

# Jewish and Christian leaders try to revive at-risk interfaith group

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WASHINGTON (RNS) As a coalition of mostly Christian groups gathered here Thursday (Nov. 29) to support church leaders who have publicly questioned U.S. aid to Israel, those same church leaders signaled that they want to reconcile with the Jewish groups who were upset by their action.

An Oct. 5 letter asking Congress to investigate U.S. aid to Israel led Jewish groups to cancel a long-planned meeting later that month of the Christian-Jewish Roundtable, a eight-year-old group dedicated to improving relations between the two faiths.

The Rev. Gradye Parsons, the top official of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the first signatory on the letter, did not attend Thursday's Washington press conference that was convened to support its message. But Parsons said he stands by the letter, and acknowledged that it heightened tensions between Jews and Christians on the roundtable.

"We regret any distancing it put between us and our Jewish partners," he said, "and we hope we can close that gap."

Jewish groups on the roundtable said they felt blindsided by the public letter, that it unfairly demonized Israel and failed to take into account the ruthlessness and human rights violations of its enemies.

Those Christian churches represented on the roundtable whose leaders signed the letter have accepted an invitation from Jewish members for a summit meeting on the impasse, Parsons said, though no date has been set.

On Thursday, a loose coalition of church and human rights groups - including the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and the Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace - met in Washington to express support for the October letter, to laud its signers as champions of human rights, and to announce tens of thousands of signatures on

petitions in support of the letter.

They said the recent hostilities in Gaza – in which Palestinian deaths and casualties greatly outnumbered Israelis' – should show Americans how Israel tragically misuses American military aid.

"I have learned through the years that unless we confess complicity, we are undermining justice," said Tom Getman of Kairos USA, a Christian nonprofit that advocates on behalf of Palestinians.

Rabbi Noam Marans, the interfaith director at the American Jewish Committee, said the recent Gaza conflict only heightened the Jewish community's dismay with "the lack of moral clarity from significant Christian voices."

They don't, he continued "differentiate between Palestinian terrorists who target civilians and Israeli military that employs extraordinary restrictions to avoid inadvertent damage to civilians while targeting terrorists."

Of the Jews and Christians on the roundtable, Marans said: "There is a lot of hard work that will need to take place in order for the two communities to find a more positive path of communication."