

United Methodist annual conferences oppose Israeli apartheid in 2022, take actions to defend Palestinian human rights

25 July 2022 – Two United Methodists annual conferences in 2022 – Oregon-Idaho and New England – have adopted resolutions that identify and oppose Israeli apartheid, with majorities of 75% and 88% respectively.

These declarations from United Methodists echo a growing global consensus about Israeli apartheid, drawing upon recent reports from independent human rights monitors such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Two other conferences – Northern Illinois and Iowa – have adopted a resolution on the subject of Christian Zionism, titled "Opposition to Unjust Theology Regarding the Holy Land."

In addition, Northern Illinois passed two more Palestine-related resolutions, one that defends the right to employ boycotts as a tool for justice, and the other endorsing the congressional bill H.R. 2590, the Palestinian Children and Families Act.

The writing and passage of [these 2022 resolutions](#) were spearheaded by justice advocates in [United Methodists for Kairos Response \(UMKR\)](#), the grassroots United Methodist movement for Palestinian rights.

Israeli apartheid, not a recent phenomenon

For decades, Palestinians have told the world of the apartheid reality under which they live. Prominent South African leaders, including Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have echoed those assertions, with little global impact or action.

The recently expanding awareness of Israeli apartheid in faith communities and civil society can be attributed to human rights agencies that have become more outspoken in identifying and reporting the reality of apartheid in the Holy Land.

The most prominent headlines have gone to the reports published by Human Rights Watch in 2021 and Amnesty International in 2022: highly documented evaluations running to hundreds of pages and years in the making.

[These and several other organizations' reports](#) describe in detail how Israel's apartheid regime fully meets the legal criteria for apartheid under international law. The depth of reporting and the stature of these organizations have put a new spotlight on Israeli apartheid.

Conditions that are documented in these reports include: the establishment of two sets of laws, one that privileges Israeli Jews and the other oppressing Palestinians; the illegal seizure of Palestinian land and water resources, accompanied by extensive destruction of Palestinian property and agriculture for Jewish-only settlements; a racist division of the population with separate reserves for Palestinians; and a severe restriction of movement within the occupied Palestinian territories, denying access to essential

services, separating families, and crippling all facets of Palestinian society.

Ecumenical solidarity

Other Christian denominations have been taking similar steps to identify and oppose Israel's apartheid regime.

In 2021, the [General Synod of the United Church of Christ](#) became the first mainline U.S. church to make such a statement. Their resolution identifies Israeli apartheid as "sin" and directs their members, congregations and "bodies at all levels to challenge the ways in which the Bible or tenets of the Christian faith are used to promote or justify oppression, dispossession or racial supremacy in study, liturgy or preaching."

Joining them in condemning and opposing Israeli apartheid are the [General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA](#) this year and [five dioceses of the Episcopal Church](#) in 2021 and 2022.

Exposing unjust theology

The Iowa and Northern Illinois resolutions that recognize and oppose the theology known as Christian Zionism are particularly relevant in the United Methodist Church where some clergy and laity promote, as the resolution describes: "biblical and theological legitimacy to the infringement of Palestinian rights."

The foundation of the politically infused theology is the belief that "the modern state of Israel is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy and it is the responsibility of Christians to support the State of Israel."

Accordingly, these two UMC conferences have declared their "opposition to any theology or biblical interpretation that would justify denying or violating the human rights of Palestinians."

They have also called for the creation of task forces to present reports in 2023 on "the biblical and theological reasons for opposing Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people."

Defending United Methodists' right to boycott

Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, increasing awareness of Israeli apartheid has been accompanied in recent years by growing efforts to criminalize advocacy for Palestinian human rights.

Over 30 states in the U.S. now have [laws or executive orders that penalize and stigmatize](#) the use of boycotts and divestments actions related to the situation in the Holy Land.

Many of these laws – known as "anti-BDS legislation," named for the global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement for Palestinian rights – unconstitutionally deny state jobs, contracts, and other benefits to those who will not sign documents pledging

they do not support any boycott related to Israel.

In passing the resolution "Supporting the Right to Free Speech and to Engage in Nonviolent Actions Including Boycotts" the Northern Illinois conference [joins over one million United Methodists in dozens of U.S. states](#) who have adopted resolutions in recent years upholding the right of United Methodists and all Americans to use economic tools to stand with the oppressed, including the Palestinian people.

The United Methodist Church has consistently opposed the Israeli occupation since the 1980s; in recent years, the denomination has called for and engaged in boycott and divestment actions focused on Israel's oppression of Palestinians.

[In 2016, the denomination called](#) for "all nations to prohibit: 1. any financial support by individuals or organizations for the construction and maintenance of settlements; and 2. the import of products made by companies in Israeli settlements on Palestinian land."

In effect, the global United Methodist Church has called for a global boycott of products from those Israeli settlements.

Beginning in June 2014, the United Methodist agency Wespath Benefits and Investments has removed or barred investments in several businesses – [including most notably five Israeli banks, as well as Elbit, an Israeli construction company, and G4S, a multinational security company](#) – due to their complicity in violating Palestinian human rights. Several United Methodist annual conferences have taken similar steps with their own investment funds.

Seventeen Christian organizations and denominations, including the UMC General Board of Church and Society, [sent an open letter to the U.S. Congress opposing anti-BDS legislation](#) in 2017. These and other major Christian leaders and communities have renewed their condemnation of such legislation in recent years.

Putting human rights conditions on U.S. aid to Israel

The third Northern Illinois conference resolution of 2022, "Advocating for the Human Rights of Palestinian Children and Families Living Under Israeli Military Occupation," supports the landmark human rights bill, H.R. 2590, introduced to Congress in 2021 by Rep. Betty McCollum.

As the resolution states, this bill would prohibit "Israeli authorities from using U.S. taxpayer funds to detain and torture Palestinian children, demolish and seize Palestinian homes, and further annex Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank in violation of international law."

The resolution further notes that "The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society [has joined over 170 human rights and faith-based organizations](#) in endorsing H.R. 2590. Those endorsements include: The Episcopal Church, The Presbyterian Church (USA), The United Church of Christ, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the National Council of Churches US, Church World Service, Pax Christi US,

American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), United Methodists for Kairos Response (UMKR), Jewish Voice for Peace, American Muslims for Palestine, and IfNotNow. ”

In 2021, the bill was endorsed by the Western Methodist Justice Movement as well as the California-Pacific and California-Nevada conferences who called their federal Representatives to co-sponsor the legislation.

This year, more than 20 Christian denomination and organization leaders – including the Rev. Dr. Susan Henry Crowe, General Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society – [signed a letter to Congress](#) in support of H.R. 2590. That letter was shared in a [congressional briefing](#) in April 2022 featuring diverse faith leaders, including UMKR Steering Committee member Rev. Alex Awad.

[United Methodists for Kairos Response \(UMKR\)](#) is a justice movement in the United Methodist Church responding to Palestinian Christians' urgent call for action, in "[Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth.](#)" UMKR seeks, through nonviolent means and in partnership with Palestinian Christians, freedom, justice and equality for all Palestinians and Israelis.

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