



1 **An Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA Congregations**  
2 ***Becoming Peacemakers in Israel/Palestine***  
3 ***June 2007***

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5 For more than 60 years, Mennonites have witnessed to the good news of Jesus Christ in Israel  
6 and Palestine. In recent decades the human rights situation for Palestinians has deteriorated  
7 dramatically. Today, a power imbalance of Israelis over Palestinians distorts the lives of everyone  
8 living in the region and fails to provide the longed for security. A system of forced segregation  
9 and oppression imposed by the Israeli government, which some have called apartheid, and the  
10 resulting spiral of violence calls for urgent collaborative action by all Mennonites including the  
11 agencies currently working in the region.

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13 In response to the discernment of the Peace and Justice Partnership Council of Mennonite Church  
14 USA of the need for a common conversation among various parts of Mennonite Church USA, a  
15 delegation of ten persons (see below) traveled in Palestine/Israel, May 11-24, 2007. We visited  
16 many important centers in the region and engaged in dialogue with Christians, Jews and Muslims.  
17 During the visit we listened to our partners, talked with leaders of other agencies and heard from  
18 ordinary people as well as co-workers of Mennonite-related agencies.

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20 ***We affirm that***

21 The situation in Israel/Palestine today confronts us with profound theological issues that  
22 challenge the roots of our faith.

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24 Our experiences confront us with new questions about our understanding of God and what it  
25 means to be peacemakers in this context. Throughout the Bible, God calls the people of Israel to  
26 express care for “the other” and the stranger and to work for justice for everyone living on the  
27 land. The prophetic tradition repeatedly emphasizes that the people of God are accountable for  
28 exercising justice and compassion. The current situation in Israel/Palestine calls us to reject the  
29 temptation to reduce God to a tribal god who cares only for the well-being of one people.

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31 The biblical witness testifies that God chose a particular people for the purpose of bringing  
32 blessing to “all the families of the nations.” We did not find blessing between peoples in  
33 Israel/Palestine. Rather, the situation we encountered impressed upon us the urgency for  
34 rediscovering God, as revealed in both the Old Testament and in Jesus, as the One whose  
35 compassion and care extends to all people, all of whom have been created in God’s image.

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37 Christians have inflicted horrific suffering upon the Jewish people through the millennia,  
38 including the Holocaust. Tragically, Christian anti-Semitism continues. It is reprehensible. It  
39 cannot be reconciled with the biblical message, nor is it consistent with our vision of anti-racism.

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41 We renew our commitment to God who disavows human vengeance, calls us to love our enemies  
42 and requires us to pursue reconciliation and peacemaking with all people. We understand this to  
43 be the essence of God’s nature and healing purpose in the world. Questions about the connection  
44 between financial investments and God’s call for justice challenge us to reexamine our  
45 understanding of Christian stewardship in light of the realities of life in Palestine and Israel.

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47 We became keenly aware of our need as God’s people in Mennonite Church USA to recognize  
48 that true security can be found only in God. Both in this region and in North America, people  
49 have tried to find security through military power. The result has been the needless destruction of  
50 human lives that we have seen in Iraq and Palestine by occupying armies. In both places the  
51 senseless response of suicide bombers adds to the death and suffering.

52 *We observe that*

- 53 • The continuing Israeli military occupation and the dispossession of Palestinians is sinful,  
54 responsible for unjust suffering and the major cause of the ongoing conflict.
- 55 • The Israeli government has consistently violated international law; the United States  
56 government has supported violations of human rights and international law by Israel.
- 57 • The Wall of Separation being constructed through the West Bank segregates Israelis from  
58 Palestinians and separates Palestinians from each other, causing undue hardship. This  
59 wall, 30 feet high and 436 miles long, will not ultimately satisfy Israeli security needs.
- 60 • The Israeli economic strangulation of Palestinians by Israeli military restrictions on the  
61 free movement of goods and people and the international sanctions imposed on Palestine  
62 are causing great suffering and deprivation.
- 63 • Christian Zionism has undergirded the occupation, reinforcing sentiments that have  
64 resulted in grave injustices for Palestinians.
- 65 • The Christian community in Israel/Palestine, the place of the birth of Christianity, is  
66 being eroded by the hardships created by the occupation.
- 67 • Suicide bombings by Palestinian extremists cause fear, insecurity and death for Israelis  
68 and work against possibilities for peace.
- 69 • In spite of the challenges, we heard the hearts of many Israelis and Palestinians still  
70 longing for peace.

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72 *In light of these disconcerting realities, in congregational education we encourage*

- 73 1. Mennonite Church USA pastors and leaders to visit both Israel and Palestine and to deepen  
74 their understanding of the current situation in this region.
- 75 2. Congregational groups and Sunday school classes to use study courses like *Under Vine and*  
76 *Fig Tree* (Cascadia) to counter the distortions of land and promise in Christian Zionism.
- 77 3. Intentional and continued initiatives to meet with and listen to a range of Israeli and  
78 Palestinian voices.
- 79 4. Use of resources on Mennonite understandings and responses to the Middle East and  
80 Israel/Palestine for further study and reflection (see [www.MennoniteUSA/peace](http://www.MennoniteUSA/peace)).

81

82 *In economic engagement, we encourage*

- 83 5. Groups visiting Palestine/Israel to consider staying in Palestinian communities including  
84 Bethlehem and Nazareth for at least a part of their time in the region to encourage economic  
85 development in Palestinian communities.
- 86 6. Church institutions to gain greater understanding of their investments in this region and to  
87 avoid investments which violate international law and promote violence. We encourage  
88 exploring ways our investments and our role as investors can be used to provide hope and  
89 promote peace in this region.

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91 *In peace building (political advocacy, public witness and accompaniment) we encourage*

- 92 7. Mennonite-related agencies working in Israel/Palestine to coordinate their work in the region.
- 93 8. Congregations and agencies to challenge U.S. military and economic support for the Israeli  
94 occupation of Palestine and to advocate for justice and protection of human rights for all  
95 people in the region.
- 96 9. All parts of the church to strengthen our commitment to bridge-building between the  
97 alienated factions in this region.

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100 *USA Executive Leadership), Ed Epp (MEDA), Kim Vu Friesen (MC USA Executive Board), Stanley*  
101 *Green (Mennonite Mission Network), Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach (MCC Washington Office), Rich*  
102 *Meyer (Christian Peacemaker Teams), Mark Regier (Mennonite Mutual Aid), Carol Rose (Christian*  
103 *Peacemaker Teams) and Lee Schmucker (Mennonite Mission Network)*