

Is the Church Committed to Middle East Peace?

An Open Letter to United Methodist Leaders

Back in 1989, when my wife, Brenda, and I were commissioned as missionaries with the United Methodist Church, we felt that the Church was intent on pursuing peace between Israelis and Palestinians and working towards a just end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. While other mainline denominations had rules against sending an individual to his or her home country, the United Methodist Church saw the value in sending me, a native Palestinian, to serve in the land of my birth and upbringing. The Church then stood behind Brenda and me with a campaign of letters and publicity when the Israeli government refused to allow me entry. After five years of pressure from dedicated United Methodist lay people and leaders the Israeli government finally recognized that the negative publicity wasn't worth the trouble, and Brenda and I were permitted to go to the Holy Land to serve. It seemed in those days that the Church not only had our backs, but through direct action was also quite proactive in defending the injustices faced by Palestinians. For example, in the past, the Methodist Church focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the Schools of Christian Missions. In addition, before the turn of the century, the Church sent delegations of Bishops to Israel and to Palestine to study the political turmoil, reflecting the Church's concern over this issue. Regrettably, today church leaders seem to be satisfied with making mild statements and saying public prayers without any muscle behind them.

As the years rolled by, and as Brenda and I attended and participated in several General Conferences and shared our witness at several annual conferences, it has become clear to us that the leadership of the United Methodist Church, bishops in particular, has gradually become much less willing to speak to this issue prophetically. This has had an impact on our denomination's ability to commit time, funds and energy to the cause of peace and justice in the Holy Land. This is not true of all bishops, and not all leaders, but most.

I can't say that I know or understand all the reasons why the chosen leaders of mainline denominations are reluctant to make strong public commitments to pursuing peace in the birthplace of our faith. I hope this letter will generate debate around that question, and if you consider my assertions unwarranted, I hope you challenge my understanding. Palestinian Christians have literally been pleading for the Church universal to actively engage with them amid their oppression. They are asking for your help in waging a non-violent campaign to stop the killing and repression. What could be more Christlike?

I have spent enough time in the U.S. to understand that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one among many pressing issues that church leaders must address. I know bishops have been required to focus on debates around human sexuality, and that this debate threatens to split the Church. I also realize that bishops and conferences are trying to find a way to best stand with our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters. Still other leaders are committed to tackling the trend of declining church membership and the aging population within many mainline denominations, and as an Evangelical in both theology and temperament, I truly understand the urgency of these efforts. And yes, racism, segregation and domestic violence are also issues that church leaders in the U.S. can't ignore. All are worthy causes, all must be served. That said, you are the leaders who know that our church body, our *connection*, extends far beyond the boundaries and concerns of any one nation. You, of all people, *know* the world is smaller.

I must sadly conclude that you seem to place the Israeli-Palestinian issue far behind domestic issues. You worry about it being divisive and controversial, about disturbing relationships with members of the Jewish community, and would rather avoid the controversy that must come whenever one speaks up for Palestinian rights. Many of you seem to suggest you must not speak – that only the General Conference can speak for the Church. From what I have seen, this principle is inconsistently applied.

I respect those in your leadership who disagree with my position. However, the situation on the ground in the Holy Land is so critical that as followers of Christ we can't ignore what is happening. Here are my reasons:

1. The situation is getting worse

During the month of May 2018, the world witnessed Israeli snipers shoot and kill unarmed Palestinian protesters in Gaza. Men, women, children, journalists, doctors and paramedics were assassinated in cold blood. Over a hundred people lost their lives and thousands were injured. No Israeli soldiers or citizens were hurt. So far, the Church's response is muted. Is the Church willing to stop, look, be moved with compassion and do something to stop future massacres in Gaza and in the West Bank?

2. The situation has clearly been "getting worse" for a very long time

The Gaza strip has been blockaded by Israel for 11 years and lately by Egypt as well. The UN has warned the international community that the 2 million people living in Gaza are facing a bleak future and that within a few years the strip will become uninhabitable. Churches have had 11 years to come together and present a united prophetic response to the Israeli oppressors and to the US enablers of the oppression of the people of Gaza, but church leaders for the most part have failed to do so.

3. The Church is ignoring the Apartheid system in the West Bank

In recent years, the world has witnessed the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the seizure of much of the lands belonging to Palestinians, the theft of water resources, the construction of the segregation wall and the collapse of the 2-state solution. What did most church leaders do? Very little in my opinion. I am, of course, gratified that through grass roots activism the Church did pass resolutions condemning the occupation, and that some conferences succeeded in passing resolutions that support the BDS movement. I must affirm our own Board of Pensions, whose commitments to certain principles led them to establish screens and make divestments that were truly noteworthy. But as for pronounced and public support for real changes, there has been mostly silence from our bishops. They have been unwilling to take sides. The peace and justice activists within the Church who have called on our church leaders to do more have been ignored, if not branded radical or disruptive. This is shameful.

4. The Trump Administration has now allied our country with the far-right Israeli leadership and their supporters in the U.S.

President Trump has surrounded himself with extreme Zionists, both Jewish and Christian, who submit to the dictates of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and his hawkish, right-wing coalition. How can the U.S. broker a peace settlement or make any progress towards a just resolution of the conflict when our own government openly supports Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the move of the U.S. Embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem? We now have an ambassador appointed to the UN, Nikki Haley, who conducts U.S. diplomacy as if the Israelis never do wrong

and the Palestinians never do right. What is frustrating for me, however, is not just the U.S. bias against Palestinians but also the deafening silence of the Church and her reluctance to protest these pronouncements and appointments, as well as their consequences.

5. The presence of the Church in Israel-Palestine and in the Middle East is in jeopardy.

An alarming casualty of the political turmoil in the Middle East is the rapid erosion of the Church. If the Church world-wide cares about Christian presence in the Holy Land, Christian leaders need to focus on and address the political/economic factors that cause Middle Eastern Christians to leave their countries.

What can churches do?

In 2009 church leaders and theologians from the Holy Land gathered in Bethlehem for the signing of the *Palestine Kairos Document*. The document, which was translated to more than 40 languages, is a call and a cry from the Church in Palestine imploring the Church around the world to use its influence to stop oppression, injustice and racial/ethnic discrimination in Israel and in Palestine. Since these injustices have multiplied in the last few years, the call inviting the faithful to action rings even louder now than it did in 2009. Our souls are in jeopardy if we ignore this plea for help.

Here are a few suggestions of what church leaders could be doing:

1. Go there! To really see! And not just holy sites!

I know that bishops are given free trips to the Holy Land. I know they see this as a way to get to know their pastors and laity. I've even have heard of bishops talking about how these "opportunities" allow them to make an impact on their ordinands. I have to say that when leaders talk about visiting the land of my birth, now filled with injustice, and use it primarily as a means of furthering their own agenda within their own conferences it makes me sad. On the other hand, I think of how beautiful it would be if the leaders of our denomination went to the Holy Land with the intention to see, hear and feel. I would be so inspired to see our leaders, in Gaza, meeting with the beleaguered Christian community there.

2. Develop a prophetic strategy

After you gain further understanding, you can come together, study the facts, seek divine guidance and then decide on a strategy to address the Israeli and US political systems that are behind so much of the turmoil. I would hope that plans are also made for an interdenominational strategy.

3. Make the voice of the Church heard

The prophetic strategy should include plans to get US and Israeli authorities to *hear* the prophetic voice of the Church. Church leaders need to specifically expose the hypocritical anti-peace policies of the Trump administration and the brutality of the Israeli leadership. This could be done by writing a letter addressed to the US President and to the Israeli Prime Minister and having bishops from our denomination sign it, and/or a joint letter signed by church leaders of various denominations.

4. Place an ad in a major newspaper

Leaders can compose a statement expressing their views on the situation in Gaza or the failed peace process and place the statement in the New York Times or the Washington Post. Failing to act means that the Church is being directly implicated in the current right-wing policies. For its own sake and witness, the Church needs to act to distance itself from these positions and send a message to Palestinians, Israelis, Arabs, Jews and Muslims that not all Christians endorse policies of antagonism and mistrust against them.

5. Recognize and encourage peace and justice activists

Leaders need to recognize the men and women in their conferences who are active in peacemaking and consult on how to cooperate with them as they do their work. The moral and organizational support from church leaders is desperately needed by these church activists.

6. Recognize, amplify and publicly support the positive actions of our denomination

As mentioned, the Board of Pensions, or Wespath, has developed policies on screens and divestments that have led to some important and positive actions. While I continue to be profoundly disappointed by some of the limits of this approach, particularly the retention of the Caterpillar Corporation in our denominational portfolios, I must also offer my profound thanks when, for example, Israeli banks are removed from our investments. I apologize if I missed it, but not one bishop that I know of acknowledged or defended Wespath when this happened. Likewise, very few bishops have publicly announced their support of any of the divestment measures taken by our annual conferences. Nor have there been any bishops who have made known their opposition to recent laws aimed at limiting non-violent boycotts of companies that sustain the occupation of Palestine.

7. Work with other denominational leaders

How powerful it would be to see a group of bishops and leaders from several denominations having a vigil and demonstrations in front of the White House or the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC. I know it's not likely, but I admit I would love to see them maintain their demonstrations against US and Israeli policies until they get the attention of the media and the political swamp in DC.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, I am beseeching you for a sustained and public witness far more than I am for your time or money. You are our leaders. I believe with all my heart that if the Church, encouraged by your leadership, addresses these issues with compassion and dedication, we may see the day when we do not have to watch and simply lament massacres of innocent people like the one in Gaza. Instead, we may see Israelis and Palestinians draw closer to working on a lasting peace. I have faith that Christ can work through you to make this happen.

God Bless You,

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