

Breaking Down the Walls

PART ONE: WE BEAR WITNESS

A. Introduction

Increasingly, we find that we are living in a world with numerous walls and barriers. These are walls that force us to live in sometimes small and isolated compartments. These walls and the resulting compartments often prevent us from seeing and understanding the lives of others who live in different compartments or on the other side of the wall from us. These walls are leading many to live in fear, isolation, and poverty; therefore, preventing all parties from living in peace.

This is no more obvious than with the conflict in Israel and Palestine. Ideological, theological, political, economic, and even physical walls have been erected that are preventing the establishment of a just peace in the Middle East.

Our Presbyterian confessions clearly affirm God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the church’s mission of reconciliation as being the heart of the gospel. Since Christ “. . . has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us,”¹ we are entrusted as “ambassadors of Christ” with this “message of reconciliation.”² We are called to be those who work to break down these walls that stand in the way of the realization of God’s peaceful and just kingdom.

The Middle East Study Committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which was mandated by our 218th General Assembly (2008) and appointed by our current and two previous Moderators, has taken seriously this gospel mandate of seeking to break through these walls of hostility and to envision appropriate steps that we recommend which our church, our nation, and the other parties involved in this conflict take.

Our voice is one, which is priestly, prophetic, and pastoral. The first voice that will be heard in this report is a priestly voice speaking of our theological understanding of justice, Zion, the land, and reconciliation. The next voice is both prophetic and pastoral. Prophets and pastors are called first and foremost to truth telling. From the vast experiences and study of the members of this committee, from numerous meetings with people and leaders of diverse communities throughout the Middle East (including Iraqi and Iranian church leaders), from meetings with political and religious leaders in Washington and New York with a wide spectrum of perspectives, from debating and challenging one another, and from traveling together for two weeks in the Middle East³, we strive in this report to tell the truth as we see it and understand it. Based on this, we are compelled to speak pastorally to ourselves as a denomination and our partners in the region, and prophetically to other powers engaged in this ongoing conflict.

Our voice is one that has a definite sense of urgency. The time for action from all parties is now. We are witnessing a rapidly closing window of opportunity for action. Events are happening every day now in Israel and Palestine and the Middle East that are making it

¹ Eph. 2:14.

² 2 Cor. 5:16–20.

³ The Middle East Study Committee is deeply thankful for the gracious welcome and engaging conversations that we had during this time with our Middle Eastern Christian partners, their Jewish and Muslim neighbors, and other political and religious leaders.

increasingly difficult to bring about this just peace for which we all pray. If we do not act now, our fear is that we will all look back with deep regret and shameful guilt. Our spirit, though, is not one of fear, but rather of hope. We do believe that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will once again speak with a clear, priestly, prophetic, and pastoral voice.

Our prayer is that the 219th General Assembly (2010) and our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will seriously and prayerfully discuss and approve the contents of this report, embrace the recommended actions, and recommit our church to being an agent of reconciliation—to being a church that will wholeheartedly work to break down the ideological, theological, economic, and political walls that stand in the way of a just peace. It is also our prayer that the whole church will then engage in a thoughtful and prayerful study of this report with a view to taking significant actions toward fulfilling God’s vision of peace for all peoples.