

OPEN LETTER TO OUR FELLOW PRESBYTERIANS ON BOYCOTT AND DIVESTMENT

Full disclosure: we write as two southern pastors with a deep concern for justice and peace in Israel and Palestine. We both would describe ourselves as pro-Israel, pro-Palestine, pro-peace, and pro-justice. As Presbyterians, we have long supported the UN-mandated state of Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people and the establishment of a viable, sovereign Palestinian state founded on justice and equal rights. We also strongly support the upcoming General Assembly overtures for divestment from Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions. We have followed the debate about boycott and divestment, and we wish to engage the reasons for a “No” vote. Basically, there are six arguments. It is claimed that boycott and divestment will:

1. strain relations with some of our Jewish friends and neighbors,
2. increase tensions between Presbyterians,
3. make the PCUSA seem anti-business,
4. make it look like we are taking the side of the Palestinians against the Israelis, and we should not take sides,
5. position the PCUSA within the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement, which includes some individuals who hold opinions at odds with stated PCUSA policy,
6. not be effective at achieving just outcomes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

We are not convinced by any of these arguments. Let us tell you why.

1. We emphasize the word “some” because the Jewish community in America does not speak with one voice on this issue. Many Jews of all ages and identifications - secular, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, even Orthodox - favor divestment as a justice-seeking strategy, and are happy that we are considering divestment. Also, friends do not always see eye-to-eye. When there is disagreement, the mark of a healthy friendship is that each respects the other’s conscience. Indeed, our “yes” vote for divestment is deeply rooted in the moral imperative of our spiritual tradition to “do justice,” a value we learned from sitting at the feet of the Hebrew prophets and proudly share with the Jewish tradition. In addition, in this instance, the overtures calling for boycott and divestment say nothing about Judaism or Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people, only about a very particular decision – how we choose to invest our money.
2. Anytime the church engages “the signs of the times,” there is bound to be tension. Jesus took bold stands on the issues of his day, and did not shrink from controversy. He was guided by deeper convictions. Tension is not always negative; it can be creative, and necessary for growth. None of the advances made in church and society have come about without tension. We should not be afraid of tension, nor is it a reason not to do the right thing.
3. Investors buy and sell stocks everyday. The PC(USA) has practiced “socially responsible investing” since 1971, divesting from tobacco, alcohol, and gambling stocks, as well as from guns and majority-munitions businesses. The PCUSA holds a multi-billion dollar investment portfolio, and our local church members across the country are business owners and employees. It is going to take a great deal more than a few votes in Detroit this summer to alienate the business community.
4. People of goodwill all across the spectrum acknowledge that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and the Israeli settlements, which are continually being built on that same land, are obstacles to peace. Saying nothing about past grievances or future aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians, the occupation is wrong, it is an injustice, it is a violation of international law, it is opposed to PCUSA policy, it is against US government policy. When there is a clear injustice, Christians must stand against it and work to end it. We have already decided as a denomination not to maintain “non-peaceful” investments. Caterpillar, H-P, and Motorola Solutions are providing the technical tools to the Israeli military to enhance and fortify the occupation. They are profiting from the occupation, and have pushed aside our patient moral appeals for 10 years. A “yes” vote for divestment takes the side of justice against injustice. The focus is not on either the Israeli or the Palestinian side, but rather on the PC(USA)’s investments, and corporate misbehavior of which we disapprove.
5. Citing opinions of some individuals within the international BDS movement which are at odds with PCUSA policy as a reason not to divest is an obvious attempt to try to discredit boycott and divestment by

tarring this time-honored moral strategy with a large brush. Clearly, the PCUSA is not responsible for what every individual who favors boycott and divestment may say, only for its own policies and actions.

6. Boycotts and divestment have proven to be highly effective nonviolent tools for social change. The boycott of British cloth and the unjust salt tax led by Mohandas Gandhi helped India gain its independence. The grape and lettuce boycotts led by Cesar Chavez won dignity and collective bargaining rights for migrant farm workers. The Montgomery Bus Boycott sparked the civil rights movement which ended an entrenched system of racial segregation. Boycott and divestment helped bring down the apartheid system in South Africa. As Nobel Peace Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said, “in South Africa, we could not have achieved our freedom and just peace without the help of people around the world, who through the use of nonviolent means, such as boycotts and divestment, encouraged their governments and other corporate actors to reverse decades-long support for the Apartheid regime.” Boycott and divestment are indispensable instruments by which the downtrodden and their allies can fight back against huge power imbalances and terrible injustices and achieve a measure of freedom and dignity.

Opponents of boycott and divestment offer alternative strategies which they assert are more productive paths to peace in the Middle East. Basically, these are:

1. Improving interfaith relations with our Jewish and Muslim neighbors here at home
2. Bringing individual Israelis and Palestinians together in face-to-face, trust-building encounters
3. “Positive investment” in Palestine enterprises

We also do not find any of these alternatives convincing. Here is why:

1. Interfaith dialogue is a fine and worthy goal, and one we both heartily endorse and have been involved in for decades. However, our experience has shown that interfaith dialogue by itself diverts our attention from the Israeli occupation, trying instead to refocus us on Christian-Jewish relations. Seder dinners, discussion groups, shared worship services and joint mission projects are all good things to do. They do nothing to change the unjust status quo in Israel-Palestine which greatly benefits Israel and greatly disadvantages Palestinians. Good as these faith-sharing projects are, they do nothing to stop routine human rights violations suffered by Palestinians from the longest-running military occupation in modern times (47 years). Interfaith dialogue is important work, but it needs to be accomplished alongside the work of justice, not in place of it.

2. Bringing individual Israelis and Palestinians together to recognize each other’s humanity and to build trust is a fine thing to do, and makes an important contribution to a more peaceful future. However, it is naïve to imagine that Israelis and Palestinians can achieve genuine reconciliation on a large scale without engaging the justice issues at the heart of the conflict. Advocates of such an approach naively believe that better relations will bring peace and justice. We believe they have it the wrong way around: peace and justice will bring better relations.

3. “Positive investment” in Palestine is much needed, but positive investment alone dodges the hard issues and does nothing to address the occupation and the settlements. As one Palestinian leader put it, quoting Desmond Tutu, “We don’t want our chains made more comfortable. We want our chains removed.”

In conclusion, let us keep our eye on the ball. What is before us as a church is a very simple and straightforward question: are there sound and conscientious reasons for divesting from Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions? Deciding this question involves taking seriously the thorough multi-year study of the issues conducted by the Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) committee and their careful, patient corporate engagement. Their recommendation is to divest. In the end, if there are not good reasons to divest, then we should not. If there are, and we submit the reasons are strong and compelling, then we should divest. In either case, we should decide it not by external pressures or misguided fears, but on the merits of the case, letting our conscience be guided by the wisdom of our tradition, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Grace and Peace,

Rev. J. Mark Davidson, Pastor, Church of Reconciliation, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
Rev. Ronald Shive, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Burlington, North Carolina