

Presbyterians narrowly vote to divest from 3 companies involved in Israeli/Palestinian conflict

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June 23, 2014

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(RNS) The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted Friday (June 20) to divest church funds from three American companies it cited for profiting from the oppression of Palestinians within Israel's occupied territories.

The 310-303 vote of the church's General Assembly in Detroit marks a victory for divestment supporters both within and without the 1.8 million-member PCUSA, now the largest American church to embrace divestment as a strategy to pressure Israel to return its illegally held lands.

The divestment resolution targets companies that divestment supporters say supply electronic and earth-moving equipment that help Israel violate Palestinian rights. Presbyterians in support of the resolution described it as a long overdue stand on behalf of Palestinians suffering under the occupation, which began in 1967 when Israel pushed back attacks from neighboring countries.

The issue has roiled the church for the last decade, and during a more than three-hour debate, many lamented the divisiveness and noted how many around the world—in the U.S., Israel and the Palestinian territories—would be watching.

"After a decade of corporate engagement with Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions, these companies have failed to modify their behavior and continue to profit from Israeli human rights abuses and non-peaceful pursuits," said the Rev. Walt Davis of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, a pro-divestment group within the church.

"This is a historic vote and the culmination of a long and deliberate internal process within the church," he said.

But the vote also bodes ill for Presbyterian-Jewish relations, which are particularly fragile since the publication in January of *Zionism Unsettled*, a booklet produced by the church-chartered IPMN and sold on the PCUSA website, which argues the right of a Jewish nation to exist in the Holy Land is based on bad theology.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, head of the Union for Reform Judaism, the largest branch of Judaism in North America, spoke before the General Assembly Thursday, and warned that a divestment vote would be taken as a sign that the church has aligned itself with those in the “Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions” movement who vilify Israel and even question its right to exist.

“It would be an attack on the Jewish community and religion,” especially in the wake of the publication of *Zionism Unsettled*, Jacobs said. “I don’t want the commissioners (assembly delegates) to think they can vote for divestment and be part of the global BDS movement and think that they can still stand with us.”

Jacobs offered to arrange a meeting in Jerusalem next week for Presbyterian leaders to talk with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu if they voted against divestment. Many who spoke against the measure said it was not worth the price of alienating the church’s Jewish friends and urged their fellow Presbyterians to accept Jacobs’ offer.

The authors of the divestment resolution seemed to take pains to distance the measure from the more strident critics of Israel inside and outside the church. The resolution affirmed the church’s support for a two-state solution and also stated that it does not mean an alignment with the overall strategy of the global BDS movement.

But Rabbi Noam Marans, director of interreligious relations at the American Jewish Committee, said in a statement after the vote: “This is an affront to all who are committed to a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The PCUSA decision is celebrated by those who believe they are one step closer to a Jew-free Middle East.”

Carol Hylkema, another IPMN member, said the vote puts the PCUSA on the right side of a moral question.

“Our denomination has been a leading voice in establishing the socially responsible investment movement that began in the early 1970s to end apartheid in South

Africa,” she said. “This is a matter of stewardship and this decision brings our investments in line with our values.”

Leaders within the church’s divestment movement have struggled to get the General Assembly to back a divestment resolution for 10 years or more, missing the mark at the last assembly meeting, in 2012, by only two votes. The divestment movement, robust in many American universities and mainline Protestant churches, is particularly strong in the PCUSA. At their most recent national conference in 2012, the United Methodist Church rejected divestment as a tool to pressure Israel, but will likely revisit the issue at their next conference in 2016.

The vote Friday was preceded by another momentous vote at the PCUSA Thursday (June 19) when the General Assembly voted by a 3-to-1 margin to allow pastors to marry gay couples in places where gay marriage is legal. A change in the definition of marriage from man and woman to “two people” needs to be ratified by the church’s regional presbyteries.