

B’Nai Brith Challenges Trinity-St. Paul’s United Church, July 2019.

Just before the July 6 - 8 long weekend in 2019, Trinity-St. Paul’s (TSP) Church Board members were alerted to a concern that needed to be resolved. Because many people were away on holiday, communication happened by e-mail and phone calls not in person. This was difficult for many to follow as people sometimes missed earlier e-mails or were confused about the facts of the situation.

Earlier in the week, the church had received communication from B’nai Brith (BB) questioning our July 13 space rental to the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM). This organization, a small group of students from York University, had rented one of our rooms to hold a celebration. The event was to honour a young Palestinian writer with a scholarship named after a famous Palestinian author and activist, Ghassan Kanafani. Kanafani was assassinated by Mossad in 1972. BB claimed that Kanafani was a terrorist and that we, therefore, should not be renting to a group that glorified a terrorist.

Several of our Board members checked with outside sources such as the General Council Office of the United Church (GCO), the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG) and others and found no truth in the accusation that Kanafani was a terrorist. The GCO promised to support us in maintaining the rental if there were any further complications. ICLMG offered to provide us with legal support. Board members had mixed views even with these assurances.

We were under time pressure as we wanted to give PYM notice in good time if there was to be a change. We did not respond to BB initially.

As we held further discussions, we received a second communication from BB intimating that TSP was “condoning violence” by letting PYM use our space. BB pointed out a PYM website note and Facebook posting that lifted up the actions of a Palestinian activist who had used violence (to defend himself or in pent up anger?), against the IDF during the “March of Return Days” in Gaza. According to BB, that proved that PYM “condoned violence” and that TSP would be complicit in “condoning violence” if we continued with the rental agreement. BB used condescending language to attempt to humiliate and demean TSP members and to attack TSP’s reputation in order to convince us to end the rental contract.

This accusation of “condoning violence” became the deciding factor as the Board held a vote. In the midst of time pressure, misunderstandings, and confusion by some Board members, many felt we could not associate ourselves with a group that condoned violence no matter what the cause. (In previous communication with our Building Management Board on July 1, the Vice General Coordinator of the National PYM clearly stated that PYM does not promote or condone violence and would not do so at their event. This message got lost, or failed to be heard clearly, by the Board.) It was decided we would not rent our space to PYM and the group was notified on July 6, a week before their event. This left many of us upset about the process, the decision, and the meddling by BB.

After the word got out, we were praised by far-right Jewish groups and media and vilified by many we thought were friends. It was clear that many did not have the correct facts and made assumptions about the reasons for our decision, who made it, and when. This was disappointing.

Because the summer was lost time in terms of debriefing with the Board, we met in September to share our thoughts and feelings. Between July and September, the Middle East Working Group of TSP and Bathurst UC (MEWG met with Robert Massoud, a Palestinian Canadian activist, to work on creating a response to the Board, both practical and ethical.

Robert helpfully pointed out that the UN Geneva Convention of 1949 and 1977 specifically makes allowances for the use of violence for populations under occupation.

Our MEWG members prepared several documents and made a presentation to the Board in Sept 2019 –

- a) an introduction which included our discussions with Robert Massoud after the July 6 Board decision
- b) background on the Palestine/Israel context
- c) an overview of the Canadian justice context – UCC policy; Christian, Jewish, Palestinian and secular groups who work alongside the UCC and TSP to seek justice and peace in Palestine/Israel.
- d) a draft proposal for a decision-making protocol regarding renters and complaints
- e) our Christian mandate
- f) future suggestions re education and action

Broader Questions (with thoughts from MEWG, David Wildman and Robert Massoud)

- PYM denied they were promoting violence. Did we give them a fair chance to defend themselves?
- Does everything posted on a website presume agreement from the website owners?
- Why is BB so interested in our renters?
- Flimsy evidence.
- Flawed logic.
- Guilt by association.
- “Terrorist” who is and who is not? Israel has been accused of state-sponsored violence and terrorism against Palestinians for years. Who has an open license to be violent? Who is it OK to be the target of violence?
- What is resistance?
- Why is violence against Palestinians not considered anti-Semitic? Why is it OK for Zionist Jews to speak out against violence against them but not for Palestinians or other Arabic peoples to do so?
- Who are the victims in this conflict? Morally indefensible actions – imprisoning children, house demolitions, stealing land, acting against international law, blocking Gaza causing starvation and killing medical personnel. “It is the state of Israel that is responsible for these morally indefensible actions on an ongoing basis and is not being held accountable. As human rights and international law are allowed to erode to the detriment of more and more people, our own human and legal rights erode.” (David Wildman, General Board of Global Ministries, the United Methodist Church, Notes to UNJPPI Sept, 2019)

Accompanying Documents

1. A Dictionary for the Bewildered
2. Board presentation outline

3. The North American Context – re seeking justice in P/I

4. Draft TSP Policy and Protocol for the use of Space and Handling Complaints

From: Palestinian Youth Movement <palyouth.usa@gmail.com>

Date: 1 July 2019 at 1:58:49 PM GMT-4

To: Lorna

Cc:

Subject: Re: PYM event booked at Trinity-St. Paul's United Church (TSP) on July 13, 2019

Warm Greetings Lorna,

Thank you so kindly for reaching out. We would like to extend our appreciation to you for graciously hosting us at the Centre.

As I'm sure you are aware, advocacy for Palestinian rights is often framed as "violent" so as to silence such advocacy. These attempts at censorship draw on islamophobic, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian tropes and rhetoric to perpetuate a one-sided narrative that provides cover for violation of the rights of Palestinians.

Nevertheless, to be clear, PYM does not promote or condone violence under Canadian law and will not do so through our event at your Centre. We appreciate you taking the time to seek clarification. We look forward to strengthening our relationship with you all. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by email or phone at 469-583-4461.

Sincerely,

Mohammed Nabulsi, Esq.
Vice General Coordinator
National Executive Board
Palestinian Youth Movement