

July 7, 2012

United Church Members and Friends!

We in the United Network for a Just Peace in Palestine and Israel are a new but growing and long-active group of United Church colleagues and friends whose mission, independent of the United Church's structure, is as follows:

In discipleship of Christ, and in solidarity with churches and other partners in the Middle East as well as globally and in Canada, this Network covenants to engage, consolidate, nourish, and channel the energy in the United Church of Canada toward the goal of a just peace in Palestine/Israel, primarily through calling for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and for equal rights for all who live in Palestine/Israel, by facilitating education, promoting partnerships, coordinating advocacy, advancing policy and encouraging action.

What follows is a brief analysis of the **Report of the Working Group on Israel/Palestine Policy**. It was released on May 1st of this year and is contained in all General Council information packets.

In general we affirm the direction and recommendations of the Report, particularly the upholding of dignity, justice and peace as the gospel values that underlie and provide its foundation. We are also heartened that the United Church has taken seriously the call of the Kairos Palestine document A Moment of Truth, which was produced in late 2009 by an ecumenical group of Palestinian Christian leaders, to exercise concrete action toward creating the conditions for the establishment of a just peace in the region. To be more specific, we strongly endorse the continuing (since it's already United Church policy!) identification of "the end of the occupation" of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem "as necessary for peace," since it is "the primary contributor to the injustice that underlies the violence of the region". Grouped under this crucial and indispensable pre-condition for peace are other recommendations which we endorse, including: "the end of all settlement construction" and the dismantling of all "settlements within the occupied territories," as well as "calling on Israel to dismantle the separation barrier ... where it crosses over the Green Line" of 1967.

This Report clearly calls for "the rejection of all forms of violence by all parties in the conflict," and we would simply add, of course, that the first and foundational form of violence has been the structural and entrenched violence of 45 years of occupation since 1967, and the original violence of the expulsion of 800,000 Palestinians from their traditional lands in the wake of the creation of Israel by UN resolution in 1948. In response to this primary and devastating form of entrenched military violence, our Network is glad that the Report also affirms "that non-violent resistance to the occupation is justified and should be supported by all who seek an end to the occupation."

Perhaps the most important recommendations of the Report, however, concentrate on calling "United Church members to take concrete actions to support the end of the occupation," namely by "avoiding any and all products produced in the settlements" and "establishing a church-wide campaign of economic action directed against one or more settlement products," otherwise known as a limited boycott campaign, and by directing the Executive to "explore the wisdom of divesting in companies that are profiting from or supporting the occupation." This call to embrace a boycott and divestment strategy is unduly narrow in its scope, and our Network would have preferred a more widespread campaign. Nonetheless, this call is a critical step forward, and responds favorably to something that both Palestinian civil society and the Kairos Palestine document have called for, since 2005 and 2009 respectively, as a crucial non-violent means of ending the occupation. Such strategies proved critical

in ending the system of apartheid in South Africa, and will no doubt be equally critical in ending the unjust and illegal occupation of Palestinian lands.

The Report's recommendations regarding the rights of refugees, in particular the Palestinian Right of Return, as well as the call to "address the critical role that some forms of Christian theology," otherwise known as Christian Zionism, "have played in legitimizing the occupation," are also important to affirm, as are its call for support of "trust-building programs between Palestinians and Israelis," its encouragement of United Church people to "see the Holy Land through (Palestinian) eyes," and its "continuing to support the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program for Palestine and Israel." A number of United Church members, approximately 18 in total, have participated in the latter program of the World Council of Churches, and many of them have returned even more determined to establish a just peace through the ending of the occupation as a necessary first step. Quite a number of accompaniers have joined our Network in recent months, as part of a growing global movement for advocacy and action, and are unwavering in their commitment to be in solidarity with Palestinians, both Muslims and Christians, by calling for boycott and divestment.

While there are a few troubling inadequacies in the Report, including its upholding of a unique form of "democracy" in Israel as privileging Jews over other citizens, its rejection of the internationally recognized naming of the occupation and its accompanying house demolitions and annexation wall as "apartheid," and its failure to strongly address the privileging of Israel in the international community by the attempt to create a cone of immunity to legitimate criticism under the umbrella that such criticism is anti-semitic, it nonetheless moves the United Church forward in finally joining other partners, including the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church in the USA, in embracing the last remaining non-violent means that Palestinians have to seek justice, namely the collective pressure of international government agency, and economic action including both boycott and divestment as well as ethical investment.

Our Network strongly endorses the majority of recommendations contained in the Report, and urges you to support it, alongside numerous Proposals from various Conferences which are making their way to General Council with concurrence.