlehem. Braverman is Program Director for Kairos USA, a movement to unify and mobilize American Christians to take a prophetic stance for a just peace in Israel and Palestine. He is the author of Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews, and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land, Beaufort Books, 2011, and the forthcoming A wall in Jerusalem: Hope, healing, and the struggle for peace in Israel and Palestine, Jericho Books, 2013.
An Awakening
American Churches Embrace Targeted Economic Actions in Response to Kairos Palestine

Susanne Hoder

I’ll never forget my first encounter with an elderly Palestinian Christian in Bethlehem. We discussed the desperate reality on the ground for families whose homes were being destroyed, their farmland and wells confiscated. With a look of deep hurt he asked me, “Why are American churches not doing anything to stop this?” I could only tell him that churches back home didn’t know. If they did, I assured him, it would be different. I was certain followers of Christ would unite against Israel’s ethnic cleansing of Christians and Muslims, which is so apparent to those who witness it.

A decade later, despite first-hand accounts from people of every faith, many American churches are still in the dark about Israel’s treatment of non-Jews. However, others are responding decisively to a historic call which has been signed by thousands of Palestinian Christians since its publication in 2009. Known as Kairos Palestine, this urgent missive to the churches of the world cries out for an end to complacency. It asks for concrete actions to help end the occupation and discrimination that confront Palestinians daily. The Kairos document followed the Amman Call of 2007 and the Berne Perspective in 2008, which said “No more words without deeds.” Kairos Palestine was unique in that it called for specific steps - including boycott, divestment and sanctions - which have successfully ended oppression in other countries.

The wheels of church policy turn slowly, and for those of us who have seen the destroyed homes, uprooted trees, and confiscated wells, the pace of change is maddeningly slow. Yet in 2013, there has been tangible action from several major denominations in the US, and there are promising signs from others.
Last year the United Methodist General Conference approved a measure calling on all nations to forbid the import of settlement goods. Groundbreaking research has been done by United Methodist volunteers to identify settlement companies exporting products to the United States and US companies importing them. The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society will be approaching US government agencies with these lists, urging that the products be banned.

Within the United Methodist Church, a global grassroots movement called United Methodist Kairos Response (UMKR) has urged the UMC to align its words with its actions. For years, the denomination has called for an end to the occupation. Yet church investment portfolios show significant holdings in companies that enable the occupation to continue. Encouraged by UMKR, a number of regional United Methodist conferences called for divestment from these companies, and several UM foundations have already divested. Others will consider resolutions to divest this summer.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) voted at its 2012 General Assembly to call for boycott of settlement products. Its highly respected Israel/Palestine Mission Network (IPMN) has formed a boycott committee and has endorsed an interfaith campaign against SodaStream. The boycott committee meets frequently through conference calls and has developed a Boycott 101 section on its web site. This guide identifies some of the settlement products being imported to the United States, offering suggestions and steps for local churches to boycott them. IPMN also provides resources for contacting stores that carry the products, and informing the communities about them. From Rochester to San Francisco, Presbyterians are leafleting retailers and writing to managers, asking that these products be de-shelved.

IPMN is encouraging an expansion of the boycott to include US companies sustaining the occupation in a variety of ways. An example is Hewlett Packard, whose biometric scanners are used as a discriminatory tool at checkpoints in the West Bank to control the movement of Palestinians in their own lands.

A measure calling for divestment of church funds from three American companies profiting from the occupation came within two votes of passing at the last Presbyterian General Assembly. Instead of divesting, the General Assembly voted to invest in Palestine and has been sending leaders on trips to the region to find suitable projects for investment. For reasons discussed later in this article, that has been difficult. Divestment will be reconsidered at the next policy session in 2014.

Big strides for justice were made in 2013 when both the American Friends Service Committee and the Mennonite Central Committee announced investment screens of 29 companies involved with the occupation. These companies are being removed from portfolios and will be ineligible for future investment until they end their role in Israel’s occupation.

The United Church of Christ Palestine Israel Network (UCC PIN) was founded in January of 2012. It has a Steering Committee of 20 people. With their support, the UCC national ministry staff has taken two bold stands in the last year. The denomination’s General Minister and President, and the Executive Minister for Wider Church Ministries joined other Christian leaders in asking Congress to investigate the use of military aid given to Israel by the US. UCC PIN is encouraging local church groups to take this request personally to their Congressional representatives. The UCC Collegium of Officers (the top national officers in the UCC) signed a special Advent letter encouraging church members to boycott certain products that support Israel’s occupation.

UCC PIN has joined the US Campaign to End the Occupation and has endorsed the Kairos Palestine Document, the Call to Action of Kairos USA, the Soda Stream boycott and the Hewlett Packard boycott. One of its Steering Committee members has become a liaison to United Church Funds and will be meeting with the Ecumenical Action Group (EAG),
which focuses on shareholder resolutions and other forms of corporate engagement to end complicity in Israel’s occupation.

Catholics too are taking action. Pax Christi joined other religious groups in the US in publishing an abridged version of the Kairos Palestine Document. In January 2013, Pax Christi International called for accurate labeling of goods produced in the settlements and “an active ban of settlement products.”

As early as 2007, the National Coalition of American Nuns stated, “We encourage a boycott of Israeli goods in order to hasten a more just civil order in the Holy Land….we call for divestment from Caterpillar, municipal boycotts of CAT machinery, and a consumer boycott of other CAT products.”

A key disappointment has been the stance of the Episcopal Church in the US, which “does not support boycott, divestment, and economic sanctions against the state of Israel.” In 2013, the Episcopal Executive Council voted to invest $500,000 in the Bank of Palestine, despite overwhelming evidence that such “positive investment” is meaningless when companies cannot get goods to market, workers cannot reach their jobs and vital resources such as water are withheld from Palestinians. Many capital projects built with donor funds have been destroyed by Israel, including roads, water cisterns, solar panels and power plants. The Bank of Palestine has its work cut out to find secure projects for these church funds. Fortunately, key groups within the church, including the Episcopal Peace Fellowship and the Palestine Israel Network, have called for BDS, and support for these groups among Episcopalians is growing.

Though the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA) has also refrained from endorsing boycott or divestment, it has promoted sanctions that would end US military aid and housing loan guarantees to Israel. Its Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine states “ELCA has 1) urged that no U.S. funds be used for military assistance; 2) called for a freeze on all Israeli settlement activity; 3) opposed further housing loan guarantees to Israel unless and until the construction and expansion of settlements in the occupied territories is stopped.” ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson joined with 14 other Christian leaders in signing a 2012 letter requesting hearings about the use of military aid to Israel to ensure compliance with US and international human rights law. The letter questioned the continuation of unconditional U.S. financial assistance to the government of Israel. (More on this “Letter of 15” will be in tomorrow’s article here on Ecclesio.)

Kairos USA, which Mark Braverman described for Ecclesio this week, has made a tremendous contribution to educating American Christians about the call of Kairos Palestine. Kairos USA’s Call to Action is inspiring. It encourages Christians to translate concern into action and “to become educated about the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.” The endorsements it has gathered from a theologically diverse mix of church leaders are impressive.

We must not stop with declarations. When importers of settlement products are named in their communities, when settlement goods are de-shelved, banned and taxed, and when investors adopt selective screens, the edifice of occupation will crumble. The tools for accomplishing this are available. We need only the determination to replace words with action.

US connections to the occupation have been identified. American consumers and investors can speak with their economic choices. In the prophetic tradition of justice to which Christ called us, American churches must lead the way. As Kairos Palestine tells us, “the time is now.”

Susanne Hader founded the Interfaith Peace Initiative, helped establish the United Methodist Divestment Task Force in New England, and co-founded United Methodist Kairos Response. Since first visiting the Holy Land in 2004, she has worked to end Israel’s occupation and persecution of Palestinians. She led a United Methodist study group to the West Bank in 2010 to document companies involved with the occupation, and has published research on companies that import products from illegal settlements to the United States.

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Response to Kairos Palestine
“The Letter of 15” and the use of U.S. military aid by Israel in Palestine

Katherine Cunningham

As Christian leaders in the United States, it is our moral responsibility to question the continuation of unconditional U.S. financial assistance to the government of Israel. Realizing a just and lasting peace will require this accountability, as continued U.S. military assistance to Israel -- offered without conditions or accountability -- will only serve to sustain the status quo and Israel’s military occupation of the Palestinian territories. -- from Letter of 15 Church Leaders to U.S. Congress.

On October 5, 2012, fifteen Christian leaders in the United States issued a letter to members of Congress that rocked American Christian-Jewish relationships. The letter addressed the American legislators who approve all economic and military aid to Israel and are charged with the responsibility of oversight for how that 3.1 billion dollar annual aid package is implemented.

No one saw this coming. The statement stunned the Jewish community used to the unquestioned support of the State of Israel as a preferential ally of the United States. The 2012 denominational national meetings, with their heated debates on divestment from American corporations benefiting from supporting the Palestinian occupation, concluded with votes among the Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians “to invest” in Palestine rather than divest church funds from U.S. corporations profiting from Israel’s military occupation. Those votes were influenced by threats from Jewish organizations that pro-divestment actions would cause a rupture in the decades of Christian-Jewish interfaith partnerships.

Within months of the national meetings, the heads of mainline churches and other Christian organizations turned their attention to the United States Congress, asking its members to investigate human rights abuses and violations of federal laws that Congress itself had placed on all foreign military aid. The intense reaction from Jewish organizations reveals a significant divide in nationalistic loyalties, focused on Christian U.S. citizens calling Congress to an honest examination of military aid under United States law against the actions of the country that so many Americans regard as the rightful Jewish homeland.

What the letter said about Palestinian and Israeli suffering

Each of the Christian churches and organizations that signed on (see list below) to the letter has an established ethical commitment to peacemaking in the region. Many of these churches have actively supported a two-state solution and encouraged Israelis and Palestinians to continue to negotiate for a just peace. The ecumenical letter sought to lift up the long history of suffering in the region, noting that the longing for security and peace for both sides is genuine and that each party bears responsibility. It affirms the deaths and horror resulting from past suicide bombings and the broad fearfulness resulting from Gaza rocket attacks upon the broader Israeli society. The Letter underscores the churches’ witness to Palestinian home demolitions, the killing of civilians by the Israeli military and other human rights violations. Its text reflects the churches’ usual “balanced” approach to suffering and security. It is careful not to characterize or criticize any faith group’s stance on the conflicts.

Kairos Palestine and the United States Congress

The Kairos Palestine confessional document insists on defining Christ’s commandment to love as inclusive of the friend and the enemy. It also claims resistance as both a right and duty of the Christian, using love as its logic. [KP: 4.2.3] Such love is corrective, refusing to resist evil with evil, and seeking respect of all life. It affirms that one may defend his or her life, freedom and land. [KP: 4.2.5] However, with regard to the international community, Kairos Palestine challenges the international community to resist “selective application of international law” which “threatens to leave us vulnerable to a law of the jungle. It legitimizes the claims by certain armed groups and states that the international community only understands the logic of force.” [KP: 7]

The reality on the ground, asserts Kairos Palestine, is one of daily inhuman conditions, enforced by the Israeli military, including military checkpoints, the use of guns, tear gas and bombs against civilians in situations which do not rise to the level of
military threat. Other policies of occupation defy and break international UN laws and, in all likelihood, United States laws, on the use of military aid provided to an allied government. This is the logic of force, and this is why it is so important that Christian leaders spoke truth to power, in this case the United States Congress.

The ecumenical document, often referred to as “The Letter of 15,” urges Congress to conduct “an immediate investigation into possible violations by Israel of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act and the U.S. Arms Export Control Act which respectively prohibit assistance to any country which engages in a consistent pattern of human rights violations and limit the use of U.S. weapons to ‘internal security’ or ‘legitimate self-defense.’” These two laws form the basis for the Letter of 15 issuing a call to Congress to engage in its responsibility to investigate and report on its findings.

The Arms Export Control Act (AECA, 1976) is a comprehensive policy regulating how arms are traded, sold or supplied for a country’s lawful self-defense and imposes restrictions on the development and proliferation of certain kinds of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. The Foreign Assistance Act dates from 1961 and includes the separation of military and non-military aid, also creating the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This law states that no assistance will be provided to a government which

*engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights, including torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charges, causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction and clandestine detention of those persons, or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, and the security of person, unless such assistance will directly benefit the needy people in such country.* [Legislation on Foreign Relations, The Government Printing Office]


When viewed through the lens of Kairos Palestine, the Letter of 15 is a collaboration of Christian organizations in the U.S. urging Congress to take responsibility for enforcing its own laws, decades old, and uphold these legal restrictions that Congress bound itself to as the legislative branch of our government, and at the same time to address how the military actions and policies of the State of Israel might be in violation of its agreements with the U.S. to abide by the laws conditional to the preferential aid it receives. Both sides are accountable for upholding United States and international laws and human rights. Congress has an accountability relationship to U.S. taxpayers to abide by our standards in providing aid. Israel is not exempt. [KP-1.2,1.4] Stevens Gutow. “The participation of these leaders in yet another one-sided anti-Israel campaign cannot be viewed apart from the vicious anti-Zionism that has gone virtually unchecked in several of these denominations.” Nevermind that anti-Zionism was used as synonymous with anti-Semitism, which it is not.

The Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbinical Council supported the call for Congressional oversight, noting that Middle East analyst MJ Rosenberg has rightly pointed out that such programs as Social Security and food stamps were under congressional scrutiny for compliance, asking why not the same for Israel? “...the U.S. alone is in a place to create the kind of leverage that might challenge Israel to turn away from policies that impede the cause of a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians and true security for all who live in the region.”

At the same time, the churches which had signed the letter to Congress quickly moved to interpret its contents in light of established denominational policies. The Rev. Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), one of the signatories, noted that in 2010 that body had explicitly noted the problems with compliance on the part of the State of Israel with regard to military aid and directed him to communicate these issues to Congress.

In an essay published by Mondoweiss, author and activist Dr. Mark Braverman asserted that beyond the issues of interfaith bullying, the churches’ letter addresses the need to look at the unconditional financial and diplomatic support by the U.S. government for Israel under the guise of security. “We know that responsible advocacy for human rights for Palestinians and a sane, compassionate U.S. policy have nothing to do
Braverman writes, “But make no mistake—we are seeing only the beginning of the battle that will be waged to silence this church movement.”

A final word
Military aid to the State of Israel from the United States is the single most important international aid factor—beyond any government’s humanitarian aid—in addressing how the conflict between Palestine and Israel will be resolved with justice. Our government arms the Israelis, a major contribution to the power imbalance between both parties, and insures the occupier’s military and colonial initiatives and logistics will succeed.

B’Tselem’s May 2013 report on human rights violations during operation “Pillar of Defense” in November 2012 states the Israeli military killed 167 Palestinians, including at least 87 who did not take part in the hostilities, 31 of whom were minors. Should our congress not be concerned with loss of innocent civilian life? Should it not also seek firm answers about whether or not US military aid was used in Pillar of Defense?

This is precisely why the Letter of 15 is a cry for justice to the Congress and to the churches. It requests that our government honor its legal responsibilities to those supplied military aid and to the taxpayers themselves who fund it. The Letter confronts the church to keep bringing that demand forward to the legislators and candidates for office: Have we been faithful to the laws of our land? Will we subject aid to the State of Israel to the same scrutiny we do other countries, and even to domestic aid programs of the Federal government? Will justice and human rights be served on our own end, even as the government calls other countries to do the same in their international relations?

Kairos Palestine issues a challenge to the churches of the world: “Are you able to help us get our freedom back, for this is the only way you can help the two peoples attain justice, peace, security and love?” [KP: 6] How do we Christians in North America respond?

Rev. Katherine Cunningham is the moderator of the Israel Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). 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 its energy toward the goal of a just peace in Israel/Palestine by facilitating education, promoting partnerships, and coordinating advocacy.

Signatories of the Letter of 15:

Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA)
Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
United Methodist Council of Bishops President Rosemarie Wenner
Peg Birk, transitional General Secretary of the National Council of Churches
Shan Cretin, General Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee
J. Ron Byler, Executive Director of the Mennonite Central Committee U.S.
Alexander Patico, North American Secretary for the Orthodox Peace Fellowship
Diane Randall, Executive Secretary of the Friends Committee on Legislation
A. Roy Medley, General Secretary of American Baptist Churches
Geoffrey A. Black, General Minister and President of United Church of Christ
Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Julia Brown Karimu, President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Division of Overseas Ministries
James A. Moos, Executive Minister for the United Church of Christ’s Wider Church Ministries
Eli S. McCarthy, Justice and Peace Director for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Kathy McKneely, Acting Director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

NOTE: For a comprehensive listing of responses to the Letter to Congress, please visit the United Methodists Holy Land Task Force web site: https://www.umhltf.org/Response_To_15_Leaders_Ltr.html
Also, The Church Letter Reporter: TheChurchLetter.org
for live links to items referred to in this article, see Ecclesio.com, search: Cunningham
“Captivity led captive” -for some
Letter from Canada

Robert Assaly

Acutely conscious of Palestinian Christians’ cry to us and to churches around the world for liberation for all Palestinians, Canadian churches engaged the Kairos Palestine (KP) document. However, little did we imagine this would have implications for liberation of the Church at home! And yet in a cruel irony typical of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there is still something wrong with this picture when North Americans, not Israelis and Palestinians, are the beneficiaries of this cry for liberation.

This reflection comes as we mark the Ascension, when the Church reads, “He ascended on high and led captivity captive” (Ps. 68.18) – a key liberation text. Palestinian theologian Canon Naim Ateek (of Sabeel, in Jerusalem) has articulated a stunning metaphor for the core problem underpinning the challenge of liberation in that conflict. Israel's birth in 1948 has as its mirror event the Palestinian Nakba (Catastrophe) – the dispossession of Palestinians to make way for the birth of a Jewish state. He thus named Israel as having been born in original sin. And he theologically explained how reconciliation would be almost inevitable when Israel confronted and overcame the conditions of its birth.

Ateek would know; indeed he remembers. His childhood expulsion from his birthplace, Beisan, with his family in 1948, was vividly recollected, along with the only return visit with his father when they were first permitted to travel a full decade later. They were denied entry to their house by the Jewish family that had claimed it, the Arabic village name had been changed, the churches transformed to various uses to suit the new Jewish residents. Their history and narrative – the foundational instrument of Palestinian liberation -- had been denied and even erased.

With Israel prohibiting Palestinian clergy from entering Gaza, Fr. Rick Marples of the Diocese of Ottawa defiantly celebrates the Eucharist under the shattered roof of St. Philip’s Gaza. The altar is presumed to have been the target of the Israeli laser-guided missile.
In his landmark book, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (1989), Ateek names the implications of silencing a narrative. He describes how the refugees tried to “tell their story” but often it fell on deaf ears in the west, thereby giving rise to violence as an alternative recourse (p.14). If there is any redemption for Israel’s birth in ethnically cleansing the Palestinians, and any reconciliation, it will begin by taking captive that very silencing, liberating the truth.

Of this, Canadians have little doubt. A federally appointed Truth and Reconciliation Commission, encouraged by the Church, continues working prominently across the country to confront our own history with the aboriginals of this land. Most notably, the Commission’s work has been to allow victims of Residential School abuse to tell their stories toward gathering the narrative, marking the beginnings of that healing process.

Yet in terms of making space for the Palestinian Christian narrative, the Canadian churches frequently acceded to being held captive, and by rather negative forces. I do not think it is hyperbole to observe that the Kafrs Palestinian document will be remembered as a turning point in this regard – indeed a Kafrs moment for the life of the Canadian Church – liberating us from the easy path of acquiescing to being silenced. Because of the uniquely powerful groups arrayed against justice and peace in Palestine as confirmed by Archbishop Tutu, and the consequences for breaking the silence, I have considered truth-telling on Palestine to be a litmus test for courage, even integrity.

Specifically, what we ourselves were liberated from is named by a keen observer of the churches’ relationship to Judaism as “The Ecumenical Deal.” Dr. Marc Ellis who 25 years ago, in tandem with Ateek’s work, launched Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation, has not explicitly called “The Deal” Faustian.

Nonetheless, it is the tacit arrangement whereby the church allows legitimate criticism of the state of Israel to be labeled anti-Semitic, such “that to support Jews they have to be silent about what is happening to Palestinians.” Yes, silent.

I would argue that the KP document constitutes, at a minimum, the straw that broke the back of The Ecumenical Deal in Canada.

The prize for buying into the Deal is maintaining relations with its peddlers -- establishment Jewish organizations which are nothing less than that Israel Lobby, ranked in the top handful of the Fortune 500 “Power 25” rankings. Their primary vehicles of influence in the Church are often national Christian-Jewish Dialogues.

First then, let us disclaim the Lobby’s disclaimers, as the blunt end of the Ecumenical Deal relies on the veil maintained by these denials. Beyond the disingenuous retort that there is no Israeli Lobby, for decades the official interlocutor in the Dialogue, the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), was stealthily integral to it. I was invited to be the ecumenical keynote speaker at the national Presbyterian General Assembly in 2010, to address the KP Document. The requisite CJC opposition “partner” was there too, shamelessly introduced as their chief lobbyist in Ottawa. The CJC’s attack on the KP document cobbled together for the occasion exposed the shallowness of their claims as it was accompanied by a CRO (church-related organization) document supporting KP in a mailing to all presbyteries across the country.

The other essential disclaimer is that the interfaith Dialogue claims to be theological, suggesting the exclusion of a foreign policy agenda. My experience has been otherwise. In any event, the veil was dropped recently; internecine struggles among the establishment Jewish organizations resulted in the bitter “smothering” of the CJC, replaced by The Centre for Jewish and Israel Affairs at the Dialogue table. Its very name belies any pretense of disinterest in a solidly Israel-first agenda, while leaving many wondering how the Dialogue might even broach theology.

The preferred enforcement method for the Deal had been clandestine tactics directed at heads of Churches. In 2000, the Canadian Council of Churches sent me along with a colleague on a fact-finding visit to Palestine and Israel, accompanied by a statement of solidarity signed by Canadian church leaders to their Jerusalem counterparts. We were greeted upon arrival with a fax indicating most signatories had recanted. Disappointed Jerusalem Church leaders were mystified at how they could be abandoned by their brothers and sisters in Christ. Upon our return, we traced the reversal to the Christian overseer of the Dialogue having quietly red-flagged the letter to the CJC, which in turn directly pressured each Church leader with the instrument of the Deal. The subsequent outrage of the Arab-Canadian community toward the churches was reported in the secular press.

This followed upon the establishment of “the two-track” process, which was supposed to allow the partnership side of the Church to freely engage the Middle Eastern churches without Dialogue interference. This came about after bringing to light the self-censoring (read: silencing) of these partnership relations under Dialogue surveillance.

The blowback from clandestine operations pushed the Lobby into tactics of open confrontations. When the Bishop of Ottawa earned the front-page headline in the Ottawa newspaper following his Christmas sermon at the Cathedral describing Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, the Israeli Ambassador attempted to embarrass him. This tactic backfired. The Bishop was applauded for standing on principle and, further, for hosting a North American conference on Jerusalem co-sponsored by Friends of Sabeel – North America (FOSNA). The conference was brought to a pregnant hush after the same above-mentioned lobbyist representing the CJC invoked the Holocaust and insinuations of anti-Semitism. Dr. Ellis, on a panel, jumped to his feet, grinned, and claimed, “You’re trying to silence us. We won’t be silent.”

The Ecumenical Deal incidents aiming to silence the Canadian churches, often successfully, could fill volumes. Then came the KP document.

Speaking with one voice for Palestinian Christians, and with a rare endorsement by all the Jerusalem Heads of Churches, the KP “Word of faith, hope and love from the heart of the Palestinian suffering” could not be ignored. KP included theological reflection, articulation of why the occupation of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem is an “evil,” the elaboration of the place of faith toward ending that suffering and effecting reconciliation, and the requirement of action in the form of non-violent economic measures including Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS).
Our immediate response was to convene Church Middle East staffers for the first time jointly with CROs, and focused on KP, however in a new broader and unshackled configuration dubbed The Forum. Thus the long harassed 25 year-old Middle East Working Group of only some church staff yielded to a space where partnership issues could be freely discussed and engaged without an institutional conduit to the Dialogue. Thus I believe KP will be remembered here as a turning-point, giving voice to the Palestinian narrative unchallenged by “balance” with the voices of oppression. KP has liberated us from the captivity to the Ecumenical Deal, allowing honest and critical partnership with Palestinian Christians, without looking over our shoulder. And the fruits are already proving rich, promising, and faithful.

A notable achievement is the success of a return visit to Canada of KP staffer Nora Carmi, also the West Banker chosen on behalf of Palestinian Christians to address Pope Benedict personally during his visit to Bethlehem. Despite later being an overseas guest speaker at the United Church of Canada’s General Assembly in 2009, she was mostly sidelined by the presence of an inter-faith partner, a prominent rabbi and former CJC president. The three resolutions on BDS went down to defeat. Last year on her Forum-initiated post-KP return, with no pro forma Lobby counter-narrative, Nora Carmi eloquently voiced the call to BDS to church leaders, the general public and, in a speech in the Parliament Building, to Senators, Members, Foreign Affairs staff and diplomats.

Only a few weeks later, the United Church of Canada’s boycott resolution passed at General Assembly with overwhelming support. This came on the heels of Lobby success in the USA with the Presbyterian and United Methodist national conventions, where divestment failed by a razor-thin margin, and despite tens of thousands of Lobby dollars invested trying to defeat the Canadian resolution. Along with Lobby enlisting of the national media and even a coalition of Senators, a former CJC representative’s brandishing the Ecumenical Deal at the Assembly was apparently no match for the liberated narrative of Palestinians.

As a direct result of the debate around that boycott resolution, for the first time, a coalition of national Arab-Canadian organizations met with the Forum, and then with Heads of Churches or their appointees. This may itself coalesce into a table with the churches where these groups can have their voices heard, deepening church relations with the region. Moreover, the churches can for the first time hear Canadian voices on all sides – progressive Jewish voices, Dialogue interlocutors, and Arab- and Muslim-Canadians – without allowing suppression of narratives.

Liberated from our own captivity to the Ecumenical Deal and its accompanying fears of being tarred with an anti-Semitism libel, the KP call to us has in significant measure moved the Canadian churches further to giving unfettered voice to the Palestinian narrative, free of an artificial balance with an offsetting voice of oppression. Perhaps it is a sign of authentic partnership that underscored our own deficiencies, however ironic, when in fact we are the beneficiaries of Palestinian Christians’ cry for liberation.

In the 1990s, the Rev. Robert Assaly was Director of the Middle East Council of Churches office in Jerusalem and the Episcopal Vicar of Gaza. He was for a decade the Canadian Council of Churches representative to the UN coordinating committee of North American NGOs on the Question of Palestine in New York. Later he was rector of a rural parish priest in the Diocese of Ottawa where he was born, and is now pursuing a Ph.D. at McGill University. He continues as Chair of the Canadian Friends of Sabeel.
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.