

**‘DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS’:  
Interpreting the “Declaration for a Just Peace Between Palestine and Israel”  
in Interfaith Settings**

developed by the Rev. Elice Higginbotham, UCC PIN steering committee

*Dear UCC – Why did General Synod vote last summer in favor of the Palestinians over Israel? Aren’t the Palestinians trying to eliminate Israel?*

*Dear UCC – I’m having a hard time bringing up the Declaration for a Just Peace Between Palestine and Israel with my congregation. We have a really good working relationship with the synagogue across the street – we provide childcare for each other’s kids doing High Holy Days and Holy Week worship, and we share in an Interfaith Community Seder every Passover. These people are our friends! We don’t know how we’re going to answer their questions about what our denomination is saying.*

*Dear Pastor – We need to talk. My Jewish spouse and I have always respected each other’s beliefs and faith practices. But now – I don’t know what to do when what the UCC is saying about Israel and Palestine comes up – it’s so painful for both of us. I love our church, but I’m wondering if I need to look for another one. Can you help me?*

*Dear UCC interfaith colleague/friend/neighbor – Hey, the AJC has called out your denomination as “antisemitic” because of the position you have taken against Israel. Didn’t you call Israel “sinful”???!! What gives?*

The Declaration for a Just Peace between Palestine and Israel presents both a challenging public stance on the part of our United Church of Christ and a challenging moment in the life of our churches as our resolution is disseminated, discussed and implemented. As you talk about and advocate on behalf of justice and peace in Palestine-Israel, questions like the ones above may be coming to you from:

- Fellow participants in interfaith coalitions who work together around common concerns
- Clergy colleagues, as well as laity, in your own community with whom you may have worked hard to develop supportive interfaith relationships
- Church members with Jewish spouses or partners
- Church members who read the news, but are not well-informed about the occupation of Palestine

UCC/PIN is here to help you. We offer these thoughts, plus some resources, below, to support you as you confront these difficult conversations in your own advocacy work. We are aware that these conversations are *difficult* by definition. That is, there are no short easy answers to questions that will satisfy all parties, certainly not in one encounter. Talking about Palestine and Israel arouses deep emotions about identity and about feeling safe in the world. There is no technique or strategy that will quickly or easily calm those emotions or allay those fears. The kind of change we call for takes time and effort and it is... *difficult*. It means enduring the pain of questioning deeply held beliefs. So articulating such a prophetic, controversial position means bearing the burden of encountering difference and disagreement. The resources included here

are aimed at helping you talk about the UCC's commitment while still making every effort to maintain relationships of good communication and mutual respect with those who may differ with us.

If you'd like to start with a little inspiration for yourself, you might wish to watch "Israel's Oppression of Palestinians: It is Apartheid," (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-rC2HHqIVk>) the second in a series of four webinars produced by UCC/PIN is a resource for our resolution. This webinar features a Palestinian Christian leader, an Israeli human rights activist, and a rabbi, now living in the U.S. but who grew up in apartheid South Africa. Near the end of the session, the interviewer invites each speaker to reflect personally on the challenges and stresses of advocating a difficult and unpopular position, and on what keeps them going.

Consider, as you think about the difficult conversations...

*1) What is your objective?*

This is a more difficult question than it might seem at first. We are advocates for human rights – we are passionate about justice for Palestinians. As Americans of faith, we see the role our own government plays in failing to recognize Palestinian rights, and we want to engage others to increase this understanding and grow constituency for changing our own U.S. policy. But interfaith conversations are not best approached as debates over who's right and who's wrong. Instead, our objective is to maintain and build relationships and keep communication open. We will be talking with people whose experiences, needs and anxieties are very different from our own; if we listen respectfully, without criticism or arguing, we are much more likely to be heard respectfully in return. Take seriously that what we say may be very painful for others to hear. Listen closely for what people care about, for what experiences and assumptions underlie what they care about, and where there might be common ground.

*2) Approach with an attitude of humility*

The resolution categorically condemns antisemitism, stating specifically that: “we reject any theology or ideology, including Christian Zionism, Supercessionism, antisemitism, or anti-Islam bias that would privilege or exclude any one nation, race, culture, or religion within God's universal economy of grace.” We Christians nonetheless are heirs to a painful history of antisemitic beliefs and behavior by Western Christianity in the past; some of this belief still exists to this day. Acknowledge that history has left scars and remaining wounds. Accept that you do not know everything, and that you may learn something from the position of the other. Respect that others may be of a different opinion than you are. Be willing to agree to disagree while still remaining respectful.

*3) Don't expect to change minds.*

Think of this as a pastoral task: you want your conversation partner to feel listened to and taken seriously. People bring a deeply-rooted sense of identity, often profound fears and passionate loyalties to this conversation. Respect that depth of feeling. Minds may change, but it is likely to be a slow process that probably won't happen right there in front of you. Your partner will only be open to change if the atmosphere is not antagonistic, if what s/he brings to the conversation is also heard and valued.

#### 4) *What are your stories?*

Personal stories and experiences are more effective than dogma or analysis in gaining a thoughtful hearing. Rather than arguing about your respective positions, be curious about how both of you came to them, what fears and hopes undergird them. If someone says or implies that support for Palestinians is antisemitic, ask: “What leads you to that conclusion?” Encourage the person questioning you to talk about her/his own experience with Israel and with Palestinians. Share your own encounters with Palestine and Palestinians and/or with Jewish friends in Israel or the U.S. who support Palestinian rights; share what you have observed and learned. Talk about your own background, about what you first thought or knew about Palestine and Israel, and what may have caused you to think differently over time. Look for the values you may share. If you’re responding to questions about the resolution without having had a direct experience with Palestine yourself, consider creating an occasion when someone with personal experience can be invited to join the conversation.

#### Different Settings for Conversation

##### 1) *The One-Off*

Sometimes you’re just put on the spot – someone hits you with a question when you’re not expecting it, perhaps a critical, antagonistic one. You want to stand by your position, but you also don’t want to escalate the tension. You’d do well to look over NOW some sources of relatively brief answers to questions and criticisms that are often raised, so you won’t be caught flat-footed.

- Take a look at the *FAQs* link (<https://www.uccpin.org/FAQ>) on **uccpin.org**, prepared in advance of General Synod for help in interpreting the Declaration; many of these are questions that will continue to be raised.
- Jewish Voice for Peace has an excellent *Guide to Difficult Conversations about Israel and Palestine* on its website (<https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/conversations/>) designed for just these situations. It obviously was prepared by and for Jews, but the information it contains is readily adaptable to other settings with a diversity of participants.

##### 2) *Education in your own congregation or community*

Have you already been surprised by how many news-reading, relatively up-to-date members of your own church or community setting seem to know little about the occupation of Palestine, or U.S. policy regarding Israel? If you haven’t yet done so, NOW may be just the time to make use of the *Resolution Study and Reflection Guide* found at [uccpin.org](https://www.uccpin.org) (<https://www.uccpin.org/endorse>). Your own fellow church members probably have diverging views on Palestine-Israel and on the Declaration. This resource both educates and motivates discussion in a supportive group setting.

Look for, and consult with, allies. Plan a program together.

- Jewish Voice for Peace (<https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/>) – look for a chapter or contact in your area.
- Seek out Palestinian Christian activists. Connect with the Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace (<https://www.pcap-us.org/>). Or a local solidarity group may include Palestinian Christians able to speak from the perspective of their faith.

While we Christians know that Palestine is the birthplace of our faith, many Western Christians seldom think about present-day Palestinians as the descendants of those first believers, still living and practicing Christianity in their homeland to this day.

3) *Be alert for opportunities for longer-term dialogue or study*

It's all about communication and relationships. If questions are raised by Jewish or other interfaith colleagues or acquaintances, consider deepening the encounter with a longer-term study or dialogue series among two or more congregations or groups of differing faiths.

- One comprehensive resource focused on Palestine-Israel and produced specifically for use by Jewish and Christian groups is *Enabling Dialogue About the Land, A Resource Book for Jews and Christians* (Paulist Press, 2020 <https://www.paulistpress.com/Products/5495-1/enabling-dialogue-about-the-land.aspx>). This collection of in-depth essays from Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars and theologians concludes with a substantial appendix, "A Curriculum for Dialogue about Israel-Palestine." A detailed process and complete resources for group reading and study, ranging from three to six or more sessions, are included.
- *Focus: Palestine* (<http://wcrch.ch/justice/palestine>) is an extensive, fully-downloadable free print and video handbook from the World Communion of Reformed Churches, of which the United Church of Christ is a member.

## More Resources

### Perspectives on the land

A 23-minute video of the virtual book launch for *Enabling Dialogue About the Land*, above, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44Q3kj-bKEo>) is available, featuring the book's editors, and offering an introduction and overview of the issues addressed in depth in the essay collection, and to the dialogue process it aims to facilitate.

*A Land With a People: Palestinians and Jews Confront Zionism*, A collection of personal stories, history, poetry and art (<https://monthlyreview.org/product/a-land-with-a-people/>), as well as a video of the book's launch which features several of the contributors sharing their own experiences (<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLG3O6UFukFTE6c5U9fsJ6VueZTD99Ly9B>).

### Perspectives on antisemitism

The critique that our UCC Declaration is "antisemitic" can be intimidating for those who work patiently and tenaciously at improving interfaith relations. However, antisemitism is defined and understood differently by different persons and groups, including Jews and Jewish organizations. Some definitions conflate discrimination against Jews with criticism of Israel. Our resolution reflects an understanding, shared by Jewish Voice for Peace and others, that antisemitism means denigrating or discriminating against Jews for being Jews, whereas criticizing the state of Israel is not inherently antisemitic.

- Jewish Voice for Peace offers *On Antisemitism, Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice* (<http://onantisemitism.com/>), essays by clergy, academics, activists and others involved in justice work.
- *Wrestling in the Daylight, A Rabbi's Path to Palestinian Solidarity* (<https://justworldbooks.com/books-by-title/wrestling-daylight-2nd-edition/>), by

Rabbi Brant Rosen. Rosen, a Reconstructionist congregational rabbi and JVP leader, recounts his personal journey from liberal Zionism to activist solidarity with Palestinians. In a 40-minute video of a 2013 speaking engagement, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lcnmg7hTJeE>), Rosen speaks personally and movingly of his own experiences and how he was led to change his views on Israel and Palestinians.