

Recent Resolutions by the UCC and NH Conference Calling to “Boycott and Divest” *How will the First Congregational Church of Lebanon respond?*

Background: Following several months of study and prayer, our Diaconate has recommended that our congregation take a formal position in response to resolutions adopted in 2014 and 2015 by both the New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the General Synod of the United Church of Christ (the UCC’s national meeting) on “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” These strongly-worded resolutions call upon the national UCC and its member churches to “boycott and divest” from companies doing business in the West Bank.

Our congregational structure and governance mean that these actions are non-binding; that each congregation is free to adopt its own position (or none at all); and that actions taken by the NH Conference and national UCC do not necessarily reflect endorsement by UCC member churches, including our own.

Neither the First Congregational Church of Lebanon nor its representatives endorsed or voted in favor of these NH Conference and national UCC resolutions. Some within our congregation did communicate with state and national church leaders in advance of these actions, expressing serious concern and opposition, but did so only as individuals and not in any formal capacity on behalf of the First Congregational Church of Lebanon.

Concerns: Our discussions within the Diaconate have raised serious concerns with both the **substance** of these resolutions and with the **process** by which they were adopted at the state and national levels. In addition, the Diaconate believes that people in our community and region may wrongly conclude that we and other UCC congregations are supportive of these actions. This misperception is harmful to our relations with the public and with other faith communities, particularly the Jewish community here in the Upper Valley. Our proposed resolution is intended to clarify and communicate our position on this matter, within the UCC, within our local community, and beyond.

Call to Action: At its November meeting, the Diaconate adopted a draft statement opposing the UCC and NH Conference’s “boycott and divest” resolutions and brought this recommendation to the December Church Council meeting to request consideration and action by our congregation as a whole. The Diaconate’s recommendation is based in part on these core principles:

- We believe we are called to offer a different witness on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than that communicated by recent UCC and NH conference actions.
- We believe that the best future for all residents of the Middle East is a peaceful future.
- We believe that peace and justice in the Middle East should be pursued in ways that do not promote – and can not be understood or used to promote – anti-Semitism at home or abroad.
- We believe that the UCC should take an active role in promoting peace in the Middle East—as peacemakers, not partisans. UCC peacemakers should work to develop ties with and to encourage both sides; we should act in ways that promote and bring about real change for good.
- We believe that partisan resolutions like those adopted by the NH Conference and the UCC can make peace harder to achieve.

Regardless of the intent of the “boycott and divest” resolutions, we have seen that they impair our ability to engage in important interfaith dialogue with our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community and impede our ability to offer an effective, credible, and compelling public witness as a church.

The Diaconate therefore recommends that the First Congregational Church of Lebanon offer an alternative public witness to these UCC and NH Conference resolutions. We must state that they do not speak for our church.

With support from our congregation, we would allow our Diaconate, Pastor, and other church representatives to communicate our witness to our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community, including the Upper Valley Jewish Community, Dartmouth College Hillel, and Congregation Shir Shalom in Woodstock; to other UCC churches in New Hampshire and Vermont; to the Grafton-Orange-Sullivan Association, the NH Conference, the national UCC, and their leaders; and to the public.

Additional Background: Some in the “boycott, divest, and sanction” movement seek to punish Israel and dictate how Israelis and Palestinians should resolve the core issues of their conflict. Our denomination’s embrace of this movement can unfortunately be perceived as maligning and undermining Israel and the Jewish people.

The General Synod’s 2015 “boycott and divest” resolution was one of three singling out Israel for punitive action, among a total of five resolutions on international affairs. Before approving the resolution, the UCC Synod invited presentations only by speakers advocating action against Israel, and much of the justification was based on the “Kairos Palestine” document, a highly partisan narrative from 2009 that overlooks the Jewish people’s historical ties to the land of Israel.

As Christians, we recognize and repent of a long history of anti-Semitism supported and advocated by the institutional church. Our denomination’s recent actions threaten to undermine the peaceful and fruitful relationship, the healing and reconciliation, experienced between Christians and Jews in the last 100 years. The complex issues surrounding the Middle East conflict deserve more even-handed treatment—especially within the UCC and other Christian churches—allowing meaningful dialogue and healing to take place.

Decision and Discussion Process

At its Annual Meeting, Church Members voted to approve the Diaconate’s recommendation that this matter be tabled to allow further discussion and education within the congregation. The Deacons facilitated individual conversations, distributed additional information on the subject, and convened one all-church forum. Based on feedback received during that process, the Diaconate now recommends the following resolution and asks the Council to convene a Special Meeting for a Congregational vote on its approval:

The Diaconate and Church Council recommend the church vote to offer an alternative witness locally, regionally, and nationally to the resolutions of the 30th General Synod of the United Church of Christ and the New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC) to “boycott and divest” from companies doing business in the West Bank and to the process that led to these resolutions.

- We affirm that the First Congregational Church of Lebanon does not support the UCC's recent partisan resolutions in favor of boycott and divestment, which can make peace harder to achieve.
- We call upon the United Church of Christ instead to take an active role as true peacemakers, working to develop ties with and encourage both sides, acknowledging that the best future for all residents of the Middle East is a peaceful future.
- We ask that future UCC actions on the Middle East reflect these peacemaking principles, refrain from positions favoring one side over another, acknowledge the rights of all peoples to live with peace, justice, freedom and dignity, and incorporate diverse perspectives and robust, open and inclusive debate in its decision processes.

Original Resolution (for comparison)

The Diaconate and Church Council recommend that the church vote to offer an alternative witness locally, regionally, and nationally to the resolutions of the 30th General Synod of the United Church of Christ and the New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ to “boycott and divest” from companies doing business in the West Bank and to the process that led to these resolutions. Our witness calls for peace in the Middle East, pursued in ways that do not vilify Israelis and Jews at home or abroad, but instead promote and bring about real and lasting peace in the region.