

Necessary conversation: The divestment debate

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

I like to think of the Christian Century as offering a lively conversation about faith and the issues of our time. This issue contains a [four-part exchange](#), and each of the writers—Vernon Broyles, Barbara Wheeler and Ira Youdovin—is a respected friend of mine. The topic is divestment and how it can be used by churches to express positions on social, political and economic justice—in this case, positions regarding Israel. Two of the three are members of my church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), whose General Assembly last summer voted to initiate a process of selected and phased divestment from corporations whose business in Israel is deemed harmful to Palestine and Israel.

The response to that action has been strong—on all sides. The Jewish community has expressed dismay and anger. Some parts of the Christian community have also disagreed, whereas some are proud of what they regard as a prophetic stand for justice and peace. Feelings and opinions run deeply. People of integrity and good faith differ, and interpret facts on the ground differently.

We believe this conversation needs to continue. At this writing the government of Israel and the newly elected government of the Palestinian people are talking with one another; security forces for both sides, for the first time in a long time, are talking about collaboration. The road ahead will be difficult, and there will be setbacks. My prayer on behalf of the Israeli people and their leaders, the Palestinian people and their leaders, is for courage and steadfastness, for grace and the strength to forgive, and for unrelenting hope.

In some places the divestment issue has been a wedge between Jews and Christians. Some have decided that dialogue is no longer possible, that war has been declared on Israel, Judaism and Jewish people. But in most cases, I believe, the issue has forced us to talk with one another more intentionally than ever before.

The Union of Reform Judaism has launched an initiative in Chicago called “Hearing Each Other’s Voice, Knowing Each Other’s Passions,” which involves pairing Christian congregations with nearby Jewish synagogues for seven joint meetings. Leaders from each of the congregations are trained to be facilitators.

The kickoff event has just been held, and it was an evening characterized by honesty and a spirit of commonality about our life together in this country and mutual concerns for justice and peace in the Middle East. I drove home from the event not only mindful of the pain and controversy my church’s decision has caused my neighbors, but grateful for the renewed commitment to dialogue and interfaith understanding that decision has precipitated and made necessary.