



Presbyterian/Jewish Dialogue
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The Middle East Study Committee Report: A Response and Recommendation

May 7, 2010

Dear Commissioners to the 219th General Assembly,

Imagine, if you will, that Jewish leaders decided to do a comprehensive study of Presbyterianism in the United States. Imagine further that the study group met with numerous members of New Wineskins, The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian church while meeting with only a handful of PC (U.S.A.) leaders. Such a report which largely ignores the mainstream Presbyterian denomination would be unbalanced and perhaps offensive to those of us who are proudly PC (U.S.A.).

Hurt, anger, confusion, betrayal are only a few of the emotions that have surfaced among Jews with the publication of the Middle East Study Committee report; a report that largely ignored mainstream Jewish organizations. Although the publication of the report has strained the relationship between Presbyterians and Jews, we believe that receiving and/or endorsing the MESC report will cause irreparable damage to the goodwill and trust that currently exist between Jews and Presbyterians in the communities served by our congregations.

The Presbyterian/Jewish Dialogue group in the greater Houston area has been a blessing to all involved and has led to in-depth dialogue and faith sharing. Pastors and Rabbis regularly exchange pulpits and leaders of each faith are welcomed at Presbytery meetings and Jewish organization meetings. We've traveled to Israel together, celebrated Passover and the Feast of Booths, and have explored the context of our faith together as sisters and brothers of a wondrous God. We fear for these precious relationships if the General Assembly even receives the MESC report in its present form. We fear the loss of trust, the loss of relationships and the loss of connection with our heritage.

This response to the report is not meant to be a defense of Israel's actions, but a plea to bring a balance and a fuller understanding of the situation in the Middle East. Our group concurs that there have been and continue to be many issues of injustice on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unfortunately, this report has focused primarily on only one of the two "narratives" (pg. 57) that it acknowledges exists. Although there are many specific areas of imbalance in the report, including the sheer number of pages (76) devoted to the Palestinian narrative versus the number of pages (8) devoted to the Israeli narrative, the following are three of the most egregious examples.

1) The report undermines the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state, which is a central focus of Judaism and the Old Testament.

- It questions whether Israel should be a Jewish state (pg.112) while the United States clearly continues to affirm Israel as a Jewish state.
- It does not acknowledge that Israel is a small democratic nation with a population of 7.5 million (1.5 million Israeli-Arabs) in the midst of hundreds of millions of Arabs and Muslims, many of whose governments have declared that Israel should not exist and that Jews should be eliminated.
- It does not mention that 95 percent of terrorist attacks on civilians by suicide bombers have been stopped by the security barrier. Having visited Israel as a group in 2005, we also understand that this security barrier has caused suffering to Palestinians who have been separated from family and their land.

2) The report does not hold the Palestinian “government” (pg. 21) to the same standards as the Israeli government.

- It did not discuss why the Palestinian government has done little for the Palestinian people to improve their infrastructure or their economy.
- The report makes several assumptions about the motivation of the Israeli government (pgs. 93, 111), but does not make similar assumptions about the Palestinian Authority.
- The report does not acknowledge that many Jews have worked with Palestinians to improve the infrastructure. We believe that where economic situations have improved, extremism has lessened.
- The report doesn't recognize that the Palestinian educational system continues to teach young Muslims that Jews and the West are evil and should be eradicated.
- The report is virtually silent on Palestinian terrorism, that there are two conflicting Palestinian “governments” (one of which is considered a terrorist regime by the U.S. government).

3) The report is detrimental to efforts for peace through its bias in language and terminology.

- It acknowledges that the War of 1948 is called the War of Independence in Israel and the Nakba by the Palestinians, yet it is solely referred to as the “Nakba,” which translates as “The Catastrophe,” throughout the report.
- The report compares the genocide of the Jews during the Holocaust to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. It is not morally sustainable to compare a regime that nearly succeeded in eradicating Jews from Europe to the current conflict between Israelis and the Palestinians.
- The report suggests on page 5 that they could find no mainstream Jewish community or national organization prepared to work together for a just and secure Israel. The statement in itself is not true and especially inflammatory.
- The report calls for an “end to the occupation,” but it never defines what “occupation” means, and its continual usage reveals the bias of the MESC.

- It calls for a Palestinian right of return in such numbers that Israel would no longer exist as a Jewish state. We advocate for some other form of compensation or alternate solution.

Our group and the U.S. government continue to endorse a two-state solution. We want to promote peace and viability for both groups without adding to the rhetoric that undermines peace. In the Holy Land where Jesus taught the power of love and justice, Christians are not forgotten. We thank God for their continued witness. We pray that the Palestinian and Israeli leaders will work for peace for the sake of all of the people.

Our frank assessment of the MESC report is that it will do far more harm in our own communities than good in the Middle East. Interfaith relationships in our communities will be set back and perhaps irrevocably broken. Leaders of other faiths may be left wondering if they are next to be disrespected by the PC (U.S.A.). This report demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to the complexity of relationships and understandings within our faith communities in the United States and to the events transpiring in the Middle East.

We recognize the hard work the MESC has put in on this report and respect those who stand up for what they believe. However, the report is not balanced enough to be studied seriously in our congregations. Thus, we recommend that the General Assembly Middle East Peacemaking Issues Committee disapprove Part One and Part Three of the report. It is also our recommendation that Part Two of the report be disapproved because the recommendations of the MESC are based upon an imbalanced report.

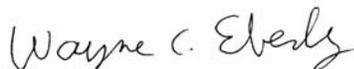
In Christ's love,



Rev. Mike Cole, General Presbyter,
Presbytery of New Covenant (PNC)



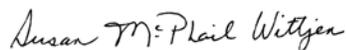
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