



My Turn: Boycott, divestment are our tools to combat the corrupt and unjust system of Palestinian occupation

By Rev. JOHN BUTTRICK For the Monitor Saturday, July 4, 2015 (Published in print: Saturday, July 4, 2015)

‘A Call for the United Church of Christ to Take Actions Toward a Just Peace in the Israeli - Palestine Conflict,’ resolution passed by a 76 percent majority at the UCC General Synod on June 30. It includes a call for divestment from companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the boycott of products produced in those territories. This resolution had been passed earlier by significant margins in 10 UCC Conferences across the country.

Three weeks before the UCC General Synod convened, I received a Facebook message, “The Israeli military is here firing tear gas.” During this incursion my 25-year-old friend, a Palestinian farmer and university student who runs an internet cafe for teenagers in his village, continued, “I have been given a summons to report to a military office for an interview tomorrow.”

Jayyous is a village of 2,200 Palestinians. It is located about 40 kilometers northwest of Jerusalem. It is on a hilltop 5 kilometers east of the internationally recognized Green Line between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank. Jayyous is under the administration of the Palestinian Authority and has an elected mayor and city council. Yet, during the three months I lived in the village, I witnessed the Israeli military entering the village three different times at 3 a.m. It came in with at least two armored vehicles each time, forced doors of homes, and took away young teenage boys from their families. The soldiers refused to tell the parents where the boys were being taken or for what reason. Other boys were given orders to report the following day to Israeli army facilities for questioning.

During the summer and fall of 2010, I served in the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel, EAPPI. Every morning we monitored the Israeli checkpoint at the triple-fenced barrier between the village of Jayyous and the farmland owned by villagers. The gate is open from 7 to 7:30 in the morning and 5 to 5:30 in the evening. Permits are required for farmers, family members, workers, tractors, mules, carts, sheep and trucks, to name a few. No one is allowed to stay overnight on the land.

We watched one morning as a 69-year-old farmer was refused entry to his land because his permit had a small tear in the fold. He paid the fee to apply for a new permit. He waited four weeks for a decision to be made. At first he was told that his permit would not be renewed because he was a security risk. He agonized, “I don’t know why. I have been getting a pass to my land every three months for the last several years. Nothing in my life has changed. I only go to my land and back to my village.” Later, two weeks into the three-month olive harvest, this man finally received a permit to go to his land: for only one month!

At an Israeli checkpoint I talked with a 38-year-old Israeli reservist soldier and school teacher who recognized the injustice of the barrier between Palestinian villages and the farmland. He expressed his frustration and despair over the situation. “What can I do?” he asked. He feels unsafe to talk about what he has seen. His teaching job could be at risk. His family and neighbors would shun him.

While living in Jayyous, I stood with a family on the rubble of their Palestinian home which had been demolished by an Israeli army Caterpillar bulldozer an hour earlier. We were called to sit with a family in a neighboring village while Israeli soldiers raised an Israeli flag and set up an observation encampment on the roof of their house. There were

tears and whispers as we sat drinking coffee and tea while anxiously hoping that the soldiers would not come into their home.

Later, we stood in the burned remains of a Palestinian farmer's olive grove that was destroyed by Israeli settlers from illegal settlements on three hills overlooking his land. And back in Jayyous we collected rain water draining from the roof of our rented home to supplement the supply of well water from the one Jayyous well out of five on its land that the Israeli authorities allowed the village to use. Even that one well was metered to charge for the water usage.

One evening, we accompanied our Palestinian farmer/student friend to a panel discussion on resistance at the university in Nablus. The panel displayed a six-speaker continuum from "just exist" at one end to "violent revolution" at the other. After reasoned academic presentations from each speaker, the floor was opened to questions and comments. Following several questions from the audience, our Palestinian friend stood up and identified himself as being from Jayyous.

It's well known in Nablus that the residents of Jayyous were the first in the area to nonviolently demonstrate against the building of the barrier inside the occupied Palestinian territory in 2002. It is also known that the Jayyous elders stopped the demonstrations after their village chickens were killed by teargas from the Israeli military and farmers were prevented from going to their land.

The 200 students, professors and citizens of Nablus fell silent. Standing among them was a young person who was daily living the questions they were discussing in a sanitized university setting. It turned the discussion from theory to the reality of a critical life threatening situation. His question was the question Christian Palestinians ask in their 2009 Kairos Palestine, Moment of Truth document, "Are you able to help us get our freedom back?"

For over 65 years we have watched the failure of political negotiations, military action, United States military financial aid to Israel, United Nations resolutions and court decisions. Nonviolent demonstrations have been met with violence. Quiet existence has resulted in demolition of homes, confiscation of land, restricted movement and collective punishment. This reality on the ground is "the Moment of Truth" in the Kairos Palestine document. I experienced that reality for three months. The Palestinians have been experiencing it for 48 years.

As a response to the truth of this daily experience under occupation, the Palestinian Christians from 13 denominations in the West Bank and East Jerusalem wrote in the 2009 Kairos Palestine document that now is the time for the nonviolent action of boycotting goods produced in or using the facilities of illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. And now is the time to divest from companies profiting from the Israeli occupation.

Resistance to boycott and divestment comes in a variety of forms. Some say it will harm Palestinians by taking away jobs in Israeli settlements. Some say that it is an action against the existence of Israel, even anti-Semitic. Some say boycott and divestment will aggravate the political and military situation making life more difficult for Palestinians and lessening the prospects of a negotiated solution. Some say the percentage of profits of multinational corporation's activities in the occupied territory is tiny. Some question its effectiveness: as a means to end Israeli occupation, acquire equality for Palestinians living in Israel, and establish a solution to the issue of the right of return for Palestinian refugees who have lost their homes in the struggle since 1948.

These critiques cloud the main concern of Kairos Palestine: "the reality on the ground." While the debate continues to focus on the pros and cons of boycott and divestment, the oppressive conditions of Palestinian daily living are undebatable.

The suffering continues for real people, both Palestinians and Israelis. The primary focus is a question of ethics and morality, "Am I willing to participate in an economic system that profits from the suffering of the Palestinian people?"

The UCC General Synod has moved beyond the debate about boycott and divestment. With its vote it has chosen a way to refuse to participate in a corrupt and unjust system of the occupation of the Palestinian territory. Boycott and divestment are vehicles of this resistance for church members, local churches and all other expressions of the United

Church of Christ. The affirmative vote of the UCC, as well as similar resolutions being considered by the Episcopal Church and the Mennonite Church USA, also gives support to other organizations and to individuals who are uncomfortable being complicit in the ongoing actions of injustice in Palestine and Israel.

Boycott and divestment action serves to unite Jews, Christians, and Muslims against actions of injustice by the Israeli and United States governments. It gives us a vehicle to refuse participation with industries, corporations, multinational companies and investment firms who profit from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It also gives support to my Palestinian/farmer friend whose freedom and commitment to nonviolent resistance is at stake. Boycott and divestment are steps in the progress toward a future where there is no more teargas, an end to collective punishment and the occupation, and a time when Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Christians and Muslims will live in peace with justice for all.

(The Rev. John Buttrick served as a United Church of Christ Global Ministry long-term volunteer working in media coordination and communication strategy for Kairos Palestine in Bethlehem, Palestine, April 2013-April 2015. John has Ministerial Standing with the Merrimack Association, New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ. He is a member of South Church, UCC in Concord and serves on the Peace With Justice Advocates ministry of the NH Conference, UCC.)