

Disciples latest to critique Israeli tactics: A resolution against the security barrier

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Despite lobbying pleas from a noted Jewish organization, delegates to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) General Assembly have passed a resolution calling on Israel to stop construction of a security barrier intended to stop suicide bombers.

The statement, adopted July 27 in Portland, Oregon, urged Israel to “cease the project to construct the barrier, tear down the segments that have already been constructed, and make reparations to those who have lost property.”

“The resolution is an abomination,” said Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, an educational foundation that runs the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. “It demands that Israel take action that would put millions of its citizens in immediate harm’s way,” said the rabbi, who, with foundation associates, passed out flyers at the assembly.

The resolution did not urge financial divestment from stocks in companies thought to be aiding Israel in the Mideast conflict—an issue raised by Presbyterians, Episcopalians and World Council of Churches leaders.

But the Israeli and Jewish reaction was as strong as it had been weeks earlier against a call from the biennial synod of the United Church of Christ for the wall to be torn down. The UCC is closely allied with the Disciples. In fact, the Disciples’ resolution was drafted by the Common Global Ministries board of the two denominations.

William Chris Hobgood, outgoing general minister of the 750,000-member Disciples denomination, said his church is obligated to respond to killings in the region. “The time is here for Disciples to speak against violence . . . whether it is state-sanctioned or committed by suicide bombers,” said Hobgood. “There must be no more violence.”

As expected, delegates elected Sharon Watkins as the new general minister and president, making her the first woman to assume the top executive post of this major mainline Protestant denomination. Currently the senior pastor at Disciples Christian Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, Watkins will move to church headquarters in Indianapolis.

Meanwhile, U.S. and Israeli Jews decried what they called a biased view of the Israeli-Palestinian issues by some mainline Protestant churches. They said the Disciples delegates, for example, listened to a representative of a Palestinian organization but were not permitted to hear a Jewish survivor of a Palestinian suicide bombing in 2003.

Rula Shubeita of the Jerusalem-based Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center told delegates that the barrier disrupts the lives of all Palestinians in the area. Some Jewish groups have accused Sabeel of anti-Semitic theology.

"As a Christian Palestinian, I can speak to the concerns of the wall," Shubeita said. "Because of the wall, I cannot see my brother, who lives three miles away. . . . The wall has prevented me from going to my church, and has affected the employment opportunities of so many people."

Rabbi Cooper, however, called the Disciples' resolution "functionally anti-Semitic." Alluding to the young bombing survivor with him at the Disciples' General Assembly, Cooper said, "I have no doubt that had the delegates seen the human face of the victims of Palestinian terrorism, the outcome could have been much different."

Israel's West Bank barrier has been condemned by the United Nations' highest court for causing hardship to thousands of Palestinians cut off from relatives and amenities by the bulwark. According to Ecumenical News International, Israel has since changed the barrier's route, moving it closer to its border with the West Bank, following a decision by the Israeli Supreme Court. The Israeli high court ruled that the government must balance the need to save Israeli lives from suicide bombers with the need to minimize hardships for Palestinians.