



## The United Church of Christ and Israel/Palestine Some Frequently Asked Questions July, 2015

Following the United Church of Christ's General Synod [action on promoting peace](#) in Israel/Palestine, and to complement the [summary guide to that action](#), this set of FAQs is designed to help UCC pastors and leaders respond to some common questions that have been posed related to our church's witness in and on the Middle East.

### ***Why should the UCC care so much about the Middle East?***

The United Church of Christ, like all churches around the world, traces its faith history to the place of Jesus' birth, ministry, passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. We have a 2000 year history there. In mission, the first Congregational missionaries went to the region in 1819, nearly 200 years ago, and since then we have developed many partnerships and relationships with Christian churches, councils and agencies throughout the region, including both Palestinian and Israeli organizations. So, our 200-year mission history and our connections with the people there through mission are important factors as well. In addition, the UCC has a special interest in promoting peace with justice, and the Middle East is a place for which such advocacy is necessary.

### ***Shouldn't the UCC care about the whole world?***

Indeed the UCC, with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) through Global Ministries, engages in mission and partnerships globally, and has staff dedicated to nurturing such relationships in Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Southern Asia, as well as the Middle East. As a result of our relationships in those places, and our engagement on the issues our partners face, we continue to be active in advocacy on global justice issues in all of those places, not just the Middle East.

### ***Has Synod addressed other international issues?***

Very clearly and extensively. Over the course of 30 General Synods, going back to 1957, the UCC has spoken to many international justice issues, and has a wide range and depth of policy, including general resolutions on human rights, East-West dialogue during the Cold War era, and the US' role in the post- Cold War order. Specific to countries and regions, the UCC has spoken on apartheid South Africa, the Congo, China, the Philippines, Cuba, Vieques and Puerto Rico, US foreign and military policy in Central America, human rights in Honduras, Vietnam, Cambodia, Afghanistan, and many other places. At this Synod, the UCC addressed the issue of Korea, and that of the Armenian Genocide, as well. The UCC has also spoken on the Middle East broadly as well as on Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, in addition to Jerusalem and Israel/Palestine.

### ***Is Israel being singled out?***

No. The UCC's witness on Israel/Palestine is consistent with its global concern and its focus on peace with justice, as exhibited above, through the General Synod's attention to many global

issues. The UCC has called for the use of economic leverage in other situations of injustice as well, for example, the boycott of Taco Bell and Mt. Olive Pickles, in support of workers' rights. At this summer's Synod, the UCC endorsed a boycott of the Washington, DC NFL team in protest of its team name. Other forms of economic leverage have included boycott of and divestment from companies doing business with South Africa during apartheid, and engagement with corporations through shareholder activism. Currently, the UCC employs social screens for investments. The use of economic leverage is not new; additionally, the US imposes sanctions against other countries for violating human rights, including Iran and Syria, and reviews its foreign aid and military assistance to other countries routinely. Given the fact that Israel receives \$3.1 billion in military assistance annually, General Synod calls for a review of this assistance in light of the occupation and violations of Palestinian rights.

### ***What about Palestinian extremists?***

The UCC has consistently and repeatedly admonished violence perpetrated by any party to the conflict, including Israel and Palestinians. It recognizes that there are extreme elements among both communities that sometimes dominate the discourse in the public arena, but works to support those who seek non-violent solutions to the conflict. Economic leverage, including boycott, divestment, and sanctions, is a non-violent approach that is endorsed by many of our Palestinian Christian partners, consistent with their own non-violent theological understanding of peace, justice, and reconciliation.

### ***What is BDS?***

In 2005, over 170 Palestinian civil society organizations, including some UCC partners through Global Ministries, endorsed "a strategy that allows people of conscience to play an effective role in the Palestinian struggle for justice. The campaign for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) is shaped by a rights-based approach urges various forms of boycott against Israel until it meets its obligations under international law by:

1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall;
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality;
3. and Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194."

The UCC's 2015 resolution supports the spirit of the BDS Movement, but only addresses the first demand—ending the occupation. (The UCC also adopted a resolution in 2005 calling for the Separation Barrier to be removed because it does not follow internationally recognized boundaries and it denies people the ability to know each other, thus augmenting barriers of the mind.)

### ***How do we support Christians in the Middle East?***

The UCC works closely with partners throughout the region, many of whom are Christian churches, councils, and agencies. Our partners are engaged in a variety of ministries, from

worship and Christian leadership development, to community development; from interfaith relations to conflict resolution; from publishing to human rights advocacy and peacemaking; and from education and health care to refugee relief. Our support of such vital ministries enhances the Middle Eastern Christian communities' witness and presence in their multi-faith societies.

We also speak out on issues that affect the people of the region, including (but not limited to) the Christians. For example, this General Synod considered, and adopted, a resolution commemorating the centennial since the Armenian Genocide. That resolution:

- ❖ marked the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> year since the beginning of the Genocide in 1915, lamenting lost lives and the lack of recognition of the Genocide by governments;
- ❖ drew attention to the reality of the Armenian community in northern Syria and the tragedy that has befallen them there;
- ❖ and reiterated the UCC's abhorrence when peoples and communities are made victims of violence based on any aspect of identity.

In addition, UCC and Global Ministries leadership have expressed solidarity with partners and Christians in many places around the world, most notably and recently in Egypt and Syria in the Middle East, as they have experienced tragedy.

### ***What did the UCC's General Synod actually say on Israel/Palestine?***

The best way to learn about General Synod 30's [resolution on Israel/Palestine](#) is to read the full text, available here. [This additional resource](#) is a summary of the action, and can be useful in understanding and interpreting the resolution. In addition, a compilation of the full corpus of General Synod resolutions on Israel/Palestine since 1967 (the first year the UCC spoke to this conflict in Synod) is [available online here](#).

### ***What are some of the implications of this action on Jewish-Christian dialogue?***

While this resolution and General Synod action may be challenging for some dialogue settings, it is all the more reason to maintain and persevere in relationship—to discuss the content of the resolution and the reality of Palestinians living under occupation. The resolution does not target Israel; rather it is directed at Israeli policies of occupation. It does not blame Jews; rather, it focuses on a government's policies and practices.

Just as our American Jewish sisters and brothers have many ties and relationships in Israeli society, so do we among Palestinian Christians; we nurture partnerships with both Israelis and Palestinians. It is important to recognize those relationships, and to understand—and explore—the narratives and experiences that each group brings to dialogue.

The UCC has affirmed its relationship with the Jewish community (1987) and the Muslim community (1989). It has expressed its abhorrence of anti-Semitism (1983 and 2001), and has spoken against actions of hostility against Islam and the Muslim community (2011). The UCC has expressed its commitment to interreligious dialogue, and is engaged in dialogue with each community, ecumenically through the National Council of Churches.