

Divestment: Corporate actions

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 15, 2005](#) issue

For most media in Israel, American Protestants are simply the people who book Bible tours of the region. In June 2004 this indifference changed. That's when the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted a resolution recommending that "a longstanding Presbyterian position against the occupation of Palestinian lands by the State of Israel" should lead to the initiation of "a process of phased, selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel, in accordance with General Assembly policy on social investing."

Reaction was swift and strong in both Israel and in the U.S., where pro-Israel Christians saw the divestment move as a threat to Israel's image.

How did the Presbyterians move from passing resolutions to proposing action against corporations that support the Israeli occupation? This move did not start, as some critics would claim, with Naim Ateek, an Anglican priest in Jerusalem who directs Sabeel, the Jerusalem-based ecumenical peace center. Aggressive supporters of Israel have been attacking Ateek and Sabeel. The focus on Ateek is ironic, since he advocates a nonviolent approach to ending the occupation.

In mid-October, those attacks included picket lines in front of the first of Sabeel's annual series of conferences in the U.S., presented this year in Chicago, Denver, Toronto, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. After attending the Chicago conference, Dexter Van Zile, Boston-based David Project's Christian outreach director, wrote on the *Stand with Us* Web site that "to these folks, the Jews are the new Nazis." That comment, designed to evoke the Holocaust, has no basis in fact. (I attended the Chicago conference; no such statement was made or implied.) Sabeel describes the "moral basis" for its work this way: "We acknowledge the sufferings and injustices committed against Jews by the West, especially those inflicted in the Holocaust. Nevertheless, anti-Semitism does not justify the injustices committed against Palestinians."

Ateek was not the initiator of the divestment movement. The movement began with an overture from a Jacksonville, Florida, Presbyterian church, sponsored by a pastor

who saw Israel's occupation up close while on a Christian Peacemaker Teams mission to Palestine. The Florida overture worked its way up to the General Assembly and was endorsed by the national church.

The United Church of Christ passed its own resolution this past summer: "Concerning use of economic leverage in promoting peace in the Middle East, . . . [we call] on UCC individual and corporate investors to use economic leverage to advocate for peace with justice in Israel-Palestine." That's not quite a specific call for divestment, but it reflects a similar strategy.

In November 2004, the Episcopal Church mandated that its Committee on Social Responsibility in Investments (created in 1972) investigate corporations that "contribute to the infrastructure of Israel's ongoing occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip." Seeking balance, the resolution instructed the committee to also identify companies "responsible for violence against Israel." Since Palestinian violence is largely the work of bomb-producing workshops in homes in the West Bank and Gaza, the committee is unlikely in this part of its work to turn up international corporations the size of, say, Caterpillar.

In October of this year, the Episcopal SRI committee reported back to the church's executive council with a document that is much milder than the resolution passed by the Presbyterians. How mild is a matter of dispute. A layperson elected to five General Conventions of the Episcopal Church told me that a careful reading of the SRI committee document provides "sufficient teeth" for the church to challenge "corporations investing funds in maintaining the occupation . . . to change the way their funds are being used."

But it appears that the vague language of the Episcopal resolution offers little encouragement to Palestinians who have looked to U.S. Christians for support. The Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, the main source on the subject for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, led its October 14 story with the headline, "American Churches Back Away from Divestment." It made no reference to "teeth" in the Episcopal resolution.

David Elcott, director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, based in New York, was one of the American Jewish leaders who talked to *Ha'aretz*. "My reading," said Elcott, "as a central Jewish player in this, is that there never was a [general] move toward divestment. Here is the reality: No church in the U.S.

except the Presbyterians has voted for divestment.”

But more resolutions will be considered. In June 2006 a number of United Methodist conferences will consider the issue. The Presbyterian General Assembly will meet next year to either affirm or change its 2004 action.

Is divestment the best tactic to use in trying to change American public opinion? I cannot say for certain. Was the nonviolent 1930 attack on the salt tax in India the best way to force the British to give India its freedom? Were marches and bus boycotts the best tactics to eliminate racial segregation in the U.S.?

Martin Luther King Jr.’s protest actions led him to a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. There he received a letter from local religious leaders telling him that his actions were “unwise and untimely” because they harmed relations between blacks and whites. King’s response, in his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” was that he had already done a lot of talking. Now it was time to act.