

RAISING OUR VOICE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Origin: Shining Waters

1. What is the issue?

At the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, half the Arab people of Palestine were driven from their homes, and their land. They have never been allowed to return, and life has become progressively worse ever since for those who remained. In recent decades, Israeli settlers have begun to move into the occupied Palestinian territories, setting up homes, businesses and communities that are illegal under international law, further restricting the human rights of Palestinians. The separation wall erected by Israel prevents free movement of Palestinians for work, health, emergencies, family connections and farming. B'Tselem, a widely respected non-governmental human rights organization in Israel declared in 2020 that due to its policies regarding Palestine and Palestinians, Israel has become an apartheid state. Human Rights Watch made the same declaration in 2021.

(The term apartheid was first used to describe South Africa's racist segregation against non-white citizens. Apartheid – Afrikaans for "apartness" – is a crime against humanity under international law. Under the 1998 Rome statute that established the International Criminal Court, it was defined an "institutionalised regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other" with the intent of maintaining that regime.)

The Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 created hope that a lasting, equitable solution might be found to assure the continued existence and security of Israel and Palestine. Since then, however, the Palestinian people have been intensely frustrated not only by lack of progress toward peace but by the deepening and broadening of oppression by the Israeli armed forces and the rapid expansion of illegal settlements. In 2020, the government of Israel proposed to annex the Jordan valley and other areas, signaling its abandonment of the Oslo process. The daily struggle for Palestinians includes the military detention of children and youth and extra-judicial killings of civilians, destruction of homes and olive groves, a series of political and judicial decisions, and severe restrictions on their access to water, electricity and medical services. All Palestinians are affected, and all aspects of their society. While people of Jewish heritage are afforded the right to return to Israel, whether or not their forebears ever resided there, Palestinians forced out in 1948, 1967 or subsequently do not have that right, even those with deeds and keys to property.

In response to the deteriorating human rights situation there, the United Church of Canada has spoken out about the plight of Palestinians frequently over the decades. One of the actions it has recommended is that faith communities and United Church entities holding investment funds take economic and other measures to draw attention to the occupation of Palestinian lands, and in particular, to illegal settlements.

2. Why is this issue important?

The United Church has a long relationship with the Jewish people, as described in *Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church–Jewish Relations (1997)* and in United Church policy. However, in the face of systematic abuses by Israel against Palestinians, whose homeland Israel is occupying, the Church must speak humbly and also with persistence. The covenant between humankind and the Holy One does not accord rights to some people that others lack. The shining message of the Torah, the prophets and the entire biblical witness is that those with power look after those without it. It affirms human rights and dignity for all. We seek justice. We resist evil.

Adoption of a strong human rights stance regarding Palestinians and choosing to divest from businesses profiting from illegal Israeli settlements sends a message to Israel that its behaviour is unacceptable to us, and that we will not profit from the Occupation. Muting ourselves on this issue sends a very different message, one that puts the moral authority of the Church in jeopardy by tolerating the persistent oppression of Palestinian sisters and brothers.

3. How does this proposal help us to live into our church's commitments on equity?

Christians have lived in Palestine since the time of Jesus. In 2020, Palestinian churches (including United Church partners) joined together to issue *A Cry for Hope*, evoking the biblical call to do justice. This proposal is in response to that call.

As the United Church seeks to heal its own participation in settler colonialism and racism, it is time to explicitly and publicly reiterate the Church's stated position on human rights for Palestinians, and facilitate pro-rights investment decisions and other actions by all Church bodies holding funds in trust in the form of stocks. To be faithful to its understanding of the Gospel is to take and publicize action on widespread and devastating human rights offenses against Palestinians. This is consistent with our opposing discrimination of any kind on the basis of identity and our commitment to becoming an anti-racist denomination.

4. How might the General Council respond to the issue?

General Council commits itself to speak out on human rights for Palestinians in an effort to support the ending of the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands.

In this calendar year, the United Church will:

- publicize its support for the human rights of Palestinians and its continued opposition to illegal settlements through a media release and on its website;
- urge the Canadian Government to support the International Criminal Court in its investigation of violations of international law and the Geneva conventions, including the illegal settlements in Occupied Palestine, and the blockade of Gaza, which is a violation of the prohibition of collective punishment.

In this triennium, the United Church will:

- share its support for the human rights of Palestinians and its continued opposition to illegal settlements with communities of faith;
- inform and advise congregations and other bodies holding funds about the divestment actions already taken by the United Church; and how to divest from companies doing business in or supporting the creation, management or security of illegal settlements on Palestinian territories with resources for education and action;
- renew and increase promotion of advocacy campaigns, such as “Unsettling Goods”, and other theological and educational resources to raise awareness of the situation in Palestine;
- develop a plan in conjunction with UNJPPI National to recognize UC communities of faith that commit to action on justice and human rights for Palestinians including divestment.

Resources, background on Palestine & United Church policy

- *Cry for Hope* (Kairos Palestine, 2020) <https://www.cryforhope.org/>
- *Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church–Jewish Relations Today* (United Church of Canada, 1997, including the 2003 Statement on United Church-Jewish Relations Today) https://ecumenism.net/archive/docu/1997_ucc_bearing_faithful_witness.pdf