

Presbyterians fire two over Hezbollah meeting: A controversial delegation

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In the midst of tense debates with Jewish leaders, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has fired two employees who were part of a controversial delegation that met with Hezbollah officials in Lebanon. Church officials, however, did not say immediately if the firings of Kathy Lueckert and clergyman Peter Sulyok were related to the Middle East visit.

After angry criticism from Jewish groups, church leaders called the visit “misguided at best” and said favorable statements about the alleged terrorist group were “reprehensible.” The firings were announced November 11 by John Detterick, executive director of the church’s General Assembly Council, which acts as the church’s board of directors. He said legal restrictions kept him from disclosing details.

Lueckert was Detterick’s deputy and was essentially the church’s No. 3 official. Sulyok coordinated the church’s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, which arranged the visit. “I know these decisions raise many questions for staff, but please realize that all staff have the right to confidentiality regarding their employment,” Detterick said in a memo to church headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky.

The visit, which included a stop at a Hezbollah-run camp in southern Lebanon, came on the heels of the church’s provocative decision to consider financial divestment in companies doing business in Israel. Jewish groups were angered that a church representative would say that “relations and conversations with Islamic leaders are a lot easier than dealings and dialogue with Jewish leaders.”

The PCUSA recently set six criteria to consider in its controversial plan to pursue “phased selective” financial divestment for companies doing business in Israel. A church panel that oversees “socially responsible” investments met November 4-6 in New York to establish a framework for church action against companies that are involved in Israeli settlements or in construction of Israel’s “separation barrier” or

that assist Palestinians in violence against Israelis.

Church leaders stressed that divestment is a “last resort” that would need the approval of church delegates in 2006. Officials said they would first pursue corporate negotiations, followed by shareholders’ resolutions. The panel hopes to conclude its research by next spring.

It is unclear how much of the church’s \$8 billion investment portfolio may be tied up in companies operating in Israel. The last time the church pursued divestment was against oil companies in Sudan and as part of the antiapartheid movement against South Africa in the 1980s.

At the same time, the dispute has apparently sparked arson threats against PCUSA churches. Officials said November 12 they received an anonymous letter postmarked from Queens, New York, with threats that Presbyterian churches “will go up in flames—bet your [expletive] that’s a terrorist threat.”

Church officials alerted law enforcement agencies and encouraged churches to beef up security and vigilance. Some leading Jewish organizations publicly decried the threats. *-Religion News Service*