



UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

SIXTY YEARS AFTER MAY 14, 1948

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers." For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you." For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

-Psalm 122: 6-9

Sixty years ago on May 14, 1948, the State of Israel was born in the wake of the awful tragedy of the Shoah. The near destruction of the Jewish communities of Europe experienced in the Holocaust is still a living memory for survivors, and is a defining historical episode for Jews and for many others with profound theological significance for Christians as well. Open xenophobia as a social and political phenomenon marked the era, and the Holocaust was the most extreme and heinous manifestation of anti-Semitism. Jews were the largest—but not only—community to fall victim to this systematic campaign to “finally” eliminate non-Caucasians including Gypsies (Roma) and Slavs, homosexuals, the mentally ill and the infirm—any group of people not conforming to the “ideal.” Almost two weeks ago, the world marked Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) on May 2—a memorial marked by the United Church of Christ as well.

In sixty years, the modern State of Israel has grown and has established itself in the Middle East and the world. From the beginning, the United States and Israel have nurtured a deep relationship that continues to be marked by close cooperation and significant financial support. It is a relationship that was signaled by the almost immediate recognition of Israel by President Harry Truman, minutes after the birth of the new State of Israel. The United Church of Christ’s General Synod has recognized Israel’s right to secure borders and peace with its neighbors. Israel is the realization of a dream for many Jews and its existence is experienced as a crucial foundation of Jewish survival into the future, not only for the 40% of the world’s Jewish population which calls Israel home, but also for Jews around the world. Thus, for our Jewish neighbors, the observance of the 60th anniversary of Israel’s national life is more than a matter of pride; it is a memorial to the six million and a pledge that never again shall Jewish life face extinction.

The events celebrated in these days in Israel, though, are remembered differently by another population. The Palestinian people remember these events with the term *al-Nakba*, or “the disaster.” Over the same course of weeks in 1948 in which Israel was established and expanded, more than 700,000 Palestinians became refugees, fleeing to the West Bank and Jordan, Gaza and Egypt, and Lebanon and Syria. Land changed hands, homes changed owners, and people’s lives were changed.

The grievances of Palestinians affected directly and indirectly by events six decades ago have not been adequately addressed and no solutions have emerged that are acceptable to all parties. Israel has joined the community of nations and participates in it. Palestinians still have not attained their dream of sovereignty—they remain stateless and restricted. The voices of the very few in each community are sometimes the loudest: eliminate the other. The voices of many in both communities and beyond, including the United Church of Christ, proclaim: **all violence must end and peace with justice must prevail.**

The United Church of Christ's Christian ecumenical partners in the Middle East—both among Palestinians, and beyond—are concerned for the future of the Christian community and Church in the lands of the scripture if this conflict is not resolved and peace is not achieved. They have named this conflict, the most enduring of conflicts, as key to their own survival.

The UCC, through General Synod, has spoken clearly and often about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The General Synod has expressed in no uncertain terms its

- Opposition to violence (GS 23 [2001]);
- Affirmation of Israel's right to exist within secure and internationally recognized boundaries (GS 16 [1987], GS 18 [1991]);
- Assertion of the right of Palestinians to enjoy sovereignty in an independent, contiguous, and viable state of their own, within secure and recognized boundaries, neighboring Israel (GS 16 [1987], GS 17 [1989] & GS 18 [1991]);
- Support for a shared Jerusalem, capital of Israel and the Palestinian state, open to people of all faiths (GS 16 [1987], GS 19 [1993] & GS 21 [1997]);
- Identification of the Israeli Occupation of Palestinian land—illegal under international law—to be a major source of conflict; and calls for the end of construction and expansion of settlements, actions that unilaterally change the facts on the ground and prejudice any negotiated resolution of the conflict (GS18 [1991] & GS 21 [1997]);
- Support for a negotiated solution, including urging the US to play a role in such negotiations (GS 8 [1971], GS 17 [1989], GS 18 [1991]).
- Encouragement that the settings of the UCC advocate for the US government to curb military spending in the Middle East; contribute to groups and partners in Israel/Palestine actively working for peace and justice; and challenge the practices of corporations that realize profit from the continued violence, and which refuse to change those practices (GS 25 [2005]).

General Synod has also lamented the presence of the Separation Barrier as an obstacle to peace and reconciliation, as well as the hardships that it has caused Palestinians, calling for it to be removed, not to deny Israel's security, but to allow Palestinians their rights, and to increase positive engagement—the only way to true reconciliation.

As Israel observes its 60th anniversary, it is appropriate to acknowledge the joy of Jews around the world even amid the enduring security concerns Israelis experience. It is also appropriate to honor the determination of Palestinians to endure and to achieve statehood and security beyond the anguish of 40 years of Occupation. But a true occasion for celebration will only come when Israelis and Palestinians both enjoy rights of security, sovereignty, and self-determination without interference, imposition, or fear. More than anything else, today's anniversary should be an urgent call to peacemaking, and a challenge to leaders in the region and their partners around the world to make peace with justice for Israelis and Palestinians alike their highest priority.

The Rev. John H. Thomas
General Minister and President

The Rev. Cally Rogers-Witte
Executive Minister, Wider Church Ministries