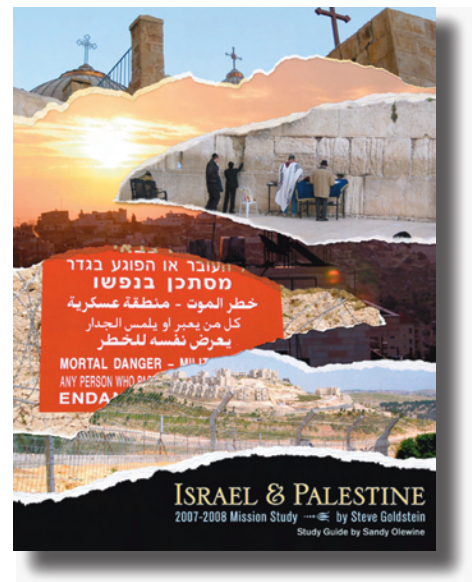


MISSION STUDY UPDATE: ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Israel-Palestine Issues and the 2008 General Conference



Issues of peace and justice for Palestinians and Israelis were prominent leading up to and during the 2008 United Methodist General Conference, which met from April 23 to May 2, 2008 in Fort Worth, Texas. This quadrennial meeting of clergy and laity makes denominational policy, and the General Conference alone speaks for the church.

1. Peace. Several measures reiterated the basic United Methodist hope for a peace that will provide justice for Palestinians and Israelis. One readopted resolution states that “The United Methodist Church continues to advocate for a peaceful settlement of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians through negotiation and diplomacy rather than through methods of violence and coercion.” (“Saying No To Violence in Middle East Conflict,” Petition 80155.)

2. Ethical investments. One controversial issue was whether the church and its agencies should divest — that is, discontinue investments – in companies that benefit from the sale of products or services considered detrimental to Palestinians and Israelis, especially those that enforce Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories. None of several proposals on divestment were adopted. A petition, which would have targeted for divestment Caterpillar that makes heavy equipment used by the Israeli Army, was withdrawn from consideration by a General Conference legislative committee because on the eve of the meeting conversations had begun between representatives of the church and the company. Heavy lobbying by those for and against divestment marked the months immediately prior to General Conference and continued on the premises.

At the same time, delegates amended and readopted a resolution (“Investment Ethics,” Petition 80400) directing the denomination’s financial agents to develop a set of ethical guidelines that will not only govern the investments of official United Methodist organizations but will also be commended as guidance for all church members. The statement says:

“The United Methodist Church believes that social justice and social usefulness must be given consideration together with financial security and financial yield in the investment of funds by individuals, churches, agencies and institutions in the United Methodist family. When we take account of both fiduciary obligations (including financial returns) and de-

nominal values (including social returns), we are investing in a socially responsible manner. The Church's investment philosophy is based on the biblical concept that all resources are God-given and can be used to promote the reign of God on earth."

The lengthy document discusses considerations that are taken into account in ethical investment and reflects on some of United Methodism's historical concerns about not investing in or benefiting from certain enterprises. It states:

"Because some companies and enterprises, such as those manufacturing alcoholic beverages and tobacco-related products and manufacturing, selling or distributing pornography and gambling opportunities, violate basic church teaching, they are excluded from investment. In addition, many church investors refuse to invest in major military contractors or companies with nuclear weapons contracts. Historically, many investors refused to invest in companies doing business in South Africa during the apartheid era. In some cases, they divested of such companies, making public their action as a moral statement."

This guidance is applicable to investment in general, including investment in companies doing business in the Middle East. It anticipates that both shareholder resolutions and divestment may be appropriate in particular circumstances.

3. Palestinian territories. The 2008 General Conference, following a course set by earlier quadrennial assemblies, opposed continuing occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel, including the building of settlements in those regions. The same resolution that rejected violence as a means of settling the conflict also observed: "The United Methodist Church has strongly stated its opposition to Israeli settlements in occupied territories."

The United Methodist Church, speaking through General Conference, again called upon all parties to the Palestinian-Israeli dispute to abide by United Nations' resolutions (notably Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338) and other international measures opposing Israel's occupation of territories obtained in military actions in the 1960s but designated for Palestinians in 1947 when Palestine was partitioned. Considerable new language was added to Resolution 323, "United Nations Resolutions on the Israel-Palestine conflict," including the following:

"Whereas, for more than 40 years the government of Israel has continued its military occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza and the seizing of more and more Palestinian land for illegal settlements in direct violation of UN resolutions as well as United Methodist General Conference resolutions, and

"Whereas, the International Court of Justice, on July 9, 2004, issued an advisory opinion which declared: that Israel's security barrier or wall built on occupied Palestinian territories violates international law; that it must be dismantled; and that compensation must be provided to Palestinians for loss of land and livelihood, and

"Whereas, Israel's government has continued to build the wall on Palestinian land in ongoing violation of international law which greatly increases Palestinian suffering as well as heightens the insecurity of both Palestinians and Israelis, and

“Whereas, May 2008 marks 60 years since the establishment of the state of Israel as well as the dispossession of 750,000-900,000 Palestinians who are still seeking their full human rights, and

“Whereas, ongoing military occupation and armed resistance heightens violence and insecurity for Palestinians and Israelis alike, and

“Whereas, the United Methodist Church opposes all violence against civilians and considers “war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ” (Social Principles 165C), and

“Whereas, the United States’ use of its veto more than 30 times in the UN Security Council to block actions by the international community to criticize and prevent the killing of Palestinian civilians has contributed to a climate of impunity and exacerbated the cycle of violence affecting both Palestinians and Israelis,

“Therefore, be it resolved, that The United Methodist Church calls upon Israel, the Palestinian National Authority and all states to abide by, and uphold United Nations resolutions, International Court of Justice rulings, and international law as the basis for just and lasting peace in Palestine/Israel,

“Be it further resolved, that The United Methodist Church calls upon the United States, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, to accept the authority of Security Council resolutions, to refrain from vetoing resolutions, and abide by Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, as well as all other relevant UN resolutions and International Court of Justice rulings, that provide a framework for bringing this conflict to a just and permanent end.”

The Conference’s mention of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of Israel in May, 2008, and the continuing failure to come to grips with the “dispossessed Palestinians” anticipated ecumenical prayers and actions for peace and justice in early June. Led by churches in Jerusalem and by the World Council of Churches, a week of activities marked the International Church Action for Peace in Palestine and Israel. A prayer issued in Jerusalem asked God to raise up political leaders “courageous enough to sign a treaty ... that puts an end to the occupation imposed by one people on another, granting freedom to Palestinians, giving security to Israelis and freeing us all from fear.”

4. Relations with Palestinian Christians. The 2008 General Conference also reiterated and strengthened an appeal to United Methodists to be more mindful of and concerned about Palestinian Christians, especially when visiting the Holy Land. The revised and readopted resolution, “Holy Land Tours,” Petition 80437, states:

“For many years some Palestinian Christians have expressed deep dismay that too many United Methodists and other Christian groups traveling to Israel/Palestine ... have missed an extraordinary opportunity for ecumenical fellowship and sharing with other followers of the Prince of Peace. Our Christian sisters and brothers indigenous to the area continue to wonder why they are so often ignored by Christian pilgrims to the region. Why, they ask,

do travelers tend to honor the inanimate stones that testify to Jesus' life and ministry while ignoring the 'living stones,' the indigenous Christians who represent an unbroken line of discipleship to Jesus in the land that he called home?"

The resolution makes suggestions on how to be more responsible tourists in the Holy Land with regard to indigenous Christians. It asks travelers to "hear the concerns of both the Israelis and Palestinians" who live in the Holy Land and not just to visit historical sites.

In adopting this resolution, General Conference expressed "deep concern that evidence continues to accumulate that Christianity is dying in the land of Jesus through economic, social and political pressures, which have greatly diminished the numbers and percentage of Christians in the Holy Land." Evidence to support this assertion and a lengthy discussion of its implications appeared in the December 2007 issue of National Geographic magazine. The article contains detailed information on the impact of "the wall" on the people of Bethlehem, which it characterizes as "walled in." National Geographic also considers the negative impact of the wall on Israelis as well as Palestinians, including the small Christian minority.

Gaza Situation Update

The crisis in Gaza has become more acute in recent months for the 1.5 million residents of this small area, almost half of whom are under 14 years of age. During 2005, Israel removed 21 settlements and withdrew its forces from Gaza though it retained control of land, sea and air access. In January 2006, Palestinians in East Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank voted for members of the Palestinian National Council. Hamas, which had boycotted elections a year earlier, fielded candidates and won a majority of the seats. This outcome highly displeased Israel, the United States and other western powers, some of which terminated economic assistance to the Palestinian Authority.

Tensions between Israel and Hamas continued, becoming much worse in March 2006 after the new government was sworn in. Israel imposed strict border controls and soon imprisoned 40 Hamas elected officials. In addition to the already limited access to jobs, Israel limited trade to Gaza to basic commodities, and almost no goods could be shipped out of Gaza, crippling private businesses there. In June 2006, after Hamas captured one Israeli soldier, Israeli bombing and military incursions reached far into Gaza, causing many civilian casualties and knocking out the only local plant generating electricity.

In September 2007, Israel declared Gaza to be "hostile territory" and began to cut energy supplies drastically. Israel defended restrictive border policies as retaliation against Hamas rocket attacks on towns in southern Israel. International human rights and development agencies like Amnesty International condemn both militant rocket attacks on Israel, and Israeli military strikes and economic restrictions that have a disproportionate impact on Palestinian civilians.

With Hamas seizing control of Palestinian ministries in Gaza in June 2007, a virtual sealing of Gaza by Israel was imposed. The action was so severe that many human rights organizations considered it “collective punishment,” which has been proscribed by the Fourth Geneva Convention since 1949. Residents of Gaza breached their closed southern border with Egypt for several days in January and were able to obtain some supplies. With mounting international pressure, Israel relaxed some of the economic restrictions but still provides less than the daily needs of 1.5 million people. As the occupying power, Israel has a legal obligation under the Fourth Geneva Convention to insure the civilian population is provided for and protected. Violent attacks by both sides continue but there are hopes that Egypt may broker a ceasefire and possible prisoner exchange between Hamas and Israel.

Travel restrictions remain in affect. In June 2008, major U.S. news outlets reported Fulbright scholarships were being withheld from seven students from Gaza since Israeli border rules would prevent them from obtaining travel visas. Following the publicity and intervention by U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, the scholarships were restored and the process to obtain permission for the students to travel was initiated. The U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem has had to intervene directly on behalf of the students. Still, another 600 students in Gaza have scholarships to study abroad but are denied visas by Israel to leave Gaza.

In late January 2008, Bishop Felton E. May, interim general secretary of the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries issued a statement expressing concern about the Gaza situation. It said, in part:

“The welfare of people both in Gaza and Israel is uppermost in my mind. A bad situation is made worse when Israel closes the border crossings where essential food and fuel pass into Gaza, as has been done in recent days. Gaza is heavily dependent on such imports from Israel since its southern border with Egypt is sealed, or was until it was breached in response to a blockage by Israel in the north. Israeli policy inflexibility is intensified by the actions of Hamas and its rockets.

“I share the astonishment of Christian leaders in Israel-Palestine that the Israeli government would even temporarily block the movement of food and fuel into Gaza. Political expediency cannot be used to starve, or threaten to starve, people or to demean the humanity of any people.

“The United Methodist Church has a long history of commitment to peace and reconciliation in Israel-Palestine. We believe in the right of Israel to exist within secure borders and the right of Palestinians to self-determination in a secure homeland.

“... I have read with anguish a January 21 statement from the heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem and Holy Land describing the suffering and frustration caused by the Gaza border crisis and the shut down of supply lines from Israel. Those of us who care about human welfare cannot remain in complicit silence but, rather, urge the political leaders of the world to, indeed, lead – to lead toward real peace and justice in Israel-Palestine without waiting to garner political advantage from half measures.

“We need also, perhaps first of all, to pray. I bow my head, and urge other United Methodists to join me in lifting to God the words of the Christian leaders of the Holy Land in their statement: ‘We pray for the Israelis and Palestinians to respect human life and God’s love for every human life, and to take all possible measures to end this suffering. Only bold steps towards just peace and ending the violence will protect the human life and dignity of both people.’”

Recent Visits to Gaza

by David Wildman*

In January 2007, one year into the harsh economic sanctions imposed by Israel on the people of Gaza, I visited Christian health clinics and vocational schools in Gaza where all the students are Muslim. It is a model of interfaith work in a context of ongoing occupation and violence. These young men, all from poor families, face a 70 percent unemployment rate. One recent graduate, 20-year-old Yousef Mansour Amarah, opened a small metal workshop but with the intensity of the siege he gets less and less income.

A 2007 World Bank report found that the private sector is all but dead in Gaza. For 18 years Nasser Jaber built his chicken farm into a thriving business. On May 16, Israeli soldiers bulldozed his farm killing 40,000 chickens that produced 45,000 eggs daily. This farm is a casualty of U.S.-supported policies that impose an economic blockade on poor civilians, and provide arms to a powerful military rather than promoting full and equal human rights for all –Palestinians and Israelis alike.

Israel bombed the only power plant in Gaza in June 2006 so electricity and fuel must now be imported. Israel has cut electricity and fuel shipments to Gaza, contravening its obligation as a military occupying power to protect the occupied civilian population. The cuts in electricity and fuel supplies mean that sewage treatment and water purification processes are in jeopardy of collapse. Since, drinking water cannot be properly treated, the level of chlorine used is now four times the safe international standard – making regular water all but undrinkable. In this context, Israel refuses to allow in shipments of bottled water. The bottled water we drank came from Egypt during the days the border was opened and people of Gaza rose up in nonviolent protest to the siege, knocked down the wall, and went shopping. Israel soon announced that it was allowing electricity to be supplied to Gaza again, but at a rate well below the minimum daily amount required.

Sewage storage pools are perpetually high due to lack of electricity. Untreated sewage is regularly released into the sea because it cannot be held until there is electricity to treat it. This affects the whole ecosystem for Palestinians and Israelis alike. It is also a disaster waiting to happen to homes that are just on the other side of the retaining walls of the sewage pools.

The Gaza Community Mental Health Program, the only mental health program in Gaza, reports that

100 percent of the population is affected by the siege and stress-related symptoms are increasing for all sectors of society. Children, in particular, exhibit increased bedwetting, nightmares, regressive behavior in school and other trauma related problems. Most of them have witnessed or know someone who was killed or wounded.

Medical personnel, patients, teachers and students have difficulty getting to clinics and schools because there is little fuel for vehicles. On the streets, donkey carts are replacing cars and none of the street or traffic lights work. Lack of fuel combined with Israeli restrictions means fishermen cannot use their boats.

In February 2008 the Department of Service to Palestine Refugees (DSPR) vocational school was packed with students (106 total) in metal and carpentry shops. They have fuel for only two hours of generated electricity each day so every conceivable piece of machinery is used at once. At 10 a.m. everything goes quiet and all lights go out for the half hour morning break. Even on the Mediterranean, it gets cold inside a building with no heat or lights in February. Of course, computer work is iffy when electricity is iffy.

The students go to school for three years from 7:30 a.m. – 2 p.m., six days per week. DSPR has had a great track record of 65 percent-plus employment for graduates from their vocational schools. Last year, for the first time, it was less than 50 percent. This affects not just the youth involved but also their very poor families.

Health services are dramatically affected, with few dependable services available in Gaza due to the economic restrictions on shipments of spare parts and supplies to Palestinian Authority hospitals. The World Health Organization reported that from Oct. 1, 2007 to March 2, 2008, 32 patients died because they were not able to reach specialized services outside Gaza. With little or no electricity, refrigeration of medicines, the operation of dialysis and other medical equipment are all highly problematic. Many patients' health has suffered due to delay or lack of treatment since the siege began and the number keeps growing.

DSPR in Gaza also operates mother-child health clinics. The clinics are always vibrant places crowded with patients where medical staff persons each see more than 40 patients per day, six days each week. Despite the difficulties of the siege, poverty and violence, the service is perhaps the only provider in Gaza that regularly does postnatal home visits. The clinics serve as informal social clubs for women who gather for health education, literacy and other empowerment programs. DSPR is a program connected with the Middle East Council of Churches that has worked in Gaza since 1952. United Methodist Women and the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries have supported DSPR's ministries for many years. It has area offices that serve Palestinian poor and refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Nazareth.

On a recent trip to Gaza, Bishop Desmond Tutu commented on the situation facing Palestinians and Israelis saying, "There can be no peace, there can be no security, there can be no freedom in isolation. Israelis and Palestinians will be free, will be secure, will prosper only together. My message to the international community is that our silence and complicity – especially on the situation in Gaza – shames us all. It is almost like the behavior of the military junta in Burma. Gaza needs the engagement of the outside world, especially of its peacemakers."

**David Wildman is an executive with the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries who works with human rights and racial justice. He visited Gaza in January 2007 and February 2008.*