

WCC endorses divestment from Israel: An unexpected resolution

News in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

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 gave strong support to last year’s controversial decision by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 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 statement—significant but not binding on member churches—was issued February 21 by the WCC’s 150-member Central Committee, which met in the ecumenical organization’s headquarters in Geneva.

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 in an action 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, the Episcopal Church, the 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 contend that 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."

The Presbyterians' plan is 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. The issue will be placed before church delegates for final action in 2006.

Presbyterians are among the WCC's largest funders in the U.S., 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.

The WCC statement recalls its backing of an economic boycott of South Africa during the antiapartheid movement of the 1970s and '80s, but Jews have bristled at the comparison between apartheid and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. -*Religion News Service*