

NEW HAMPSHIRE CONFERENCE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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A Pastoral Letter to the Churches of the New Hampshire Conference

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Dear Friends in Christ,

Several years ago I discovered my photo on a website that erroneously identified me as anti-Israel because I had signed on to a pastoral letter with other Conference Minister colleagues in support of oppressed Palestinians in Gaza. Our Conference Center was also depicted in another photo on that site. Because I had taken a stand, we were all implicated. I was perceived as the voice of the New Hampshire Conference, which is clearly not the case in our congregational/covenantal form of governance. Covenant means that we are open to conversations with each other—not to win arguments or converts to our positions—but because we care about one another as people connected in faith, hope, and love. My reason for writing is to encourage such conversations. There are many voices in the United Church of Christ.

This summer at the 30th General Synod of the United Church of Christ delegates passed the resolution, "A Call for the United Church of Christ to Take Actions Toward a Just Peace In the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" (<http://uccfiles.com/pdf/GS30-A-CALL-FOR-THE-UNITED-CHURCH-OF-CHRIST-TO-TAKE-ACTIONS-TOWARD-A-JUST-PEACE-IN-THE-ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN-CONFLICT.pdf>), which was offered in support of a peaceful solution to the longstanding crisis between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank. This is obviously a complex, long-term conflict that has no simplistic solution. We are a long way geographically from the intense violence and deep-seated fear in this part of God's world, but we are connected in so many ways—including our faith traditions—to these peoples.

The New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ was among the sponsoring Conferences that had offered resolutions, calling for divestment from those companies that profit from the conflict and the oppressive conditions in this disputed region. Our Resolution, which was adopted by the Annual Meeting on October 23, 2014, after much thoughtful

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debate, contained rationale that expressed appreciation for "relationships with Jewish groups in the US who have differing perspectives on the conflict and with Jewish Israeli peace activists." That sentiment found deeper expression in the final form of the Resolution as it came from the Synod committee that was assigned to study, revise, and present it in final form. The Resolution, which reaffirms previous Synods' advocacy for Israel's right to exist¹, was adopted by the delegates to General Synod on June 30, 2015.

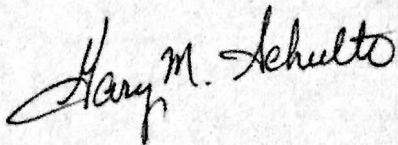
Since Synod, there has been some confusion about what the Resolution says and does not say. A helpful, clarifying statement from the United Church of Christ is attached for you.

I continue to believe that those who gathered as delegates to General Synod 30 clearly saw the need for a peaceful solution to the deadly crisis. I ask you: ***Is this current state of affairs what God intends for all the peoples in the West Bank? What solution would you offer for a just and enduring peace?*** The United Church of Christ's resolution is not the only answer to that question; it may not be the best answer—but it seeks to be part of a solution. We have not always been right, but many times our voice has proven to be important in transforming the troubles of the past and present into the world as God created and intended it to be.

Just as I am not the voice of the New Hampshire Conference and do not speak for the Conference but to the Conference, so the General Synod resolutions do not speak for the Church but to the Church. Thus, I write to you now, as beloved members of the United Church of Christ in the New Hampshire Conference, in order to encourage you to continue speaking and acting for a just peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Whether you heed the Synod's call for divestment or pursue another path, may you do so with humility and hope. May you live with such courage that you will change the world and make it a more peaceful, just, and humane home for all God's people.

May the Spirit of the Risen One open our eyes and encourage our hearts to be bold and faithful disciples.

May the Peace of Christ be with you all,



Rev. Gary M. Schulte, Conference Minister
New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ

¹ WHEREAS, historically the United Church of Christ has affirmed Israel's right to exist within secure and internationally recognized boundaries (GS 16[1987] iii 244 and GS 18[1991]iv245) and asserted the rights of Palestinians to enjoy sovereignty in an independent, 246 contiguous, and viable state of their own, within secure and recognized boundaries (GS 16 [1987], GS 17[1989],v 247 and GS 18[1991].



The 30th General Synod of the United Church of Christ met from June 26-30 in Cleveland, Ohio. In addition to a variety of significant business on its own structure, race issues in the US (mass incarceration and the Washington, DC football team name), and global issues (unification of Korea and the Armenian Genocide), Synod also addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On Israel/Palestine, the General Synod **adopted** a resolution entitled, “A Call for the United Church of Christ to Take Actions toward a Just Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” The vote was 508 in favor, 124 opposed, and 38 abstentions (80.4% in favor, counting those who voted for or against; 75.8% in favor, counting all delegates).

This resolution calls upon the UCC to:

- A. Study the Kairos Palestine document
- B. Divest from companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and people
- C. Boycott products made by companies that operate in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories
- D. Advocate with Congress to ensure Israel's compliance with US laws, related to the \$3.1 billion of military aid that the US sends annually to Israel, and in light of Israeli human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territories
- E. Continue to engage in interfaith dialogue, including with Jewish colleagues and organizations.

This resolution does **not** call for boycott or divestment from Israel. There is an important distinction between that and what the resolution calls for. The resolution addresses the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and its people; it does not challenge Israel's existence.

This resolution is an endorsement of the spirit of the Palestinian BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) Movement, but only addresses one of the BDS Movement's calls—the end to occupation. The BDS Movement is a Palestinian civil society movement that was launched in 2005 and supports employing these tactics to bring about an end to the occupation, as well as two additional calls, which the UCC's General Synod resolution does not address: “recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.”

The resolution seeks to employ a non-violent tactic to bring an end to the occupation, in response to the authentic and clear call of Palestinian Christian partners, especially as articulated in the *Kairos Palestine* document (2009). The UCC has consistently condemned violence in all of its forms, not only in the Middle East. This approach is consistent with that understanding of ideal human relations.

The resolution focuses on Israeli policies; it does not seek to provoke or alienate our Jewish partners and friends. It does hope to stimulate dialogue on the realities of occupation and on the conflict as a whole, recognizing that the UCC has close ties of partnership and relationship with Palestinian Christians and their institutions, as well as other partners in Israel/Palestine, and that many Jewish colleagues have close ties with Israeli Jews and institutions in Israel (but not as many opportunities for encountering the occupation).

The UCC, through General Synod, has an extensive corpus of General Synod policy on Israel/Palestine dating back to 1967, and a very long history of engagement on the Middle East, as well as global justice issues throughout the world and over the course of our history, including the Congo, South Africa, the Philippines, Colombia, among other places.

Our engagement in the Middle East is part of the global witness, and our relationships with partners in the Middle East involves solidarity, advocacy, support of vital ministries of presence and witness (including refugee response, community development, conflict resolution, justice and peacemaking, education at many levels, health and wholeness, interfaith dialogue, and Christian presence). The UCC's General Synod positions in Israel/Palestine focus primarily on the situation of Palestinians living under occupation, seeking to end the occupation and various aspects of it. Taken as a whole, these positions characterize the uneven conflict between Israel and the Palestinians as:

- ❖ a conflict over land, control of resources, and political power, between two peoples: the Israelis and the Palestinians—Jews, Christians, and Muslims;
- ❖ a conflict that dates back into the first half of the twentieth century;
- ❖ a conflict that requires a negotiated political solution that addresses the main concerns such as security, boundaries, settlements, refugees, Jerusalem, resources (including water), and demographics and citizenship rights.
- ❖ It is not understood as a millennia-old civilizational conflict, or even as Jewish-Muslim; Palestinian Christians experience the same effects of occupation as their Muslim neighbors.

In previous years, the General Synod has adopted resolutions on the use of economic leverage, such as boycotts of Taco Bell and others related to the Immokalee tomato pickers movement for fair wages; boycotts of Mt. Olive pickles, also related to justice for the workers; and calls for corporate engagement and divestment from Apartheid-era South Africa.

General Synod 30 also considered, but **defeated**, a resolution that would have called upon the United Church of Christ to “recognize the actions of Israel against the Palestinians as *apartheid*,” according to the 2002 International Criminal Court definition. The vote was 312 in favor, 295 opposed, and 31 abstentions (51.4% in favor, counting those who voted for or against; 48.9% in favor, counting all delegates). The resolution again focused on the occupation and Israeli policies in the West Bank and around Gaza. It did **not** seek to name Israel an apartheid state. While more delegates supported the resolution than opposed it, it did not obtain the required 2/3 majority to pass.

Selected resources for further study:

Kairos Palestine—A Moment of Truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering, http://www.globalministries.org/palestinian_christian_kairos.

Recommended reading on Israel/Palestine,
http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/globalministries/legacy_url/5638/Books-Israel-Palestine.pdf?1419967449

UCC General Synod resolutions on Israel/Palestine,
http://www.globalministries.org/israel_palestine_resolutions

This summary is prepared to assist clergy, members, and others in understanding and interpreting the actions of the 30th General Synod. For more substantive discussion, please contact Dr. Peter Makari, Executive, Middle East and Europe, Wider Church Ministries, UCC, in the National Setting of the UCC in Cleveland, OH. He can be reached at (216) 736-3227, and by e-mail at makarip@ucc.org.