

# Frequently Asked Questions on Just Peace in Palestine and Israel and The United Church of Canada (June 16, 2022)

## What is the General Council of The United Church of Canada?

General Council is the United Church's highest decision-making body. It normally meets every three years. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a delay of the 44th General Council by an additional year, and the choice was made to move the event online, extending from February through early August. The current meeting is the 44th General Council held since the church was founded in 1925 and is referred to informally as GC44. The 260 commissioners elected from the 16 regional councils and the National Indigenous Council are the decision-makers. For more information on the GC44 process, please see [GeneralCouncil44.ca](https://www.gc44.ca).

## What does it mean to talk about “just peace” in Palestine and Israel?

The United Church's Just Peace Task Group began to work in 2019, engaging in research and consulting with diverse voices in the Middle East region and in Canada. The group produced a report entitled “[In Support of Just Peace in Palestine and Israel: A Call to Costly Solidarity](#).” The church's General Council Executive then produced a draft proposal for consideration by this General Council, [GCE04 Just Peace in Palestine and Israel: A Call to Costly Solidarity](#). These and other proposals are being considered by commissioners in a series of learning sessions and through discussion in small groups. Then a facilitation team made up of respected church leaders (former Moderators and others) will deliberate on suggestions from discussion groups. That team will draft refined proposals to reflect the recommendations as necessary. Decisions are not expected until late July.

## Why is the United Church again addressing issues of peace in Palestine and Israel?

The United Church has a long history of responding to issues of injustice around the globe, and in particular to requests from partners for accompaniment and solidarity. The ongoing occupation of Palestinian Territories has been a critical part of the engagement of the church.

Despite efforts by governments, faith communities, and non-governmental organizations, peace has not been attained in Israel or the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The United Church of Canada speaks about a range of issues and is actively engaged in responding to calls from partners in [Colombia](#), [Philippines](#), and the [Korean Peninsula](#), as well as Palestine and Israel.

The last major review of the church's policy on Palestine and Israel was done in 2012. There are three **principal** areas in which the United Church's existing policies diverge from what **partners in Palestine and Israel and the [global ecumenical community](#)** are requesting:

- a. whether Israel's policies and practices toward Palestinians constitute apartheid according to international law
- b. recognition of Israel as a Jewish state

- c. adoption of economic and other measures of non-violent resistance against the Israeli occupation

### **What is the “Just Peace” proposal?**

[Proposal GCE04 Just Peace in Palestine and Israel](#) asks the church to agree to use a principles-based approach to its engagement in Palestine and Israel, and has suggested several **principles** that could be applied in determining policy statements and responses to concrete requests from partners or other bodies related to issues of just peace in Palestine and Israel. The proposal does not ask the church to take particular actions beyond applying this principle-based approach on an ongoing basis.

### **Why a principles-based approach?**

Through the consultations, the task group recognized that with the ever-changing situation on the ground, one concrete policy addressing a particular moment in time will quickly become unresponsive to the needs of partners. The principles speak to the decolonizing approach into which the church is living.

### **What are the “regional council” proposals?**

There are five proposals (CS01, FSL01, PM02, RC15-01, SW02) that do not arise from the report by the Task Group on Just Peace. These regional council proposals are similar in wording and do ask the church to take particular actions in relation to Palestine and Israel (e.g., giving public support to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement). Many of the proposals from regional councils were presented to their respective regional councils and transmitted to General Council 44 prior to the passing of GCE04 at the 43rd General Council Executive in November 2021. In various ways, these proposals draw from a Christian Palestinian initiative, *Kairos Palestine*, that urges the Christian community worldwide to “act justly and speak the truth” about Israeli policies and practices with regard to Palestinian rights under the occupation and the blockade of Gaza.

### **How does the United Church promote “Just Peace” without lapsing into antisemitism, or anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudices?**

Given the presence of antisemitism and anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudices in church and society, we need always to be vigilant. We do believe peace between Israelis and Palestinians is possible. We also believe we have a role to play among religious communities in overcoming antisemitism and other forms of racism and prejudice. As stated clearly in the Just Peace principles, The United Church of Canada has zero tolerance for antisemitism and all forms of racism.

### **What is antisemitism?**

“Literally meaning ‘opposed to Semites’ (i.e. Jews, Arabs and other Semitic peoples); usually used to mean hatred of Jews. The term was invented in Germany in the late 19th Century to give hatred of Jews a scientific ring in the context of a pseudoscientific study of the human races” (Just Peace report, p. 20).

Please see also: The United Church of Canada Statements on Antisemitism, key excerpts from documents and statements of The United Church of Canada, Office of Theological Leadership, March 30, 2022 (appended [below](#)).

**Why has the United Church chosen to use the [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#) as a resource in considering antisemitism instead of the [International Holocaust Remembrance Association’s \(IHRA\) definition](#), which is supported by the Government of Canada and many Canadian Jewish organizations?**

The United Church of Canada’s Theology and Inter-church Inter-faith Committee (TICIF) reviewed the definition of antisemitism as defined in the March 2021 Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA), and recommended that the Just Peace Task Group consider its use.

The Jerusalem Declaration responds to the IHRA Definition, the document that was adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2016. Because the IHRA Definition is open to different interpretations, it has caused confusion and generated controversy, hence weakening the fight against antisemitism. Jerusalem Declaration proponents have offered a clearer core definition and a coherent set of guidelines. They hope this will be helpful for monitoring and combatting antisemitism, as well as for educational purposes. They propose their non-legally binding Declaration as an alternative to the IHRA Definition.

**Why isn’t the United Church focusing on the situation of Christians elsewhere in the Middle East? What about Christians in Egypt or Syria?**

The United Church is a member of the World Council of Churches, which actively supports Christians throughout the Middle East. We are also an active partner with the Middle East Council of Churches, which represents many Christian communities in the region. The United Church continues to advocate for and support advocacy and accompaniment to partners in the Middle East, including in Syria and Lebanon. The United Church of Canada also continues to make available opportunities and support to congregations that are willing to offer protection to refugees in the form of resettlement through refugee sponsorship under its Sponsorship Agreement with the Government of Canada. For more information on refugee sponsorship, see the United Church’s [Sponsor a Refugee](#) page. Together with churches in Canada and around the world, the United Church has also called on governments in the Middle East to ensure the safety and security of all people living in conflict areas like Syria, especially vulnerable and minority groups, including Christians.

**What happened on April 6, 2022?**

During a learning session on proposals under consideration by General Council for just peace in Palestine and Israel, an open microphone captured an obscene phrase uttered by one of its participants while one of its Jewish guests was speaking.

The church’s Moderator, the Right Rev. Dr. Richard Bott, [apologized](#) immediately on behalf of the church, and called the incident “unacceptable.”

### **What steps did the United Church take following the April 6 incident?**

Church leaders met in subsequent days with the two guests and repeated the church's apology. The Moderator and the General Secretary met with the person who had uttered the phrase and who has also apologized. On April 27, commissioners and guests ("corresponding members") met online to share their experiences of the April 6 learning session. A possible outcome may be an educational program on antisemitism.

### **Why does the General Council have a new proposal entitled "Challenging Antisemitism in the United Church?"**

Given that we have zero tolerance for antisemitism, we are proposing an education program to ensure that all members of the United Church are engaged and equipped to counter antisemitism.

The proposal proposes an education program based on the key document and statement regarding Jewish-Christian relations in the United Church, [Bearing Faithful Witness](#), which was adopted by General Council in 2003. The statement acknowledges a history of antisemitism within Christianity as a whole and within the United Church and names antisemitism and anti-Judaism as affronts to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In addition, the statement calls for all members of the United Church "to be vigilant in resisting antisemitism and anti-Judaism in church and society." It affirms that "the State of Israel has the right to exist in peace and security."

### **How does the United Church relate to interfaith communities?**

The United Church of Canada values its relationships with other faith communities, whether through local interfaith groups where United Church members engage; participation in the [Canadian Interfaith Conversation](#); membership in the [Canadian Council of Churches](#), which also engages in interfaith work; and the relationship of the [United Network for Justice and Peace in Palestine and Israel](#) (UNJPPI) with Independent Jewish Voices. It is our continuing practice to invite interfaith guests, as well as a global and ecumenical partners, to accompany General Councils.

## **The United Church of Canada Statements on Antisemitism \***

Key excerpts from documents and statements of The United Church of Canada over the last 40 years or so regarding the church's commitment to be vigilant against antisemitism in church and in society.

### **1992 “response to Petition 81” (Petition 81 was passed by the 32nd General Council in 1988)**

This response was adopted by the Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee in 1992 and includes the following acknowledgement:

1. The history of Christian antisemitism has been largely suppressed and unacknowledged in The United Church of Canada. Some members of the church have come to recognize the roots of anti-Judaism in the New Testament and have learned to discern expressions of anti-Judaism in theology and liturgy. They have come to understand the causal relationship between anti-Judaism which is religious and theological and antisemitism which is racist and national. The United Church as a whole, however, failed to understand and acknowledge the anti-Judaism and antisemitism in our Christian tradition.

Further, “Vigorous and ongoing opposition to all forms of antisemitism must be strengthened and upheld throughout the whole church” (as noted in *Bearing Faithful Witness*, p. 73).

### **2002 GCE statement on antisemitism**

The United Church of Canada reiterates its passionate prayer for peace, security and justice for all peoples of the region as it recommits itself to denounce antisemitism whenever and wherever it occurs.

(Found on the United Church Commons under “What We Believe and Why” > “Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations.”)

### ***Bearing Faithful Witness, 2003***

Our key document and statement regarding Jewish–Christian relations in the United Church, *Bearing Faithful Witness*, was adopted by General Council in 2003. The statement acknowledges a history of antisemitism within Christianity as a whole and within the United Church and names antisemitism and anti-Judaism as affronts to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In addition, the statement calls for all members of the United Church “to be vigilant in resisting antisemitism and anti-Judaism in church and society.”

The document notes that critiques of policies and actions of any government, whether the government of Canada or the government of Israel, can be valid. However, a caution is raised about criticism that can cross over into antisemitism:

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\* Theological Leadership, General Council Office, March 2022.

The problem is to distinguish legitimate criticism from illegitimate assaults driven by a concealed prejudice.... Legitimate criticism, on the other hand, concerns itself with specific policies and actions on the part of Israeli leaders and governments, as well as the enduring problems and tensions of Israeli society. **Legitimate criticism is always able to distinguish between a regime and a people**, between what is transient and what is enduring in the history of a particular country.

(In a reflection on “Antisemitism and the State of Israel,” p. 11–12, emphasis added)

The document itself provides additional in-depth study material for United Church members to engage in further learning about Judaism and the problematic history of interpretation of Old and New Testament texts by Christians. Guidelines for addressing antisemitism in scripture passages and hymns in worship, Sunday school, and Bible study groups are included.

### **The United Church of Canada Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism, October 2009**

In reference to the rationale for creating *Bearing Faithful Witness*:

The rationale for the work acknowledged there is increasing anti-Judaism, antisemitism, white supremacy, and neo-Nazism in Canada and other countries that is often perpetrated in the name of Jesus Christ. Equally important, however, were the following recognitions: that rarely in the church is Jesus ever referred to as a Jew; that no other religion is as closely related to Christianity as Judaism; that the Christian God is the God of Israel; that Christian scripture includes the scriptures of Israel; and that the hope of Israel is the Christian hope, too: earth under God’s rule of peace, prosperity, and justice for all.

The passion of many in the church for justice for Palestinians continues to contribute to tensions with the Jewish community. This was evidenced this past summer [2009] in background material to a series of motions forwarded to the General Council from a regional body of the church. The church’s decision to “reject and repudiate” these background materials was a reflection of the experience in 1972,<sup>†</sup> and an indication that passion for a just resolution to the conflict in the Middle East can “cross the line” into antisemitic language.

The war years and the Shoah (Holocaust) are clearly the bleakest part of the world’s history of antisemitism. During this time, the United Church in fact evidenced a deep concern for the safety of Jewish people. Two months before Kristallnacht, the General Council voiced its concern for the Jewish people.

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<sup>†</sup> In 1972 the United Church *Observer* published an article titled “How the Zionists Manipulate Your News,”

Following the Nazi pogrom, the church was filled with denunciations and forwarded scores of pro-Jewish, pro-refugee resolutions to the government of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King. The *Observer's* predecessor attacked the Canadian government for dragging its feet and criticized the church for its earlier silence. In a 1939 editorial it said, "To keep out others, when our house is largely empty, is to be guilty of a political immoralism as grave in its implications as the crude immoralism of the Nazis." That year, pro-refugee resolutions were passed by virtually every Conference of the church from coast to coast.

No one is free from guilt for the Shoah. The church in particular must recognize the connections between Christian theology and the Nazi rationale that underlay the Holocaust. If the church believes that never again must this be allowed to happen, then the church's beliefs must be examined for their complicity and changed.