



Statement on the Methodist Church response to Memorials M37-50 on the situation in Israel/Palestine

The last few months has seen some quite remarkable events in the build-up and during the Methodist Conference of 2019.

First, and of great significance, was the submission of a Memorial to the Conference from no less than 12 Circuits and 5 Synods across Britain, pertaining to the situation in Israel and Palestine¹. The Memorial was passed overwhelmingly by the Circuits and Districts with approximately 800 individual votes in favour.

The Memorial noted with concern the deteriorating situation for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, highlighting the continual flouting of international law by Israel, the ongoing blockade of Gaza, the violence inflicted upon Palestinians including those killed peacefully protesting in the Great March of Return, and the continued building of settlements. It went on to challenge Conference to make clear its opposition to these human rights abuses, and specifically to revise its current investment policy on Israel and Palestine to make investments in companies profiting from the occupation impossible, and divest from those that were already doing so.²

The Memorial is an accurate, realistic and persuasive document on the current situation in Israel and Palestine. The reference to the continual denial of Palestinian human rights is well documented by development and humanitarian agencies on the ground, as well as the United Nations, the UN Human Rights Council, and governments across the world. The illegality of the settlements, route of the separation barrier, pillage of Palestinian natural resources and arrest and detention of Palestinians (including minors) is irrefutable under international law. Deaths and injuries to Palestinians and Israelis from the conflict are monitored by the Israeli information centre B'Tselem. Figures revealing the disproportionality of Palestinian fatalities, 24 to 1 over the past decade, are revelatory. The Memorial should be

¹ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/11944/conf-2019-memorials-to-the-conference.pdf> M37-M50

² The memorial specifically directs Conference to the publication [Investing for Peace](#) and the [recent decision by the Quakers](#) to screen out any companies profiting from the illegal occupation of Palestine.



commended for its accurate portrayal of the unbearable life for Palestinians living under violent military control and illegal dispossession.

In the light of the above, it seems obvious to ask the question ‘What can the Methodist Church do?’ Indeed this question has been asked before on several occasions, and the Methodist Church has responded. Memorials and Conference reports in 2010, 2014 and in the years before led to the formation of several Methodist policies, including that which was being questioned in this Memorial – the Investment Policy statement on Israel/Palestine (updated 2016)³. The Methodist Church in the past has taken significant, bold (and some would call brave) steps to align itself with the oppressed, and to speak out in support of Palestinian self-determination, and for this it should be applauded.

It was therefore disappointing to see that despite the overwhelming support from Methodists across the country, the reply from the Memorials Committee in June *was to decline each and every version of this Memorial submitted by the 12 circuits and 5 synods*. The reply included many a sympathetic comment in agreement with the Memorial, highlighting that the situation has deteriorated for Palestinians, and raising its own concerns about the ongoing expansion of the settlement enterprise, and the recent introduction of Israel’s Nation State Law. But ultimately despite these concerns summarised that *the current investment policy adequately reflects the position of Conference* and therefore declined the Memorial.

With reference to the Investment Policy, the reply to the Memorial also commends the work of the Joint Advisory Committee on the Ethics of Investment (JACEI) and mentions specifically the work of the Central Finance Board and Connexional teams in engaging with several companies funded by the Methodist Church with business activities in Israel and Palestine. Of particular significance is the mention of the CFB’s engagement with HeidelbergCement, a company that for several years has been under scrutiny for its dubious dealings in both quarrying land in the occupied Palestinian Territories for the profit of Israel, and in providing cement for the constructions of Israeli settlements in the West Bank⁴.

³ <http://www.cfbmethodistchurch.org.uk/ethics/policy-statements/cfb-israel-palestine-policy-statement.html>

⁴ <https://whoprofits.org/company/heidelbergcement/>



It looks on the surface that the Investment Policy is robust and doing its job. But does it hold up to scrutiny? Does it adhere to the principled view the Methodist Church takes on the rights of Palestinians and Israelis to justice, security and freedom?

Section 3.1 of the Policy states the following:

“The CFB aims not to invest in any company that is directly or materially involved in activities that are in breach of international law, or is complicit in violations of human rights as defined by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

This immediately raises the question of why a company like HeidelbergCement is in the investment portfolio in the first place? As mentioned previously there is a wealth of documented evidence as to their current practice in the occupied Palestinian territory. The exploitation of Palestinian natural resources by either the occupying power or by private companies given access by the occupying power is prohibited by the Fourth Geneva Convention and Hague Regulations, and therefore in complete contravention of international law. So how does a company like HeidelbergCement slip through these guidelines? And as this company has, how many others are also invested in that profit from the Occupation and are violating the very Policy that the Methodist Church put in place to begin with?

The answer to the latter is, several. Siemens, Volvo, and HSBC are all listed in the investment portfolio in the Central Finance Board’s 2018 Financial Report⁵. All have been listed and identified by databases as profiting from the Occupation. Volvo provides heavy machinery used for the demolition of Palestinian houses in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, construction of Israeli settlements and construction of the Separation Wall⁶. Siemens provide traffic control systems for West Bank settler-only roads (which Palestinians are forbidden to travel on), the perimeter security system to the Gilboa Prison in Israel that holds Palestinian political prisoners, and it has tendered for the electrification of the Tel-Aviv/Jerusalem high speed train which will cross the Green Line and be built on Palestinian land yet only serve

⁵ <http://www.cfbmethodistchurch.org.uk/downloads/CFB-financial-statements-2018.pdf>

⁶ <https://whoprofits.org/company/volvo-group-ab-volvo/>



Israelis⁷. HSBC have been the target of an international campaign led by War on Want due to their ties with companies supplying weapons to Israel⁸

The current Investment Policy of the Methodist Church is not doing enough if companies such as the above slip through its guidelines. But perhaps of greater concern is the current strategy to influence change through *'dialogue and constructive engagement with companies'* (section 3.3 of the investment policy).

In the reply to the Memorial there are two statements:

'In the case of every engagement so far, JACEI has reported that the company concerned has changed its practice in relation to activities in the occupied Palestinian territories' and

'The report of JACEI to the 2019 Conference includes a reference to JACEI's engagement with HeidelbergCement with respect to the Nahal Raba quarry in the West Bank near the Palestinian village of al-Zawiya and the Israeli settlement of Elkana. The Conference notes a statement of intent by HeidelbergCement that its operating company, Hanson Israel, will divest itself of the Nahal Raba quarry enterprise.'

The first statement appears encouraging. But on reflection, what has engagement achieved? If we take the example of HeidelbergCement, they have been in the CFB's investment portfolio for around 7 years. During that time they have expanded their quarries, confiscated Palestinian land around them, and delivered cement to settlements, all the while accruing profits at the expense of Palestinians. Would not a principled stance of divestment years ago have sent a stronger message?

And what of the latest decision of HeidelbergCement, as reported by JACEI, to 'divest itself of the Nahal Raba quarry'? That sounds like a positive response. However, research by the Israeli organisation Who Profits has uncovered the following:

⁷ <https://whoprofits.org/company/siemens/>

⁸ <https://waronwant.org/hsbc>



'The company (HeidelbergCement) has recently been granted a license to expand its quarry in Nahal Raba, this time through confiscating lands of Rafat (which is another adjacent village)... This is especially important since the company has been claiming for the past year to close or sell off the quarry (there is no concrete evidence of that, but we have received this info through partners and activists who have contacted the company or attended shareholders meetings).'

We know that companies often use 'constructive engagement' as a smokescreen. They can continue to dialogue with concerned investors for years without making actual changes to their policies and practices on the ground. Eventually they may well sell up or extract themselves from the region, but this is often due to the divestment of large financial backers (as was the case in the campaign against Veolia⁹), rather than the on-going dialogue from investors. Meanwhile what has the cost been to those without the power to challenge? What has the cost been to the communities in the Palestinian villages around Nahal Rahba? Who has been calling for justice on their behalf?

Despite the declining of the Memorial, and the lack of change to the Investment Policy, Methodists across the country should be proud of their achievements this year. Two positive outcomes from this debate are worthy of note. The first is groundswell of support for justice for Palestinians that is evident in the lay people of the Methodist Church. This is where the heart and soul of the Church lies, and it placed itself firmly on the side of justice this year. Secondly is the surprising decision by the Central Finance Board to divest all holdings in HeidelbergCement, which apparently happened in May this year. Of course, financial reasons were stated, but Methodists can live in hope that this was also an ethical and moral decision.

Ultimately, money talks. For too long now our Churches have taken the soft approach of engagement, using disinvestment as a last resort. We know that the situation in Israel and Palestine is deteriorating. Now is not the time for years of dialogue, now is the time for economic pressure. It is one of the only ways we have to influence change. In the words of Archbishop Tutu;

⁹ Powerful and creative local campaigning persuaded local municipalities in dozens of cities to exclude Veolia from public contracts or to not renew contracts when they expired. Veolia lost an estimated \$20 billion in contracts.



Sabeel-Kairos

Taking Action for Palestine



“We learned in South Africa that the only way to end Apartheid peacefully was to force the powerful to the table through economic pressure.”

We hope that the Methodist Church continues to stand alongside the oppressed and poor wherever they are in the world, and to be a voice for the voiceless in situations of injustice. As part of this, we hope it has the courage and determination to challenge itself, when necessary, to review and change its own practices.

Statement by Sabeel-Kairos UK
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