

Mission Study on “Israel-Palestine” Is Consistent with United Methodist Policy

A joint statement of the General Board of Global Ministries and the Women’s Division

A comprehensive 1996 statement on Christian-Jewish relations by The United Methodist Church’s legislating General Conference strongly reiterated the denomination’s opposition to all forms of anti-Semitism.ⁱ Four years later, the quadrennial General Conference, which is the only entity that speaks for the whole church, urged United Methodists to observe Yom HaShoah, the annual Holocaust Memorial Day,ⁱⁱ and also addressed Israeli-Palestinian relations in the Middle East. The latter action endorsed two United Nations’ resolutions that asserted the rights of Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries. The UN measures called for Israeli forces to withdraw to the borders that existed prior to the 1967 war as a contribution to a permanent peace.ⁱⁱⁱ The 2004 General Conference opposed Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and called for study of the matter.^{iv} The United Methodist Church also has a long history of opposition to violence,^v including notation that “targeted assassinations, suicide bombings, and attacks against civilians by both Israelis and Palestinians heighten the fear and suffering of all.”^{vi}

These actions and positions form the background of a current United Methodist mission study entitled *Israel-Palestine*, published in the late spring of 2007 by the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries. This publication is part of its 77-year-old Schools of Christian Mission program. This program develops annual or biennial study guides on selected spiritual growth topics, societal issues, and geographical areas, either country- or region-specific. The printed material for the Israel-Palestine study is a study guide, not a “manual” on Israel and Palestine. The guide was used without controversy in scores of regional and annual conference Schools of Christian Mission in the summer of 2007 and in local congregations and units of United Methodist Women beginning in the fall of that year.

We were surprised when, in late January 2008, the mission study became embroiled in a public debate triggered by an informational session at a briefing for delegates to the forthcoming 2008 General Conference. A panel presentation at that briefing included pro and con considerations of economic divestment as a church strategy for pressuring companies to adopt just practices, particularly in Sudan and Israel-Palestine. One issue in the discussion was a petition to General Conference seeking United Methodist divestment from a company whose equipment is used in enforcing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.^{vii} The Israel-Palestine mission study was not mentioned.

Subsequent to the panel, an organization called “Fair Witness on the Middle East” stated in letters to some General Conference delegates that The United Methodist Church was not prepared to make a decision on divestment and cited the mission study as support for deferring a decision. The letter charged that the mission study represents a “bias to the point of antipathy against Israel and perhaps even Jews on the part of the people responsible for its publication.”^{viii} A later “Fair Witness” press release attacked the study

even more directly, labeling it as “unbalanced” with regard to its treatment of Israelis and Palestinians.^{ix}

These charges are untrue. Enclosures provided with the letter from “Fair Witness” suggest that the claims are based on a twisted reading of the author’s family reminiscences that are included in the study.

The mission study’s perspective is in keeping with the thoughtful, informed, and consistent position of The United Methodist Church on Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. The United Methodist Church is not neutral on the question of military occupations. *Israel-Palestine* is a regional study, not an exploration of ethnic identities or faiths. It deals with Israel as a secular nation-state. The study analyzes political actions and aspirations. It seeks to expand the dialogue regarding this matter by including viewpoints rarely heard in public discourse. Many of the phrases and concepts challenged by “Fair Witness” are common in current academic and interfaith discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The United Methodist Church is on record as a firm advocate of both Israeli and Palestinian rights. The mission study was prepared with the goal of helping United Methodists appreciate the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the context of our commitment to a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

The General Board of Global Ministries and the Women’s Division will continue to be guided by the policies and actions of General Conference on issues related to Israel and Palestine.

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ⁱ *Building New Bridges in Hope: Statement of The United Methodist Church on Christian-Jewish Relations*, 1996. (Available online at www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=999).

ⁱⁱ “Holocaust Memorial Day (Yom HaShoah),” continued in 2004, *Book of Resolutions* 2004, #75, pp. 213-214.

ⁱⁱⁱ “United Nations Resolutions on the Israel-Palestine Conflict,” continued in 2004, *Book of Resolutions* 2004, #323, pp. 811-812.

^{iv} “Opposition to Israeli Settlements in Palestinian Land,” *Book of Resolutions* 2004, #312, pp. 787-790.

^v “Plan to Eliminate Terrorism,” 2004 Book of Resolutions, # 336, pp. 838-841.

^{vi} “Opposition to Israeli Settlements in Palestinian Lands,” *op. cit.*, p. 787.

^{vii} Letter of Christians for Fair Witness on the Middle East, February 5, 2008, p. 2.

^{viii} Letter of Christians for Fair Witness on the Middle East, February 5, 2008, p. 2.

^{ix} “Fair Witness Is Disturbed by Methodist ‘Mission Study’,” Press Release, February 13, 2008.