

Divisive divestment

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 23, 2014](#) issue



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At the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), held last month in Detroit, members of the governing body voted to allow Presbyterian clergy to preside at same-sex weddings in states where same-sex marriage is legal (see ["PCUSA votes to divest funds, to marry gays where legal"](#)). They also approved an amendment to the church's constitution that would change the definition of marriage from "between a man and a woman" to "between two persons, traditionally a man and a woman." For the next two years, 173 local presbyteries will debate and vote on the change.

This is a huge step toward full equality for the gay and lesbian community in the church and society.

The other issue that dominated the assembly was a vote to divest Presbyterian funds from three companies whose products are deemed harmful to the Palestinian people and prospects for peace: Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard, and Motorola. The economic impact on the corporations will be minimal; in fact, in an ironic twist, their executives may be relieved that Presbyterians won't be showing up at corporate headquarters asking for high-level meetings and offering stockholder resolutions. The vote has been noted by other mainline denominations agonizing over Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people and will be applauded by the international BDS movement (boycott, divestment, sanctions), whose supporters argue for abandoning the two-state solution—an independent and secure Palestine and Israel living together in peace—for a one-state solution in which Jews would be outnumbered and

Israel, as a Jewish state, would eventually disappear.

The decision reverberated among those in the American-Jewish community, which overwhelmingly sees the move as anti-Israel if not anti-Semitic. Even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu weighed in, sharply criticizing the Presbyterian decision on CNN.

Divestment did play a role in bringing down apartheid in South Africa and the government that enforced it. Yet I've never been comfortable with the analogy between South Africa and Israel. For one thing, South Africa made no pretense of being a democracy when it denied the vote and equal judicial process to the majority of its population. Israel at least has a constitution that guarantees rights to all its citizens.

Second, I've never been persuaded that divestment is effective. It has a seriously negative impact on interfaith relations; Presbyterian pastors and people are now scrambling to explain to Jewish friends and neighbors what the decision means and does not mean. Divestment also alienates a community of interfaith partners that have the potential to influence public opinion and Israeli policy.

Yet a third reason for my discomfort is the further division that we'll see within the Presbyterian family. I'm a veteran of Presbyterian struggles over race, gender, and sexual orientation, but this conflict seems to divide people more deeply than any other. Old and trusted friends are not only not listening to one another, they are barely speaking.

In the meantime the situation on the ground is messier than ever. Israel continues to make it difficult for its sympathizers by expanding settlements, overreacting to Palestinian violence, and torpedoing peace negotiations. The Palestinians struggle with attempts at unity between Fatah, a secular government in the West Bank, and Hamas, which governs Gaza. Hamas included a call for the destruction of Israel in its charter, continues to commit random acts of violence against Israel, and shows signs of moving toward an Islamist state.

The committee assigned to deal with the divestment issue was comprised of 50 or so randomly chosen commissioners or delegates. The national Presbyterian Church individuals who provided resources for the committee made no attempt at neutrality but advocated for divestment at every opportunity. So did hundreds of others inside and outside of the committee room, including representatives of Jewish Voice for

Peace, a small but vocal group wearing green T-shirts with pastel stoles. Other demonstrators wore black T-shirts that announced, "Another Jew for Divestment," and young Presbyterians wore shirts that challenged observers to "Ask Me About My Trip to Israel/Palestine."

Committee leadership, which is supposed to remain neutral and ensure balance, did not do its job. At one point the vice moderator said, "Jesus was not afraid to criticize Jews. Why should we be?" My assessment is that the committee and the assembly were clearly leaning toward approving divestment.

When the committee's recommendation for approval came to the floor, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism (the largest Jewish denomination), asked the assembly not to approve divestment. Jacobs declared his outspoken opposition to expanding settlements and Israeli intransigence and invited Presbyterians to partner with Jews to find a way toward peace and justice.

His plea did not change the decision. Now, in light of this development, Presbyterian leaders and people urgently need to reach out to Jewish neighbors. We need to explain that 49 percent of the commissioners voted against divestment and that it is the sense of many of us that a strong majority of Presbyterians do not agree with divestment and are distressed by it. We also need to explain that the church affirms Israel's right to exist, that it has made positive investments in both Israel and Palestine, and that it is committed to a two-state solution.

We also need conversations between supporters and opponents of divestment in the churches, with the goal of restoring civility and respect for one another and for Israelis and Palestinians, so that we can work together toward the elusive goal of peace with justice for which all of us so desperately yearn.