

Jewish groups pleased by PCUSA stand on Mideast: An "important step forward"

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Jewish groups said the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s recent call for peace in the Middle East is an "important step forward" in repairing relations between the two sides after several years of acrimony.

At the Presbyterians' General Assembly meeting in California in June, the church called for a nonpartisan approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We will avoid taking broad stands that simplify a very complex situation into a caricature of reality where one side clearly is at fault and the other side is clearly the victim," said a statement passed by the assembly.

The PCUSA statement, especially its recommendation that members should serve as "nonpartisan advocates" for peace and its decision against calling for divestment from companies working in Israel, was welcomed in a statement issued June 27 by the umbrella Jewish Council for Public Affairs. Groups endorsing the JCPA statement included the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the Simon Wiesenthal Center and organizations within Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism.

The PCUSA, in a 504-171 vote, also joined with other denominations to endorse the Amman Call; initially issued by the World Council of Churches in June 2007, it urges a peaceful two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Delegates also called for the U.S. to become more directly involved in brokering a peace agreement and to refrain from unilaterally supporting either side of the conflict.

Previously, Jewish groups were upset with what they perceived as the PCUSA's bias against Israel, arguing that the church overlooked the actions of Palestinian militants. In response to the assembly's statements, the nine Jewish groups

expressed hope that the church will direct pressure against Iran and Syria, both of which have provided support for terrorist acts against Israelis.

While optimistic, the Jewish groups expressed concern with some elements of the assembly's position.

The Amman Call "purports to advance peace, but is inconsistent with a political solution that would include a viable Jewish state alongside an independent Palestinian state," the groups said in a statement.

Tensions flared between Jews and Presbyterians when the church voted in 2004 for "phased, selective divestment" in companies with operations in Israel, such as Motorola, Caterpillar and Citigroup. Two years later, the assembly changed course, seeking investment only in "peaceful pursuits" and individually engaging the companies to discuss concerns. -RNS