

Endorsing Distribution of Palestinian Christians' Open Letter to the Western Church

RECOMMENDATION

The San Francisco Presbytery overtures the 226th (2024) General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to:

1. Receive with gratitude and endorse the distribution of "A Call for Repentance: An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians":
2. Direct the Stated Clerk to distribute the letter to all PC(USA) agencies, mid-councils, and congregations.

RATIONALE

This letter speaks for itself.

A Call for Repentance:

An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians

"Learn to do right; seek justice; defend the oppressed" (Isa 1:17).

We, at the undersigned Palestinian Christian institutions and grassroots movements, grieve and lament the renewed cycle of violence in our land. As we were about to publish this open letter, some of us lost dear friends and family members in the atrocious Israeli bombardment of innocent civilians on October 19, 2023, Christians included, who were taking refuge in the historical Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza. Words fail to express our shock and horror with regard to the on-going war in our land. We deeply mourn the death and suffering of all people because it is our firm conviction that all humans are made in God's image. We are also profoundly troubled when the name of God is invoked to promote violence and religious national ideologies.

Further, we watch with horror the way many western Christians are offering unwavering support to Israel's war against the people of Palestine. While we recognize the numerous voices that have spoken and continue to speak for the cause of truth and justice in our land, we write to challenge western theologians and church leaders who have voiced uncritical support for Israel and to call them to repent and change. Sadly, the actions and double standards of some Christian leaders have gravely hurt their Christian witness and have severely distorted their moral judgment with regards to the situation in our land.

We come alongside fellow Christians in condemning all attacks on civilians, especially defenseless families and children¹. Yet, we are disturbed by the silence of many church leaders and theologians when it is Palestinian civilians who are killed. We are also horrified by the refusal of some western Christians to condemn the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine, and, in some instances, their justification of and support for the occupation. Further, we are appalled by how some Christians have legitimized Israel's ongoing indiscriminate attacks on Gaza, which have, so far, claimed the lives of more than 3,700 Palestinians,² the majority of

¹ We explicitly include the atrocities against Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023

² The number is now much higher.

whom are women and children. These attacks have resulted in the wholesale destruction of entire neighborhoods and the forced displacement of over one million Palestinians. The Israeli military has utilized tactics that target civilians such as the use of white phosphorus, the cutting off of water, fuel, and electricity, and the bombardment of schools, hospitals, and places of worship—including the heinous massacre at Al-Ahli Anglican-Baptist Hospital and the bombardment of the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius which wiped out entire Palestinian Christian families.

Moreover, we categorically reject the myopic and distorted Christian responses that ignore the wider context and the root causes of this war: Israel's systemic oppression of the Palestinians over the last 75 years since the Nakba, the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Palestine, and the oppressive and racist military occupation that constitutes the crime of apartheid. This is precisely the horrific context of oppression that many western Christian theologians and leaders have persistently ignored, and even worse, have occasionally legitimized using a wide range of Zionist theologies and interpretations. Moreover, Israel's cruel blockade of Gaza for the last 17 years has turned the 365-square-kilometer Strip into an open-air prison for more than two million Palestinians—70% of whom belong to families displaced during the Nakba—who are denied their basic human rights. The brutal and hopeless living conditions in Gaza under Israel's iron fist have regrettably emboldened extreme voices of some Palestinian groups to resort to militancy and violence as a response to oppression and despair. Sadly, Palestinian non-violent resistance, which we remain wholeheartedly committed to, is met with rejection, with some western Christian leaders even prohibiting the discussion of Israeli apartheid as reported by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and B'Tselem, and as long asserted by both Palestinians and South Africans.

Time and again, we are reminded that western attitudes towards Palestine-Israel suffer from a glaring double standard that humanizes Israeli Jews while insisting on dehumanizing Palestinians and whitewashing their suffering. This is evident in general attitudes towards the recent Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip that killed thousands of Palestinians...³

...⁴ Regrettably, many western Christians across wide denominational and theological spectra adopt...⁵theologies and interpretations that justify war, making them complicit in Israel's

³ Cut for word limit.

⁴ Here we have removed a portion of the letter that places Israel's treatment of Palestinians in an historical context that includes colonialism, enslavement, apartheid, the American use of atomic weapons in Japan and its indiscriminate bombings of civilian populations in Iraq and Afghanistan. First, we cut to get under the word limit for overtures. Second, we think these are serious issues that deserve earnest conversation, yet we decided to set that conversation aside for another day so that we can concentrate on the crisis at hand. We do not want to be distracted by questions about the legitimacy of certain historical comparisons while more than 10,000 children have been slaughtered, more than two million civilians have been displaced, and a crisis of mass starvation is imminent.

⁵ Here we edited the word "Zionist," which means different things to different people. We do not want debates over the precise meaning of a word to distract from the reality and extent of the unmitigated catastrophe ongoing in Gaza.

violence and oppression. Some are also complicit in the rise of the anti-Palestinian hate speech, which we are witnessing in numerous western countries and media outlets today.

Although many Christians in the West do not have a problem with the theological legitimization of war, the vast majority of Palestinian Christians do not condone violence—not even by the powerless and occupied. Instead, Palestinian Christians are fully committed to the way of Jesus in creative nonviolent resistance (Kairos Palestine, §4.2.3), which uses “the logic of love and draw[s] on all energies to make peace” (§4.2.5). Crucially, we reject all theologies and interpretations that legitimize the wars of the powerful. We strongly urge western Christians to come alongside us in this. We also remind ourselves and fellow Christians that God is the God of the downtrodden and the oppressed, and that Jesus rebuked the powerful and lifted up the marginalized. This is at the heart of God’s conception of justice. Therefore, we are deeply troubled by the failure of some western Christian leaders and theologians to acknowledge the biblical tradition of justice and mercy, as first proclaimed by Moses (Deut 10:18; 16:18–20; 32:4) and the prophets (Isa 1:17; 61:8; Mic 2:1–3, 6:8; Amos 5:10–24), and as exemplified and embodied in Christ (Matt 25:34–46; Luke 1:51–53; 4:16–21).

Finally, and we say it with a broken heart, we hold western church leaders and theologians who rally behind Israel’s wars accountable for their theological and political complicity in the Israeli crimes against the Palestinians, which have been committed over the last 75 years. We call upon them to reexamine their positions and to change their direction, remembering that God “will judge the world in justice” (Acts 17:31). We also remind ourselves and our Palestinian people that our *sumud* (“steadfastness”) is anchored in our just cause and our historical rootedness in this land. As Palestinian Christians, we also continue to find our courage and consolation in the God who dwells with those of a contrite and humble spirit (Isa 57:15). We find courage in the solidarity we receive from the crucified Christ, and we find hope in the empty tomb. We are also encouraged and empowered by the costly solidarity and support of many churches and grassroots faith movements around the world, challenging the dominance of ideologies of power and supremacy. We refuse to give in, even when our siblings abandon us. We are steadfast in our hope, resilient in our witness, and continue to be committed to the Gospel of faith, hope, and love, in the face of tyranny and darkness. “In the absence of all hope, we cry out our cry of hope. We believe in God, good and just. We believe that God’s goodness will finally triumph over the evil of hate and of death that still persist in our land. We will see here ‘a new land’ and ‘a new human being’, capable of rising up in the spirit to love each one of his or her brothers and sisters” (Kairos Palestine, §10).

Your Kingdom come!

Full text and Palestinian Christian Endorsers at:

<https://www.change.org/p/an-open-letter-from-palestinian-christians-to-western-church-leaders-and-theologians?signed=true>