

## **ELCA Analysis of the Kairos Palestine Document** **Prepared by the Peace Not Walls team, January 2010**

From Bethlehem on December 11, 2009, an ecumenical group of Palestinian Christian leaders issued *A moment of truth: A word of faith and hope from the heart of Palestinian suffering*. The ELCA Peace Not Walls team offers these accompanying comments on this document and event.

**Background quoted from the Kairos Palestine website (<http://www.kairopalestine.ps>)**

*This document is the Christian Palestinians' word to the world about what is happening in Palestine. It is written at this time when we wanted to see the Glory of the grace of God in this land and in the sufferings of its people...*

*The initiators of this document have been working on it for more than a year, in prayer and discussion, guided by their faith in God and their love for their people, accepting advice from many friends: Palestinians, Arabs and those from the wider international community. We are grateful to our friends for their solidarity with us.*

### **1. This is a pastoral document with several audiences.**

*A Moment of Truth* is above all a pastoral communication from an ecumenically broad group of Palestinian Christian leaders to their own people. Yet the document challenges all readers to a high standard of flourishing within the human community. Therefore, it addresses other audiences, including Muslims, Jews, the world-wide Church, the international community, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders, the Palestinian and Israeli people, and leaders in Palestinian business and politics. It is especially important to recognize that the document's Christian authors, without equivocation, reached out to diverse audiences within the Palestinian community: fellow Christians, observant Muslims, secularized Muslims and Christians, persons loyal to Fatah or Hamas, and those disengaged from Palestinian politics.

*A Moment of Truth* is a document within a specific geopolitical context. Some North American Christians may not detect this document's many nuances. Nevertheless, we are invited to receive its "word of faith and hope from the heart of Palestinian suffering" and to accept its challenges, even as we acknowledge that we may not fully understand or agree.

### **2. This document is primarily a word of hope.**

Much like the Bible's psalms of lament, this document is primarily a word of *hope* in a time characterized by an overwhelming lack of optimism. Christians are called to hope even when optimism dims. Precisely because there is hope, the document calls for resistance (4.2ff) to injustice and to the logic of violence. Despair leads to political passivity and calculated self-preservation—responses welcomed by any systemic or structural expression of oppression and violence. Nonviolent resistance, on the other hand, is grounded in hope and love that "puts an end to evil by walking in the ways of justice" (4.2.1). Such resistance finds its foundation in hope; it is a call to all persons of faith.

### **3. This document provides an authentic, though only partial, analysis of the conflict.**

Given the above observations, it is important to note what the document is not. *A Moment of Truth* does not seek to provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It does not therefore engage in a full analysis of the history and complexity of the conflict itself.

Section 2.3.2 provides the only analysis of the core of the conflict. While it is possible that this section will be a source of criticism—the point could be read as reducing Israel's foundation to the Holocaust alone, thus minimizing the long history of Jewish persecution and the Zionist response—it is important to

note that this analysis is primarily a critique of contemporary western Christian motivations concerning the State of Israel.

In addition, this section and section 2.3.4 stress the connectedness of the Palestinians to the Holy Land, which may be perceived by some as not acknowledging a parallel Jewish connectedness to the land. Pertinent, however, is the document's recognition that the entire Holy Land belongs to God and is inhabited by two peoples (2.3.1; 6.2). The document's message to Jews is "Even though we have fought one another in the recent past and still struggle today, we are able to love and live together" (5.4.2).

#### **4. The document does not deny Israel's legitimacy or right to exist.**

The document presents no attempt to remove legitimacy from the State of Israel or claim that Israel has no right to exist. Rather, the emphasis is on an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, after which "they [Israelis] will see a new world in which there is no fear, and no threat but rather security, justice and peace" (1.4).

In section 9.3, *A Moment of Truth* critiques the notion of establishing a religiously-based state (whether Jewish or Islamic) "that practices discrimination and exclusion, preferring one citizen over another." Instead, the writers "appeal to both religious Jews and Muslims: let the state be a state for all its citizens, with a vision constructed on respect for religion but also equality, justice, liberty and respect for pluralism and not on domination by a religion or a numerical majority." This critique and appeal challenge both those who affirm Israel as a Jewish state and those who seek to make the future Palestine an Islamic state.<sup>1</sup>

#### **5. The document seeks to restore dignity to both Palestinians and Israelis.**

Section 2 of the document, "A word of faith," proclaims the drafters' faith in a good and just God. God loves all of God's creation. The dignity of God is the source of dignity for every human being, created in God's image and likeness. The calling of this dignity is that we have been created to know and love one another rather than to live in conflict. The vocation of humans in the Holy Land is the same holy calling of the land itself—to flourish in relationships and dignity. This is the theological context of the declaration in section 2.5 that "the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a sin against God and humanity." This declaration rests not on any particular political position, but on the vocation of preserving dignity for all humans, Palestinians, Israelis, and all others. The occupation harms Palestinians by depriving them of human rights. More fundamentally, however, the sin of the occupation distorts and conceals the image of God in both Israeli and Palestinian. This distortion results from the long-standing asymmetries of power in the situation, the narratives of suffering for both peoples, and the pervasive fears of the "other" among both populations which have been exacerbated by lack of contact for many years and, of late, by physical barriers and walls that scar both land and human dignity. It will be prudent for us to examine critically the offering of theological support for political injustice and the invoking of the name of God to endorse the distortion of God's image in the perpetuation of the Israeli occupation.

#### **6. The document addresses western Christians, particularly with regard to Christian Zionism.**

Western Christian readers are addressed at several points in the document. We are called to be attentive to the fact that some Christian theologies have legitimized the injustice experienced by Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian: "we know that certain theologians in the West try to attach a biblical and

---

<sup>1</sup>On the point of a "Jewish state" see recent insights from Gershon Baskin, Israeli co-CEO of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI): "The confusion between Israel as a Jewish state and Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people is one shared by Jews and non-Jews alike. The terms are used almost interchangeably, and that has caused confusion.... Those who understand modern international law and have a comprehension of the legal basis on which Israel was founded understand the importance of the definition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people." [*Jerusalem Post* 4 January 2010]

theological legitimacy to the infringement of our rights.... We call on these theologians to deepen their reflection on the Word of God and to rectify their interpretations so that they might see in the Word of God a source of life for all peoples" (2.3.3). Specifically, the document calls on western churches and Christians to "revisit fundamentalist theological positions that support certain unjust political options with regard to the Palestinian people" (6.1). This sentence is a description of what some analysts have begun to describe as Christian Zionism. Countering Christian Zionism (and other theologies that sanction potentially unjust use of state power against Palestinians) is a central responsibility for western Christians as they respond to the call from their Palestinian Christian sisters and brothers. Beyond the specific challenge of Christian Zionism, this document invites us to reexamine our theologies of peace and justice and the ways those inform our political advocacy.

## **7. The document endorses economic measures as a means of non-violent resistance.**

Many readers in the West (including the United States) will be critical of the document's endorsement of divestment, boycott and economic sanctions as appropriate responses to Israeli policies against Palestinians. Reaction will occur on a number of interrelated levels:

- 1) There is a strong debate within U.S. church circles regarding economic divestment and boycott. One mainline/mainstream church in the U.S. has explored the path of divestment and has been heavily engaged in conversation with Jews and pro-Israel Christians. Although there is little real economic threat to the State of Israel through institutional divestment, the movement toward any form of economic sanction could be interpreted by some as anti-Semitic; such a movement could be the catalyst for a social movement leading to government-led economic sanctions with real effects on Israeli interests. ELCA policy precludes the option of divestment but does allow for the exploration of the feasibility of refusing to buy products produced in Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Churchwide Assembly 2007). Some groups in Europe, including some churches, have supported a boycott of products from Israeli settlements. For the ELCA to consider any boycott, the process described in a policy adopted by the Church Council would need to be followed.
- 2) The BDS (boycott-divestment-sanctions) movement provides an important analogy to the South African experience of the end of apartheid policies at an institutional level (see 4.2.6).
- 3) Beyond the practical and conceptual concerns some have about BDS and historical consciousness, the template of the Kairos document will invite comparison of the policies, practices and experiences in South Africa with those of Israel with respect to the occupation of the occupied Palestinian territories (including East Jerusalem). This comparison is vociferously resisted by many Israeli and pro-Israeli officials and activists. Nevertheless, some analysts may conclude, based on further study, that this analogy is highly appropriate. While drawing the analogy, the document does not engage in or call for this analysis.

## **8. The document places particular emphasis on the importance of Jerusalem.**

*A Moment of Truth* proclaims, "Jerusalem is the foundation of our vision and our entire life" (9.5). Affirming that "the city is inhabited by two peoples of three religions," the document calls for a political resolution based on the prophetic vision of peace and on international resolutions addressing Jerusalem. The authors are unequivocal: "This is the first issue that should be negotiated."

The ELCA, too, recognizes the crucial place of Jerusalem in any peace agreement. Our Strategy calls for "A negotiated, final status agreement, which includes a 'shared Jerusalem' that can serve as a capital to both Palestine and Israel, with access by and full rights in the city for Jews, Christians, and Muslims."

