

Reflection Guide for Proposed GS Resolution on Palestine and Israel

Prepared by the UCC PIN Network Steering Committee, February 2021

*This six-session guide is intended to accompany the full text of the “**Declaration for a Just Peace between Palestine and Israel**,” to be considered at the 2021 General Synod of the United Church of Christ. Congregations are invited to read the declaration and discuss its implications for their mission, outreach, and advocacy. Individual participants should read at least the WHEREAS sections of the declaration, on pages 3-5, in preparation for discussion. The study guide is structured around the six affirmations made toward the end of the text, beginning on Page 5. For each of these affirmations, we offer questions for reflection to stimulate group discussion, along with a prayer, a visual resource, and suggestions for further study. For those who are new to the issue, this six minute video from Jewish Voice for Peace explains the origins and progression of the conflict: <https://www.uccpin.org/where-to-start> .*

SESSION ONE: A Cry for Help

Affirmation (From lines 184-193 of the Declaration)

“We affirm that the continued oppression of the Palestinian people remains, after more than five decades of oppression..., a matter of theological urgency and represents a sin in violation of the message of the biblical prophets and the Gospel, and that all efforts to defend or legitimate the oppression of the Palestinian people, whether passive or active, through silence, word, or deed by the Christian community, represent a fundamental denial of the Gospel.

Therefore, we reject the notion that Israel’s occupation of Palestine is a purely political problem outside the concern of the church or that the oppression of the Palestinian people is an inevitable consequence of global or regional geopolitical interests.”

Questions for Reflection

- What is the “message of the biblical prophets and the Gospel” regarding political oppression by one group of people over another? Are there particular scripture passages that come to mind?
- Read together lines 151-158 of the Declaration. In what ways are Palestinians oppressed today? Is oppression an “inevitable consequence of global or geopolitical interests”?
- Read together lines 77-82. What do you see as the church’s role in responding to political oppression?

Prayer

Gracious God, we have heard your call to proclaim Good News to the poor, and we have heard the urgent cry of the Palestinian people for help in the face of their oppression. Grant us wisdom to understand our role in breaking down injustice and building up peace. Amen.

For further Study

1. Read the testimony of Palestinian Christians in “Kairos Palestine: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering” (2009). <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-kairos/kairos-palestine-document>.

SESSION 2: Blessed to be a Blessing

Affirmation (From lines 195-202 of the Declaration)

“We affirm that the biblical narrative beginning with creation and extending through the calling of the Israelites, the corrective admonitions of the prophets, the incarnation and ministry of Jesus and the witness of the apostles to the “ends of the earth” . . . speaks of God’s blessing extending to “all the families of the earth” (Genesis 12.3).

Therefore, we reject any theology or ideology including Christian Zionism, Supersessionism, antisemitism or anti-Islam bias that would privilege or exclude any one nation, race, culture, or religion within God’s universal economy of grace.”

Questions for Reflection

- Genesis 12 tells of Abraham’s call by God to go to a new land. Verse 3 says, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” What does it mean to be blessed or cursed by God? Does this verse suggest that Abraham’s move to the Promised Land will be a blessing only for his own people?
- Read together lines 165-172 in the Declaration. How can the arrival of a new group of people bless a place where other people already live? Is the arrival of immigrants always positive? Is the arrival of immigrants always negative?
- Does the need to protect the rights of Jews, particularly after the Holocaust, excuse discrimination against non-Jews in Israel/Palestine?

Prayer

Generous God, you have created in us amazing diversity of cultures and skills and interests, and set us together in community. Help us to find delight in our differences and to learn with each other. Give us the courage to speak out for the rights of all people. Teach us to cherish strangers, to welcome them in your name, and to make a place for each person at the table of your grace. Amen.

For Further Study

1. Michael Spath, Interview with Max Blumenthal on Christian Zionism:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjI571mDFQ>

2. *Zionism Unsettled* (Kindle book) from IPMN of the Presbyterian Church. This examines the role of Jewish and Christian forms of Zionism that have contributed to domination and dispossession of Palestinian people. <https://www.amazon.com/Zionism-Unsettled-Congregational-Study-Guide-ebook/dp/B0171YYU2G/>.

3. Reviews of *Zion’s Christian Soldiers*, by Stephen Sizer.

<https://www.stephensizer.com/books/zions-christian-soldiers/zions-christian-soldiers-reviews/>

SESSION 3: Apartheid

Affirmation (From lines 204-209 of the Declaration)

“*We affirm* that all people living in Palestine and Israel are created in the image of God and that this bestows ultimate dignity and sacredness to all;

Therefore, we reject any laws and legal procedures which are used by one race or religion to enshrine one people in a privileged legal position at the expense of another, including Israel’s apartheid system of laws and legal procedures.”

For Reflection

- Many countries treat citizens differently from non-citizens. Is this different from discriminating against people based on their religion or ethnicity? Does it matter that, although most Palestinians do not have Israeli citizenship, they are de-facto subjects of a state that is under Israeli control?
- The State of Israel grants the right of citizenship, if requested, to people of Jewish heritage who are citizens of other countries; yet Palestinians who have lived in the region for generations, many of whom are Israeli citizens, are often denied civil rights. Is it ethical to grant this privileged position to Jews?
- In “The International Convention on the Suppression and punishment of the Crime of Apartheid,” the UN General Assembly defined the crime of apartheid as *“inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them.”* (The full text, from 1973, is [here](#).)
Read together lines 134-137 and 151-158. In what sense might this be called an apartheid system?

Prayer

God of peace and justice, we know you love the whole earth and all of its inhabitants, yet we struggle to create systems that are fair and equitable. Help us to see your face in each individual, and to conduct our affairs in a manner that upholds the dignity of all. Amen.

For Further Study

1. Learn more about Israel’s discriminatory Nation State Law:
<https://www.vox.com/world/2018/7/31/17623978/israel-jewish-nation-state-law-bill-explained-apartheid-netanyahu-democracy> .
2. Webinar: *Calling the Thing by its Proper Name: “Apartheid” Between the Jordan River & the Mediterranean Sea*. <https://fmep.org/resource/webinar-calling-the-thing-by-its-proper-name-apartheid-between-the-jordan-river-the-mediterranean-sea/>
3. “The B’Tselem Report on Israeli Apartheid,” by Richard Falk.
<https://richardfalk.org/category/apartheid/>

SESSION 4: Whose Home?

Affirmation (From lines 211-222 of the Declaration)

“*We affirm* that all peoples have the right to self-determination and to their aspirations for sovereignty and statehood in the shaping of their corporate religious, cultural, and life, free from manipulation or pressure from outside powers, and that a just resolution of conflicting claims is only achieved through peaceful negotiation based on international law and UN resolutions, the equal protection of civil rights, and the fair and just sharing of land and resources.

Therefore, we reject the use of Scripture to claim a divine right to the land as the rationale for Israel’s illegal seizure and annexation of Palestinian land as well the imposition of so-called peace agreements by Israel or the United States through the exercise of political and military domination that leaves Palestinians without equal rights, full citizenship, and the opportunity to thrive religiously, culturally, politically, and economically.”

For Reflection

- Does God’s promise of land and descendants to the ancient people of Israel give the modern State of Israel a justification for annexing Palestinian land?
- Read together lines 134-137. Should the State of Israel be subject to international law and UN resolutions, which forbid the annexation of occupied lands and the establishment of Jewish-only settlements in the West Bank?
- Given the State of Israel’s de-facto military occupation of Palestinian territories, what obligation does Israel have to provide for the protection of civil rights and the fair and just sharing of land and resources—for or example, the distribution of COVID vaccines—among the Palestinian people?

Prayer

God of all peoples, we struggle to balance the rights and interests of our own families and cultures with the rights and interests of others. Give us the compassion to desire the good of all people, and the dedication to work through peaceful means to achieve true community with justice for all. Amen.

For Further Study

1. Read Walter Brueggemann’s book, *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, for a discussion of the theological issues underlying the conflict.
2. Read about unequal distribution of COVID vaccines in Israel and the West Bank:
<https://www.msf.org/stark-inequality-covid-19-vaccination-between-israel-and-palestine>

SESSION 5: Right of Return

Affirmation (From lines 224-230 of the Declaration)

“*We affirm* the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes if they so choose or to be compensated for their loss of property, consistent with UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (1948).

Therefore, we reject the denial of this right, just as we reject efforts to manipulate internationally-agreed-upon definitions of refugees to attempt to erase this right which extends across generations.”

For Reflection

- What does home mean to you? Have you ever had to leave your home against your will?
- Read together lines 123-132. The displacement of Palestinians from their homes has been going on for a long time and is continuing today. If you were the government in charge of providing for refugees in Palestine, what policies would you want to put in place? Cessation of new Jewish settlements? Return of Palestinian to their ancestral homes? Monetary compensation for land that was taken? Jobs & housing programs for Palestinians in their new locations?
- If Palestinians were allowed to return to the homes & lands that have been taken from them, what should happen to the Israelis who now occupy those homes & lands?

Prayer

Creator God, you give us life and breath, and provide us with all we need to thrive upon the earth. And yet, all too often, we take more than we need and neglect the needs of others. We pray for the day when each person has adequate food, shelter, comfort, security, and joyful purpose. We pray for the day when conflicts are resolved peacefully and each person can feel at home on your good earth. Help us to speak out for do our part to bring to life your vision of shalom for all.

For Further Study

1. Watch a brief video by Jewish Voice for Peace, which explains the origins of the conflict in simple terms: <https://www.uccpin.org/where-to-start>
2. Learn more about Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian Territory: <https://www.afsc.org/resource/israel%E2%80%99s-settlement-policy-occupied-palestinian-territory>
3. Learn more about Palestinian refugees and the Right of Return at <https://www.afsc.org/resource/palestinian-refugees-and-right-return>

SESSION 6: Free Speech and BDS

Affirmation (From lines 232-242 of the Declaration)

“We affirm the First Amendment constitutional right to freedom of speech and assembly to protest the actions of the State of Israel and to uphold the rights of Palestinians, including the use of economic measures to support justice as a First Amendment right and joining the international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement by individuals, institutions, corporations, and religious bodies that advocate peace with justice or participate in any aspect of the use of economic measures to support justice.

Therefore, we reject the idea that any criticism of policies of the State of Israel is inherently antisemitic, and we oppose the efforts of U.S. federal and state governments to limit free speech on university campuses and to restrict or ban support of the international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement.”

For Reflection

- Who is responsible for calling out a government’s unjust practices? Only its own citizens? Only those who are oppressed? The international community?
- Read together lines 145-129 of the Declaration. Is all criticism of the State of Israel inherently antisemitic? Is the call for boycott, divestment and sanctions in Israel inherently antisemitic?
- Name some historical examples of how boycott, divestment, or sanctions have been used to influence national or international policies. Were they effective?
- Does suppressing all critique of the State of Israel on US college campuses violate our American right to free speech?
- If this resolution is adopted by the UCC General Synod, how might your local congregation engage in further study and action for peace with justice in the Holy Land?

Prayer

Loving God, even as we seek to promote justice around the world, we admit that our own house is not in order. Give us courage to continue the hard work of building relationships that are free and fair, both at home and abroad. Amen.

For Further Study

Learn more about the BDS movement at <https://bdsmovement.net/>