

Methodists to consider divestment plans: Jews decry 'anti-Israel' path: Caterpillar holdings under consideration

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The 7.9-million-member United Methodist Church is poised to become the next U.S. denomination to consider divesting from companies said to support Israeli military-security goals, a topic so controversial that it prompted the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to redefine its own divestment program two years ago.

At its quadrennial General Conference this April in Fort Worth, Texas, the Methodists will debate whether to pull church holdings in Caterpillar, which provides the Israel Defense Forces with bulldozers.

The proposal from the Methodists' General Board of Church and Society comes as the church's women's division offers a 224-page study guide on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has been slammed as "inflammatory, inaccurate and polemical" by Jewish groups.

Citing references that compare Israelis to Nazis and characterize the creation of Israel as "original sin," four U.S. Jewish women's groups told Methodist leaders that the guide "would simply take anyone who turns to it . . . on the wrong path." The guide is "anti-Israel and anti-Jewish from cover to cover," said Ethan Felson, assistant executive director for the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

The author of the report, Stephen Goldstein, a minister who works for the church's General Board of Global Ministries, was unable to be reached for comment.

James Winkler, general secretary of the General Board of Church and Society, said he had just received the study report and not yet read the "troubling quotes." However, he explained the rationale for divestment.

“The board felt that after 40 years of statements and resolutions from our denomination, as well as from many other churches and other organizations urging Israel’s withdrawal from occupied lands in the West Bank, that something more needed to be done,” he said.

“The feeling was that economic pressure was needed,” Winkler said. Caterpillar was chosen because Israel uses its products to “destroy Palestinian homes, build bypass roads and build the wall of separation.”

Some \$5 million of the United Methodist Church’s \$17 billion portfolio is currently invested in Caterpillar.

In a statement, Caterpillar said that it complies with foreign and domestic laws, stating that “for the past four years, activists have wrongly included Caterpillar in a publicity campaign aimed at advancing their much larger political agenda” and that protests “neither change the facts nor our position.”

Whether the Methodist Church’s divestment proposal will meet the same fate as its counterparts in other churches remains to be seen.

In June 2006, the Presbyterians replaced a 2004 call for a “phased, selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel” with a plan for more peace-minded investment in the region.

The United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church have all stalled or reversed course on earlier attempts at divestment.

For its part, the United Methodist Church is not of one mind on divestment.

Timothy Bias, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Peoria, Illinois, where Caterpillar CEO James Owens is a member, said the divestment proposal helps “raise the consciousness of the conflict.” However, he regrets that the church did not first broach the issue with Caterpillar. “If we’re going to make resolutions, we need to have conversations with all parties involved,” Bias said.

For the last several years, Jewish organizations have made that argument to mainline Protestant churches considering divestment.

“The state of interfaith relations between the Jewish community and the mainline Protestant churches is very much a work in progress,” said Rabbi Gary Greenebaum,

U.S. director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, who spoke against divestment on behalf of mainstream Jewish groups at the Methodist Church's preconference meeting on January 25 in Fort Worth. -*Religion News Service*