

A Message on The Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

I

The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America views the present Israeli/Palestinian conflict with increasing concern and anguish. We are acutely aware of our sinful complicity as Lutherans in the past, especially in the face of atrocities previously committed against the Jewish people. This confession of prophetic failure in the past cannot lead us into silence now, however. We must speak about the human rights abuses in the Occupied Territories today, especially amidst the rapidly changing developments in the Middle East. Our faith calls us to stand with all who suffer, whatever their religious conviction or cultural identity.

Members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan have raised their prayer that we would end our silence and voice our concern. They have requested our prayers and support in their struggle for a just and peaceful settlement of this conflict. We stand in solidarity with them in their suffering and in their hope that peace might come in a place where there is little peace.

We speak because of our faith in God, the bringer of peace. Called to serve this God, the ELCA is constitutionally mandated to participate in God's mission by ". . . *advocating dignity and justice for all people, [and] working for peace and reconciliation among the nations.*" (ELCA, 4.02)

II

Our most immediate and urgent concern is for the cessation of human rights abuses against the Palestinians, because of the Israeli occupation. These abuses include detentions without trial, the closing of schools, denial of access to health care, deportations, and the use of live ammunitions and plastic bullets in response to non-life-threatening situations.

This brutal conflict has taken hundreds of Palestinian lives and caused untold suffering. It has also divided the citizens of Israel as well as the worldwide Jewish community, many of whom are concerned that a continuation of the conflict will only further erode Israel's democratic institutions and undermine Jewish prophetic values, which are our Christian legacy as well.

III

We recognize that the intensity of the present situation has roots in a long and tragic conflict. It is essentially one involving Israeli and Palestinian claims to a land which both groups view as their home. Although each side has historically rejected the other's claim, both claims have legitimacy:

A. The Palestinian claim rests upon their uninterrupted habitation in the land for countless generations. Palestine is the land of their ancestors and the site of their cultural development. Both Muslim and Christian Palestinians recognize the land as holy.

B. The Israeli claim rests upon an historic relationship to the land going back to the time of Abraham. More recently, the Israeli claim rests upon the generation of Israelis born since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Like their Palestinian counterparts, the land of Israel/Palestine is their home, and the holy site of Judaism's development.

Both Israelis and Palestinians articulate political goals that are viewed as necessary for each group's continued survival. Both sets of goals need to be recognized as legitimate if peace is to be achieved:

A. Because of a history of discrimination and genocide and the dangers feared today, the desire for national security is the major Israeli political goal.

B. Because of a history of occupation and experience as a refugee people, Palestinian self-determination incorporated within an independent Palestinian state is the major Palestinian political goal.

IV

We recognize that resolving such a deep and complex conflict will involve lengthy, sustained negotiations. Yet we are encouraged by the spreading recognition that perpetuation of the status quo will be increasingly detrimental to both sides, as well as to world peace. Our hope for peace has been strengthened by recent developments, including:

- Yassir Arafat's statement (December, 1988) renouncing the use of terrorism, recognizing Israel's right to exist, and accepting the provisions of United Nations Resolutions #242 and #338 as a basis for negotiations;¹
- the U.S. decision, in light of the above, to begin dialogue with the Palestinian Liberation Organization;
- rapid movement within the international Jewish community toward favoring direct dialogue with representatives of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, some of which has already begun at an unofficial level.

Yet we are aware that a peaceful settlement can only be accomplished when human rights abuses against the Palestinians are ended. Therefore, we urge the U.S. government to assist both sides in developing conditions for negotiations which should ensure the following:

- a Palestinian delegation of that community's own choosing;
- an Israeli commitment to Palestinian self-determination, including the possibility for an independent Palestinian state;
- a Palestinian commitment to ensure Israel's legitimate security concerns.

1. Resolution #242 states that Israeli forces must withdraw from territories" occupied as a result of the 1967 war, urges ". . . respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force."

Resolution #338 calls for a cease-fire, the implementation of #242 and the initiation of negotiations.

We urge members of the ELCA to:

A. familiarize themselves with the history of the Middle East and current issues affecting the conflict so that they can be advocates for responsible political action; ²

B. pray for the coming of God's gift of peace in this area so that Christians, Muslims and Jews might live lives free from violence and fear.

2. See especially the study booklet, *Two Peoples . . . The Same Land*. ed. Carol J. Birkland (Augsburg Fortress, 1987).

The above message was approved by the Board of the Commission for Church in Society in March, 1989 and forwarded to the ELCA Church Council for action. It was amended and affirmed by the Church Council on April 16, 1989.

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