

# The Washington Post

## On Faith



### Guest Voices

Other Views On Faith and Its Impact on the News.

## Peacemaking is more than pointing fingers

By Katharine Henderson and Gustav Niebuhr

*On Faith panelists*

How best to encourage peace in the Middle East? The week of July 4, Presbyterians will tackle this most daunting of questions when they convene their denomination's General Assembly--its top policymaking body--in Minneapolis. Awaiting the 600 commissioners--as representatives of the Presbyterian Church (USA) are called--will be a scaldingly critical 150-page report. It rebukes Israel for its treatment of Palestinian neighbors and calls for the denomination and the American government to squeeze the Jewish state financially.

We do not like it, and have signed a letter circulating among Presbyterians nationwide, calling on the General Assembly to reject the Middle East Study Committee's report. Why? Because we find that report to be unbalanced, historically inaccurate, theologically flawed and politically damaging.

Presbyterians believe that God calls them and others to be peacemakers and to work for justice. Historically, the denomination has condemned violence on both sides, affirmed a two-state solution--Israel and Palestine--and asked the U.S. government to serve as an even-handed broker.

Sadly, the report strays from this path to peace-building and instead deals in neatly-assigned roles--Israel as oppressor, Palestinians as victims--period. That may briefly feel good, but righteous simplicity never fits complicated, nuanced circumstances.

We recognize that the support of the report's authors may feel good to Palestinians undeniably suffering under occupation--including Christian Palestinians, whose numbers are sharply dwindling. And we believe that a solution must be found soon because the window on a two-state solution is narrowing.

But peacemaking does not mean pointing fingers. The prophet Isaiah knew that: He spoke out against the assigning of blame elsewhere.

If the Presbyterian family really wants to encourage peace, we will have to listen to each other--carefully--at this gathering and beyond. Either that, or run the risk of replicating in our own, almost 3 million-member body the conflict we are hoping to diminish. And we need to listen to all involved, including American Jews, essential partners who were not consulted in the report's preparation.

Isaiah calls us all to be repairers of the breach--a process underway through coexistence projects involving Israelis and Palestinians. This summer, youth from both sides of the conflict will come to the United States on a program that allows them to meet "the enemy" for the first time, face to face! Last week, American seminarians, including Christians and Jews, came home from an immersion trip to Israel and the West Bank, where Muslims, Jews and Christians served as guides and tutors in asking them to think about their peacemaking roles. Auburn Seminary provides a home for these and other programs.

Of course, peacemaking may involve advocacy. We do not argue that Presbyterians, as individuals and groups, should avoid criticizing the Israeli government and demanding help for the Palestinians. Nor would we make the opposite case. But we believe God calls for dialogue, debate and working for justice, which means investing energy, intelligence, imagination and love into a situation already fraught with too much heartache and tragedy. What's needed is not provocative language, but constructive work--for respect, understanding, and reconciliation among Christians, Jews and Muslims everywhere.

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