

CORRECTING MISSTATEMENTS FROM GENERAL CONFERENCE 2016

By United Methodists for Kairos Response – June 2016

For more information, see www.kairosresponse.org

“Israel alone is not responsible for the occupation.”

When an elephant is standing on the tail of a mouse, it is the elephant who must move.

Israel is the only occupier. Palestinians have lived in this land for thousands of years, as have many Jews. But only one party is in control of another’s land. Palestinians are not demolishing Israeli homes, taking Israeli water, or destroying Israeli orchards and agricultural land. Only the occupier can end the occupation.

“Divestment does not work.” (or “Divestment won’t make a difference.”)

If divestment did not make a difference, Israel would not have allocated millions of dollars to defeat it.

Israeli newspapers report it *is* making a difference. At least nineteen companies have left the West Bank to avoid boycott and divestment. These techniques have also been effective in the past. According to Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and other leaders, divestment played a decisive role in ending apartheid in South Africa.

“Caterpillar has taken steps to align with the Ruggie Principles.”

This is not true. The Ruggie Principles require companies to publicly share their human rights goals and progress toward meeting them. Caterpillar has not done this.

Professor Ruggie himself told UMKR that the requirements are clear, and if a company does not meet those requirements, it is not in alignment with the Principles.

“Caterpillar has announced adoption of the Ruggie Principles on its website.”

Nothing on the Caterpillar website mentions the Ruggie Principles.

“Caterpillar has published an effective Code of Conduct.”

This is a simple PR document focused on abstract concepts like integrity, excellence, teamwork, and commitment. It has a brief section on sustainability, but this has no substance. It only mentions human rights once: “We conduct our business in a manner that respects human rights.” There are no steps listed to make sure this happens.

“Caterpillar has made meaningful progress in response to Pension Board concerns.”

The only concrete steps Caterpillar has taken in response to the Pension Board are the publication of the hollow “Code of Conduct” and a letter stating that Caterpillar expects its customers to use its products in a manner consistent with human rights. There has been no change in its activities regarding Israel or Palestine during eleven years of engagement by church agencies, ecumenical partners, and annual conferences.

“Caterpillar sells equipment to the US government and the US government sells it to Israel. We can’t blame Caterpillar for what the US government does.”

According to the federal agency running this program, every military contractor sees and reviews the contracts with foreign governments in advance and can decline them. Caterpillar D-9 bulldozers are used as weapons. Every weapons company on the UM list of prohibited investments sells its products through the same program Foreign Military Sales Program that Caterpillar uses; CAT is the only company that has tried to hide behind the mechanism that facilitates these sales.

“Caterpillar could be held criminally liable under US anti-boycott laws if it refused to sell its D-9 bulldozers to Israel.”

This is not true. The US anti-boycott laws are intended to prevent companies from taking part in a boycott led by a foreign entity. UMKR is not asking Caterpillar to support a foreign boycott or to stop selling its equipment in Israel. We are simply asking Caterpillar not to sell its D-9 bulldozers to the Israeli army for use as weapons, or to contractors engaging in home demolitions or destruction of Palestinian property.

UMKR called the agency of the US government that handles foreign military sales and was told that “any company can refuse any contract at any time.”

“HP, CAT and Motorola Solutions are not involved with human rights violations.”

This contradicts ample documentation from reputable sources such as the United Nations and Israeli human rights organizations. Pension Board staff belong to the Ecumenical Action Group, which has submitted many letters and shareholder resolutions to these companies about their involvement in human rights violations.

“If we invest in the Palestinian economy, they will become better partners for peace.”

1. No economy can prosper without freedom of movement for goods and services, access to markets and raw materials, and adequate water. The occupation denies all these to Palestinians.
2. Israel has demolished scores of projects that have been built with international aid and investment funds. These would be risky investments.

“Divestment will harm fiduciaries.”

Actually, holding onto companies that are the objects of criticism globally and are being divested by other large pension funds endangers fiduciaries. The Pension Board has continued to hold some companies long after they learned that contracts were being lost as a result of global boycotts connected to their role in Israel’s occupation, and investors have lost money on those stocks as a result.

“Boycott and Divestment are singling out Israel, when many countries of the world have far worse records on human rights.”

Of fourteen high risk areas identified by the Board of Pensions, Israel is the only one where the church has investments.

The UMC has divested from companies involved with oppression in Sudan, South Africa, Western Sahara, Equatorial Guinea, and other parts of the world. The church has used boycott to end unfair labor practices in the U.S. These are time-honored ways of achieving change wherever human rights are being violated.

“Israel is the region’s only democracy.”

Israel has no constitution. Though Palestinian Israelis are allowed to vote, Israel is a full democracy for its Jewish citizens only. Many laws and restrictions prevent full equality inside Israel. In the occupied territories, Israel maintains a blatant system of apartheid based on race.

Other countries in the region, including Tunisia, Turkey, and Lebanon, are also democracies. Democratic elections were held in the occupied Palestinian territories and Egypt, but the elected governments were overthrown with Israel’s support.

“Divestment means taking sides in this conflict.”

We have already been taking sides by supporting Israel with our investments. Divestment means taking the side of justice.

“Divestment would damage relationships between United Methodists and Jews.”

Many Jews are working with United Methodists and other Christians to promote divestment and boycott as ways of ending the occupation. They include doctors, lawyers, authors, and Holocaust survivors. This joint work for justice is one of the most rewarding and inspiring interfaith experiences many United Methodists have had.

“The Occupation represents a small percentage of the overall sales of some companies.”

Any investment in the oppression of other human beings is wrong. If it is a small percentage of sales, it should not be hard for a company to end its involvement. These companies are visible symbols of oppression in the settlements, and our church should not be associated with them. Their impact on Palestinian lives is huge.

“Palestinians teach their children to hate Israel. What about incitement?”

When a child wakes up each day to find armed soldiers on the streets of his town, sees his parents humiliated at checkpoints, stares at high grey walls built through the middle of his neighborhood, and is forced to ration scarce water while the settlement next door has swimming pools, it is hard not to notice Israel’s oppression.

These are the constant realities that produce hopelessness and, in some cases, bring a violent response. Yet hundreds of United Methodists who have visited and lived in the region have found that most Palestinians are longing to live in peace with Israelis once Israel stops taking their land and water and treats them as equal human beings.

“There are so many layers of complexity.”

“Thou shalt not steal” is not complex. Israelis are forcibly taking land and resources that have belonged to other people for centuries. This is wrong. The “complexity” argument is used as a distraction to remove our focus from the essential moral issues.

“What about Palestinian violence?”

Palestinians are overwhelmingly the victims of Israeli violence, though we seldom read about it. During five decades of occupation, most Palestinian resistance has been nonviolent. Both Christians and Muslims have held prayer services in their fields as bulldozers and soldiers surrounded them. They have marched with signs and testified before international courts. Yet young Palestinians can see the occupation worsening. Some have turned to violence. Many more have put their hope in creative nonviolent actions like boycott and divestment, which are making a difference. Supporting these actions is a way to provide hope.

“CAT bulldozers are used by Palestinians as well as Israelis.”

Fertilizer has many legitimate uses, but when used by a bombmaker, it becomes an instrument of destruction. CAT bulldozers have legitimate uses, but when used by the Israeli military, they are tools of racial intimidation and massive destruction.

“Boycott and Divestment will harm Palestinians.”

All Palestinian labor unions have endorsed divestment and boycott. They value their freedom more than menial jobs in Israeli settlements built on stolen land.

“Use of the words ‘Palestine’ or ‘Palestinians’ is inflammatory.”

Palestine has been on world maps for centuries and was mentioned in ancient literature. People who lived there were Palestinians, and they included Jews, Christians and Muslims. They were known throughout the region for being highly educated, and there were many prosperous families among them. We have pictures of Palestinian cities, towns and people from the 1800’s, along with Palestinian coins, newspapers and passports from the early 20th century. Their long history in the land cannot be erased.

“The Bible says we should support Israel.”

The Bible says we should support justice. It describes many instances where the people of ancient Israel turned away from God and failed to keep His commandments. Sometimes they were punished. In each case, God sent prophets to admonish them. They were told that God’s covenants were conditional on their obedience to God’s commandments.

We must never equate “the Israelites” (the Jews of the Bible) with the modern political state of Israel, which is only 68 years old. Many Jews do not subscribe to its policies and reject any attempts to associate their religion with it. Some are being persecuted for this.

Supporting divestment is a way to support the courageous people of every faith who are making great sacrifices to end Israel’s oppression of the Palestinian people.

United Methodists for Kairos Response (UMKR) is a global grassroots group of clergy and laity within the United Methodist Church working for a just peace in the Holy Land. www.kairosresponse.org.

*Dec. 2016 – This document has been updated with the new name of UMKR:
[United Methodists for Kairos Response](http://www.kairosresponse.org)*