

Jews, PCUSA still at odds on Israel policy: Divestment plan challenged

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A high-level summit between Jewish and Presbyterian leaders covered little new ground in a sharp, ongoing dispute over Middle East policy, but both sides promised to stay in close contact as the church considers selectively divesting from Israel.

Relations between the two faiths soured in July after Presbyterian delegates voted to explore divestment from companies whose business in Israel supports violence against either Palestinians or Israelis. Jewish groups said the measure, along with a related call for Israel to end construction of a controversial security barrier, was unfair and did not apply equal pressure on Palestinians to stop suicide bombers.

During a three-hour meeting September 28 in New York City to discuss the fallout, both sides said they had gained a better understanding of the other, but neither was willing to back down. They did, however, promise to talk more. "This is the beginning, not the end, of a process among us," said Clifton Kirkpatrick, who as stated clerk is the highest executive officer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

For his part, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said he did not expect a change of heart on the part of the Presbyterians, but signaled a diplomatic offensive in hopes that Jews will be able to influence the church's lengthy deliberations on divestment. "It is nonetheless our hope that there will be a reconsideration . . . that there will be a greater understanding of Jewish concerns, that down the road perhaps there will be a different outcome," he said.

In November a committee overseeing the church's \$7 billion investment portfolio will set criteria for possible divestment, and next March it will make recommendations to the church's General Assembly Council, or board of directors.

A churchwide decision will not be made until delegates meet again in 2006. Kirkpatrick said the church's long-term goal is corporate pressure before "selective phased" divestment is used as a last resort.

Contending that he cannot change the delegates' overwhelming support of divestment, Kirkpatrick stopped short of calling it a mistake. He did, however, say Jews need to be part of the conversation as the church moves forward. "I do not leave this meeting feeling that the decisions of the General Assembly ought to be rescinded or reversed, but be shaped by these conversations," he said.

Earlier in September, more than a dozen members of Congress and Kirkpatrick exchanged letters on the same issues. "The Presbyterian Church has knowingly gone on record calling for jeopardizing the existence of the state of Israel," the members concluded in a lengthy September 13 letter. The letter stated their belief that the church misunderstands the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and called the proposal for divestiture "irresponsible, counterproductive and morally bankrupt."

In his three-page response, Kirkpatrick wrote in part: "Perhaps if the United States Congress had been more forthright in seeking . . . a just solution for Israel and Palestine, it would not have been necessary for our General Assembly to take this further action to achieve our long-term commitment for peace and well-being for both Israelis and Palestinians." Kirkpatrick added that it is "the occupation, not our move to consider divestment," that threatens Israel's existence. -*Religion News Service*