

## **A Statement from the Session of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago**

*June 11, 2010*

In 2008, the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) called for the creation of a Middle East Study Committee (MESC) to “prepare a comprehensive study, with recommendations” regarding the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people, a conflict that has been of deep concern for Presbyterians for many years. In March of this year, the MESC released its full report, “[Breaking Down the Walls,](#)” which will be considered at the 219th General Assembly in early July.

This report has already generated considerable scrutiny and criticism from many Presbyterians as well as several prominent mainstream American Jewish organizations. As the convocation of the General Assembly draws near, we, the Session of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, voice our disagreement with both the tone and content of this report. We believe that rather than functioning as an instrument of peace and reconciliation, this report will sow only discord and division among Presbyterians and drive a deep wedge between us and our Jewish friends in both the United States and Israel.

While our large urban congregation draws together people of various viewpoints on this contentious issue, the Session and pastoral leadership of Fourth Presbyterian Church have consistently affirmed the PC(USA)’s advocacy for a two-state solution to this conflict, maintaining Israel’s right to exist alongside the right of Palestinians to a viable state, with sovereignty and security for both. As a congregation, we have always tried to approach this issue with balance and fairness, as demonstrated by our efforts in 2004 and 2005 to reframe the Presbyterian debate about phased selective

divestment from companies that profit from this conflict to an approach of proactive investment in peaceful pursuits in both Israeli and Palestinian ventures.

Equally important to us in our context of public urban ministry, Fourth Presbyterian Church continues to do the difficult yet critical work of developing and nurturing meaningful and constructive relationships with our Jewish and Muslim neighbors in the city of Chicago. We feel that this report seriously imperils these relationships.

After studying this document, the Session of Fourth Presbyterian Church concurs with other Presbyterians who consider this report to be unbalanced and overwhelmingly biased against Israel. In an attempt to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people, whose suffering we lament along with the suffering of the Israeli people, the MESC report presents a strikingly one-sided view of an incredibly complex and multilayered situation. We are troubled by the unbalanced constituency of the committee and regret that it did not consult a broader spectrum of mainstream Israeli and Jewish voices to balance out the voices calling for justice for the Palestinian people. The historical analysis is deeply biased in favor of one of two competing narratives, and the study material offered is glaringly unbalanced in both length and substance. Since there is plenty of suffering and fault on both sides of this conflict, we, as concerned and invested outsiders, must listen equally to both perspectives. Similarly, the efforts of the PC(USA) to influence the situation should also focus on the actions of both the Israeli and Palestinian people.

To our ecumenical and interreligious friends, we ask for understanding and patience as this report works its way through the Presbyterian process. At this time, it must be recognized that this document is only a committee report, not the official policy of the PC(USA). As a Session, we do not feel that this report represents our congregation or the voices of moderation, interreligious cooperation, and constructive peacemaking in our denomination. There are some recommendations with which we agree and find consistent with historic Presbyterian statements and actions, but we strongly disagree with the context, presentation, and tone of the material that surrounds these recommendations.

With this statement, the Session of Fourth Presbyterian Church recommends that the MESC report should not be adopted by the 219th General Assembly

of the PC(USA).

While we appreciate and value our right and responsibility as a community of faith to speak prophetically and passionately about issues and situations in the world, especially in cases where we maintain deep and historic connections with the people and places involved, we seek to do so with humility, fairness, and grace. We believe that it is our calling to be peacemakers and agents of reconciliation. In order to do this with integrity, we cannot champion one side over the other in a conflict that is characterized by legitimate concerns and grievous violence on both sides.

As we consider the implications and consequences of this report for peacemaking in the Middle East and our local commitment to ongoing dialogue and cooperation with Jews and Muslims in service of the common good, we cannot in good conscience remain silent as the General Assembly prepares to deliberate on this divisive report. We urge our Presbyterian sisters and brothers to lay this report aside and reconsider our approach to the mission of peace and reconciliation in the Middle East. We humbly ask our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers in Chicago and beyond to bear with us as the PC(USA) seeks God's guidance as a corporate and democratic community of faith. And for our sisters and brothers in the Middle East—children of Abraham and children of God—we offer our sincere prayers for peace and our commitment to stand in solidarity with all of those who have suffered from violence and fear. May we all work together to find a way forward beyond division and bloodshed to true peace and reconciliation.