

World Council of Churches Endorses Divestment From Israel

By Kevin Eckstrom
Religion News Service

The World Council of Churches has urged its 347 member denominations to give "serious consideration" to pulling investments out of Israel in protest of what it sees as mistreatment of Palestinians.

In calling for church-sponsored "economic pressure," the WCC on Monday (Feb. 21) gave strong support for last year's controversial decision by the Presbyterian Church (USA) to seek "phased selective divestment" from Israel.

"This (Presbyterian) action is commendable in both method and manner, uses criteria rooted in faith and calls members to do the things that make for peace," the WCC's 150-member Central Committee said in its resolution.

The Geneva-based WCC is the major ecumenical voice for the world's mainline Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches. It does not include the Roman Catholic Church or most evangelical or Pentecostal churches. While the WCC statement is significant, it is not binding on member churches.

The WCC said its concern was focused on companies that assist Israel in demolishing Palestinian homes, constructing settlements and erecting a controversial "dividing wall" within the Palestinian territories.

The unexpected resolution caught many American Jewish groups off guard and confirmed fears among some that the Presbyterians opened a Pandora's box last summer that now has the tacit approval of global Protestant and Orthodox leaders.

Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, interfaith director for the Anti-Defamation League, dismissed the WCC as "irrelevant" but was nonetheless concerned that the divestment campaign has taken on a life of its own.

"The best thing we can do is continue to call it what it is -- holding Israel to a double standard and using religious language to justify political ends," Bretton-Granatoor said.

Since last summer, other churches -- including agencies of the Anglican Communion, Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) -- have examined whether to follow the Presbyterians' lead in taking some form of economic action against Israel.

The WCC said economic sanctions must be "equitable, transparent and nonviolent," but Jewish groups say the standards continue to be biased against Israelis without equal pressure on Palestinians to rein in violence.

David Elcott, interfaith director for the American Jewish Committee, blasted the WCC for an "ill-conceived and destructive" policy at a time when Israel is dismantling settlements and working with new Palestinian leadership.

"It's ironic that politicians are acting with greater moral strength than religious leaders," Elcott said. "If (the WCC) chooses to be irrelevant and take themselves out of the peace camp, they're welcome to do that."

Jewish leaders have been fierce critics of the Presbyterians' plan to consider pulling part of the church's \$7 billion portfolio from companies that assist Israelis or Palestinians in pursuing violence in the Middle East.

Despite intense lobbying by Jewish groups, the 2.5 million-member church says it remains committed to its decision and expects to place the issue before church delegates for final action in 2006.

Presbyterians are among the WCC's largest funders in the United States and the church's top officer, Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick, is a member of the WCC's Central Committee. Like the WCC, the Presbyterians have long argued for better treatment of the Palestinians.

In some ways, the WCC statement is merely symbolic because the 56-year-old ecumenical agency has no power to compel action or policy by its member churches.

The Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy, a frequent WCC critic, said divestment would not be "constructive" for reaching a Middle East peace. "It's reflective of an overall bias that the WCC and many mainline Western denominations have against Israel," said Mark Tooley, a spokesman for the conservative Christian think tank.

Still, the WCC imprimatur carries weight as a global religious organization. In the anti-apartheid movement of the 1970s and '80s, the WCC led churches in an economic boycott of South Africa; Jews have bristled at the comparison between apartheid and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Nonetheless, the WCC action shows that the divestment proposal has picked up steam in other churches. The Rev. Victor Makari, the Presbyterians' coordinator for Middle East policy, said he welcomed the WCC statement "with interest and appreciation."

"Clearly, it is the same spirit that led the PC(USA) assembly who has been at work in the representative body of the world churches, through this and numerous previous actions," Makari said in a statement to Religion News Service.

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