

Presbyterians try to mend Jewish ties: Divestment plans, support of messianic Jews caused tension

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The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), under fire from Jewish groups for its funding of messianic Jewish congregations and a move to divest from Israel, is appealing to members of both faiths to respect whatever “fragility of trust” still exists between them.

In a three-page statement issued July 20, Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick defended recent church votes that one prominent Jewish group called “hostile and aggressive.”

“I encourage Presbyterians to maintain their relationships with people of other faiths, with sensitivity to the fragility of trust in the present climate of violence and terror,” said Kirkpatrick, the church’s highest elected official.

PCUSA headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky, has been inundated with hundreds of angry phone calls and e-mails from Jews who protested votes on Jewish evangelism and the Israeli-Jewish conflict during the church’s recent General Assembly in Richmond, Virginia.

Delegates narrowly voted—260-233—to maintain funding for churches, including one in suburban Philadelphia, that are geared toward Jewish converts to Christianity.

The Philadelphia congregation, Avodat Yisrael, received \$260,000 from various church agencies and has been called offensive by Jews for its use of Jewish ritual music and sacred objects such as Torah scrolls and menorahs in Christian worship.

Delegates also voted 431-62 to study whether the church should divest from companies doing business in Israel. The last time the church altered its portfolio to protest actions of a foreign country was in the 1980s against South Africa.

Articles in the Jewish press reported that the PCUSA approved a blanket divestment. In fact, a decision will not be made until next March when a committee reports with recommendations to the church.

In a separate 471-34 vote, delegates said the controversial Israeli security wall “ghettoizes the Palestinians and forces them onto what can only be called reservations,” the church said.

In his statement, Kirkpatrick refused to apologize for any of the votes. He said the votes on Israel were taken “as part of a larger commitment of the PCUSA to human rights and social justice all around the world. It should be noted that the [church] is not singling out Israel and Palestine alone for observation and critique.”

Funding decisions are handled by local bodies called presbyteries, and church leaders trust the projects that receive money have been vetted and are appropriate, he said.

B’nai B’rith International, in a statement issued July 20, said the “hostile and aggressive” votes “shattered 50 years of interfaith dialogue” between Jews and Presbyterians. The group said talks must be suspended until church leaders “recant.”

Joel Kaplan, president of the humanitarian group, demanded an apology for the “absolutely horrifying” statements by the Presbyterians that he said ignored the ongoing terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens. “I think the Presbyterian Church on this issue totally departed from anything real, rational or fair, and has in a great way debased itself and its reputation,” Kaplan said in an interview.

Earlier, the Anti-Defamation League said “targeting Jews for conversion to Christianity is an insult to the Jewish people.”

Jay Rock, the church’s interfaith affairs director, acknowledged that relations with Jewish groups have hit near rock bottom. “It’s certainly a very tense point, but I don’t think it’s going to break the relationship,” Rock said.

Rock pointed out, however, that a 1987 statement that discouraged targeting Jews for evangelism because they “are already in a covenantal relationship with God” remains unchanged.

Susan Andrews, a pastor who ended her term as moderator at the Richmond assembly, said the church needs to “rethink” how it funds evangelism so as not to offend Jews. Andrews’s church in Bethesda, Maryland, shares space with a Jewish congregation. -Kevin Eckstrom, *Religion News Service*