

*“From Time to Time a New Shipment of History Arrives”  
The Church, the Synagogue, and the Dilemma of the Middle East*

Fall Convocation Address  
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities  
September 19, 2006

John H. Thomas  
General Minister and President  
United Church of Christ

Introduction

In 1987 the 16<sup>th</sup> General Synod of the United Church of Christ adopted a statement on “The Relationship Between the United Church of Christ and the Jewish Community.”<sup>1</sup> The statement included a call to repentance for the history of Christian anti-Semitism, a theological affirmation of God’s enduring covenant with the Jewish people, and a call to action which included attentiveness to the image of Jews and Judaism presented in curricula at local church and seminary levels, sensitivity in liturgical materials, the establishment of Jewish Christian dialogue groups locally, regionally, and nationally, and the development of relationships of trust that would enable a “joint witness against all injustice in our local communities and in the world.” Excerpts from the General Synod give a sense of the significance of this statement:

Christianity, developing its faith and identity, its life, and its creativity from a common heritage with Judaism, has a unique relationship with the Jewish people. . . . We in the United Church of Christ acknowledge that the Christian Church has, throughout much of its history, denied God’s continuing covenantal relationship with the Jewish people expressed in the faith of Judaism. This denial has often led to outright rejection of the Jewish people and to theologically and humanly intolerable violence. . . . The most devastating lethal metastasis of this process occurred in our own century during the Holocaust. . . . We pray for divine grace that will enable us, more firmly than ever before, to turn from this path of rejection and persecution to affirm that: *Judaism has not been superseded by*





Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.

A second contextual framework for the UCC's Synod Statement of 1987, along side of the altered cultural consensus, was the growing influence of the Holocaust on theological, literary, and political discourse. The popularity of books like Elie Wiesel's *Night* and *The Diary of Ann Frank*,

1987. What was groundbreaking was the formal disavowing of supercessionism, the belief that “God’s covenant with the Jewish people has been abrogated,” affirming instead that “God has not rejected the Jewish people, that God is faithful in keeping covenant.” The General Synod not only rejected the violence perpetrated against Jews throughout the centuries. It also challenged the fundamental theological underpinning of that violence. In so doing it declared that Christians and Jews are inextricably linked by more than shared origins, by more than a long and painful history of anti-Jewish violence leading to the Holocaust. The Synod declared that we are bound by enduring and indelible covenants with God. In the words of the Theological Panel convened to reflect on the Synod Statement,

Our commitment to the particular act of God in Christ is a word we hold as firmly as our avowal of God’s unrescinded covenant with the Jewish people. When we hear this twofold word, we overcome a distorted picture of the New Testament. To affirm that “God was in Christ reconciling the world. . .” (2 Corinthians 5.19), and to affirm, simultaneously, that the “gifts and call of God” to the Jewish people are “irrevocable” (Romans 11.13) is to witness to the faithfulness of God. . . . Our affirmation both of the continuing covenant of God with the Jewish people and of fulfillment of God’s promises in Christ appears to be a paradox. Yet through this double affirmation we are invited into a deeper understanding of our faith.<sup>0</sup>

### III.

The response to the General Synod Statement from within the church was lively, with particular criticism around the rejection of supercessionism from those who were uncomfortable with its implied rejection of a Christian mission to the Jewish people. As a result, the President of the United Church of Christ, Dr. Avery Post, appointed a “Jewish-Christian Theological Panel” which conducted hearings around the United Church of Christ, carried out theological research, listened to Jewish and Christian consultants beyond the denomination, and issued “A Message to the Churches” in May, 1990.<sup>0</sup> The Panel included representatives of the Seminaries and persons from various theological perspectives within the life of the church. Jewish and Arab Christian voices were included in the work of the Panel. While much of the work of the Panel focused on the issue of supercession, atonement, Christology, the meaning of the Shoah, and





Statement challenges unilateral actions that “inflare attitudes and reduce the prospects of achieving peace,” including settlements, calls for addressing the problems of refugees and displaced persons, and for negotiations leading to agreement on the status of Jerusalem. Implicit in this vision is an end to the nearly forty-year old Occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, as well as the dismantling of Israeli settlements throughout the West Bank and Gaza. While subsequent General Synod actions and letters from Officers of the church have addressed new realities, a two-state solution and a negotiated sharing of Jerusalem by two nations and three religions has been the consistent policy of the United Church of Christ, a policy largely shared by its ecumenical partners.

United Church of Christ support for the rights of Palestinians within the broad framework of the 1981 Statement has been a prominent part of its global advocacy work. It has been done in collaboration with the Middle East Council of



2000, and Israel's devastating military response; increasing restrictions on Palestinian life; and the construction of the separation barrier has led to an intensifying of rhetoric and to the sharpening of advocacy positions that leaves Jewish Christian relationships in a very vulnerable, even volatile place, far from achieving the hopes of twenty years ago.

In the past four years two significant "shipments of history" have arrived which have brought Jewish Christian relationships in the United States to a point of severe tension: the building of the separation barrier and all that it symbolizes, and the rise of the so-called "divestment movement" which seeks to challenge the Occupation itself. The separation barrier adds a new element to what was already a "separate but unequal" life for Palestinians. In East Jerusalem alone, for example, annexed by Israel after the 1967 war, there are twelve public parks compared to nearly 1,500 in Jewish neighborhoods in West Jerusalem. There are three public libraries in Palestinian neighborhoods compared to thirty-six in Jewish neighborhoods. There are twenty seven sport facilities for Palestinians compared to two hundred and fifty eight for Jewish communities.<sup>0</sup> Travel through the West Bank and Gaza reveals similar disparities and, with travel restrictions increasing, there is a steady decline in the possibility for the economic viability of Palestine. The building of an essentially parallel road and tunnel system through the West Bank linking settlements with Israel further reminds Palestinians of their isolation in an increasingly oppressive occupation.

The stated goal of the separation barrier is to protect Israelis from Palestinian suicide bombers. In the past six years 171 people have been killed in 38 bombings in Jerusalem alone.<sup>0</sup> Israel has legitimate security concerns. But, as B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization points out,

the route of the Barrier defines all security logic and appears politically motivated. In Jerusalem, the Barrier roughly follows the municipal boundary, set when Israel annexed East Jerusalem. This boundary ignores urban planning considerations; it cuts through Palestinian neighborhoods, at times literally running down the middle of busy, urban streets. Leaving 220,000 Palestinian Jerusalemites on the Israeli side of the Barrier, it is hardly consistent with the State's own security logic; does the State of Israel consider Palestinians living on one side of the street dangerous, but not those on the other side?<sup>0</sup> Visitors to other parts of the West Bank can see the barrier intruding far beyond the Green Line,



Jerusalem and Israel/Palestine together, the dialogue itself seems to have lost much of its momentum.

Particularly troubling to Christian leaders are an increasing number of initiatives by both national and regional leadership of Jewish organizations toward their counterparts in regional and local church bodies in an effort to rally opposition to divestment and dissent from their own national governing bodies. Prior to the 2005 General Synod many delegates found themselves the object of organized email lobbying campaigns and during the Synod a full-page paid advertisement sharply critical of proposed General Synod action on divestment was published in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. In June, 2006, in an unprecedented move, the leaders of all the major national Jewish organizations, (twelve in all) including the American Jewish Committee and the Anti Defamation League, as well as the synagogue and rabbinic organizations, sent a letter to each of the commissioners to the Presbyterian Church General Assembly calling on them to reconsider the 2004 action. This well organized “anti-divestment” campaign has included sharp criticism of key Palestinian church leaders. The Rev. Naim Ateek of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, a close partner of many mainline U.S. churches, has been particularly singled out. In addition, the Jewish press has significantly increased its coverage of the actions and statements of Christian leaders and governing bodies, often portraying their actions in the most unfavorable light. Following the UCC General Synod in 2005, for example, headlines in the *Jewish Times* accused UCC leadership of “hijacking” the Synod in order to pass its economic leverage resolution. Letters and public statements directed at church leaders, and some published articles, regularly accuse the church of being anti-Israel, of insensitivity to the history of anti-Jewish violence and the Holocaust, even of anti-Semitism.

Jewish organizations have thus far avoided such an alliance, this partnership is disturbing to Christian leaders who must deal with the divisive attacks of IRD and its denominational affiliates on a regular basis.

Adding an additional layer of complexity is the growing influence of Christian Zionism among politically and religiously conservative Christia

northern Israel, and Lebanon have only been the most recent shipment of history, and they add heavy weight to the already demoralizing burden. This is not where we expected to be.

The dilemma of the Middle East for the church is that we find ourselves caught between two valued and precious relationships, each with its own compelling yet seemingly competing narratives of vulnerability, victimization, and loss. Criticism of the policies of Israel, including the Occupation and the security barrier, leads to charges of betrayal from many, if not most in the Jewish community and to a near paralyzing introspective anxiety among Christians born of our awareness of complicity with centuries of anti-Semitism. Silence in the face of injustice in Palestine for the sake of the future of our relationship with the Jewish community here leads to charges of betrayal on the part of our Christian partners in the Middle East who ask whether we care sufficiently for the viability of an indigenous Christian presence in the land of Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection. What are we to do or say in the face of this?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous admonition in his 1943 New Year's Letter to his co-conspirators is apt: "The ultimate question for the responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair but how the coming generation is to live."<sup>0</sup> There is no responsible extrication for Christians from the dilemma posed by both the violence and the injustices of the Middle East. The future of Palestinian and Israeli children must be our ultimate question, not how we might make life more comfortable or congenial for ourselves in today's charged and difficult American Jewish Christian context. Two viable states with secure and internationally recognized borders, two people living if not in harmony, at least at peace and with



- 
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
  8. James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*, (Boston, 2001).
  9. "A Message to the Churches" in *New Conversations*, p. 4.
  10. See Jay Lintner, "Conversation Piece: God's Unbroken Covenant with the Jews," *New Conversations*, pp. 2-5.
  11. "A Message to the Churches," pp. 6-7.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
  13. Jay Lintner in *New Conversations*, p. 3.
  14. Jay Lintner, "Final Reflections and Issues for Dialogue," in *New Conversations*, pp. 62-63.
  - 0.15. "Minutes of the Thirteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ," p. 77, and "The Middle East Policy Statement" adopted by the Governing Board of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, USA, November 6.1980,
  16. "A Wall in Jerusalem: Obstacles to Human Rights in the Holy City," (B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, Summer, 2006), p. 19.
  - 0.17. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
  - 0.18. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
  - 0.19. The action of the Synod itself is found in *Minutes of the 24<sup>th</sup> General Synod of the United Church of Christ*, pp. 35-36.
  - 0.20. "A Message to the Churches," in *New Conversations*, p. 7.
  - 0.21. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (New York: 1972), p. 7
  - 0.
  - 0.
  - 0.
  - 0.
  - 0.

---

0.

0.

0.

0.