

ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONSULTATION REPORT

16 June 2009

I. Introduction and History

While the United Church of Christ and its predecessors have been actively engaged in work for peace and justice in the Middle East for many years, since 1967 the General Synod has spoken frequently on issues related to the conflict in Israel and Palestine and on the role of the church in partnership, relief and development, and advocacy.

The UCC's context in the United States – both the prevalent political context and ours as a community of faith—is unique. We are committed to interfaith dialogue (engaging with both the US Jewish and Muslim communities) and to our global partners (including Palestinian Christian churches and organizations). These commitments have informed the Synod's positions in responding to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including:

- + Opposition to violence (GS 23 [2001]);
- + Affirmation of Israel's right to exist within secure and internationally recognized boundaries (GS 16 [1987], GS 18 [1991]);
- + Assertion of the right of Palestinians to enjoy sovereignty in an independent, contiguous, and viable state of their own, within secure and recognized boundaries, neighboring Israel (GS 16 [1987], GS 17 [1989] & GS 18 [1991]);
- + Support for a shared Jerusalem, capital of Israel and the Palestinian state, open to people of all faiths (GS 16 [1987], GS 19 [1993] & GS 21 [1997]);
- + Identification of the Israeli Occupation of Palestinian land—illegal under international law—to be a major source of conflict; and calls for the end of construction and expansion of settlements, actions that unilaterally change the facts on the ground and prejudice any negotiated resolution of the conflict (GS18 [1991] & GS 21 [1997]);
- + Support for a negotiated solution, including urging the US to play a role in such negotiations (GS 8 [1971], GS 17 [1989], GS 18 [1991]).
- + Affirmation of the UCC's relationship with the Jewish community, including a rejection of supercessionist theology (GS 16 [1987]).
- + Condemnation of anti-Semitism in all its forms (Executive Council 1983), and the confession of the sin of anti-Semitism and its renunciation (GS 23 [2001]);
- + Theological, political and social critique of the separation barrier (“security fence”/“segregation wall”) (GS 25 [2005])
- + A call for the use of economic leverage to promote peace in the Middle East (GS 25 [2005]).

In 2007, General Synod 26 voted to refer the resolution “In Support of a Renewed and Balanced Study and Response to the Conflict Between Palestine and Israel” directly to Executive Council for implementation. In taking such an action, General Synod affirmed the resolution's overall consistency with previous General Synod positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The resolution was considered at the October, 2007 Executive Council meeting, and the following action was adopted in order to implement its mandate:

That the Executive Council call for a Consultation to be held in 2008 or early 2009 on the question of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in cooperation with Wider Church Ministries; that the Executive Council requests the General Minister and President in consultation with the Executive Minister of the Wider

Church Ministries and the Area Executive for the Middle East and Europe to convene a panel of United Church of Christ members representing diverse settings and constituencies of the Church; that the Executive Council requests that the panel engage in dialogue with traditional as well as new voices among ecumenical colleagues, regional partners, and interfaith colleagues representing diverse perspectives.

Further, the Executive Council requests the General Minister and President to name a moderator for the panel, which will be staffed by the Area Executive for the Middle East and Europe and the ecumenical officer. The Executive Council requests that a report from this panel be sent to General Synod Twenty-Seven in response to the action of GS 26 which referred the resolution “In Support of a Renewed and Balanced Study and Response to the Conflict Between Palestine and Israel,” to the Executive Council. Finally, recognizing that funding is not currently available for this consultation, the Executive Council requests that the General Minister and President seek funds for this Consultation.

The Consultation, convened by the Rev. John Thomas and moderated by the Rev. Lyle Weible, was originally scheduled for January 26-28, 2009. As a result of the crisis in Gaza (December 2008-January 2009), and our Palestinian partners’ expressed need to remain in Palestine (both to attend to professional responsibilities related to the relief efforts and for a concern of an inability to travel) the Consultation had to be rescheduled for June 1-3, 2009. The new date allowed all of the international, interfaith, and ecumenical presenters to participate, and meant a few, small changes in the UCC Panel. The following is the list of participants, by category:

The UCC Panel

The **Moderator** of the Panel

Rev. Lyle Weible

The **Panel**, comprised of members from the Executive Council, the Wider Church Ministries Board of Directors, Conference Ministers, a UCC seminary, pastors of local churches, and at-large members

Rev. Krista Betz

Rev. Dr. John Deckenback

Rev. Roddy Dunkerson

Rev. Eric Fistler

Rev. Graylan Hagler

Rev. Dr. Jane Fisler Hoffman

Ms. Zora Ludwig

Ms. Corliss Marsh

Ms. Ariel Royer

Dr. L. Michael Spath

Rev. Dr. Kent Ulery

The **Presenters**

HE Ambassador Warren Clark, Executive Director, *Churches for Middle East Peace*

Mr. Jonathan Frerichs, *World Council of Churches*

Rabbi Gary Greenebaum, Director of US Interreligious Relations, *American Jewish Committee*

Mr. Mitchell Plitnick, Director of Outreach-USA, *B’Tselem—The Israeli Human Rights Information Center*

Dr. Bernard Sabella, Executive Director, *Middle East Council of Churches’ Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees*

Dr. Ilan Troen, Brandeis University

Mrs. Jean Zaru, Clerk, Friends Meeting in Ramallah

Ecumenical Observers

Dr. Tony Kireopoulos, Director, Faith and Order and Interfaith Relations, *National Council of Churches*
Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

UCC Officers

Rev. John Thomas, General Minister and President
Rev. Cally Rogers-Witte, Executive Minister, Wider Church Ministries

UCC Staff to the Consultation

Rev. Lydia Veliko, Minister for Ecumenical Relations
Dr. Peter Makari, Executive for the Middle East and Europe

UCC Observer Staff

Rev. Michael Neuroth, Justice and Witness Ministries, Washington, DC office, International Legislation
Mr. Derek Duncan, Wider Church Ministries/Global Ministries, Associate for Global Advocacy and Education

II. Partnerships

The United Church of Christ, because of our connections of history especially within the body of Christ through mission, remains deeply concerned about the absence of peace in the Middle East, particularly in Israel-Palestine. UCC members and leadership visit the region and see realities that contradict the vision for resolution of the conflict we share.

Through Global Ministries, we have shared in ministry with Palestinian Christians for decades, including the:

Middle East Council of Churches (partnership with which was reaffirmed by General Synod 17 [1989]) and its *Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees*;
YWCA and YMCA; *Rawdat El-Zubur* (“Garden of Flowers”) primary school, a Global Ministries child sponsorship center;
Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center;
International Center in Bethlehem, associated with the Christmas Lutheran Church there; the *Lutheran World Federation*, the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land*; and the *Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem*, and specifically its *al-Abli Arab Hospital* in Gaza.

We have had a history of missionary presence in the region, working with various partners, as well as participants in the *World Council of Churches*-sponsored *Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme* in Palestine and Israel, a “witness for peace” program that offers solidarity with Palestinian and Israeli groups working to seek reconciliation and resolution to the conflict through non-violent means. All of these relationships have endured conflict, and would continue, we pray, beyond the resolution of the conflict. With these partners, the UCC engages in its witness for peace and justice in the region, promoting a vision for peace, insisting on the imperative of peace, and seeking the day when two states—Israel and Palestine—can live side by side with security, sovereignty, and dignity.

III. What did we learn?

The issues in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians are multiple and complex. The following represent some of the things we learned from the presenters during the Consultation:

1. There exist multiple narratives between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as within the Israeli Jewish and Arab communities, and within the Arab and Palestinian communities. These narratives are not simply descriptive but provide legitimization for each for belonging, identity, claims to and presence in the land. These narratives raise issues of fear, insecurity, and question the claims, motivations, legitimacy, and goals of the other. In their respective narratives, Israelis and Palestinians both perceive themselves to be under siege. Israelis understand themselves threatened by Palestinians and the larger “hostile” region, including the Arab world and Iran, state and non-state actors. Palestinians understand themselves threatened by an oppressive and dehumanizing Israeli occupation.
2. The Consultation discussed the request for a “*balanced*” study and response to the conflict between Israel and Palestine.” Our speakers offered a variety of perspectives which highlighted the problematic nature of the term “balance.” What does it mean to speak of “balance” in a situation where there is an obvious imbalance of power between Israelis and Palestinians? The two parties do not have equal power in the conflict economically, politically, and militarily. While any resolution to the conflict will require more or less from the parties because of this imbalance of power, education and discernment about the multiple narratives will bring us a more complete understanding of the conflict.
3. There are many obstacles to peace, including: the occupation of the Palestinian Territories by Israel, economic imbalance, settlements, political paralysis, human rights restrictions, extreme expressions of religion, and violent acts against civilians.
4. Language is important. Terms like “security,” “peace,” “truth,” and others have a variety of meanings depending on the contexts of the persons using them or hearing them. Truth, justice, and peace are all interrelated. The severity of the situation on the ground requires care, clarity, and discipline in our use of language.
5. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is deteriorating and both sides are “stuck.” At this stage of history, the United States has a unique opportunity and challenge to be an honest broker for a just peace in the region. The Consultation heard a real urgency on the part of each of the presenters for bold action for peace on the part of the United States administration and Congress.
6. The two-state solution is the most desirable option for a just peace – two economically and politically viable states existing side by side. The obstacles to attaining a two-state solution are not only between Israelis and Palestinians but also include internal Palestinian and Israeli political divisions. The problems facing the Israelis and Palestinians are political problems with political solutions. The presenters affirmed that they believe such political solutions exist.
7. We heard differing opinions about the purpose, impact, and future of the separation barrier. We heard that it was built for security. In most places, the barrier is not built on the “Green Line”; in many instances it cuts off water supplies, confiscates fertile land, separates people from their livelihoods, and its route is illegal according to international agreements and resolutions. While the separation barrier may have been successful in the short run in lessening the number of Israeli deaths due to suicide bombers, it was the consensus of the presenters that in the long run the presence of the separation barrier is detrimental to both Israelis and Palestinians and is an obstacle to a lasting peace.

IV. How could our witness to justice and peace in Israel and Palestine be strengthened?

With respect to our Christian witness as a Just Peace church, we hear God's call for peoples and nations to live in right relationship with God, God's creation, and all God's children. We are moved by God's prophets, who dared to speak truth to power for the purpose of naming evil, ending injustice, and birthing hope. We embrace our responsibility to work tirelessly and to pray unceasingly for that peace which reflects God's will and realm in its fullness. We are led by Jesus' example in reaching out with compassion to all who are marginalized, oppressed and suffering. And we are compelled by hope, instructed by a text lifted up by one of our presenters: "... we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed." (2 Corinthians 4: 4, 8-9).

Aware of our own humanness amid the complexities of the issues, and dependent upon God's Spirit as we move into a future impacted by a history of sinfulness and failures, in conversation with our presenters, and considering previous United Church of Christ resolutions, we offer the following advice and counsel to the whole of the church:

1. The United Church of Christ has affirmed God's enduring covenant with the Jewish people and has enjoyed rich relationships with Muslims for decades through Global Ministries and U.S. dialogue opportunities. We recommend continued, public, and bold action that affirms our biblical and theological understanding of all people as children of God. We abhor the evils of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Arab prejudice, as well as exclusivistic theologies that plant seeds of violence and injustices that result in individual, institutional, and systemic violence. We also recognize the importance of bringing Muslim voices to the table in future consultations. We seek a creative and public witness to be in solidarity with those who suffer in any way.
2. We recommend that the ministries of the United Church of Christ strengthen their present partner support and seek out new and creative ways to be in partnership with organizations and individuals that further the creation of a just peace in the region.
3. We recommend that United Church of Christ policy continue to take seriously the resolutions, conventions, and agreements of institutions and structures that provide a framework for solutions and adjudicate human rights and international law, such as the United Nations, Geneva Conventions, human rights organizations, the International Court, etc.
4. The United Church of Christ General Synod has spoken on the challenge to peace presented by settlements and their expansion. We commend the United States administration in its present stance vis-à-vis the cessation of building new settlements, expansion of settlements, and the impediment that existing settlements pose to a lasting peace. We strongly urge the church in all its settings to press for continued support for the current efforts of the United States administration and Congress to that end as a first step toward the comprehensive resolution of the conflict.
5. The United Church of Christ General Synod has spoken on the challenge to peace presented by the separation barrier. The separation barrier represents political and moral failure and symbolizes a "dividing wall of hostility" which the Gospel compels us to overcome. Recognizing that the separation barrier is experienced by many Israelis as a legitimate source of security, we also note that it creates a painful disruption of life for Palestinians and that Israeli and international courts have found significant portions of its route illegal. We urge the United States administration to press for action to address the route and help establish alternative security options that will be trustworthy for both Israelis and Palestinians.

6. We commend the renewed international initiatives toward a comprehensive peace in the region. In order to make a just peace in the Middle East a very high priority, we recommend urgent and sustained political advocacy to the United States administration and Congress by the local churches, conferences, and the national setting of the church, in ecumenical partnership with organizations such as the *National Council of Churches of Christ*, *World Council of Churches*, *Churches for Middle East Peace*, and the *National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East*, in consultation with various interfaith organizations, and in dialogue with partner churches and organizations in Israel and Palestine. We encourage congregations and Conferences of the United Church of Christ to explore the resources provided by our Wider Church Ministries and Justice and Witness Ministries as they also engage in such advocacy efforts.

7. We recommend educational initiatives for the United Church of Christ – local, conference, and national settings – that would enhance the church’s understanding of the conflict and its work toward a just peace in the region. These educational initiatives shall be designed to empower all settings of the church toward advocacy and engagement in these issues, including but not limited to, the development of concrete resources which will help to:

- a) educate local churches, clergy and laity about the history and complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as the historical and current UCC engagement and partners in the region; and,
- b) facilitate the ability of local churches, clergy and laity to actively engage in peacemaking through advocacy and accompaniment in our local settings as well as through our UCC national setting, including, but not limited to, Wider Church Ministries and Justice and Witness Ministries.

V. Concluding Remarks

The conflict between Israel and Palestine involves profound political challenges requiring political solutions. The United Church of Christ must engage in advocacy in support of those solutions. But for the United Church of Christ there are deep spiritual challenges as well as spiritual resources. Deep spiritual ties to Palestinian Christians and the injustices experienced by all Palestinians, Christian and Muslim, under occupation demand our active solidarity. Close friendship with American Jews, a confessional reflection on the meaning of centuries of Christian anti-Semitism leading toward the Holocaust, and an awareness of the significance of the state of Israel for Jews everywhere also demands our solidarity.

Can we be accountable to both? Must we choose, as we sometimes feel asked to choose, between one neighbor or the other? Our dual vocation is demanding, and requires courage that only the Spirit can offer. And, the enduring conflict, so complex and seemingly so intractable, easily lures us to resignation. Such despair is understandable, but is a luxury that further oppresses those in the midst of the conflict and, as we have heard, endangers the world. Thus we require hope that only the Spirit can offer.

Our Consultation began in prayer, using the words of the ancient Psalmist. Gifted by courage and hope, we must continually “pray for the peace of Jerusalem. ‘May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.’ For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’” (Psalm 122: 6-8)