



Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: A Question for the Church

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Introduction

by Alain Epp Weaver

As one of the first international agencies to respond to the conflict in Palestine-Israel, MCC has worked alongside Palestinians for over 60 years and with Israelis for more than 40 years. Throughout these decades MCC has accompanied the Palestinian churches, seeking counsel from Palestinian sisters and brothers in Christ about what shape MCC's outreach in the name of Christ should take in Palestine-Israel. The Palestinian churches in turn have encouraged MCC to speak up for peace, justice, and reconciliation.

With the publication of the Kairos Palestine Document in December 2009, Palestinian church leaders representing Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communions called on Christians around the world to explore boycott and sanctions against and divestment from Israeli companies operating in and profiting from the resources of the Occupied Palestinian Territories of East Jerusalem and the West Bank (see www.kairospalestine.ps). Bearing the title, "A Moment of Truth; A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering," Kairos promotes boycott, divestment, and sanctions as an essential nonviolent response to the ongoing dispossessions Palestinians (Christians and Muslims alike) face at the hands of the Israeli military occupation. Since the publication of the Kairos document, MCC's Palestinian Christian partners, along with Palestinian Muslim and Israeli Jewish peacebuilders, have increasingly urged MCC to take the call to explore BDS seriously.

Endorsed by the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, the Kairos Palestine Document presents a stark picture of the daily reality faced by Palestinian Christians and Muslims, as the following excerpts make clear:

1.1.1 The separation wall erected on Palestinian territory, a large part of which has been confiscated for this purpose, has turned our towns and villages into prisons, separating them from one another, making them dispersed and divided cantons. Gaza, especially after the cruel war Israel launched against it during December 2008 and January 2009, continues to live in inhuman conditions, under permanent blockade and cut off from the other Palestinian territories .

1.1.2 Israeli settlements ravage our land in the name of God and in the name of force, controlling our natural resources, including water and agricultural land, thus depriving hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and constituting an obstacle to any political solution.

1.1.3 Reality is the daily humiliation to which we are subjected at the military checkpoints, as we make our way to jobs, schools or hospitals.

1.1.4 Reality is the separation between members of the same family, making family life impossible for thousands of Palestinians, especially where one of the spouses does not have an Israeli identity card.

1.1.5 Religious liberty is severely restricted; the freedom of access to the holy places is denied under the pretext of security. Jerusa-

MCC's work in Palestine-Israel

As one of the first international agencies to respond to the conflict in Palestine-Israel, MCC has worked alongside Palestinians for over 60 years and Israelis for 40 years. After the horrors of the Holocaust, many Jews welcomed the creation of the State of Israel, viewing it as a potential safe haven. The establishment of Israel in 1948, however, went hand in hand with the dispossession and displacement of over 750,000 Palestinians. Arriving in 1949 to provide material assistance to Palestinian refugees driven from their homes in 1948, MCC stayed to work alongside Palestinians in their search for freedom and dignity through education, the promotion of Palestinian needlework, and rural development.

MCC also developed bonds of friendship and partnership with Palestinian churches, joining them in their ministry. Since the Israeli occupation began in 1967, MCC has supported the dedicated work of and partnered with Palestinians and Israelis committed to nonviolence and a future of peace and reconciliation for both peoples on the solid foundation of justice.

Palestinian churches appreciate and ask for the ongoing involvement of Western Christian organizations such as MCC as a sign of solidarity with the local church in its witness to the Gospel of peace. An important expression of this work is through education and advocacy, communicating the stories of Palestinian and Israeli peacebuilders to U.S. and Canadian audiences.

lem and its holy places are out of bounds for many Christians and Muslims from the West Bank and the Gaza strip. Even Jerusalemites face restrictions during the religious feasts. Some of our Arab clergy are regularly barred from entering Jerusalem.

1.1.6 Refugees are also part of our reality. Most of them are still living in camps under difficult circumstances. They have been waiting for their right of return, generation after generation. What will be their fate?

1.1.7 And the prisoners? The thousands of prisoners languishing in Israeli prisons are part of our reality. The Israelis move heaven and earth to gain the release of one prisoner, and those thousands of Palestinian prisoners, when will they have their freedom?

1.1.8 Jerusalem is the heart of our reality. It is, at the same time, symbol of peace and sign of conflict. While the separation wall divides Palestinian neighbourhoods, Jerusalem continues to be emptied of its Palestinian citizens, Christians and Muslims. Their identity cards are confiscated, which means the loss of their right to reside in Jerusalem. Their homes are demolished or expropriated. Jerusalem, city of reconciliation, has become a city of discrimination and exclusion, a source of struggle rather than peace.

The Palestinian Christian response to these various forms of deepening dispossession and oppression, as articulated in the Kairos Palestine Document, is one of nonviolent resistance motivated by the logic of love. BDS, as the following excerpts from Kairos explain, is a form of nonviolent resistance shaped by Christian love:

4.2.3 We say that our option as Christians in the face of the Israeli occupation is to resist. Resistance is a right and a duty for the Christian. But it is resistance with love as its logic. It is thus a creative resistance for it must find human ways that engage the humanity of the enemy.

4.2.4 Christ our Lord has left us an example we must imitate. We must resist evil but he taught us that we cannot resist evil with evil. . . . It is a difficult commandment yet it alone can stand firm in the face of the clear declarations of the occupation authorities that refuse our existence and the many excuses these authorities use to continue imposing occupation upon us.

4.2.5 Resistance to the evil of occupation is integrated, then, within this Christian love that refuses evil and corrects it. It resists evil in all its forms with methods that enter into the logic of love and draw on all energies to make peace. We can resist through civil disobedience. We do not resist with death but rather through respect of life.

4.2.6 Palestinian civil organizations, as well as international organizations, NGOs and certain religious institutions call on individuals, companies, and states to engage in divestment and in an economic and commercial boycott of everything produced by the occupation. We understand this to integrate the logic of peaceful resistance. These advocacy campaigns must be carried out with courage, openly sincerely proclaiming that their object is not revenge but rather to put an end to the existing evil, liberating both the perpetrators and the victims of injustice.

Throughout the course of its ministry in Palestine-Israel, MCC has shared the stories and voices of Palestinian Christians and of Palestinian and Israeli peacebuilders with the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in Canada and the United States that make up and support MCC. Today the Palestinian churches (along with Palestinian and Israeli peacebuilders) urge MCC, along with Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches around the world, to support BDS.

Even as Palestinian churches urge the world to explore BDS as a nonviolent means of confronting the Israeli occupation, others raise concerns and objections to BDS as a strategy. Some question the effectiveness of BDS: why, these critics ask, should one realistically expect churches divesting from some Israeli companies operating in the Occupied Territories to have an impact on Israeli state policy? Other critics of BDS, meanwhile, worry that BDS as a strategy is polarizing and counterproductive. Instead of building bridges, the argument goes, BDS puts Israeli Jews who might otherwise be critical of particular Israeli policies and practices on the defensive. Rather than campaigning for a negative, punitive strategy like BDS, these critics continue, proponents of a just peace between Palestinians and Israeli Jews should promote investment in the Palestinian infrastructure, social services sector, and economy.

How should MCC respond to the call from Palestinian churches to promote BDS among Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in Canada and the United States? What counsel do Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in Canada and the United States have for MCC on whether or not to support and engage in BDS efforts? How should Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches respond to the appeal from the Palestinian churches to support BDS not only as a nonviolent tool for resisting oppression, but ultimately as a path towards conflict transformation and reconciliation?

This issue of the Peace Office Newsletter offers representative voices from the Palestinian churches and from Palestinian and Israeli peacebuilders supporting BDS. Sam Bahour, a Palestinian businessman, encourages the church to stand firm for justice as essential to peace and reconciliation: “There is no excuse today for the church community to be at a loss on how to engage to bring peace and justice to the Holy Land; Palestinian civil society is leading the way.”

While Bahour lifts up the role of Palestinian civil society, Jeff Halper, co-director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, explains why he, as an Israeli committed to nonviolence and reconciliation with Palestinians, believes that BDS is a vital part of durable peacebuilding.

Kholoud Ajarma highlights the ongoing dispossession and displacement of Palestinian refugees and sees BDS as a way of securing Palestinian refugee rights. Marcelle Al-Zoughbi, a Palestinian student at Goshen (Ind.) College, challenges the language of “peace” that is too often employed by those who carry good intentions (Jeremiah 6.14), while Leon Kehl reminds us of Jesus’ cry over Jerusalem while the people’s eyes were blind to the things that truly make for peace (Luke 19.41–42).

Staff from the Palestinian grassroots “Stop the Wall” Campaign speak to the “culture of resistance” that has developed in the Occupied Territories in which BDS has become a tool to unmask attempts to “normalize” oppression and inequality—normalization that at times happens under the guise of “peacebuilding.”

André Gingerich Stoner of Mennonite Church USA describes that church’s response to the Kairos Palestine Document. The Palestinian Christian lay leader Samia Khoury, meanwhile, holds up Kairos Document and its call for BDS as part of the long history of the Palestinian churches working faithfully for peace, justice, and reconciliation. Khoury and Gingerich Stoner both raise the vital question of how churches in Canada and the United States, including Anabaptist-Mennonite churches, are to respond to the call of the Palestinian churches to join them in BDS as a form of nonviolent resistance and conflict transformation.

Paul Heidebrecht of MCC’s Ottawa office reflects on the obligation of our churches to heed the call of the Palestinian churches. “Perhaps it is time for our own moment of truth?” he asks.

The call to BDS in the Kairos Palestine Document is an invitation to the global Christian community—and that includes Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in Canada and the United States. “Leaders of North American churches frequently ask where the Palestinian non-violent movement is,” Sam Bahour observes. “Well, it is here in Palestine and everywhere those who seek justice reside; it’s alive and well and is called BDS. Everyone is invited to join.” MCC welcomes the candid counsel of its supporting churches as to how Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in the U.S. and Canada should answer this call. How should we respond?

Alain Epp Weaver is Co-Director of MCC’s Planning, Learning and Disaster Response department and is the author of States of Exile (Herald Press 2008).

Palestinian Civil Society in the Lead

by Sam Bahour

When politicians face failure what do they do? Step down? No way. Not in Palestine at least. Over and over again the Palestinian leadership has hit a cement wall (no pun intended) in its attempts to lead the Palestinian people to freedom and independence. And with every colossal failure, the leadership looks to Palestinian civil society for direction. Today, that direction is coined: BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions).

Similarly, communities around the world who are in solidarity with the Palestinian quest for freedom and independence are taking their cue from the hyper-vibrant Palestinian civil society. Many church communities around the world have followed this path; many more, especially in Canada and the U.S., should. This is not a foreign concept. In the U.S. civil rights movement, the church was there, on the ground, making its voice heard. In Latin America, at the height of U.S. military intervention, the church

Additional Resources

To learn more about “Christian Zionism and Peace in the Holy Land,” see the July–September 2005 issue of the *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* at mcc.org/system/files/PON_2005-03.pdf.

Alain Epp Weaver, “Interfaith Bridge Building, Peacebuilding, and Development: Learning from Palestine-Israel,” in *Borders and Bridges: Mennonite Witness in a Religiously Diverse World*, ed. Peter Dula and Alain Epp Weaver (Cascadia Publishing, 2007), 102; also, see Timothy Seidel, “Independence or *Nakba*? A Sketch of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict,” in *Under Vine and Fig Tree: Biblical Theologies of Land and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (Cascadia Publishing, 2007).

To learn more about arguments for and against BDS, see endtheoccupation.org/downloads/bds_faq.pdf.

In 2005, MCC produced “Peacebuilding in Palestine/Israel: A Discussion Paper.” That paper pointed out:

“Palestinians and Israelis working for a just resolution of the conflict lamented that decades of appeal to international law and resolutions have failed to end this story of dispossession, with Israeli power routinely trumping appeals to the power of law. Palestinian Christian partners, in particular, urged Christians in the West to take a stand for justice, peace, and reconciliation for Palestinians and Israelis alike, a stand that markedly differs from Christian Zionist theologies that deny Palestinians a secure place in the land. These trusted partner organizations urged MCC to consider ways in which Christians from Canada and the United States might . . . examine ways in which our money either promotes justice, peace, and reconciliation in Palestine/Israel or contributes to the ongoing dispossession.”

middleeast.mcc.org/discussion-paper-palestine-israel-2005

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions

In 2005, Palestinian civil society issued a “Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel until it Complies with International Law and Universal Principles of Human Rights.” It called on the international community “to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel” until three conditions are met:

- 1) Ending the occupation and the colonization of all Arab lands and the dismantling of the Wall;
- 2) Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
- 3) Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in U.N. Resolution 194. Read more at www.bdsmovement.net/call.

was among the people, part and parcel of the broader civil society. In the Free South Africa movement in the U.S., the church was the organizing node of a national movement to end apartheid. When Jesse Jackson made an attempt for the U.S. presidency, it was the church community that served as his organizing platform. There is no excuse today for the church community to be at a loss on how to engage to bring peace and justice to the Holy Land; Palestinian civil society is leading the way.

The Palestinian Authority’s (PA) newly realized dedication to cleanse Palestinian markets of Israeli settlement products comes at a time when Palestinian markets are overwhelmingly dependent on the Israeli economy. This structural dependency is not new; it was nurtured over decades of direct occupation all the way up to the Oslo agreement. The Oslo period would have been an ideal time for the PA to set the tone that settlements—all settlements, but especially those in East Jerusalem—are not a negotiable issue but are illegal under international law and have no place in a peaceful solution. But that did not happen.

As a matter of fact, the PA not only ignored the illegal products from these settlements for many years, it also ignored the Israeli services that infringed on Palestinian markets, the most notorious being the unlicensed Israeli telecommunications operators who used their settlement-based infrastructure to provide service to all Palestinian areas, A, B and C. This infringement on the Palestinian marketplace not only caused (and is still causing) real losses to the licensed Palestinian operators, who at the time had a monopoly license to provide services to the Palestinian areas, but it allowed for an economic fact on the ground to be created and take root. This fact was, and is, no less an obstacle to peace than the settlements themselves.

Today’s boycott of settlement products is not a new effort, nor was it designed by the PA. It is a product of the hard work of dozens upon dozens of civil society players in Palestine and abroad. The build-up to today’s boycott comes from a two-pronged civil society strategy.

The first prong is a global campaign that is much more comprehensive than just addressing settlement products. It is known as the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) Campaign and emerged from a unified call from Palestinian civil society on July 9, 2005. The last few years have witnessed a series of successes for the BDS campaign that have surely not gone unnoticed by the PA.

The second prong of the strategy is a multitude of efforts that promote local production. The most notable of these efforts has been the *Intajuna* (“our production” in Arabic) project: a donor-funded project that was managed by the Palestinian private sector player that designed it. This effort was visible everywhere—retail points of sales, building and construction materials, and most recently in the produce markets. *Intajuna* provided a depth of analysis and campaigning that goes far beyond the traditional slogan of “Buy Palestinian.”

But as this all plays out, Palestinians, and those in solidarity with them, are taking some satisfaction in watching the settlement enterprise run in circles trying to figure out a way to stop the boycott. Perhaps more interesting is that there are those in Israel itself, including members of the Knesset’s Economic Committee, who are running in the same circles, most likely in an attempt to raise the stakes now so that the boycott does not expand to include all Israeli products and services.

If experience is any guide, the Palestinian leadership will end up bear-hugging the entire BDS campaign approach in due time, given that the tools of boycott, divestment and sanctions are much more powerful non-violent methods than negotiating in vain with a government bent on ethnic cleansing.

Leaders of churches in the U.S. and Canada frequently ask where the Palestinian non-violent movement is. Well, it is here, in Palestine and everywhere those who seek justice reside; it’s alive and well and is called BDS. Everyone is invited to join.

Sam Bahour is a Palestinian-American business development consultant from the Palestinian city of Al-Bireh in the West Bank. He is co-author of HOMELAND: Oral Histories of Palestine and Palestinians (1994) and blogs at www.epalestine.com.

Israeli Responses to BDS

by Jeff Halper

While the movement for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions began in the Palestinian community with the 2004 Call for an Academic and Cultural Boycott and the broader 2005 Civil Society Call for BDS “against Israel until it complies with international law and universal principles of human rights,” its Israeli counterpart has for the most part seen its role as supporting the Palestinian Call and lending it legitimacy and protecting it from charges of “anti-Semitism” or being “anti-Israel.”

The Gush Shalom call for an international boycott of settlement products marks the beginning of a concentrated Israeli BDS campaign. Rather than calling for a broad boycott, Gush Shalom adopted the approach of a “selective boycott,” a consumer boycott. “Every shekel which you pay to buy a product of the settlements strengthens the settlers and their extremist leaders,” they declared. “Buy products of Israel, not of the settlements!” A major advance in the Gush Shalom boycott campaign was linking the boycott of settlement products to the Association Agreements that Israel has signed with the European Union. Under that agreement, Israel is forbidden to label products made in the settlement as “made in Israel” and they do not enjoy the special duties of other Israeli products. The EU continues to ignore Israeli violations and even a vote by the European Parliament to suspend the agreements, this continuing to be a major BDS focus.

With the outbreak of the second intifada, several Israeli voices were raised in public forums and in the Israeli press calling for an end of military aid to Israel. In 2001, 35 Israeli academics signed a statement calling “on the world community to organize and boycott Israeli industrial and agricultural exports and goods, as well as leisure tourism, in the hope that it will have the same positive result that the boycott of South Africa had on Apartheid. This boycott should remain in force as long as Israel controls any part of the territories it occupied in 1967.”

The launching of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) in Ramallah in April 2004, by a group of Palestinian academics and intellectuals helped galvanize the BDS movement. In January 2005, The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD)

issued a call for a broad BDS campaign. Entitled “Sanctions Against the Israeli Occupation: It’s Time,” it noted that “After years of diplomatic and political efforts aimed at inducing Israel to end its Occupation, while watching it grow ever stronger and more permanent, ICAHD supports a multi-tiered campaign of strategic, selective sanctions against Israel *until the Occupation ends*; i.e. a campaign targeting Israel’s Occupation rather than Israel *per se*.”

By this time the BDS campaign was still in its formative stage. Sabeel, a Palestinian Christian liberation theology organization, preferred to frame it as a positive campaign encouraging “Morally Responsible Investment” (MRI), although it actually meant divestment from or putting pressure on companies profiting from the Occupation. ICAHD, therefore, assembled under “sanctions” what in fact included divestment and boycott—plus hauling Israeli decision-makers and military officials into international courts.

In July 2005, the Palestinian Call for BDS that frames the movement until today was issued. ICAHD subsequently revised its statement to incorporate those demands and thus bring its call into conformity with the Palestinian-led BDS movement. ICAHD also abandoned the more selective BDS approach of Gush Shalom and called for a boycott of all Israeli products plus support of the cultural and academic boycott, arguing that since Israel itself is responsible for perpetuating the Occupation, it should be the target of BDS and not merely settlement products. Again, ICAHD stresses that the BDS campaign is not against Israel *per se* but, in line with the Palestinian Call, will end when the three elements of a just peace are realized, just as sanctions against South Africa ended with the fall of apartheid. Finally, following the Israeli invasion of Gaza in December 2008, over 540 Israelis issued a call initiated by members of “BOYCOTT! Supporting the Palestinian BDS Call from Within,” which is yet another important forum for Israelis to support the BDS campaign. Among other actions, Boycott From Within called on Leonard Cohen and Madonna not to perform in Israel, issued a statement supporting efforts by the British Committee for Universities in Palestine to advance the academic boycott and appealed to the EU to cancel the Association Agreements.

BDS as an Advocacy Tool

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) first became widely known and utilized as a tool for opposing the apartheid state in South Africa. When the apartheid regime was overthrown in 1994 many looked to the BDS campaign as an instrumental tool for social change. Former South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: “If our madness could end as it did, it must be possible to do the same everywhere else in the world. If peace could come to South Africa, surely it can come to the Holy Land?” Inspired by the success of BDS in South Africa, Palestinian Civil Society issued a similar call for divestment.

Universities played an important role in the BDS campaign against apartheid. Hampshire College was the first US university to divest from South Africa in 1977 and in 2009 they were the first US university to divest from companies profiting from the occupation. This is a very symbolic action and student groups on more than forty campuses in the US are in the process of advocating for their universities to do the same.

Protestant churches in the US have been some of the first to engage in Morally Responsible Investment (a term that encompasses both divestment and positive investment in peace). The Presbyterian Church USA was the first to divest, The United Church of Christ and the Methodist Church have also divested and conversations are taking place regarding this issue in many Protestant Churches, including Mennonite Church USA. These efforts are likewise nested within the broader international BDS campaign. Upon returning from a Mennonite Church USA delegation to Israel/Palestine in 2007, an Open Letter was published encouraging: “church institutions to gain greater understanding of their investments in this region and to avoid investments which violate international law and promote violence. We encourage exploring ways investments might be used to provide hope and promote peace in the region.”

—Krista Johnson

Who Profits?

It is argued that Israel's occupation of Palestinian land continues in part because it is profitable for companies in Israel and around the world. Israeli and international corporations are directly involved in the Occupation: in the construction of Israeli colonies and infrastructure in the Occupied Territories, in the settlements' economy, in building walls and checkpoints, in the supply of specific equipment used in the control and repression of the civilian population under occupation. The Coalition of Women for Peace offers a list of public and private companies profiting from the Occupation at www.whoprofits.org. Who Profits focuses on three aspects of the Occupation in particular: control of population (private security firms, firms involved with the Wall and checkpoints and suppliers of specialized equipment and services), economic exploitation (companies that exploit cheap and vulnerable Palestinian labor) and the settlement industry. The Interfaith Peace Initiative offers a list of publicly traded companies that support this significant obstacle to peace at www.interfaithpeaceinitiative.com/profit.php. The United Methodist Church New England Conference has published a list of 29 publicly traded companies "supporting the Occupation in a significant way" at www.neumc.org/divest.

The BDS movement has yet to penetrate the mainstream Israeli peace camp, which tends to see it, as do other Israelis, as "anti-Israel." After years of opposing BDS, Peace Now finally joined in the boycott of settlement products in 2011. Yet most Israelis continue to see it as "delegitimizing Israel." Even Uri Avnery, the venerable head of Gush Shalom, opposes it. "I get the feeling [BDS supporters] are not so much about a boycott on Israel as about the very existence of Israel. . . . Any boycott must serve this purpose [of peace]: to isolate the settlers and the individuals and institutions which openly support them, but not declare war on Israel and the Israeli people as such."

There is no doubt that the BDS movement in all its expressions is having a sobering effect on Israelis and their leaders. Attempts to arrest Israeli politicians on war crimes charges, protests against Israeli sport teams and all the rest have added to Israelis' feelings of isolation—though not to the degree that it has sparked any initiative to end the Occupation, which is still a "non-issue" in Israel. BDS is having its effect, but as in South Africa, its strength is mobilizing international opposition to Israeli policies rather than in fundamentally affecting public opinion within Israel.

Jeff Halper is the co-director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHN).

BDS and the Right of Return

by Kholoud Ajarma

I was born in Aida Refugee Camp, a small piece of land that was rented by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), to host Palestinian refugees. Aida camp was established in 1950. The original refugees in Aida camp generally came from 17 villages in western Jerusalem and western Hebron areas, including my home village. According to UNRWA statistics, Aida accommodates over 4,700 registered refugees.

In Aida, I grew up hearing the stories of the *Nakba* (Arabic for "catastrophe," referring to the dispossession and displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians and the destruction of over 500 Palestinian villages during the 1948 war) from my grandmother and witnessing the ongoing *Nakba* that we, in Aida Camp, and in Palestine in general live. I came to know that the Palestinian refugees are equivalent to about 70 percent of the entire Palestinian population, which is estimated at 10.7 million worldwide. According to UNRWA one-third of the registered refugees live in 59 U.N.-run camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The majority of the rest live in and around cities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and of neighboring countries.

I also learned about U.N. Resolution 194, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 11, 1948. This resolution ensures that Palestinian refugees who were expelled or fled during the fighting in 1948, and wishing to return, "should be permitted to do so at the earli-

est practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible."

As I read history books, I learned that when Israel was established in 1948, its admission to the U.N. was conditional on acceptance of U.N. Resolutions, including 194. By denying Palestinian refugees the right of return, Israel is in breach of international law.

My grandmother has lived with the hope that one day she will return to the land of 'Ajjur. But given the fact that Palestinian refugees represent the longest unresolved refugee issue in history and the largest refugee population in the world today, my grandmother and all Palestinian refugees continue to be denied their right of return by Israel.

One of the best ways to defend our rights is to join and support the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS). During the 1980s the campaign for BDS was an effective tool of resistance used against the apartheid system in South Africa. Today in Palestine it is an effective way to hold Israel responsible and accountable for its colonization, discrimination and military occupation. This form of resistance can force Israel to fulfill its duties toward the Palestinians, including the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

BDS is a moral responsibility that targets the occupation and those who support it or benefit from it. It is a grassroots action meaning it is stemming from the will of the people, who are demanding a change. For so long, the political leaders have participated in peace negotiations that have shown that Israel is not willing to change. Meanwhile relying on international governments to end the occupation has proven ineffective. The change must come from the people—through BDS Palestinians and internationals alike can voice a demand for justice.

In 1949, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's Prime Minister at the time, said, "We must do everything to ensure they [the Palestinians] never do return . . . The old will die and the young will forget" (Karma Nabulsi, "The Great Catastrophe," *The Guardian*, 11 May 2006). However, as a descendant of refugee parents, I did not forget the right of return; neither did the new generation of refugees. Therefore, we have chosen to actively resist the occupation and colonization of our land. BDS is an active and nonviolent form of resistance that we, Palestinians, and the international community at large, can effectively use in order to hold Israel responsible

for its crimes and apply sanctions on Israel until it complies with international law.

Refugees have not forgotten their rights. As human beings we have the right to exist and live in dignity. As occupied people, we have the right to resist and to freedom. As Palestinians, we have the right to live in our land and as refugees, we have the right to return to our homelands; and we will by demanding a change through BDS. BDS should be a strategy for all activists until Israel meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people's right of return, comply with international law, recognize Palestinian's right to self-determination and implement U.N. resolutions, including 194. BDS is an opportunity for people believing in justice to show their support and create pressure that will eventually lead to a just peace.

Kholoud Ajarma is a Palestinian refugee originally from the village of 'Ajjur, living in Aida Refugee Camp. Kholoud is a graduate of Bethlehem University and holds a Masters of Peace Studies from Coventry University in the U.K. Kholoud is board member for Lajee Center, an MCC partner, and currently works at the Independent Commission for Human Rights in Ramallah.

A Call to Change

by Marcelle Ahlam Al-Zoughbi

Being a student at Goshen (Ind.) College has been both a positive learning experience and a pleasure for me. Arriving at Goshen College as a freshman, I was delighted to find a community that cares about issues of peace and justice. I was also impressed by how many staff and faculty already understood the complexities and suffering caused by more than 40 years of Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian people and territories. I found that Goshen College lives out their belief in the classroom and this has provided a safe learning environment where I have been able to share my experiences growing up under a military occupation.

As a Palestinian Christian who grew up in Bethlehem (Occupied Palestinian Territories), I spent the first 16 years of life learning the "rules" of being an occupied person. My father almost missed my birth because the Israeli military occupying Bethlehem at the time refused to give him permission to accompany my mother to the hospital. Years later, the end result of the failed Oslo

Peace Process was that more than 100,000 people in the Bethlehem District, including my family, were put under a 6-week continuous curfew ("curfew" means we were not allowed to leave our homes except for a period of 2 hours, twice a week, designated by the Israeli military, to go get food) and Israeli soldiers in tanks, helicopter gunships, and on the ground showered us with a daily dose of shelling, sound grenades and bullets. It was under these conditions that I angrily declared to my mother, "Who cares about peace, I just want to live in freedom!" It is one of the greatest ironies that a "peace process" should have led to massive, illegal, confiscation of Palestinian land by Israel, and the implementation of the Israeli "open air prison" that is my home today. These words from the Kairos Palestine Document Section 1.1 best describe my feelings:

"1.1 "They say: 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14). These days, everyone is speaking about peace in the Middle East and the peace process. So far, however, these are simply words; the reality is one of Israeli

Students from several Mennonite-related colleges and universities issued an open letter to call for attention to and support for selective divestment from the Israeli Occupation. They state: "Our purpose is to promote peace in Israel/Palestine by first removing our complicity. We urge Mennonite churches and institutions to join us in resisting the structural violence of the illegal Israeli Occupation by making sure our investments are not supporting international law or human rights violations." Read more at mennosfordivestment.wordpress.com.

Weeping over Jerusalem

The words of the Gospel seemed very real as I stood with my fellow MCC Learning Tour members overlooking Jerusalem in the spring of 2011. We were listening to a former colonel in the Israeli military justify the wall he helped design that divides Jerusalem, the city of peace. At the time I wanted to weep and I still feel sorrow at that sight thinking of the words in Luke 19:41-42: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.'"

The former colonel talked of wanting peace and to remove the "temporary" wall, but what kind of peace did he envision and by what means? We started the tour overlooking a Palestinian refugee camp on the other side of the wall. As a tank commander he had shelled this refugee camp years before. He didn't know we had visited the camp the day before and listened to stories of the children killed and wounded in those attacks. I felt physically sick and wanted to cry out to God, asking how peace in this land is possible.

I don't know how the Palestinian Christian MCC worker, who accompanied us that day, could bear listening in grim silence. He and his family lived mere meters from that wall on the Israeli side, cut off from former neighbors. Life for him is better than those neighbors trapped on the other side, but he still talked of possibly moving to the West to allow his children to be raised in a place where they could be truly free and equal. What must that be like to consider leaving a home your family has lived in for generations, just so your children can be free?

Palestinian Christians, like him and others around the world, are asking us in the West to participate in the BDS movement. Will that bring down the wall? I don't know, but if we don't think it will, then as followers of Christ should we not be suggesting alternatives?

(continued on page 9)

occupation of Palestinian territories, deprivation of our freedom and all that results from this situation:"

It is my upbringing that led me to look for ways to seek equality and freedom for Palestinians and an end to the cycle of violence whose roots largely stem from injustice. My search had me looking at Apartheid South Africa and the global effort of divestment that eventually led to the collapse of the system of apartheid. Last year, three students and I started a divestment circle to educate those around us about the current situation in Palestine and Israel, and to call people to stand with us for ethical and responsible investment.

We sent out an appeal asking people to join with us and others in Anabaptist colleges to encourage the Mennonite Education Agency and Everence to apply their stewardship investment policy more fully by not investing in companies that profit from or enable the unjust and painful Occupation in Palestine.

One of the activities I collaborated on, along with both the Arabic and Middle Eastern Club and the Pax Club on campus, in order to raise awareness of this issue,

was to build a separation wall in the middle of campus. The "Wall," about 4 feet high, was a minor inconvenience to students because it meant you either had to go through the "checkpoint," knowing that at any time you could be turned away for no reason other than that you were wearing the wrong colored shirt that day, or you could avoid the checkpoint and walk all the way around the "Wall," taking about two minutes longer than your normal route. We had many different responses to building this wall. For me, for the space of a couple days, it meant that students had a small taste of what my family and friends live with on a daily basis in Bethlehem.

I believe that now is the time for a courageous step to be taken by the Mennonite Church by joining with other churches who have already adopted an ethical and responsible investment policy. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Marcelle Zoughbi Elias Al-Zoughbi, a Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem, is a student at Goshen (Ind.) College.

Boycotts as a Culture of Resistance

by Stop the Wall Campaign staff

Stop financing the killing of our people was one of the slogans shouted by Palestinian youth from the Independent Palestinian Youth Movement and youth sections of Palestinian political parties that had organized the February 2nd protests in Jerusalem and Ramallah. The youth had gathered in front of French institutions in Palestine to oppose the French acquisition of \$500 million worth of drones from Israeli Airspace Industries and to support the campaign launched by French activists against the deal.

This action followed a similar youth protest held in front of the United Nations (U.N.) compound in Ramallah and the Brazilian embassy—world's second biggest importer of Israeli weapons—to accompany the launch of the call from the Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC) on July 9, 2011, for an immediate and comprehensive military embargo.

As a new generation of Palestinian activists moves to the forefront of the struggle, boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) are part of their political DNA. The Palestinian youth movement, which has gained strength and self-confidence in the wake of the Arab Spring, is working to support and promote the calls for international BDS action while promoting a culture of boycott as a form of resistance on the ground.

As a reaction to a planned New Year's Eve party in Ramallah (in the west bank) featuring an Israeli singer who regularly performed for the Israeli military, the youth announced protests and an alternative New Year's celebration. After the event featuring the Israeli singer was canceled due to the pressure of the youth, people in Ramallah instead could enjoy a youth-organized night of Palestinian music, songs of resistance, Palestinian dance and poetry in a central square of the city.

These kinds of actions constitute a key part of the Palestinian boycott efforts. Called “anti-normalization,” they confront economic, cultural and academic relations in which Palestinians and Israelis are not jointly fighting the Occupation, Israeli apartheid and colonialism, but where both sides are brought together as seemingly “equals” to engage in “business as usual” or in initiatives to further “mutual understanding.” These mainly Western-funded initiatives are billed as “peacebuilding,” but do nothing of the sort. Instead, they effectively mask the dramatic inequality between the oppressor and the oppressed. They mask the fact that the Palestinian struggle for justice and self-determination is really not about solving a “misunderstanding” or creating more economic ties that allow the Israeli economy to benefit from a captive Palestinian market sealed off from the world. The Palestinian struggle is about ending Israeli military Occupation, stopping its bulldozers, halting drone attacks, freeing the thousands lingering in prison and wresting back the right of return for the majority of the people forced in exile over 60 years ago.

Youth have been a key target for these kinds of “normalization” initiatives and the same Palestinian youth today are in the forefront of confronting these—sometimes very well-intentioned—projects. Instead they aim to build up a culture reinforcing Palestinian identity and demands on which to build any common action and solidarity.

While today a Palestinian culture of boycott is strongly on the rise again, it is nothing new to the Palestinian struggle. Grassroots boycotts have been powerful before, especially during the first intifada when popular protests were going hand in hand with boycotts of Israeli products, of taxes to be paid to Israeli Occupation authorities, and of work in the settlements.

During the second intifada boycotts gained ground again. For instance, Stop the Wall and its grassroots popular committees promoted boycotts through banners and slogans in the weekly protests, awareness raising initiatives, and popular trade fairs to show that there are local alternatives to many Israeli products. In the universities, student councils have ensured that most of the cafeterias on campus today no longer sell Israeli products. Today it is once again commonly frowned upon if Israeli products are served at civil society meetings in Palestine.

However, the impact of this on-the-ground boycott is heavily limited by the constraints imposed on Palestinian official institutions

through the Oslo Agreements and the corresponding economic Paris Agreements. After the experience of the first intifada, Israel has been careful to introduce clauses in those agreements that de facto outlaw boycotts of Israel and its products by any Palestinian official institution.

It is key to unravel these restrictions and to question why the Palestinian National Authority should feel itself bound to agreements Israel is violating every day. However, it is also crucial to understand that Palestinian popular resistance and boycotts on the ground are only effective if they are matched with global solidarity and a powerful global BDS movement. Based on this understanding, the Palestinian call for an international BDS movement was launched in 2005.

For Palestinians the understanding that popular struggle and solidarity have to go hand in hand is deeply ingrained within society. The struggle for justice and self-determination of the Palestinian people is a global issue from its very beginnings. The catastrophe of the Palestinian people was created by the international community through the U.N. Partition Plan and then the subsequent unwillingness of the U.N. to actually enforce any of its resolutions regarding Palestine. Palestinians have worked since the founding of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964 in close cooperation with anti-colonial and social justice struggles across the globe. Further, they have learned a profound lesson from the comparison of the uprising of the first intifada at the end of the 1980s and the South African anti-apartheid struggle, which could count on an impressive global boycott movement to match internal pressure on the regime.

While the first intifada was able to put Palestine on diplomatic and media maps and create widespread international sympathy, it missed the key element of effective outside pressure on Israel’s system of apartheid. The Palestinian popular resistance is an essential part of the Palestinian liberation struggle, but it is not enough to bring about the enormous shift in the power balance that is needed in order to effectively achieve the fulfillment of Palestinian national and human rights. The global solidarity movement is needed for that, to give the Palestinian people’s grassroots resistance the support it needs and deserves.

Hasan Karajeh (STW youth coordinator), Aghsan Barghouti (member of Herak Shebabi) and Maren Mantovani (STW international outreach coordinator) collaborated on this article. Learn more about the Stop the Wall Campaign at www.stophewall.org.

Weeping over Jerusalem (continued)

Two years ago, when I read about the Kairos Document call of Palestinian Christians to consider participating in the BDS movement, I wondered what would be an appropriate response. Realizing that as churches we are not unified, or in some cases knowledgeable, how could we possibly respond?

With an approaching annual meeting of Mennonite churches of eastern Canada, I engaged MCC and church leadership in a possible motion from the floor to start a dialogue. The resolution passed by a wide margin and called on MCC and church leadership to “provide congregations with resources to help churches and individuals discern and seek common responses to the ongoing lack of peace in Israel/Palestine.” I was delighted again when Mennonite Church Canada delegates at the annual meeting in 2011 passed a similar resolution.

Do these motions mean we are ready to move on BDS as churches? Of course not, but maybe they mark a very small step on a journey toward a common response. As followers of Christ, I think we need to heed his words that “thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” and work toward that goal.

I don’t claim to know what the answers are, but I believe Jesus continues to weep over Jerusalem. I believe we are invited to weep with him and in our grief, seek lasting solutions that bring about peace to the descendants of the people he wept for so long ago.

—Leon Kehl, a member of Floradale Mennonite Church in Ontario, has been involved in interfaith dialogue, sponsoring of Palestinian refugees from Iraq and traveled on an MCC learning tour to Israel/Palestine in April 2011.

Churches Respond to the Kairos Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions

- In July 2004 the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly voted to initiate selective divestment from corporations profiting from the Israeli occupation. In June 2006, the Assembly adopted a modified resolution which replaced the word “divestment” with a call for the Church to invest only in companies involved in peaceful pursuits in Israel and the Palestinian territories. In the summer of 2012 the Assembly will once again re-visit the issue of selective divestment.
- In February 2005, the World Council of Churches (WCC), based in Geneva, commended the selective divestment resolution passed by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and planned to focus BDS efforts on companies providing resources utilized for demolishing Palestinian homes, constructing settlements, and erecting the controversial wall.
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rejected a pro-divestment resolution during the summer of 2005 and the Episcopal Church USA ruled out the possibility of divestment that same year. The United Church of Christ has endorsed a range of economic leverages that include divestment but did not commit to their pension fund or foundation functionally divesting.
- The Toronto Assembly of the United Church of Canada has voted to boycott goods produced in Jewish settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, while the national-level United Church of Canada instead chose to support pro-peace investments.
- In the Spring of 2012, the world United Methodist Church Assembly adopted a resolution urging sanctions including an end to U.S. government military aid to the region and encouraging boycotts of products made by companies in Israeli settlements on Palestinian land. While the vote supported boycotts and sanctions, the Assembly voted against a resolution for selective divestment from companies profiting from the Israeli occupation (such as Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions and Hewlett Packard).

Mennonite Church USA Responds to Kairos Palestine

by André Gingerich Stoner

For more than 65 years, members of Mennonite Church USA (and its predecessor denominations) have witnessed to the good news of Jesus Christ in Israel and Palestine through Mennonite Mission Network, Eastern Mennonite Missions, Mennonite Central Committee, Christian Peacemaker Teams, our colleges and seminaries and in other ways. Some of us have developed deep friendships and bonds of faith with Christians and other partners there.

This is a region with much hurt and pain. We are mindful of the extreme suffering and trauma experienced by the Jewish people. These horrors were often committed by those who claimed Christian faith. Ongoing careful listening, reflection and repentance are called for. At the same time, Palestinians suffer deep and profound loss and pain. Their cries, too, have reached us. We have been especially challenged by the Kairos Palestine Document, “a word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestine suffering” released in December 2009 by Palestinian Christian leaders speaking in one voice.

Within Mennonite Church USA the perspectives and commitments related to Israel and Palestine vary greatly. Many of us are deeply anguished by the injustices experienced by Palestinians and readily name the military Occupation of Palestine as a sin. Others are relatively uninformed of the realities of daily life in Israel and Palestine. Our views are shaped largely by a range of mainstream American media. And some of us read the Bible through a lens that would regard Israeli Occupation of Palestine as part of what is understood as God’s unfolding plan.

Some Mennonites have long struggled with how their tax dollars support war and the militarization of the Middle East and other regions. During the past years, Christian Peacemaker Teams and college student groups especially have been encouraging boycotts and divestment as a way to work for justice and a lasting peace in Israel/Palestine. Some individuals and groups have begun to examine their practices in this arena more closely. An October 2011

response from Mennonite Church USA to the Kairos Palestine Document states that “we will continue to wrestle with the way our lives are enmeshed in the policies and implementation of Occupation through our economic practices and seek to turn from them.”

Everence, the stewardship agency of Mennonite Church USA, has long employed investment screens reflecting historic Anabaptist concerns related to militarism and human rights. Today they are working with other institutional investors to consider the complex realities in zones of conflict, be that Myanmar (Burma) or Israel/Palestine, as a factor in making investment decisions.

The Mennonite Church USA response to the Kairos Palestine Document recognizes the posture of Christian nonviolence at the heart of that statement. Addressing Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters, the response states: “We are challenged and inspired . . . for the way, even in your situation, you trust in the power of love as modeled by Jesus Christ. We are deeply moved by your testimony that even in the midst of cruel circumstances, you bear the strength of love rather than that of revenge.”

The Mennonite response includes a commitment to promote and expand opportunities for leaders and members to visit and learn firsthand about the suffering of Palestinian brothers and sisters.

The letter concludes: “In the Kairos Document, you again remind us that the way of the cross binds together great love for every person and courageous resistance to injustice and sin. We pray that as we journey together we will grow in our faithfulness to the One who leads the way and whom we proclaim as Lord and Savior.”

These statements as well as a helpful biblical and theological reflection can be found at peace.mennolink.org/holyland.html.

André Gingerich Stoner is Director of Holistic Witness for Mennonite Church USA.

Palestinian Christians, the BDS Movement, and the Kairos Document

by Samia Khoury

Palestinian Christians are among the indigent people of the land, whose presence in the Holy Land goes back to the days of Jesus Christ. It is from their land that His message of peace and love for all was sent out to the whole world. At one time they were the majority of the population, but due to political changes in the region over the years they were a little more than 10 percent before the Nakba in 1948. After 45 years of Israeli military occupation their number has dwindled to less than 2 percent. As a precursor to the Kairos Palestine Document, MCC partner The Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center issued “A Call for Morally Responsible Investment: A Nonviolent Response to the Occupation” in 2006. There have been many responses to Palestinian Christians calls for boycott and divestment, including articles, church statements and resolutions, press releases and other items of interest that can be found at www.fosna.org/investment-activism.

Palestinian Christians are part of the Palestinian people, struggling together for liberation and self-determination. The brutality of the occupation has been endless. Enough is enough. It is a Kairos moment—a moment of truth.

Palestinian Christians needed to raise their voice. A voice intended to reach the international community, which has been watching without any action beyond statements and resolutions. But it was also a voice addressed to political leaders of the region, to local churches and churches around the world, and to the Palestinian and Israeli communities. Kairos Palestine 2009 was inspired by hope, faith and love. It is the fruit of prayer and reflection by a group of Christians—clergy and lay, men and women. It called the occupation evil, and a sin that needed to be removed. It asserted the right of every person to resist evil, but not with evil. So it was a call for peaceful and non-violent resistance, including tactics such as BDS.

Ever since the second intifada, and the suffering that ensued, Palestinian civil society organizations have been calling for non-violent resistance. In fact the weekly peaceful protests against the confiscation of land and the apartheid wall that had started in Bilin as early as January 2005 have now spread

out to different parts of the Palestinian Territories, and are often joined by international and Israeli solidarity movements.

The churches in the U.S. and Canada, who have been trying to promote BDS have been harshly criticized, as well as pressured and intimidated not to pass resolutions regarding such campaigns.

While many churches have taken courageous stands, and have reacted very positively to the Kairos Document, some continue to be reluctant to raise their voice against the Occupation for fear of hindering interfaith dialogue. But then what is the use of interfaith dialogue if it is not going to help the groups engaged in such a dialogue to make use of the common morals and values of each faith for the welfare of humanity? If interfaith dialogue is a means of silencing the prophetic voice of truth and justice then it seems to be not only useless, but a very harmful and hypocritical exercise.

Western Christian leaders continue to be concerned about the emigration of Christians from the Holy Land. Conferences, seminars and meetings are held for that purpose as well as studies showing the seriousness of the issue. No further studies are necessary because the root cause of the emigration is the Israeli military Occupation; an Occupation that is suffocating every aspect of the lives of the Palestinians, both Christians and Muslims. The Bethlehem area, which seems to be the concern of so many Christians abroad, has lost most of its land to Israeli settlements and has been isolated from Jerusalem by a wall that snakes through the area. With regard to the Occupation and its brutal measures that deprive people of their right of residency and their right of return, the prophetic voice of the church leadership needs to be raised repeatedly.

It remains to be said that due to the Occupation, Christians as well as Muslims have been leaving the country. But because the number of Christians is small in the first place, the mosaic of the Palestinian society will be affected should more Christians emigrate. However, the Christians of the land have for a long time been small in number, yet they managed to survive and to assert their presence, raise their voice, and contribute to the development of their community.

Resources for further learning from MCC

For more information from MCC, including how you can get involved, you can visit MCC's advocacy offices' websites: the Canada Ottawa Office at ottawa.mcc.org, the U.S. Washington Office at washington.mcc.org and the UN Office at un.mcc.org. Also visit the MCC Palestine Update blog at mccpalestine.wordpress.com for regular worker updates from the region.

The Fall 2010 issue of the MCC U.S. Washington Office Memo, “Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem: U.S. Policy towards Israel-Palestine,” also lifts up issues named in the Kairos Palestine Document (washingtonmemo.org/newsletter/fall10/), as does the July-September 2005 issue of the MCC Peace Office Newsletter on “Christian Zionism and Peace in the Holy Land” (mcc.org/system/files/PON_2005-03.pdf). The Winter 2010 issue of MCC's publication *A Common Place* features the cover story “Remembering . . . as a path to peace” that tells the story of Palestinians and Israelis working for peace (acommonplace.mcc.org/acp/2010/01_02/).

Samia Khoury is a long-term educator and activist for justice and peace. She is a graduate of Birzeit University. Among her many roles, she has served as President of the YWCA of Palestine and as a board member for Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center. She chairs the MCC Palestine Advisory Committee. Khoury has two children and six grandchildren.

Kairos, KAIROS, and a moment of truth for Canadian churches

by Paul C. Heidebrecht

In November 2009, the Government of Canada announced that it was ending its long-standing funding relationship with KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, a coalition of 11 Canadian churches and church-related organizations that includes MCC Canada. In the following year and a half, KAIROS became fodder for politicians, political pundits, and the media who were both critical and supportive of the government's decision. The drama reached a high point in the spring of 2011, when the Speaker of the House of Commons ruled that the government minister responsible for the decision, Bev Oda, may have misled Parliament. This ruling ended up contributing to a confidence motion that brought down the minority government.

One of the reasons why a relatively insignificant funding decision became so consequential is because of a line in a speech given by Jason Kenney, a much more prominent Canadian cabinet minister, when he visited Israel in December 2009: "We have defunded organizations, most recently, like KAIROS who are taking a leadership role in the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign." This speech came mere days after Palestinian Christians released "A Moment of Truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of the Palestinian suffering"—what has come to be known as the Kairos Palestine Document. Perhaps Minister Kenney or his staff had been confused by the various uses of the word "kairos" they had come across in the media. Although KAIROS has been a long-time supporter of Palestinian Christian organizations such as Sabeel and the Middle East Council of Churches, and although the Kairos Palestine Document called on the international community to apply "a system of economic sanctions and boycott" against Israel "in order to reach a just and definitive peace," KAIROS itself has never been a leader in this movement. In 2008, KAIROS prepared a resource for its members on "Economic Advocacy Measures" in response to a call from Sabeel for churches to embrace a "Morally Responsible Investment" strategy, but this resource makes it clear that KAIROS was "not advocating sanctions against Israel or a boycott of products from Israel."

In any case, Minister Kenney subsequently back-tracked, insisting that the government's funding decision was actually based on a change in priorities at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). However, he did *not* stop criticizing KAIROS for attempting to "de-legitimize" the state of Israel. Perhaps Kenney was swayed by submissions made to the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism, an initiative he was instrumental in creating. The Inquiry Panel Report released by this coalition highlighted the rise of a "new anti-Semitism" in Canada, which it defined as a "form of political prejudice" that is directed toward Israel or Zionism.

The KAIROS affair points to the deep challenge faced by Canadian churches and other civil society organizations trying to work for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Where do we begin to create the space for effecting political change when our government seems to lack a basic awareness of the issues? Perhaps the repeated declaration of the Prime Minister of Canada and his Minister of Foreign Affairs that "Israel has no greater friend in the world than Canada" places a particular obligation on Canadian churches to speak out on behalf of their Palestinian friends. Perhaps it is time for our own moment of truth?

Paul C. Heidebrecht is the Director of the MCC Canada Ottawa Office.

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