



UNJPPI

United Network for Justice and Peace
in Palestine and Israel

January 17, 2022

The Right Rev. Dr. Richard Bott
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Rev. Michael Blair
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Dear Right Rev. Dr. Bott and Rev. Blair,

New Year's Greetings from the United Network for Justice and Peace in Palestine and Israel ('UNJPPI'). We do hope that you and the other staff of the General Council office were able to be with family and friends over Christmas and experience the joy and love of the season despite Covid restrictions.

UNJPPI is a national organization of United Church members and friends. Some of us have served through the United Church in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program of the World Council of Churches which brings international citizens to the West Bank to monitor life under the Israeli military occupation.

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The UNJPPI mission is:

In discipleship of Christ, and in solidarity with churches and other partners in the Middle East as well as globally and in Canada, this Network covenants to engage, consolidate, nourish, and channel the energy in the United Church of Canada toward the goal of a just peace in Palestine/Israel, primarily through calling for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and for equal rights for all who live in Palestine/Israel, by facilitating education, promoting partnerships, coordinating advocacy, advancing policy and encouraging action.

We are sending this letter in response to the report of the Just Peace Task Group, which we understand is being forwarded for consideration by GC44 in the next few months. We ask that the GC44 Commissioners be given a copy of this letter. If for some reason that is not possible, we ask that you notify us of that decision at your earliest convenience.

We do appreciate having been forwarded a copy of the Task Group report shortly after its release this past November. Earlier, we had been invited to make submissions to the Task Group and did so twice. We recognize the tremendous amount of work done by members of the Task Group and supporting staff, and the careful nature of their deliberations. Their report addresses three important issues raised by the Israel occupation and the violence it generates, namely:

- the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement;
- the use of the word or term apartheid in relation to Israel; and,
- the use of the term Jewish state to refer to Israel.

while at the same time respectfully living with our ongoing commitment to resist true Antisemitism, Islamophobia and human rights abuses around the world.

Filling Suggested Gap in Report

The first part of the Background section of Appendix B sets out an excellent description of the present worsening human rights situation in Israel and Palestine. What is noticeably missing, perhaps especially for any commissioners or others unfamiliar with the history, is a description of how the present situation has developed. For anyone who learns most effectively from stories, what is also missing are any personal stories from United Church people who have visited and seen firsthand the conditions on the ground.

To fill this gap, we are providing the links to two resources. The first is a very short (6.5 minutes) YouTube video from Jewish Voice for Peace entitled "*Israel & Palestine: A Very Short Introduction*" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y58njT2oXfE>

The second is a slightly longer (12.75 minutes) video prepared by UNJPPI entitled "*Seek Peace, Pursue Justice in Israel-Palestine: Time for Action*". While it was prepared before the 2012

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General Council, it is still very relevant.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzuBWBBIUlo&t=552s>

UNJPPI Supports Task Group Recommendations

UNJPPI strongly supports the two recommendations found at the end of the Task Group report. We appreciate the brief theological centering presented in section 3 of the report, including the recognition of Christ's call for the church to stand in costly solidarity with those most at risk of losing the fullness of life God intends for all people. We also appreciate the decision to frame the conversation through a lens of decolonization, writing:

On Palestine and Israel, it is impossible to overlook the link between the Canadian settler experience and the dispossession of Palestinians from their lands and resources.

We are particularly thankful for the careful and inspired thought that went into the comprehensive list of principles the Task Group discerned from the theological centering process it followed. They collectively provide an excellent framework through which to review the questions on which it focused. The framework will similarly be appropriate for our church to use going forward in analysing many other questions.

Where we have some difficulty with the Report is in places where it appears to potentially sanction a departure from the principles – based approach.

Inspiration from Archbishop Desmond Tutu

While we were considering an UNJPPI response to the Task Group report we were saddened to learn of the Boxing Day death of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. While best known for his leadership role in helping end apartheid in South Africa, he also spoke out against injustices around the world. He visited Palestine more than once. He was an outspoken critic of the Israeli military occupation of Palestine and the human rights abuses it inflicts on Palestinians. On more than one occasion he spoke to the first two issues addressed in the Task Group report.

In 2012 he wrote to the United Methodist Church that was considering a divestment resolution:

“I therefore wholeheartedly support your action to disinvest from companies who benefit from the Occupation of Palestine. This is a moral position that I have no choice but to support, especially since I know of the effect that Boycotts, Disinvestment and Sanctions had on the apartheid regime in South Africa.”

In a 2014 article published in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz¹ he declared his support for the international boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement as a peaceful means of opposing the Israeli occupation.

¹ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/desmond-tutu-to-haaretz-this-is-my-plea-to-the-people-of-israel-1.10494007>

"Those who continue to do business with Israel, who contribute to a sense of 'normalcy' in Israeli society, are doing the people of Israel and Palestine a disservice. They are contributing to the perpetuation of a profoundly unjust status quo," he wrote.

In 2015 he wrote a letter to the United Church of Canada which was forwarded through UNJPPi and intended for the General Council meeting that year. Unfortunately, it did not reach the General Council at that time. A copy is attached hereto as Appendix A. It is as relevant today as it was then. On the issue of Apartheid, Archbishop Desmond Tutu stated:

In recent years, I have been increasingly dismayed at the deteriorating conditions of the Palestinian people living under occupation, which has now gone on for 47 years with no end in sight. Even a decade or more ago when I first visited the Holy Land I saw the marks of apartheid in the policies of the Israeli government continued to the present day. The Palestinians are forced to live in segregated areas, often relocated to less desirable land so Jewish settlers can live in fine red ceramic-roofed houses with paved roads while most Palestinians live in squalor in villages and refugee camps. Water is diverted to settlers so that they can have nice green lawns, irrigated fields and community swimming pools while Palestinians endure shortages and dusty roads. I have looked at this and seen the ugly face of apartheid and the racism within it. I have been vilified numerous times for making this comparison to apartheid. I shrink not one step backwards. I saw and I name what I saw: apartheid, separation, segregation. I might add that these settlements are illegal under international law, as is the occupation itself, and an affront to the world.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu did not have the benefit of the framework recommended by the Task Group. It is apparent, however, that he did have the internalized framework of his faith as a follower of Christ, including Christ's call to costly solidarity.

The Three Specific Issues

The Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement

Concerning Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, the application of the discerned principles points strongly to full support for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions as a form of free speech and a creative and non-violent means of resisting the Israeli military occupation of Palestine.

Whatever doubt is created in the Report to this conclusion appears to come from outside the principles, through the naming of challenges to supporting BDS. The three named are:

1. Whether it is effective in its goals;
2. Whether it is inherently antisemitic in singling out Israel; and

3. Whether to support BDS requires that the UCC support all the objectives of every other group that supports BDS.

Palestinian civil society has chosen a non-violent form of resistance to what is a violent Israeli military occupation. In doing so, it follows the many other previous examples noted in the Task Group report. Whether BDS will ultimately prove effective for Palestinians is something that cannot be judged in advance but will only be known in the fullness of time. In Canada, BDS is a form of constitutionally protected free speech. The Report notes the suggestion of some that a non-binding resolution adopted by Parliament “creates a chilling effect and makes outright support of the BDS movement risky for the denomination.” The church should not be deterred by any such suggestion but should follow the example of Archbishop Tutu and speak with a prophetic voice, taking risks for the sake of justice. As stated in a principle named in the report, the church should “speak truthfully, even when the truth is painful; with courage to name things as they are.”

The Task Group report states that “some have argued that support of the BDS movement is inherently antisemitic in nature, claiming that it unfairly singles out Israel when many other nations could be equally criticized.” This claim appears to equate all Jewish people to the State of Israel and fails to acknowledge that many Jewish people are opposed to oppressive actions by the State of Israel and support BDS. Also, the request for the UCC to support the BDS Movement comes from UCC partners in the Holy Land, including some who are descendants of the first Christians and experience the oppression of the Israeli military occupation. If there are other nations that could be equally criticized, there may not have been a similar request to our denomination. And, as pointed out by Prof. Michael Lynk, UN’s special rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Israel and Palestine are different than most other countries in that they were created through a United Nations decision – the 1947 decision to partition Palestine. As a result, all UN members share a special responsibility for what is happening there.

The Use of the Word Apartheid

We thank the Task Group for the concise but thorough definition of apartheid set out in Appendix C to its Report. It notes that under the Apartheid Convention and Rome Statute the crime of apartheid consists of three primary elements: an intent to maintain a system of domination by one racial group over another; systematic oppression by one racial group over another; and one or more *inhumane acts*, as defined, carried out on a widespread or systematic basis pursuant to those policies. There is ample evidence documented by B’Tselem and Human Rights Watch in their 2021 reports, that these three primary elements exist.

The January 2021 B’Tselem report states:

A regime that uses laws, practices and organized violence to cement the supremacy of one group over another is an apartheid regime. Israeli apartheid, which promotes the supremacy of Jews over Palestinians, was not born in one day or of a single speech. It is a process that has gradually grown² more institutionalized and explicit, with mechanisms introduced over time in law and practice to promote Jewish supremacy. These accumulated measures, their pervasiveness in legislation and political practice, and the public and judicial support they receive – all form the basis for our conclusion that the bar for labeling the Israeli regime as apartheid has been met.

In its very detailed April 2021 report, Human Rights Watch concludes:

On the basis of its research, Human Rights Watch concludes that the Israeli government has demonstrated an intent to maintain the domination of Jewish Israelis over Palestinians across Israel and the OPT. In the OPT, including East Jerusalem, that intent has been coupled with systematic oppression of Palestinians and inhumane acts committed against them. When these three elements occur together, they amount to the crime of apartheid.

In his 2015 letter, Archbishop Desmond Tutu had no difficulty naming what he saw on visits to Palestine as apartheid. Anyone who has visited occupied Palestine since 2015 will know that conditions there have worsened much since then and the oppression has only intensified.

Appendix B to the Task Group report identifies many of the oppressive actions of the Israeli government that justify the apartheid designation. If all such actions were listed, the list would be very long. In our conversations with people in Canada, the oppressive actions against Palestinian children, including arrests in the middle of the night, detention until trial in unfair military courts, and detention where family visits are difficult or impossible are often of the ones that first touch the heart.

Apartheid is a crime against humanity under international law.³ When a crime is being committed, we should not shrink from calling it by name.

The Task Group states that *“The United Church of Canada could affirm the accuracy and usefulness of the term apartheid to describe laws and legal procedures of the State of Israel that enshrine one people in a privileged legal position at the expense of another.”* But it then qualifies this statement by saying *“we would urge great caution about using this term as a descriptor of Israel itself when its usage is calculated to provoke anti-Israeli or anti-Jewish sentiment.”* No clear explanation is given as to when the usage of the term apartheid would be *“calculated to provoke anti-Israeli or anti-Jewish sentiment.”*

² https://www.academia.edu/43645497/Whats_in_the_Apartheid_Analogy_Palestine_Israel_Refracted

³ The Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid was adopted by the General Assembly on 30 November 1973, by 91 votes in favour, four against and 26 abstentions. It came into force on 18 July 1976.

The Task Group did further comment *“How effective is our prophetic witness when there is failure to name what we normally would call ‘evil’? [Our] current policy on apartheid is preventing us from speaking truth; of living into our commitment to decolonize our role as advocates and companions, and supporting processes and systems that lift up those who are marginalized and oppressed.”*

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said:

Christ does not call us to be polite or to walk some middle line until all parties are appeased, but rather, Christ calls us to stand in costly solidarity with those who seem most at risk of losing the fullness of life that God intends for all people.

On the Question of Israel as a Jewish State

We fully support the assessment of the Task Group on this question. To quote from their report:

- *The recent Nation-State law makes clear that it does not include full and equal citizenship and rights for non-Jewish Israelis;*
- *The affirmation of Israel as a Jewish state is rooted in a former time, when a two-state solution was assumed as the necessary and inevitable outcome to the conflict, and when Israel had not clearly defined what it meant by its identity as a Jewish state. Neither of these conditions still exist. In this context, and when viewed through the lens of the principles, it no longer makes sense for The United Church to affirm Israel as a Jewish state.*

Summary

The report concludes with two recommendations:

That the Executive of the General Council

- i. adopts a principles-based approach to its justice work going forward; and*
- ii. adopt the principles outlined in Point 4 as lenses for discerning concrete actions in response to proposals and requests from partners and church bodies.*

UNJPPI strongly endorses these recommendations.

The Task Group made the decision to *“present a number of principles, rooted in the church’s historical theological understandings and its commitments to becoming an anti-racist church, which would guide the response of the church as specific questions and new situations appear.”* While many of us might have hoped for *“prescriptive statements on particular issues,”* the approach taken by the task force will challenge the church to reflect on and address the issues that have been raised.

We have been shown the direction; we must now walk that path.

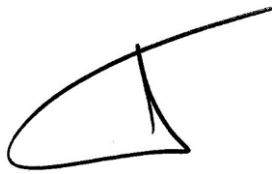
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Over the coming months UNJPPI calls on all United Church members, alongside partners and friends, to study in detail this report, and the background materials prepared by our Network, the churches of the Middle East and our partners working for peace.

We further call for the support of numerous Proposals from various regions which are making their way to this year's General Council in support of our Middle East partners and the rights of Palestinians.

As requested above, we ask that the GC44 Commissioners be given a copy of this letter. If for some reason that is not possible, we ask that you notify us of that decision at your earliest convenience.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'George Bartlett', written over a horizontal line.

George Bartlett
Chair, UNJPPI
Tel.: 416-485-4166

Appendix A

25 June 2015

My dear sisters and brothers in the United Church of Canada:

I recall so joyously the witness and generosity of your Church in helping those of us caught in the shackles of apartheid during those dark days of our oppression. You were an enormous strength to us, and we forever remain bonded in our commitment to justice for all people everywhere.

In recent years, I have been increasingly dismayed at the deteriorating conditions of the Palestinian people living under occupation, which has now gone on for 47 years with no end in sight. Even a decade or more ago when I first visited the Holy Land I saw the marks of apartheid in the policies of the Israeli government continued to the present day. The Palestinians are forced to live in segregated areas, often relocated to less desirable land so Jewish settlers can live in fine red ceramic-roofed houses with paved roads while most Palestinians live in squalor in villages and refugee camps. Water is diverted to settlers so that they can have nice green lawns, irrigated fields and community swimming pools while Palestinians endure shortages and dusty roads. I have looked at this and seen the ugly face of apartheid and the racism within it. I

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have been vilified numerous times for making this comparison to apartheid. I shrink not one step backwards. I saw and I name what I saw: apartheid, separation, segregation. I might add that these settlements are illegal under international law, as is the occupation itself, and an affront to the world.

Where this wall or fence or barrier violates Palestinian land, it serves as a form of segregation. I remain heartbroken to see the gross injustice of the occupation being imposed by Jewish people who, themselves, have endured so many centuries of oppression and suffering, much of it at the hands of Christians, culminating in the tragedy of the Holocaust. One would have expected just the opposite, a country, Israel, which would be a light to the nations, a beacon of justice. Other Jewish voices have arisen to denounce what is done in their name through this shameful occupation.

I understand the enormous burden western Christians carry for the many centuries of anti-Semitic behavior towards our Jewish sisters and brothers. It is a dreadful record which will require years of healing and reconciling work to overcome fully the depredations of the past. But I must point out to you quite emphatically that the injustices borne by Jewish people in Europe and later Canada cannot be corrected at the expense of another injustice perpetrated against the Palestinian people. Why should the Palestinians be the bearers of the sins of western complicity in anti semitism and the Holocaust? Your rightful initiative to reconcile with the Jewish people should not come with a blind eye for the inhumane policies inflicted by the state of Israel on the Palestinians.

I therefore commend you to carry on with and expand your Unsettling Goods campaign. I urge the United Church of Canada to join with other denominations around the globe who have decided to boycott and divest from companies that benefit from the occupation. Also I urge you to recognize your own country's complicity in Palestinian suffering under occupation. Please read and study the proposals before you that advocate furthering boycotts and divestment. You proved with us in South Africa that only economic pressure could force the powerful to the table. As you have courageously done before, may you once again witness to the cause of Christ's justice to free the oppressed and by so doing to liberate the oppressor so that these two peoples can finally be reconciled and live together in dignity, security and peace.

God bless you all as you as a Church wrestle to discern what God requires of you in this hour. With a heart full of love to a people I will always embrace, I am

Yours sincerely

+Desmond Archbishop Emeritus Cape Town