

An inside look at the UCC vote to divest from the Israeli occupation

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The Rev. Allie Perry was a delegate from the Connecticut Conference at the United Church of Christ (UCC) General Synod, recently held in Cleveland, Ohio. She supported the Synod resolution calling on the United Church of Christ “To Take Actions Toward a Just Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” which passed by an overwhelming margin of 508 to 124 with 38 abstentions. A former board member of Interfaith Peace-Builders and a member of the steering committee of the UCC Palestine/Israel Network, Allie was randomly assigned to Committee #3 which worked on the Just Peace resolution. Mike Daly, Program Coordinator of Interfaith Peace-Builders, conducted this interview.

The “Call for the United Church of Christ to Take Actions Toward a Just Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” resolution passed overwhelmingly, with 3 out of 4 delegates supporting it. What is your sense of why this was so well-received and supported?

By the time General Synod started, 10 conferences (out of 38 total) had studied and voted on some version of this resolution, and every single conference passed it. The [United Church of Christ Palestine/Israel Network](#) (PIN) played a critical organizing role in that. Started about three years ago and led by a national steering committee of 20 people, PIN created and shared language for a proposed resolution; much of that language was used in the resolutions of 9 out of 10 conferences (with the exception of the resolutions from Northern California/Nevada which looked at this before we’d come up with the PIN resolution). As a result, each conference, in considering the resolution, was working with similar language and themes; that was important. There were small differences from resolution to resolution because of amendments passed at the various Conferences’ Annual Meetings, but by the time of the General Synod, ten conferences had already gone through a process of carefully studying, discussing and voting on some version of the resolution. And, as I mentioned, every conference that considered it at their annual meeting passed it.

That’s one point; another has to do with the very interesting way the General Synod structures the committees that handle the resolutions. Delegates are randomly assigned to committees, each of which considers a specific resolution and the resolution then becomes property of that committee. There were ten such committees at this year’s General Synod with roughly 70 delegates to a committee. I was randomly assigned to Committee #3, the one that dealt with the Just Peace in Israel/Palestine resolutions (there were initially two that then we combined into one). All committees had an educational intensive where an outside expert, in our case Professor Pete Moore of Case Western Reserve, came in and talked about the issues.

Two days later the committee met and got down to work in a three and a half hour session. The first part was open with visitors, as well as the assigned delegates, free to speak. One of the speakers was a civil rights lawyer and Jewish Voice for Peace member who spoke about how the war against Gaza last summer had given him a voice. Speaking to the resolution, he said “This resolution is not anti-semitic or anti Jewish, or even anti Israeli. It is carefully crafted to be a resolution of love, not of hate.” His was a very persuasive voice. There was one UCC delegate there who’d previously had deep reservations about the resolution. After the lawyer spoke, she said, “I needed to hear that, that voice was very important for me,” and thereafter she completely supported the resolution.


After this open part of the committee hearing, delegates began to deliberate, and then only the assigned delegates could speak. Out of that came concerns to address and suggestions for language changes; then a writing committee was selected which worked on text edits over lunch. After the lunch break, the committee reconvened for a 45 minute session. The revised resolution was presented and the committee voted the resolution out of committee with unanimous support.

For me it was significant that the process was so collaborative and inclusive. It meant that a committee of randomly selected delegates completely owned the process—and thus the resolution. Everybody had a chance to raise concerns and be heard. It was a very well-structured, very conscientious, and I think, a very faithful process that the resolution went through with this committee. I could have never predicted that it would come out of committee with unanimous support. That was stunning and a testament to the process.

Another important thing was the presence of the Rev. Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem; he was one of the Synod preachers. Because of a delay caused by a glitch with the electronic voting equipment, the Just Peace resolution did not come to plenary until Tuesday, the morning after Rev. Raheb preached. Mitri's sermon was incredibly powerful and very moving. He interpreted scripture through the eyes of a Palestinian Christian and had a wonderful line about how the Bible had a stamp on it, saying 'Made in Palestine' and not the Bible Belt. Mitri spoke about his own life, and how like Jesus, he'd lived his entire life under occupation, and he spoke about the resilient spirit of the Palestinians who follow a 'loser' God who triumphs. Picking up on the theme of General Synod, "God in Unexpected Places," Mitri commented on the presence of nine members of Jewish Voice for Peace and how General Synod was an unexpected place for them to be, giving witness to this resolution.

While unexpected, the presence of these nine JVP visitors was another important factor. They were very visible, helping out by volunteering and passing out cookies, and being available for one-on-one conversations and to speak at various Conferences' breakfast meetings. Their witness was both powerful and informative.

One more thing that I'd say was incredibly important and compelling was [Archbishop Desmond Tutu's endorsement of the Just Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict resolution](#). Many people at Synod picked up copies of his endorsement, and speakers both in the committee meeting and on the plenary floor quoted from it.



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How did the plenary discussion and vote go?

There had been concern that the strongest opposition from within the UCC would concern the financial implications and would come from the Pension Boards, and the United Church Funds, entities that are being called on to divest. Without going into all of that, we found that the more pressing concern on people's hearts was how this would affect relationships with Jewish colleagues. Those who spoke against the resolution at plenary were speaking to that issue and the perception that the resolution was one-sided. Nothing came up about the financial piece in the plenary; concerns voiced were largely about the effect on Jewish colleagues.

During the plenary on Tuesday, a pastor and delegate from Iowa said that "it was with no joy and a great deal of pain" that he was speaking in support of the resolution. He shared that he came from a family of Holocaust survivors and non-survivors and admitted that he too had shared some of the concerns of those speaking against the resolution. He concluded by saying this:

At the same time the words of the Most Reverend Desmond Tutu keep ringing in my ear. When an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not

appreciate your neutrality. It is clear who the elephant and who the mouse is in this situation. This is not to deny the pain or the violence experienced by Israeli Jews.

But it does no honor to my family, it does no honor to the memory of those who were killed and who were the victims of human rights abuses in Hitler's Germany, to use those abuses as excuses to perpetuate further human rights abuses on other oppressed people. So it is with sadness and pain that I urge you to vote yes to this resolution.

Immediately after he spoke, someone called the question for a vote; his words were the last supporting comments before delegates voted.

There were so many people and things, all of which worked together and that were critical in engendering such overwhelming support for the vote. It all felt incredibly spirit-led.

This seems like a clear victory for justice and for our growing movement in North America to align our values with our actions in Palestine. I'm curious, for you, as a UCC minister, what does the vote mean to you personally?

As a member of the United Church of Christ, it is incredibly moving and very important. I put a lot of work into this as a member of the Palestine/Israel Network and it makes me very proud of our denomination, both in terms of our process and our willingness to risk the kind of criticism that is coming back at us now, as it did for the Presbyterians.

10 years ago when the UCC passed a previous resolution on Israel/Palestine, denouncing violence on all sides, opposing the occupation, and calling for economic leverage, we also passed a resolution supporting equal marriage. Fast forward to 2015: the first day of this General Synod was the day the Supreme Court announced their decision on equal marriage. There is a kind of parallel here, in that these things are a process; it happens over time. In fact the 2005 resolution on Israel and Palestine was the nineteenth resolution that the UCC had passed since 1967; this one makes our 20th. It means a lot to me that the UCC will take controversial positions, will take a position knowing it will receive criticism, while acting in good faith. In 2005 there were people who left the UCC for its stand on equal marriage; there may be people who leave because of this resolution. That's unfortunate, but this is clearly a stand for human rights, against violence.

So this decision is very affirming and makes me proud of the denomination. There are people who say the General Synod speaks *to* the denomination, it doesn't speak *for* it, which means there will be people who don't agree with it and won't necessarily promote it. But it's a step and a very important and power witness for justice and equality and the dignity of all.

It was really wonderful right after the vote to get an email sent to folks from Jean Zaru from the Friends Meeting in Ramallah saying that the passage of the resolution has been announced on Palestinian radio and that it meant a lot to have that expression of solidarity. I also got a personal email from a colleague Rabbi Brian Walt expressing his gratitude and saying the UCC was courageously following in the path of Jesus.

The fact the vote is so overwhelming . . . It's about momentum, it's about building a movement. It just gives me a lot of encouragement and a lot of hope. It's an affirmation of all the hard work, all the conference calls, everything leading up to this. All of that preparation mattered. And we have to continue that work.

It also means for me coming home to continue conversations with Jewish colleagues and neighbors, particularly with a close and beloved Jewish colleague, a rabbi who absolutely disagrees with the resolution and in particular support for divestment and boycotts. We've been in conversation and we'll continue to be in conversation. Before the Synod, I emailed him and told him I was going, that I knew we disagreed, and that I was a voting delegate. And I told him I have deep affection and respect for him and that I trusted we'll talk when I get back. Yes, conversations

going forward will be hard, but they'll be honest and heartfelt. And some of those conversations will also be with my own UCC colleagues who don't necessarily agree.

What now? Are there ways that others can support the UCC?

Well, the first thing that comes to my mind, and it even goes a bit beyond your question, but let me start here, is the importance of traveling to Israel/Palestine. To quote Arundhati Roy, "once you see, you can't unsee." Or as Vincent Harding says it, "when you know, you owe." There's no substitute for being there and traveling on a delegation. In terms of the people who were passionate and involved and working hard on this UCC resolution – and they were working hard – virtually all of them are people who have traveled and seen with their own eyes. That's certainly at the heart of the Kairos Palestine document which says, "Come and see." And it's part of why I'm proud to be a board member of [Interfaith Peace-Builders](#). As you well know, Mike, IFPB delegations are so incredibly well-organized, eye-opening and transformative. It's important and imperative to get people over there, it makes all the difference. And it makes what can be seen as a complex situation much simpler because it's about standing for human rights.

In terms of what others can do regarding the UCC vote, I think number one is to take heart from the example of organizing from within. You grow where you're planted. I hope this inspires people to organize within their own communities, whether they're communities of faith or whatever communities they are, and to persevere. We can all work with the tools we have and the structures we have to grow this movement.

Second, in terms of supporting the UCC: yes, there is something of a backlash already underway and there are a number of articles coming out, every day. That means if people see articles in their local communities that are critical, they can engage and write a letter to the editor. Some of the backlash doesn't even get the details of the resolution right. For example, many critics represent the resolution as calling for "divestment from Israel." That is completely wrong. It calls for divestment "including, but not limited to" and then mentions five specific companies: Caterpillar, Inc., Motorola Solutions, Hewlett-Packard Company, G4S, and Veolia Environmental, "profiting from or complicit in human rights violations arising from the occupation of the Palestinian Territories by the state of Israel." It is very specific, very focused, challenging the occupation and standing for human rights. So, it can be good to have the text of the resolution ([PDF](#)) – to know both what it does say and what it doesn't say. Some of the pieces so far have been responding to things it didn't say, so support in being accurate and responding when people hear negative and inaccurate things would be really helpful.

I guess the most important thing to say is that this resolution comes from people acting in good faith, in *deep* faith. You know, there's that passage from Micah: "Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God." This is about doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly.

I hope people can see this as its own case study of how one, within one's community, can organize to work on building the movement, until we get to a tipping point. I hope and pray and believe that that is happening.