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Press Releases

Report Calls for Dignity for All in Israel/Palestine

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Toronto: The United Church of Canada today released the report of its Working Group on Israel/Palestine Policy. The report will be considered by the denomination's 41st General Council, which meets in Ottawa, August 11–18, 2012. Until that time the working group's report is not policy of the church, and its proposals are solely recommendations.

- Download the complete text of the working group's report from the [GC41 Workbook](#), REPORTS 79-108
- [Questions & Answers](#) [PDF: 6 pp/135 KB]

Former United Church Moderator, the Very Rev. David Giuliano, chaired the three-member working group. He says the working group believes that the dignity of all peoples in the region must be at the heart of any United Church policy directions.

"Without dignity for all the people of the land, and for the land itself, justice that leads to peace is not possible," says Giuliano.

The 26-page report was completed following extensive consultation, including a 12-day [visit to the region in February 2011](#). During that visit the working group met with representatives of Palestinian, Israeli, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities in Israel and the West Bank.

Giuliano says the working group listened carefully to many points of view from all perspectives in the conflict, but did not shy away from arriving at its own conclusions about a situation that is long past the point where claims of complexity can remove responsibility for making judgments.

Foremost is the conclusion that the first step to peace is to end the occupation.

"Simply put, Israel is maintaining a harsh occupation that must end so peace can emerge. The occupation is damaging both Palestinians and Israelis. The occupation is being implemented by a democratic country and sustained and supported by Western governments, including Canada's," says the report.

"The future of Israel and of Palestine are intimately intertwined," says Giuliano. "Until Palestinian people experience justice, peace, and freedom of movement, Israel will be unable to fully claim its place among democratic nations."

In terms of economic sanctions, Giuliano explains that the working group encountered its greatest challenge in considering the implications of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement.

In the end the working group decided to call for an economic boycott focused exclusively on settlement

products. Their recommendation is for the United Church to establish "a church-wide campaign of economic action directed against one or more settlement products that can be identified as produced in or related to the settlements or the occupied territories."

"What we're calling for is a focused boycott of products that are being created illegally," explains Giuliano. "To buy settlement products is the same as buying stolen goods—in other words, benefiting from the crime." He adds, however, "This is not a call for a boycott of Israel or Israeli products."

The working group advises against the use of the language of apartheid when applied to Israel. Their report argues that "the charge of apartheid applied to Israel shuts down conversation, disempowers those who desire and work for change in Israel, and does more to harm than to help the potential for successful peace negotiations."

Giuliano notes that although the report acknowledges the challenging reality of a "new antisemitism," which is expressed as hatred of the Jewish state, the working group does not believe that criticism of Israel is in itself antisemitic.

"Criticisms of Israel vary significantly and must be judged by their intent," explains Giuliano. "Criticism that questions Israel's right to exist or that seeks to undermine its legitimacy as a state is unacceptable."

At the same time, Giuliano adds, Israel can and should be held to a higher standard than surrounding non-democratic countries or authoritarian regimes. He says the working group believes, "It is precisely because of Israel's commitment to democratic ideals that Israel needs to be challenged on its policies around the occupation."

The report also says that United Church policy should identify and support initiatives that work toward the creation of a viable Palestinian state. The two-state model is widely recognized as the key option for the future of Israel/Palestine. However, as Israel continues to expand settlements and control water and productive land, a viable Palestinian state becomes less and less possible.

"The working group understands that for Palestinians the longing for a homeland is just as pervasive and deep as it was for Jews, who dreamed of a Jewish homeland for millennia," comments Giuliano.

He adds that church policy must honour the right of self-determination for both Israelis and Palestinians. The choice of one or two states must be made by the peoples themselves. In whatever situation emerges, ending Israel's military occupation must be the starting point.

The working group is also deeply concerned that the occupation, particularly the building of settlements, is being supported financially and politically by Christian Zionist movements throughout North America. These organizations and churches operate out of a theology that the working group believes to be false.

"The impact of Christian Zionism must be countered by those in the Christian community who reject these false beliefs," says Giuliano.

The working group's report notes that, although "the United Church recognizes Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state within safe and secure internationally recognized borders," the church has previously not defined what it means by the term *Jewish state*.

"Our use of the term 'Jewish state' has become confusing and problematic for some partners of the United Church and for many inside and outside the church," explains Giuliano.

The working group therefore recommends that "any United Church affirmation of Israel as a Jewish state must be accompanied with a clear explanation of its meaning: specifically, *as a homeland for the Jewish people and a democratic state that ensures complete equality of social and political rights to all of its inhabitants*

irrespective of religion, race, or gender."

Using the same logic, the report proposes that a future Palestinian state would also be a homeland for the Palestinian people. It also recommends supporting "a negotiated settlement to the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees that maintains the demographic integrity of Israel," and acknowledges that "It is unacceptable to insist that Palestinians accept Israel as a Jewish state as a precondition of continuing negotiations."

In the biblical and theological introduction to the report, the working group notes that "we are called to respect the witness that the land of Israel and Palestine has offered through thousands of years."

"While much of this history has been clouded by violence and oppression, empires and occupation, exile and return, this land has also been shaped by an awareness of the sacred and transcendent. Whether it is the night journey of Muhammad, the vision of Solomon, or the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, here heaven and earth have come close to each other. The integrity of the three world faiths represented by the land of Israel/Palestine is at stake in how this conflict is resolved," says the report.

"What happens in this land matters to the world," adds Giuliano.

[Video clips](#) of the three members of the working group talking about the report are also available on the United Church's YouTube channel.

An [abbreviated version](#) of this news release is also available.

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