

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 3, 2013 at 12:30pm

Methodist conferences divest from companies involved in the Israeli occupation

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

NCR Today

"Little and by little" is the advice often given when attempting to achieve a big goal. Members of the United Methodist Church (UMC), concerned about Palestinian rights, seem to be applying that strategy in their push to divest their church's pension funds of companies involved with the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories.

Last month, UMC conferences in New England, Minnesota, the Pacific Northwest and upper New York voted to divest from occupation-sustaining companies, according to United Methodist Kairos Response, a global grass-roots network of clergy and laity spearheading the Methodist divestment campaign. The four U.S. conferences join five others that have taken similar action, bringing to a total of nine the number of regional bodies that have passed divestment resolutions.

The targeted companies include: Caterpillar, maker of bulldozers used to raze Palestinian homes; Motorola Solutions, provider of surveillance equipment for Israeli forces and Jewish-only settlements within the occupied territories; and Hewlett-Packard, which provides, sometimes through subsidiaries, the biometric monitoring system for Israeli checkpoints and information technology for the Israeli Navy.

A nonviolent form of economic protest, divestment is used to encourage companies to end their unjust practices. Methodists have applied the tactic to push for social change in the United States and abroad. In 1988, the UMC divested \$77 million from companies supporting apartheid in South Africa and in the 1990s dropped \$800,000 of Kmart stock for the selling of adult books.

The UMC General Conference, the church's national body, has been issuing statements condemning the Israeli occupation and settlement construction in the Palestinian Territories since the mid-1990s. In 2004,

it passed a strongly worded resolution that not only opposed the continued occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, but "the confiscation of Palestinian lands and water resources, the destruction of Palestinian homes, the continued building of illegal Jewish settlements, and any vision of a 'Greater Israel' that includes the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the whole of Jerusalem and its surrounding."

Additionally, church representatives have engaged in shareholder activism for many years but have failed, so far, to persuade companies like Caterpillar from prohibiting the use of their products for human rights violations against Palestinians.

Yet persuading the UMC to shift from statements of condemnation to economic action has proved to be an uphill battle. The divestment strategy is hotly contested among Protestant denominations and vigorously opposed by a number of Jewish organizations who regard calls to withhold funds from companies involved in the occupation as an attempt to delegitimize Israel.

Last spring, amid vigorous debate, the UMC's General Conference rejected 2-to-1 two divestment resolutions. Delegates voted instead to support positive investment in the Palestinian economy. They also endorsed a statement that denounced the occupation and settlements and called on all "nations to prohibit the import of Israeli products made on Palestinian land."

If passed, the resolutions would have affected the investment practices of the church's national pension fund, considered to be one of the largest religious pension funds in the country. Since their loss last spring, divestment activists have focused their attention on the investments of the regional conferences, which convene annually.

The UMC in the United States is made of 63 conferences. To have nine opt for divestment means one-seventh of all the regional bodies -- representing thousands of churches -- support withholding money from companies facilitating the Israeli occupation. An additional five more conferences have asked UMC's national pension fund to divest millions of dollars in holdings from occupation-profiting companies.

The Methodists are not alone in pressuring companies to clean up their act in Israel/Palestine. Last year, the giant U.S. pension fund TIAA-CREF divested \$72 million of Caterpillar stocks after a corporate ratings agency dumped the manufacturer from its list of socially responsible companies. The use of Caterpillar bulldozers in the razing of Palestinian homes was among the reasons given for the downgrade. The Friends Fiduciary committee, an investment firm serving more than 300 Quaker institutions, also nixed Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Veolia Environment from their portfolio. The latter company provides segregated water and transportation systems to Israeli settlers living in the West Bank.

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United Methodist Kairos Response reports the Mennonite church and American Friends Service Committee recently identified 29 companies, including the three mentioned earlier, as ineligible for investment because of their involvement in the Israeli occupation.

Hope is never a constant in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Israeli seizing of Palestinian lands outpaces the passage of divestment resolutions, and the announcement of these divestment victories comes amid news the Israeli Knesset has approved a plan that could result in the forcible relocation of 40,000 Bedouins (Israeli-Palestinians) from their villages in southern Israel. Nonetheless, it is heartening to learn of these divestment initiatives, to realize that the dollars funding this occupation are dwindling little and by little.

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