

Family tensions: The PCUSA and Palestine

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 16, 2004](#) issue

Last summer the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) passed several resolutions that have distressed the American Jewish community. The church criticized Israeli policy toward Palestinians, condemned Israel's construction of a security barrier, declined to withdraw support for a congregation in Philadelphia which appears to target Jews for conversion and—the move that most angered the Jewish community—voted to consider selective divestment from corporations that do business in Israel.

Some Jews interpreted the action as an attack on Israel—perhaps even an anti-Semitic gesture. Presbyterians have been stunned by the depth of Jewish anger, and how what seems to many like legitimate social witness is experienced as a form of anti-Semitism.

Then, when it seemed like things could not become worse, they did. A Presbyterian delegation visiting the Middle East met with representatives of Hezbollah, an Islamic organization which the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations says has “planned and has links to” international terrorist activities. After the conversation, one of the Presbyterian participants told the press that “relations and conversations with Islamic leaders are a lot easier than dealings and dialogue with Jewish leaders.” The comment was broadcast widely in the Arab media. The individual who made the comment was not a spokesperson for the PCUSA or the delegation. Church officials immediately called the comments “reprehensible” and not reflective of the PCUSA. They also called the unauthorized visit “misguided at best.”

No doubt the PCUSA's orderly polity will be used to sort things out. My guess is that Presbyterians will have an intense conversation about divestment as a method of social witness and about unauthorized meetings involving Presbyterian delegations. I hope we will reaffirm our position that while everyone is welcome in our churches and God's love in Jesus Christ is for all, our brothers and sisters of the Covenant are

not objects for proselytizing.

A recent visit to the Gettysburg battlefield reminded me that family fights are often the most tragic and horrific. My hope is that Christians will join with Jews in some intentional listening to one another, exercise the forbearance and forgiveness which lie at the heart of our shared tradition and maybe even reenergize the collaboration which is precious to both our traditions.

A starting point might be a joint reading of *The Dignity of Difference*, by Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi in Great Britain. He caught my attention with these opening words: "I see in the rising crescendo of ethnic tensions, civilization clashes and the use of religious justification for acts of terror, a clear and present danger to humanity. For too long the pages of history have been stained by blood shed in the name of God . . . In our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged, not threatened, by difference."