

**Open Letter to the General Council Commissioners  
of British Columbia Conference of The United Church of Canada**

**Grieving a Missed Opportunity**

**Some Personal Thoughts on the Report of the Working Group on Israel/Palestine  
Policy**

June 2012

To my sisters and brothers in this part of the Creator's family,

My teacher Douglas John Hall impressed upon me, almost forty years ago now, that the single most important relationship for Christians to sort through — to strive “to get right” — was with the people Israel. That conviction has shaped me ever since, making me bold enough to think that I have something to contribute to the current controversy surrounding the Report of the Working Group. I am but one voice, and you will be asked to listen to a great many as the General Council process unfolds, so let me outline why I think my voice is worth a few minutes of your time.

I have a PhD in Systematic Theology from McGill University exploring the post-Holocaust recovery of “hope” as a theological category for Rabbi Dr. Emil Fackenheim and what that recovery might mean for Jewish-Christian dialogue. I have been a practitioner of Jewish-Christian dialogue for some years. And, since some of you will be wondering if I am so much on Israel's side in this controversy that I do not believe the political leadership of the Jewish State can be wrong, let me state clearly and unequivocally that I believe that the Palestinian peoples are hugely disadvantaged by the status quo, that the Settlement issue is a major stumbling block to peace, that the Palestinians have as much right to living in a secure and peaceful state as any of us, and that, therefore, a two-state solution is the best way forward. None of these issues will be resolved without hard, face-to-face negotiations in which all parties involved are prepared to surrender some deeply held positions. And I grieve that this Report has missed an opportunity to contribute to the calling together of Palestinians and Israelis for the hard work of respectful negotiation. Here are a few of the elements that have grieved me most.

I grieve the direct linkage, in the original report, of the murder of six million Jews to the significant human rights challenges faced every day by the Palestinian peoples. The death camps were built for one purpose: to kill Europe's Jewish citizens. The security barrier/wall was not built to harm Palestinians, but to protect Israelis. That it has accomplished. It was not built to steal land, though government policies have enabled some of that to happen. The Holocaust cannot be reduced to an organized campaign of human rights violations. It was a deliberate, systematic attempt, in the heart of a supposedly Christian continent, to destroy utterly the Jewish people — their languages and cultures and their very bodies. Though this section of the Report has apparently been withdrawn, its echoes resound throughout the whole of it still, colouring the reading of the balance of the Report for a great many of us. It was wholly unnecessary to posit a kind of moral equivalency between the pain of the Holocaust and the pain of the post-1948 Palestinians.

I grieve the continued singling out — in many United Church discussions — of the State of Israel as the sole or primary actor in righting the many wrongs of the status quo. The State of Israel is not uniquely responsible for all that is wrong in the Middle East. It did not start the 1948 war which greeted its re-establishment. It did not seek out an opportunity to create generations of Palestinian refugees. It stood alone listening to the belligerent rhetoric of its Arab neighbours threatening another Holocaust in the build-up to war in the summer of 1967, and took decisive action to meet that threat. There is a need to broaden our understanding of the entire historical context of the Arab–Israeli conflict if we are going to more fully understand the Israel/Palestine conflict. If you have not yet had a chance to read it, I encourage you to take a look at the response to the Report prepared by the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs. Some of our colleagues in the United Church community find the language in parts of the response somewhat harsh and/or hyperbolic. I read it quite differently: as the thoughtful response of our partners in dialogue who are getting increasingly frustrated that every time General Council meets we replay this conversation yet again.

I therefore also grieve that we have not engaged in such significant Jewish-Christian dialogue as to obviate the return, General Council gathering by General Council gathering, of this issue. Our in-house process creates the opportunities for passionate and committed local groups to get an issue on the national stage, but this Report is significantly different. It represents not the passion of a local group, but the considered wisdom of a General Council Working Group. Yet the United Church's lack of understanding of the intimate connection between land and people and state is on evidence once again, pulling significantly back from our commitments in *Bearing Faithful Witness (BFW)* (2003). Surely this is one area in theological dialogue to which we must commit ourselves to deeper understanding. I also grieve that in this Report we feel we have the right, perhaps even the obligation, to define for ourselves what the language of “the Jewish State” means. This is hardly the approach envisioned by BFW.

I grieve the rather selective use of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which calls not only for Israel to withdraw from the territories it occupied as a result of the 1967 War, but also for the “termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.” While the UN is not without its problems (the current inability to address Syria's civil war is a case in point), even the UN does not ask for unilateral action on the part of Israel. Why do we? Where genuine peace negotiations with Arab neighbours have been possible, Israel has pursued them. But how do you negotiate with those who are not willing to acknowledge your right to exist (such as Hamas)? Israel alone is castigated for its treatment of the Palestinians, but how have those same Palestinians been treated by their Arab neighbours? How many of the Arab countries which surround Israel have made the Palestinian refugees welcome? Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have missed opportunities for substantive peace negotiations, so to hold only Israel accountable is to single the Jewish State out in a way that it is surely reminiscent of the 2000 year history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism

which has marred the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people. Put most simply, whenever Jews were singled out by their Christian neighbours, it was bad news for them. To single out the Jewish community is therefore to open the door to misunderstanding about the motives of The United Church of Canada, which can begin to sound like not-so-distant echoes of anti-Semitism.

I grieve that we are proposing that, because the term “apartheid” might at some point become applicable, we are not going to reject its use in the current dialogue.

I grieve that while the language of dignity is prominent in the report, its use is basically reserved for that which has been taken away from or denied to the Palestinians by the Israelis. Yet by holding only Israel to account for its actions over the decades with regards to the Palestinian population, this Report actually serves to diminish the dignity of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian leadership in both Gaza and the West Bank have not been unwitting bit players in this narrative, but willing and active participants who also must be held to account for their actions and decisions. I would further argue that many Israelis already acknowledge that the security barrier/wall has an undeniable impact on their own dignity.

I grieve that we Christians have arrogated to ourselves the role of prophet in this issue, and think that we must remind the people of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Hosea of their prophetic heritage. Both the Kairos and Bethlehem Call texts, to which the Report refers, call the wider Church to a prophetic stance of condemnation with regards to Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian peoples. Not intended as contributions to Jewish-Christian dialogue, they are polemical texts seeking to enlist the support of the wider Church against the Jewish State and its policies. In the texts, the sense of pain and suffering are palpable, and no one is suggesting that the Palestinian peoples should not be supported. They are a wounded people. But are we bound to support them in exactly the way they demand of us? Though my understanding of the biblical record may well be “wonky,” as I understand it, the role of the prophet was to stand with God over against the perpetrators of injustice: all the perpetrators of injustice. Those who build settlements on land which they do not own, and those who destroy themselves in order to attack civilians. Those who want to drive all Palestinians away and those who want to drive all Jews away. Prophets, primarily, choose to align themselves with God’s call to justice. Prophets are not free to enlist only on one side of an extremely complex issue. It is being suggested yet again that our only truly prophetic choice here is to stand with the Palestinians against the Jewish State. I would say that a prophetic stance would be to stand with both and against both for the sake of God. I would further wonder why we, who have over the centuries demonstrated an ability to be wrong so often while believing we were right, do not seem to have learned to ask ourselves hard, humbling questions: “Where in the Kairos and Bethlehem Call are the prophetic denunciations of the calls to slaughter Israelis? Where are the prophetic renunciations of indiscriminate acts of destruction targetting all civilians, Israelis as well as Palestinians? Where is the call to peace that questions the use of schools and hospitals as shields from which to launch missiles at Israel? Where is the calling to account of all those who believe that violence is an acceptable diplomatic tool?”

I grieve the renewed call to economic sanctions. I have heard the argument from some of those in favour of sanctions (and under that rubric I include boycott and divestment as well) that this action will “hurt” Israel. I trust that such language is intended to convey the sense of damage to Israel’s international prestige, because the actual economic impact of any sanction undertaken by The United Church of Canada on Israel’s economy would be negligible. Where that impact might be felt greatest, however, is among the many Palestinian employees of the companies which might be subject to such sanctions. Rather than ineffectively “punish” Israel, and possibly cause further economic damage to the Palestinian community, I would think that finding ways to support Palestinian businesses —such as forming co-ops to import their goods, or convincing local suppliers to do so — would have a far more positive impact. Unless, of course, the only goal of the sanctions is to punish Israel, and then we are back to the singling out issue mentioned above. Where are the calls to sanction all those companies and individuals who are making huge profits by the suffering of others in Syria, in Egypt, in Afghanistan, in Nigeria, e.g.? Are the lives and suffering of those who happen not to live in democracies of less value or interest to us in The United Church of Canada? I do not believe they are, but from this Report it is difficult to gain that sense.

I grieve that we are called primarily to negative actions, rather than positive commitments. Is there not an opportunity here to signal our willingness to work with Palestinian and Jewish organizations and individuals who are already on the ground, already in dialogue, already committed to a peace process that is founded in mutual acceptance and respect? Such opportunities exist, but once again, from this Report it is difficult to gain that sense.

Were I to be a Commissioner this year, I would read as much material as I could get my hands on from as many perspectives as possible, and if still convicted in the same way, I would work to defeat the adoption of the Task Group Report, to defeat any proposal calling for sanctions against Israel, and to call for a permanent theological dialogue between the Jewish community of Canada and The United Church of Canada. Further, I would try to encourage the Conferences of the Church to examine ways that we can, even without leaving Canada, support and/or partner with local Palestinian congregations and businesses, as well as reminding United Church visitors to Israel that our historic ties within the West Bank are strong and worthy of a few days exploration/education.

There are a number of positive elements in this Report. I do not think, unfortunately, they shift the balance of my understanding of any of the foregoing. This was an opportunity to call forth “the best angels” within all those committed to the way of justice and peace for all of God’s children, and we missed it. That I grieve most of all.

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