

Presbyterians find common ground on Mideast: Committee members displayed "mutual forbearance toward one another"

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As Presbyterians opened their eight-day General Assembly on the Fourth of July weekend, they faced a bitter debate over a report on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It appeared to some leading participants that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) would reenact a bruising version of Mideast confrontations “within its own body, so divided were we on all sides.”

However, a heavily revised version of the 170-page report was adopted on the last full day of the assembly in Minneapolis, 558 to 119—a margin called “miraculous” by one voter.

The report approved July 9 urged the U.S. to halt aid to Israel until it ends expansion of settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, called on Israel and Egypt to lift a blockade of civilian supplies to Hamas-controlled Gaza territory and continued to seek “the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.” But the revised report also affirmed Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign nation “within secure and internationally recognized borders” and revised what many U.S. Jewish groups termed an anti-Israeli bias in the original report.

As reported by the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the approved report eliminated two background pieces that critics said offered a lopsided historical account, one downplaying Jewish claims to the Holy Land and favoring Palestinian views. “Instead, it called for the creation of a monitoring committee that would solicit four essays each from Israelis and Palestinians on what they perceive the conflict to be,” the newspaper said.

The revision made it clear that a Palestinian Christian report, “A Moment of Truth,” was fine for “study” but that the PCUSA General Assembly endorsed only selected themes reflecting an “emphasis on hope for liberation, non violence, love of enemy and reconciliation.”

The committee that sent its revisions to the full gathering drew praise from denominational leaders. Rick Ufford-Chase, the 2004 moderator, spoke on the convention floor July 8 on behalf of at least eight former assembly moderators with various views who backed the changes. “God’s healing presence has been at work,” said Ufford-Chase, who is executive director of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.

Committee members “tackled tough issues while refraining from tackling one another,” added top PCUSA executives—including stated clerk Grady Parsons and newly elected moderator Cynthia Bolbach—in a July 10 statement. “They placed great value on finding common ground as they displayed gracious, mutual forbearance toward one another.”

Especially noteworthy was the joint approval of the amended report by four church leaders who had earlier expressed fears that the convention battle would become a microcosm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Ron Shive, chair of the Middle East Study Committee which authored the controversial document, and Carol Hylkema, moderator of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, said the report “was a long-awaited recognition of the suffering of the Palestinian people, particularly our Christian brothers and sisters, and a stirring call to action and solidarity.”

Bill Harter, co-convenor of Presbyterians for Middle East Peace, and Katharine Henderson, president of Auburn Theological Seminary, said the original report had “seemed indifferent to Israeli concerns for a secure homeland and the [PCUSA’s] ongoing relationship with the Jewish community.”

But the four leaders came together to support the report as amended, saying the revised document represented “a new way of approaching the intractable problem and, indeed, a new way of being the church” in a statement posted online by *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine.

In related resolutions, the assembly voted 418-210 to denounce Caterpillar, Inc., saying that friendly engagement with it had failed to convince the company to take

responsibility for the way Israel uses its bulldozers and other construction equipment to build walls and destroy Palestinian homes.

However, more than 70 percent of the delegates voted not to consider selling the church's Caterpillar stock worth \$10 million. Caterpillar has said it does not condone immoral use of its property, but "cannot monitor the use of every piece of equipment around the world."

A resolution that compared Israeli control over Palestinians to apartheid policies that once prevailed in the Union of South Africa did not get considered in assembly voting.

The American Jewish Committee, in a joint statement with other Jewish organizations, welcomed the "nuanced stance" on the Mideast conflict. "Modifications to the controversial report and rejection of [resolutions] calling for the use of divestment and labeling Israeli policy as apartheid demonstrate a desire for broader understanding in the quest for peace."

The Anti-Defamation League was less sanguine in its statement, contending that though the Presbyterians "averted a rupture with the Jewish community by rejecting some extremely harsh anti-Israel proposals and language," they perpetuated a one-sided approach that "put the onus for peacemaking on Israel."