

**A Background and Overview of the
“Phased Selective Divestment” Resolution
Presbyterian Church (USA) – 216th General Assembly
June 26 – July 3, 2004**

Purpose

This background and overview of the recent “Phased Selective Divestment” resolution of the 216th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) was requested by the Session of Nassau Presbyterian Church in the Fall of 2004. Following its review by the Mission Committee, this document was submitted to the Session in January, 2005, and formally received on February 17, 2005.

Early History of the Presbyterian Church in the Middle East

Presbyterian missionaries first went to the Middle East in 1823, serving in Beirut under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

Presbyterian missionaries in the Middle East primarily served in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt where the Evangelical Church of Egypt (or the Synod of the Nile) was formed in 1853 and remained part of PC(USA) until 1958.

The legacy of these Presbyterian and other Christian missionary efforts, together with the growth of indigenous Christian communities in the region, is an Arab Christian population in the Middle East that today totals in excess of 10,000,000 people. Included in this number are approximately 75,000 Arab Christians who live in the West Bank, Gaza, or East Jerusalem, although that latter number is declining.

People from Nassau with ties to the Middle East

Alice Studebaker is a descendant of Daniel Bliss, founder of the American University of Beirut in 1866.

Stanley and Elsa Kerr, deceased members of Nassau, were the parents of Malcom Kerr, a former president of the American University of Beirut.

Tony Glockler was born in Beirut where first his grandfather and then his father worked for the Presbyterian Mission. Tony’s great-grandfather on his mother’s side was a Presbyterian missionary who came to Beirut in the late 1860’s.

Harry and Barbara Purnell both attended the American Community School in Beirut, a secondary school founded in 1905 by Presbyterian missionaries and administrators of the American University of Beirut.

Conrad Plimpton's father taught at the American University of Beirut.

Bill and Janet Stoltzfus met in Beirut where Bill's father was a Presbyterian missionary who worked with a college for Arab women. Bill later served as the American ambassador to Kuwait and several other countries in the Middle East during his career in the State Department.

Dick and Sallie Jesser lived in Jordan from 1959 to 1962 where Dick worked as a civil engineer on a water irrigation project.

Dick and Jeanne Katen are of Syrian ancestry and their grandparents were founding members of the Syrian Protestant Church, a Presbyterian congregation in Brooklyn, New York, which just celebrated its 100th anniversary.

Carl Brown, Garrett Professor in Foreign Affairs, Emeritus, in the Near Eastern Studies Department of Princeton University, and Anne Brown have traveled, worked, and resided in the Middle East extensively. They are also both on the Leadership Council of Churches for Middle East Peace.

Recent Nassau Guests from the Middle East

Darren and Elizabeth Kennedy, Princeton Theological Seminary graduates and Presbyterian missionaries serving at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (and now on an educational sabbatical in Edinburgh). Darren and Elizabeth are also one of the missionary families directly supported by Nassau as part of our designated giving to PC(USA).

Father Elias Chacour, a priest in the Melkite Catholic Church and the founder of the Mar Elias College in the town of Ibillin in Galilee. This school and its related institutions were founded for "all the children of Israel". The Reverends Gordon and Nancy Mikoski, part of the Nassau family, both serve on the Board of Directors of the Pilgrims of Ibillin, a group that directly supports Father Chacour's efforts.

Adi Frish and Laila Najjar, life-long friends from Neve Shalom/Wahat El Salam (or the Oasis of Peace), an Arab/Jewish community near Jerusalem that was founded in 1978.

Marthame and Elizabeth Sanders who recently served as Presbyterian missionaries on the West Bank and whose current ministry is Missionaries-in-Residence at the Middle East Office of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Louisville.

Adam Keller, spokesperson for Gush Shalom, a leading Israeli peace group.

George Kiraz, a Syriac Orthodox Christian born in Bethlehem and now living here in New Jersey, who recently led a Nassau adult education class on Christians in the Middle East.

Churches for Middle East Peace

Another long-time Presbyterian initiative has been the sponsorship of Churches for Middle East Peace, a coalition of 20 public policy offices of national churches and agencies from Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant denominations that has worked for peace in the region since 1984, consistently calling for peace for the Israelis and justice for the Palestinians. More information on CMEP can be found at www.cmep.org or by calling Tom Charles (the New Jersey coordinator for the group) at 609-430-0223.

CMEP and the Washington office of PC(USA) also are participants in the annual Ecumenical Advocacy Days conference in Washington, DC, that focuses on issues involving Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, the United States, Eco-justice, and Jubilee/economic justice. This conference is scheduled for March 11-14, 2005, and will include a sermon by Rick Ufford-Chase, the new moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as well as visits to congressional offices. More information on this event can be found at www.advocacydays.org.

Social Witness Issue

For those with questions concerning the justification for the Church being involved in such international matters and passing resolutions dealing with these issues, the following paragraphs deal with the Theological Basis of Social Action and can be found in the Advisory Committee for Social Witness Policy section of the PC(USA) website.

“The statements of the General Assemblies on social issues are rooted in a deep theological concern for faithfulness to God's will for the world. It is fitting, then, that this compilation begin with excerpts from the proceedings of past General Assemblies that set forth the theology behind social concern and actions.

Historically, the churches articulated their theological bases for contemporary social involvement over the years 1953-1966. The process began with the "Joint Statement of The Reformed Faith in Relation to Social Concern and Action" in 1953, and culminated in the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. with the adoption of "The Confession of 1967," approved and submitted to presbyteries in 1966, and in the Presbyterian Church in the United States with "The Theological Basis for Christian Social Action," adopted in 1966. The actions of the 1966 Assemblies proved to be pivotal events in the histories of both denominations.

The Presbyterian Church, U.S. in adopting the "The Theological Basis for Christian Social Action" vigorously redefined the influential doctrine of the "spirituality of the

Church" to acknowledge the duty of the church to act on behalf of God's will in temporal affairs. In the United Presbyterian Church, the adoption of the Confession of 1967, along with other historic confessions of the Reformed tradition, marked a reawakening to the breadth and depth of Reformed theology and its relevance for contemporary affairs. The Confession of 1967 continues to inform the life and work of God's people as a part of the *Constitution of the [reunited] Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*.

The fact that General Assemblies have not been moved to extensive examination of the theoretical reasons behind social involvement in recent years reflects the acceptance which a theology of social concern has found in the churches. To a remarkable degree, the theology debated and defined by the Assemblies of the 1950's and 1960's, illustrated below, has provided a reliable foundation for the work of later Assemblies, the church as a whole, and the recently approved "Brief Statement of Faith."

In 1993, the General Assembly approved the report of the Task Force on Why and How the Church Makes a Social Policy Witness. This report ... was a response to a movement in the church asking why the church even has a witness to social policies. The report uses the newly approved *Brief Statement of Faith* (1991) to illustrate that Presbyterians are involved in a social policy witness as an intrinsic part of their Christian faith, and of what it means to be Reformed. While the recommendations are for the most part logistical, the background has great insight for all Christians as we seek to live out our lives of faith. (*see PC(USA), 1993, p. 767-788*)

An example of such witness from the history of Nassau Presbyterian Church itself is described by Lefferts Loetscher in the book, "The First Presbyterian Church of Princeton". "Dr. Ashbel Green, while president of the College [of New Jersey and pastor of First Presbyterian Church], was the principal author of an antislavery resolution of the General Assembly of 1818 which was the strongest condemnation of slavery that the undivided Presbyterian Church ever made" (p.35).

Past General Assembly Resolutions dealing with the Middle East

General Assemblies have traditionally dealt with a wide range of national and international human rights issues as noted in the 2003-2004 Human Rights Update and Study Guide that can be found on the denominational website. The Reverend Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA), has estimated that less than five percent of such resolutions and statements issued by the GA over the years have dealt with the Middle East.

However, as noted in a ACSWP summary of General Assembly resolutions dealing with the Middle East, the (region) has been an area of deep concern to General Assemblies ever since the 1948 PCUSA Assembly declared: "We believe that a solution to the problem will be achieved only by a return to the principle of faithful devotion to the welfare, needs, and rights of both the Jewish and Arab peoples ..." (PCUSA, 1948, p.203).

Since that first resolution in 1948, over 20 additional Resolutions and Statements dealing specifically with the Middle East have been passed by the General Assembly.

For example, the 1967 PCUS Assembly supported the cause of peace in the Middle East and wrote: ". . . The General Assembly express[es] deep concern over the unrest and recent conflict in the Middle East, an area which contains much that is sacred to Christian, Jew and Moslem alike, and it registers its wholehearted and prayerful support of individuals and nations who are seeking to bring peace and concord to that area of the world . . ." (PCUS, 1967, p. 111).

A 1974 Statement noted that "the parties involved should negotiate a shared common authority for a unified Jerusalem that will preserve the integrity of the city; give full expression to the legitimate national political interests of both Israel and the Palestinians; protect the rights of all residents; and protect the legitimate religious interests of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim groups, including free access to all holy places . . .".

In 1984, 1986, and 1987, the Assemblies called again for the U.S. government to seek peace in the Middle East by recognizing the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, while affirming Israel's right to exist, and by taking immediate actions to support international efforts to create an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (PC(USA), 1987, p. 870).

The 1990 Statement, in turn, "encourage[d] the Congress of the United States to make continuation of U.S. aid to the State of Israel contingent upon an end to further settlements in the occupied territories, and an end to human rights violations . . . (pp. 105, 106).

And the preamble to a 2003 Resolution indicated the frustration felt by some Presbyterians with the status quo in the Middle East: "Although it has spoken out, the church is often accused of being silent. Its call for justice and peace has continued to go unheeded. Now it must speak up and speak out again, perhaps in stronger language. Its message is clear, consistent, and straightforward: it calls for the broad goal of ending the occupation, appeals with a most urgent priority for international protection for Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation, and the protection of innocent Israeli citizens. The United States and the international community must act now to end the conflict and the occupation."

Related Economic Actions by Other Parties

It is also important to note that PC(USA) was not the first to initiate such possible actions.

Jewish Voice for Peace, a group that describes itself as the largest grassroots Jewish peace group of its kind in the United States, together with the Catholic Sisters of Loretto and the Mercy Investment Group, has been leading a shareholder resolution campaign

against Caterpillar, Inc., for the last two years. Their resolution, which calls on Caterpillar to review whether the sale to the Israeli army of the D9 and D10 bulldozers (which have been used to demolish Palestinian homes and agricultural resources) violates its corporate “Code of Worldwide Business Conduct”, received 4% of the vote at Caterpillar’s last shareholders meeting and will be considered again in 2005.

This shareholder action is also a “member resolution” of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, an ecumenical group supported by PC(USA). Indeed, PC(USA) voted its \$3 million of Caterpillar stock in support of this shareholder resolution in 2004.

In addition, Human Rights Watch, a major U.S. human rights group, has called on Caterpillar to immediately suspend sales of this same equipment to the Israeli army on the grounds that it is being used to violate international law in the occupied territories.

What is “Phased Selective Divestment”?

As defined on the PC(USA) website, “phased selective divestment” denotes a particular process for addressing divestment issues. This economic strategy was first adopted by the 197th General Assembly (1985) as a way to implement the foundational divestment policy adopted by the 196th General Assembly (1984) in relation to the church’s holdings in corporations doing business in South Africa.

The “phased selective divestment” process includes a full range of efforts including education, interpretation, and public witness, as a way both to create a better informed constituency regarding the nature of Christian witness through the use of financial resources and to engage actively Presbyterians in advocacy around the issues that [prompted] the divestment process.

It should be noted that this “phased selective divestment” process has, over the past two decades, been applied by PC(USA) to more than twenty corporations for their involvement in military-related production, tobacco, or human rights violation issues.

The “Phased Selective Divestment” Resolution of 2004

The evolution of this resolution began with an overture from the Presbytery of St. Augustine in Florida that supported the Geneva Accord and urged Israel and Palestine to implement the Accord. One of several suggested actions in the overture was a “call on our Board of Pensions to divest itself of investments in companies receiving one million dollars or more in profits per year from investments in Israel or that have invested one million dollars or more in Israel.”

The Assembly Committee on Peacemaking considering this overture, however, modified this provision by resolving instead to “refer [the divestment issue] to [the] Mission

Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) with instructions to initiate a process of **phased selective divestment** in multinational corporations operating in Israel, in accordance to General Assembly policy on social investing, and to make appropriate recommendations to the General Assembly Council for action.” The Committee approved this revision by a vote of 68-0-0 and sent it on to the General Assembly for consideration.

The Reverend Bruce Gillette, who served as the moderator of this Committee, later commented on the need for the resolution and the strong support it received, saying that “Since 1948, Presbyterian General Assemblies have issued statements for peace with justice in the Middle East, but with little impact. Middle East Christians have made clear to American Christians that they would welcome less talk and more action. A Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem told assembly commissioners this year, “To have statements is not enough. They might be good for discussions within churches, but they’re not much help to us on the ground.” The Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem urged words and actions in support of Palestinians and Israelis working for peace and justice: “[Speaking out] is not anti-Semitic. It’s not anti-Jewish. It is anti-Israel-government policy.” ”

The General Assembly, in turn, approved the Assembly Committee on Peacemaking measure by a vote of 431-62-7 with over 86% of the delegates supporting the resolution. Divestment was not the only issue addressed in the resolution as it contained several other paragraphs, including a confession of the sovereignty of God over all nations, a recognition of the tenacity of hope of our Palestinian Christian partners, a welcoming of the possibilities of peace contained in the Geneva Accord, a call for the end of horrific acts of violence and deadly attacks on innocent people [by both sides], and an urging of both parties to proceed with negotiated compromises.

The New Brunswick Presbytery commissioners at the General Assembly, the Reverend Jean Pinto of the Pilgrim Presbyterian Church and Elder Jean Woodward of the Hamilton Square Presbyterian Church, both voted in favor of the resolution, as did the Youth Advisory Delegate, Stephen Bruestle of the Pennington Presbyterian Church.

PC(USA) News Release

The PC(USA) news release that followed the passage of this resolution was entitled “Assembly endorses Israeli Divestment”. This heading omitted the “phased selective” phrase of the actual resolution.

The news release contained quotes from the Reverend Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor from Bethlehem and an ecumenical guest at the Assembly, who said that “divestment is important because it is a way for the churches to take direct action. For too long the churches have simply issued statements — and that is not enough.”

Also quoted was the Reverend Victor Makari, the PC(USA)'s liaison to the Middle East who said that “the issue of divestment is a very sensitive one with Israel ... if nothing

else seems to have changed the policy of Israel toward Palestinians, we [as Presbyterians] need to send a clear and strong message [with this resolution].”

These quotations not only illustrated the frustration felt by some Palestinian and American Christians on this issue but, in retrospect, were also clear portents of the reaction to come.

Responses

The reaction to the divestment resolution has been strong but, in many cases, misinformed.

Telephone call complaints to both the Louisville office and Presbytery offices around the country began within days of the resolution action. Several American Jewish groups condemned the action, accusing the Presbyterian Church of “choos[ing] tyranny over democracy, terrorism over negotiations, and violence over peace” (B’nai B’rith International) and charging that the General Assembly had “officially equated the Jewish state with apartheid South Africa and ha[d] voted to stop investing in Israel” (Forward). Individual reactions were even stronger with Alan Dershowitz calling the action an “immoral, sinful and bigoted denigration of the Jewish state” while Joseph Farah, a self-described former Presbyterian, authored an article entitled “Presbyterians or Prostitutes”.

Even some Congressmen complained with 14 members of the House of Representatives [none of whom were from New Jersey] imploring the Presbyterian Church (USA) to rescind its July decision ... describing the action as causing “terrible distress.” The stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reverend Clifton Kirkpatrick, responded [by] citing “terrible distress” as well: the failure of the U.S. Congress to be a balanced arbiter for peace in the region or to condemn the illegal expansion of settlements in the West Bank.

And the criticism culminated with an arson threat against Presbyterian churches demanding that the resolution be withdrawn.

Not all of the reaction was extreme and negative.

In fact, Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) “applaud[ed] the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) for its recent vote to explore divesting from companies who profit from the harming of “innocent people, Palestinian or Israeli.” Far from being an attack on Jews, the PC(USA) decision to investigate selective divestment, as a way to end Israel’s 37-year occupation, is in the best Judeo-Christian tradition of supporting universal human rights and justice.”

Meretz USA, another Jewish group, also used more measured language in suggesting that “it would have been far more appropriate for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to invest in one or several of the many non-governmental organizations in

Israel and the Palestinian territories which are actively trying to promote justice, relief, and reconciliation.”

And Rabbi Michael Lerner, co-chair of the Tikkun Community, observed that “the whole discussion and media coverage [concerning the resolution] would have been dramatically different had the Presbyterian leadership insisted that, in any public or private conversation with "Jewish leadership", that leadership include Tikkun, Jewish Voice for Peace, and other progressive Jewish voices”.

Reaction from Presbyterian ministers to the resolution and the resulting criticism included a letter to Presbyweb from the Reverend David Dawson who wrote, “My thanks ... for [the] excellent information on the media barrage regarding the Israel/Palestine and interfaith relations positions of the Presbyterian Church. I want to express a word of encouragement and thanks to [the Stated Clerk] and others for their measured response to much dishonest portrayal of PC(USA) positions. ... Thankfully the PC(USA) has strong, faithful, and long-standing positions on these matters.”

The Reverend Henry Brinton, pastor at Fairfax Presbyterian Church, was less comfortable with several of the General Assembly resolutions (especially the one dealing with Iraq) and the response to them from parts of his congregation which he described in his recent op-ed piece in the Washington Post entitled “Politics and the Pulpit: the Church is a Place for Dialogue, not Decree.” Although he observed that “past Presbyterian pronouncements have supported positions that were once controversial but are now accepted by many if not most Americans” (public school desegregation, equal rights for women, divestment in South Africa to help end apartheid, a ban on land mines, and the reduction of greenhouse gases), Reverend Brinton concluded that “instead of focusing on crafting pronouncements, churches should put their energy into gatherings that, as Bruce Springsteen said of one of the central jobs of a musician, “provide an alternative source of information.” Like music, religion is most valuable when it draws people together, socially and spiritually. And, like music, it's most inspiring when it isn't blasted into our ears.”

But the Reverend Dr. John A. Huffman, Jr., in a sermon to his congregation at Saint Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California, described the resolution as “the very careful and well-thought-out endeavor of our denomination to work for justice and peace for both Israelis and Palestinians in the violence fraught Middle East.” He concluded by saying “I beg you, pray for the peace of Jerusalem. I beg you to pray for the Middle East. I pray for you once again in this election year to be careful not to overreact to harsh statements designed to stimulate a reaction, and to treat both those who make those kind[s] of statements and those who try to answer them with graciousness and love, realizing this is a hurting world. As followers of Jesus, we must not hide our heads in the sand. Yet, to speak up will cause misunderstanding. When all is said and done, I would hope that we would be known more as peacemakers than peace disturbers, refusing to fan the flames of religious, national, and political violence.”

PC(USA) MRTI Committee Meeting

Early in November, the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment (which includes two representatives from each of the denomination's two investing agencies, the Board of Pensions and the Presbyterian Church (USA) Foundation, and five at-large members) met in New York to consider the implementation of the "phased selective divestment" resolution. The committee set six criteria to guide the process of "phased selective divestment" from corporations that profit from Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza unless their business practices change.

Four of the six criteria target the Israeli occupation, including the construction of Jewish settlements that further entrenches it. A fifth aims to identify multinational corporations that enable violence by either Palestinians or Israelis. The final criterion addresses the Israeli government's ongoing construction of a separation barrier, which the Assembly condemned in another action in June.

The committee noted that the divestment recommendations made by the committee would follow discussions with the identified companies, would require final approval by the next General Assembly in 2006, and even then would be implemented only as a last resort.

The Reverend Bill Somplatsky-Jarman, MRTI's longtime head and the denomination's primary liaison with the previously mentioned Interfaith Committee on Corporate Responsibility, described the parameters as "a set of criteria to organize the work". He added that "addressing Palestinian violence is within the mandate of MRTI, even if it is not explicitly stated in the divestment legislation. Human rights violations are human rights violations. And we want to be sure our work covers all the human rights violations in an area."

More Recent Developments

A December 6th article by Jane Lampman in The Christian Science Monitor summarized the ongoing discussions relating to this issue: "In some ways, last summer's divestment vote has forced a conversation about the Middle East conflict. ... Christian and Jewish leaders have met ..., hosted by the American Jewish Committee and the National Council of Churches. From discussions on the theology of land to the divestment issue, the religious leaders "spoke from their pain" and asked tough questions of one another ...". The article concluded with a quote by Bishop Christopher Epting, deputy for interfaith relations in the US Episcopal Church, who said that "the Presbyterian decision was a flash point but, in a strange way, it may well re-energize the relationship [between the Christian and Jewish communities]".

Locally, a class entitled "The Presbyterian Church and the Middle East: The Past and the Present" was held at Nassau on December 12th and was attended by approximately 50 Nassau members.

On the national level, a PC(USA) conference on the “Steps Toward Peace in Israel and Palestine” was held in Louisville on February 10-12, 2005, and was attended by representatives of synods and presbyteries from across the country.

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