

June 11, 2010

A Pastoral Letter in Response to the MESC Report on the Middle East

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This summer, in Minneapolis, at the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), our denomination will consider the *Report of the Middle East Study Committee*. The committee members who authored this document seek to chart a path toward peace—a just peace—in a region consumed by distrust, hatred and inter-religious violence. In this they are to be commended. Peace for the Middle East is a holy objective and as Presbyterians we join together in hoping and praying that every person who lives in Israel, Palestine and across the entire region will live to see God’s justice “rolling down like waters.” (Amos 5:24) May it be so! May it be soon!

Many of us, like the members of MESC, have traveled and studied in the Middle East, interviewing national, religious, and community leaders, and spending time on the ground in both Israel and the West Bank. After careful study of the report we conclude that the *Report of the Middle East Study Committee* is unbalanced, historically inaccurate, theologically flawed, and politically damaging. Its critical defects threaten the Presbyterian Church’s impartial role as a peacemaker and jeopardize our credibility as we attempt to speak to a complex situation. Recent events in the Middle East underscore the fact that for Presbyterians to play an ongoing role in making peace in the world, we must avoid choosing sides even in a time when we must decry injustice and speak out for victims of violence. Although the report cries out for justice, we believe that it will ultimately do an injustice of its own.

This report is not balanced.

- The nine-member committee drew on its own personal knowledge and experience to articulate the Palestinian view of tensions in Israel-Palestine. This is appropriate. The suffering of Palestinians is real and tragic. Pro-Palestinian voices and perspectives must be at the table. At the same time, there is conspicuous absence of other crucially important voices in the conversation. **Regrettably, the authors of this report have had little or no dialogue with organizations that fall within the mainstream of the American Jewish community.** In our own ministries, we have found such dialogue to be of crucial importance. At times, this dialogue is painful. We do not always agree. Yet, if Presbyterians are to speak with authority (and are to be trusted) on such matters, it is absolutely crucial that we engage all of the key parties in this discussion. In the absence of actual engagement, the report holds out hope that mainstream American Jewish organizations like J Street might be potentially positive conversation partners. We agree. J Street is a political organization in Washington D.C. that advocates “for vigorous U.S. leadership to achieve a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” However, we called J Street and learned that, in fact, they were never contacted by the study committee, and have since issued a statement condemning the committee’s report.

- **The imbalance in this report becomes painfully obvious when one considers the space that it allots for various perspectives.** It offers a 71-page “Plea for Justice” that reflects an exclusively pro-Palestinian perspective written by two members of the committee. This is placed next to a 9-page reflection by a rabbi with whom the committee met in Jerusalem. (Unfortunately, the rabbi, Dr. Ron Kronish, states that he was not presented with either the report or its recommendations prior to publishing, so that his perspective could be in dialogue with theirs. Rabbi Kronish has now written that he does not and cannot support the recommendations made in this report, nor does he “agree in any way with the ‘historical analysis’ in the appendix.”)
- The report rightly raises concern for a dwindling Christian presence in Israel and Palestine and challenges the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza as well as the establishment of settlements beyond Israel’s borders. **But it fails to condemn several important and disturbing elements that prevent peace. The report does not specifically call upon Palestinian leaders to condemn violence against Israeli citizens. There is no call to neighboring nations to recognize the legitimate right of Israel to exist as a state and no affirmation of the right of Israeli citizens to defend themselves against aggression and to live in peace without the threat of terrorism.** In a similarly imbalanced way, the endorsement of the Kairos Palestine document represents a troubling and weighted perspective which should not be commended because of its particularly one-sided views.

This report is historically inaccurate.

- It manifests a decidedly one-sided analysis of a complicated history. To see a clear example of this, note section 2.3 of the “Plea for Justice,” entitled, *The 1967 War*. This section begins with the following sentences, “In June 1967, Israel attacked Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. At the end of six days, Israel had taken the Gaza strip and the Sinai from Egypt, East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan from Syria.” Without crucial historical background, these two sentences imply an unprovoked land-grab by Israel. It does not tell of numerous provocations by Israel’s neighbors—border clashes with Jordan, shelling from Syria, Egypt’s decision to dismiss the United Nations buffer force in the Sinai and to bring 1,000 tanks and 100,000 troops to that border, even as it initiated a blockade of Israeli ships.
- It is not appropriate for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to endorse a one-sided view of history. Such imbalances will not further the cause of peace. **If we are going to wade into this complex conflict in hopes of advocating for justice and peace, we need to be balanced, fair, and accurate when presenting its history.** This report does not achieve these essential objectives.

Important parts of the report are theologically flawed.

- Early on, the authors state that the Holocaust (the extermination of 6 million Jews in Nazi Germany) is a unique event and cannot be compared to any other historical event. They were right to do this. However, in their conclusion to the document, they use a famous quotation by anti-Nazi pastor Martin Niemoller to do exactly what they counseled should not be done. They compare the present situation in Israel and Palestine to the Holocaust, and in so doing, they place the Palestinians in the place of the Jew and the Jew in the place of the Nazis. **We dare not make such awkward comparisons between such vastly different situations.** This is a particularly troubling theological convolution.
- Though the report is generally critical of terrorism, it sometimes speaks euphemistically about terrorist acts, naming them “violent resistance.” Of equal concern are several statements in the report that tend toward excusing terrorist acts committed by Palestinian radicals as understandable, or as being Israel’s fault [see 5.2 on page 176] in light of the Palestinian people’s deep frustration and anger. **We believe that it is inappropriate for an official document of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to, in any measure, imply sympathy for or understanding of acts that would deliberately murder innocent men, women, and children.**

The report is politically damaging.

- Not only would the approval of the report effectively severely strain dialogue between the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and most American and Israeli Jewish organizations, we believe it would also have two unintended but tragic effects. First, such a document from a major American Christian denomination would increase the sense of isolation that many Israelis already feel, effectively encouraging moderate and progressive Israeli Jews to see their situation in the same way that the Israeli right often does, perceiving that the world is aligned against them and that Israel must guarantee its security without regard to international opinion. Second, a document like the MESC Report could well play into the hands of more extreme Palestinian voices, suggesting to them that it will be possible to make peace and achieve national aspirations entirely on their terms, without need for compromises. Both these potential “real-world” effects of the report would, ironically, further the very alienation and polarization that the report rightly decries.

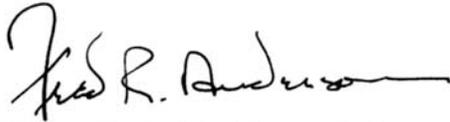
Thus it is with great reluctance, that we, the undersigned, ask the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) not to approve the MESC Report. We say this with great reluctance because much in the report is powerful and admirable. The report faithfully chronicles the suffering of Palestinian brothers and sisters in Christ. It identifies the longing for peace that we all share. But important elements of the complex nature of the Middle East’s context are absent in the analysis and recommendations which are offered. **Therefore, unhappily, we conclude that the failures noted above and the overall imbalance of the document make it inappropriate as an official position for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).**



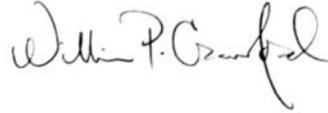
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Retired Senior Pastor, Morningside Presbyterian
Church, Atlanta GA



The Rev. Joseph J. Clifford, D. Min.
Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Dallas TX



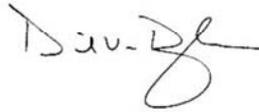
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Pastor, Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church,
New York City



The Rev. Dr. William P. Crawford
Senior Pastor, Larchmont Avenue Church,
Larchmont NY



The Rev. Dr. John M. Buchanan
Pastor, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago IL



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Pastor, Head of Staff, House of Hope,
St. Paul MN



The Rev. Dr. Cynthia McCall Campbell
President, McCormick Theological Seminary,
Chicago IL



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Auburn Theological Seminary, New York City



The Rev. Charles P. Henderson
Executive Director, ARIL/CrossCurrents,
New York City



The Rev. Mark D. Hotstetter
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Seminary, New York City



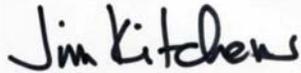
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Member of the Board, Auburn Theological
Seminary, New York City



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Senior Pastor, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian
Church, New York City



The Rev. Dr. Jon M. Walton
Senior Pastor, The First Presbyterian Church,
New York City



The Rev. James Kitchens
Interim Pastor, Calvary Presbyterian Church,
San Francisco CA



The Rev. Theodore J. Wardlaw
President, Austin Presbyterian Theological
Seminary, Austin TX



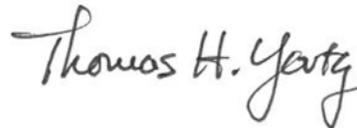
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Pastor, Brick Presbyterian Church,
New York City



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Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta GA



Dr. Blair R. Monie
Pastor, Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church,
Dallas TX



The Rev. Thomas H. Yorty
Senior Pastor, Westminster Presbyterian Church,
Buffalo NY