
Cultivating a Common Mind on Israel-Palestine

The 2017 Mennonite Church USA Consensus Resolution “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine”

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In July 2017, the Mennonite Church (MC) USA delegate assembly in Orlando, Florida, adopted the resolution “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine.”¹

This action was more than simply a vote on a statement; it was the culmination of a six-year process of deliberation and discernment that involved thousands of church members.

Unlike statements from other denominations, this resolution addresses Mennonite complicity both in policies of military occupation of the Palestinian people and in antisemitism. The resolution laments that complicity and commits the denomination to take concrete next steps in both arenas.

Despite the fact that theological and political perspectives within the denomination are wide ranging, the 2017 resolution was adopted with 98 percent of the 548 delegates voting in favor of it.²

This article is a short summary of the framework and content of the resolution and of the process surrounding its adoption, followed by a reflection on how this

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1 Mennonite Church USA, “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine: A Resolution for Mennonite Church USA,” 2017, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IP-Resolution.pdf>.

2 “Mennonites Choose ‘Third Way’ on Israel and Palestine,” Mennonite Church USA News, July 6, 2017, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mennonites-choose-third-way-israel-palestine/>; Daoud Kuttab, “Christian Consumers: How the Mennonite Church Came to Boycott Israel,” *The New Arab*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/conscious-consumers-how-mennonite-church-came-support-bds>.

faith community discerned together and came to a common mind and substantive shared commitments on a contentious set of issues. I served as Director of Holistic Witness for Mennonite Church USA during this time and share these reflections as a member of the team that was deeply involved in this process.

The Resolution

The “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine” resolution addresses the injustices of Israel’s military occupation, with the goal of seeking a just peace in Israel-Palestine. It also opposes antisemitism and seeks right relationship with Jewish communities. The resolution states that “the suffering of these two groups”—Palestinian and Jewish peoples—“has too often been set one against the other. We recognize, rather, that the legacy of Jewish suffering is intertwined with the suffering of Palestinians. Palestinians have often borne the consequences of persecution of Jews” (lines 10–12).

Some advocates for justice for Palestinians, as well as some Mennonites and Jewish partners, urged us not to address these issues together. A focus on antisemitism, we were told, has often been used to avoid or delay addressing the injustices suffered by Palestinians. To address Palestinian suffering, others warned, would minimize and relativize the horrors and evils of the Holocaust and centuries of antisemitism. After the fact, one critic argued that addressing both issues constituted a calculated effort to be “balanced,” to create a “false equivalence.”³

The authors and advocates of the resolution were not seeking some kind of balance. We were not diminishing the sufferings and injustices experienced by either people, nor were we comparing the wrongs the two peoples have suffered. Instead we recognized that these experiences of suffering are intertwined. Further, we acknowledged that Mennonites have not adequately addressed our involvement and complicity in either set of injustices, and we affirmed that both matters are important and urgent and call for concrete action.

The resolution takes a confessional and restorative justice approach. The posture it adopts is not that of outside assessment or judgment on others. Instead the resolution begins each section with confession and lament, naming concrete ways that we as “Western Christians, Mennonites and U.S. citizens” are complicit in and share responsibility for harms to each people.

The three-person writing team—André Gingerich Stoner, Lisa Schirch, and Rod Stafford—along with staff consultant, Jonathan Brenneman, included Mennonites who have family relationships and affinity with both the Jewish and the Palestinian experience. Jonathan and Lisa carry deep knowledge of the issues

3 John Kampen, “Assessing the 2017 Mennonite Resolution on Israel/Palestine,” in *Peace and Faith: Christian Churches and the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, eds. Cary Nelson and Michael C. Gizzi (Philadelphia: Presbyterians for Middle East Peace, 2021), 298–99, 310, 314.

and were attentive to nuances of history and language. Lisa brought a restorative justice frame. Rod is a pastor whose life work has been forming communities of faith. I listened and helped us all listen to each other and to varied perspectives within the church. We were alert to how phrases and words carry contested meaning. We worked hard to write so that various communities would feel heard. We sought to communicate in ways that would speak with integrity for our own faith community.⁴ We tested concepts and language with Jewish and Palestinian partners. In addition, the writing team formed and consulted regularly with a ten-person reference group of diverse Mennonites who gave us important feedback and suggestions.

Commitments and Implementation

Unlike many church statements, each section of the resolution names specific actions and concrete steps that Mennonite church members, our congregations, and our institutions can and should take toward making things right. Within one year, concrete next steps were taken on nearly every commitment in the resolution. Many of those actions reverberate to this day.

Perhaps the most significant commitment in the section on occupation was to urge individuals, congregations, and Mennonite-related organizations “to avoid the purchase of products associated with acts of violence or policies of military occupation, including items produced in settlements,” and to “[withdraw] investments from companies that are profiting from the occupation” (lines 90–101). In an appended section, “Clarifications,” this commitment is presented as an outgrowth of longstanding Mennonite efforts to put faith into practice in their economic activities, from refusing to buy war bonds to advocating fair trade and developing socially responsible investment options.

The Clarifications section highlights the fact that while the resolution urges Mennonites to avoid purchases and investments directly related to the military occupation of Palestinian territories, it does not call for a boycott of all Israeli goods or for an academic or cultural boycott, as the Boycott, Divestment

⁴ One example is the several references in the resolution to the role of the state of Israel in the Jewish experience: “The longing for a secure Jewish state and hostility to Jews resulted in many Jews fleeing to Palestine and establishing the state of Israel” (lines 12–13). The resolution confesses our “failing to understand the significance of the state of Israel for many Jewish people and the diversity of perspectives and understandings among Jews related to Israel and Zionism” (lines 124–25). These words reflect an honest grappling by the Mennonite community, which embraces a non-statist, nonviolent theology and ethic, and these elements were included because of the reflection and attention of the diverse writing team. This accounting is somewhat at odds with Lisa Schirch’s portrayal in “Anabaptist-Mennonite Relations with Jews Across Five Centuries,” *Mennonite Life* 74 (July 9, 2020).

and Sanctions (BDS) movement does (lines 25–51). In an interview with *The New Arab* several days after the resolution was adopted, Jonathan Brenneman explained that the resolution does not endorse the full BDS movement, because there was not agreement in the church on academic and cultural boycotts.⁵ In a video introducing the resolution to the church, executive board member Bishop Leslie Francisco said that we “don’t condemn or condone BDS.”

One step in implementing the section of the resolution on opposing military occupation was a consultation sponsored by Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) on investment and Israel/Palestine, held November 2018, five months after the delegate action. The day-long meeting included representatives of Everence—the stewardship agency associated with the denomination—Mennonite Mission Network, Mennonite Education Agency, Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), and Christian Peacemaker Teams (now Community Peacemaker Teams). Everence reported on its military and human rights screens in relation to Israel and how it had “augmented its screening processes, invested in new research and developed tailored products for investors concerned about military occupation.”⁶ The day included reports from the various organizations and extended conversation and exchange.

Six months later, in May 2018, MC USA leaders advocated for peace and justice in Palestine and Israel at Washington, DC, congressional offices in a further step of implementing the resolution. Each of the six delegates had spent time in Palestine and Israel, some through MC USA’s Come and See tours. The delegation visited fifteen congressional offices representing five states and referenced the denominational resolution in their visits. The day of advocacy was planned and financed jointly by MC USA and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) U.S. Washington Office and took place just days after Israeli soldiers killed more than sixty largely nonviolent Palestinian protesters in Gaza earlier that month.⁷

The resolution encouraged individual Mennonites to put their faith into practice on this issue, sometimes at a significant personal cost. Esther Koontz, a Mennonite math teacher in Kansas, lost her job because she could not in good conscience sign a statement that she was not involved in a boycott of Israel. Multiple experiences led her to this conclusion, including the adoption of the

5 Kuttab, “Christian Consumers,” <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/conscious-consumers-how-mennonite-church-came-support-bds>.

6 “MC USA Consultation on Investment and Israel/Palestine,” Mennonite Church USA News, Jan. 23, 2018, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mc-usa-consultation-investment-israel-palestine/>.

7 “MC USA Leaders Visit Capitol Hill to Advocate for Peace in Palestine and Israel,” Mennonite Church USA News, June 26, 2018, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mc-usa-leaders-visit-capitol-hill-to-advocate-for-peace-in-palestine-and-israel/>.

MC USA resolution earlier that summer.⁸ The lawsuit she brought against the state of Kansas, with the support of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), was reported on widely and led to the Kansas legislature significantly rewriting the legislation. It was the first such lawsuit in the country. Others have followed.

In the fall of 2023, six years after the resolution was adopted, Mennonite Action was formed, a grassroots movement of Mennonites taking public action for a ceasefire in Gaza. Its first mass Zoom call at the end of November 2023 engaged an unprecedented eight hundred people from more than two hundred fifty congregations across the US and Canada.⁹ Since then, Mennonite Action has coordinated prayer vigils, hymn sings and protests at more than forty locations across the US and Canada, led a large civil disobedience action in Washington, DC, and joined an interfaith coalition protesting the national conference of Christians United for Israel.¹⁰

At the initial Zoom mobilization and subsequently, organizers repeatedly referenced the 2017 resolution and the process leading up to it as laying significant groundwork for the widespread engagement of Mennonites now taking action for a ceasefire. It was important and overdue for Mennonites to officially and formally address antisemitism, as the second section of the resolution did. Lutherans, Catholics, and other Christian denominations had wrestled with these questions in the decades after World War II and had produced major statements in the 1980s and 1990s. Some Mennonites lived with the illusion that as a historic peace church we do not share in the complicity of other Christians, even though the Nazi involvement of some German Mennonites who immigrated to the Americas was becoming an open secret. The “Seeking Peace” resolution named Mennonite failure “to do the hard work of examining our participation in anti-Semitic belief and practice” (line 115).

Encouraged and supported by the resolution and as one important next step, Bethel College (North Newton, Kansas) in March 2018 hosted the first academic history conference in the US on Mennonites and the Holocaust.¹¹ Mennonite

8 Esther Koontz, “Kansas Won’t Let Me Train Math Teachers Because I Boycott Israel,” ACLU, Oct. 12, 2017, <https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/kansas-wont-let-me-train-math-teachers-because-i-boycott-israel>.

9 “Mennonite Action Mobilizes 800 Participants in Call for Ceasefire,” Mennonite Church USA, Nov 29, 2023, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/mennonite-action/>.

10 “Movement News,” Mennonite Action, <https://www.mennoniteaction.org/news>.

11 “‘Mennonites and the Holocaust’ Conference Issues Call for Papers,” Mennonite Church USA News, March 10, 2017, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mennonites-holocaust-conference-issues-call-papers/>. See also “Mennonites and the Holocaust” conference schedule, March 16–17, 2018, <https://mla.bethelks.edu/MennosandHolocaust/>.

Church USA provided seed money and the impetus for this conference. More than two hundred people attended. Papers presented at the conference were published by the University of Toronto Press in 2021 in the book *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, edited by Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen.

The resolution also affirms and encourages conversation on how Mennonites read scripture in light of the Holocaust. While the resolution was being drafted, Mennonite Church USA staff secured funding for such a conference. Seven years later, in May 2023, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) hosted a symposium of Jewish and Mennonite clergy and scholars on reading the Bible after the Holocaust.¹²

In conjunction with the resolution, Mennonite Church USA convened a Mennonite-Jewish Relations Group, bringing together for the first time Mennonites who have a wide range of close relationships with Jewish partners. Various Mennonites in this group had close relationships with a senior staff member at the Anti-Defamation League and key leaders at Jewish Voice for Peace. The Mennonite-Jewish Relations Group included representatives of two congregations who shared a building and, in one case, pastoral staff with a synagogue; congregations who worked closely with Jewish congregations on local justice efforts; and Mennonites who had married Jewish partners. Most of these Mennonites had not previously been in conversation with each other. Seven years later, this group continues to meet. As the resolution was being drafted and considered, Mennonite Church USA staff also compiled an extensive twenty-one-page bibliography of “Resources on Mennonite and Jewish Relations.”¹³

The Mennonite-Jewish Relations group and the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), which formed during the multi-year process of preparing for this resolution, are both still active and collaborate on occasion, such as sharing a booth at Mennonite Church USA conventions together with other Mennonite social justice organizations.¹⁴

Regarding both military occupation and antisemitism, the resolution includes an assessment of where we are as a church, what needs to be confessed, what work needs to be done, and what concrete next steps we could commit to

12 David C. Cramer, “AMBS Hosts Jewish-Mennonite Symposium on Reading the Bible after the Holocaust,” Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary News, May 25, 2023, <https://www.ambs.edu/news/ambs-hosts-jewish-mennonite-symposium-on-reading-the-bible-after-the-holocaust/>.

13 “Bibliography of Resources on Mennonite and Jewish Relations,” Mennonite Church USA Israel/Palestine initiatives, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/peacebuilding/israel-palestine-initiatives/>, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/bibliographymennonitejewishrelations_2018feb/.

14 Personal email with Jonathan Brenneman, August 31, 2024.

taking. A range of stakeholders have taken seriously the implementation of the resolution. It is far more than a statement; it has set much in motion in the church.

How Did We Get There?

Grassroots and Senior Leadership: A Top-Down/Bottom-Up Strategy

For years, some Mennonites, especially those who have served with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and/or Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT), have been profoundly aware of the injustices that Palestinians endure because of Israeli military occupation supported by the United States.

In 2007, a delegation of senior leaders of Mennonite agencies traveled to Israel-Palestine in recognition “of the need for a common conversation among various parts of Mennonite Church USA.” The group wrote an Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA Congregations.¹⁵ Among other things, the letter called on church institutions to avoid investments that violate international law and promote violence.

In 2011, after consultation with the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, Executive Director Ervin Stutzman released a public letter of response to the “Kairos Palestine” statement. That remarkable statement had been written by Palestinian Christians committed to struggle for justice in the spirit of “Jesus’ way of love” (lines 20–21). To these Christians, Stutzman wrote that Mennonites “commit ourselves to promote and expand opportunities for our leaders and members to visit you and learn firsthand about your suffering. . . . Further, we will continue to wrestle with the way our lives are enmeshed in the policies and implementation of occupation through our economic practices and seek to turn from them.” This open letter was accompanied by a letter to Mennonite Church USA congregations.¹⁶ Acknowledging that “within Mennonite Church USA the perspectives and commitments related to Israel and Palestine vary greatly,” the letter urged Mennonites to study and engage with the Kairos Palestine document.

In 2013, grassroots leaders submitted a resolution for consideration by Mennonite Church USA delegates. This process involved vetting by the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC)—an advisory board comprising representatives from each of the area conferences and constituency groups (representing

15 Delegation participants, “An Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA Congregations: Becoming Peacemakers in Israel/Palestine,” Mennonite Church USA, June 2007, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/2007OpenLtrAndResourcesIsraelPalestine2007June.pdf>.

16 Ervin Stutzman, letter to sisters and brothers in Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church USA, October 5, 2011, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/KairosLtrToMCUSA_2011Oct5.pdf.

racial/ethnic associations in the church, for example).¹⁷ The draft resolution did not adequately build on previous work in the denomination and did not have broad ownership. It was summarily dismissed by the CLC, which chose not to pass it on to delegates for further consideration.

These various experiences highlighted the role both of senior leaders and of grassroots leaders in making change happen. The 2007 open letter and the 2011 executive board response to Kairos Palestine were significant in that the most senior levels of denominational leadership showed their concern about and openness to addressing these matters. In the denomination, for example, not only the executive director but also key executive board members, including moderators, had firsthand knowledge of the injustices of occupation. Patty Shelly, for example, had spent years as MCC staff and regularly led student groups on learning tours to the region. At the same time, many grassroots church members had firsthand knowledge, experience, and relationships that compelled them to engage in activism and advocacy. These initiatives could be seen as top-down/bottom-up efforts at change, but they weren't enough to lead to concrete action by the denomination.

The Missing Piece: Mid-Level Leaders

John Paul Lederach, known for his pioneering work in justice and peacebuilding, has an insightful essay on how change happens in a community.¹⁸ While Lederach was primarily writing about protracted community conflicts, his insight also applies to how change happens in a denomination such as Mennonite Church USA, which at that time had roughly 875 congregations, 90,000 members, and 19 area conferences.

Lederach points out that grassroots activists are often personally affected, deeply committed, and very engaged. They also often feel isolated and powerless.

Senior leaders have visibility and power, but their every move is scrutinized. That scrutiny can make them cautious, especially in matters that they do not see as a priority, even if they are sympathetic or supportive. If they are not being pushed and supported by a broad base, they will likely not act, or the action they take may have a limited impact.

Senior leaders in Mennonite Church USA understood something about the injustices in Palestine, and they were willing to make a statement, but Israel-Palestine simply wasn't their priority in the midst of the slow implosion

17 Annette Brill Bergstresser, "Resolutions Are Back, but with a Difference," Mennonite Church USA News, November 9, 2012, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/resolutions-are-back-but-with-a-difference/>.

18 Michelle Maiese summarizing John Paul Lederach, "Levels of Action (Lederach's Pyramid)," *Beyond Intractability*, July 2003, https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/hierarchical_intervention_levels.

of the church underway at the time around issues of sexuality. The grassroots was not sufficiently connected, not organized in powerful ways, and not strategic enough to make change happen. Lederach's essay and the experience at the CLC with the 2013 resolution proposal helped some of us see what was missing: mid-level leaders.

Mid-level leaders have relationships with senior leaders, and they have relationships with the grassroots. They also have relationships across the system with other mid-level leaders. Because they are not as visible and exposed as senior leaders, they can experiment and take risks in ways that are difficult at the very top. Key mid-level leaders in Mennonite Church USA were leaders of area conferences and constituency groups, people who make up the CLC.

The executive director's response to Kairos Palestine had committed the church to providing learning opportunities for Mennonites. The experience at the CLC helped us see that we should focus on area conferences and constituency groups.

While participants in previous MCC and other learning tours to Israel-Palestine were mostly self-selected people who were already attentive to the plight of the Palestinian people, we now worked with area conferences to recruit key pastors and leaders in that conference. We urged them to include leaders of color in delegations. One learning tour was organized especially for Latino and Black leaders. We also made it a requirement that after returning to the US, participants would share with the conferences through workshops at area conference assemblies and writing for their conference periodicals.

It was a good idea. But how to fund it and make it happen?

An Inside-Outside Strategy

Much of the grassroots activist attention focused on Everence and its investment practices. Students especially targeted Everence because it managed the large Mennonite college endowment for Mennonite Education Agency.

Everence has had a long history of pioneering socially responsible investment and was a leader in the field. The agency saw itself as a servant of the church and was cautious about being seen as out of sync with the church. Already at this point, Everence staff had been applying military and human rights screens to investments related to Israel-Palestine and had been leading conversations and initiatives with their counterparts in the world of socially responsible investment. But they used "investment-speak" rather than the language of advocates and activists.

Students at Mennonite colleges were pushing Everence hard to take more action and to make it public. Everence staff asked whether the church was supportive. Denominational staff asked Everence if they were ready to help the broader church become better informed. In the end, Everence and MCC, with a smaller contribution from Mennonite Mission Network (MMN), provided a \$1,000

scholarship for every participant in what were later called “Come and See” learning tours.

While student groups often have a brief lifespan, in 2013 a grassroots network of pastors, former MCCers and CPTers, and concerned church members formed Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN) to connect and coordinate advocates for justice across the church. These leaders took inspiration from advocacy groups in mainline Protestant denominations. MennoPIN developed a study guide on the Kairos Palestine call¹⁹—made available in English and Spanish—and created “space for advocacy and action on the issue of boycott, divestment and sanctions within Mennonite Church USA.”²⁰

Encounter and Transformation

In the spring of 2014, the first of what we came to call “Come and See” learning tours included fifteen key leaders from Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Mutual Aid, MCC, MMN, and other church institutions.²¹ The purpose was to test whether to promote this initiative in the church. The consensus was to move forward with an agreed-on set of goals and criteria.²²

Staff from these organizations met regularly to discuss direction and strategy for the tours. We set a goal to send 100 leaders on Come and See tours over the course of the next 5 years. In the end, 112 pastors and leaders from at least 12 area conferences, Iglesia Mennonite Hispana, the African American Mennonite Association, and denominational agencies participated in learning tours in 3 years.²³ Participants reported experiences that made them read the newspaper and the Bible in new ways²⁴ and challenged them to follow Jesus with new courage and

19 “Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth,” a four-week congregational study plan, Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), 2016, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Kairos_StudyGuide_Menno_9_Digital-2.pdf.

20 “Brief History of Mennonite Involvement in Palestine-Israel,” MennoPIN About, <https://mennopin.org/brief-history-of-mennonite-involvement-in-palestine-israel/>.

21 Jenn Carreto, “‘Come and See’: Mennonite Leaders Visit Israel/Palestine,” Mennonite Church USA News, March 24, 2014, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/come-and-see-mennonite-leaders-visit-israelpalestine/>.

22 “Come and See Fund, Mennonite Church USA,” September 13, 2013, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/TourCriteria.pdf>.

23 For a listing of participants, see “‘Come and See’ Learning Tour Participants and/or Recipients of ‘Come and See’ Scholarships,” Mennonite Church USA, 2020, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2017_10_Come_and_See_Participants_update.pdf.

24 “Seeking Peace in Palestine and Israel through People-to-People Connections,” MCC, March 22, 2024, <https://mcc.org/our-stories/seeking-peace-palestine-and-israel-through>

conviction.²⁵ They came back and presented workshops, led chapels, preached sermons, and wrote articles in conference newsletters and other settings.

Aligning Partners

Grassroots and agency leaders collaborated to bring a second resolution about justice in Palestine to the delegates at the 2015 Mennonite Church USA delegate assembly.²⁶ By this time there had been significant further conversation and collaboration between the service and advocacy organizations like MCC, CPT, and MennoPIN, on the one hand, and Everence, on the other. These parties worked together closely in drafting the new resolution. Though the advocacy groups and Everence used different language, they shared an interest in helping the church live out its faith in its financial life.

This time the resolution moved more easily through the CLC vetting process and came before the delegates at Kansas City in 2015. But those setting the agenda for the delegate sessions were focused on what seemed like a head-on collision in the church regarding LGBTQ inclusion. The executive board planned to bring two competing and contradictory resolutions on issues of sexuality to delegates on Thursday, July 2. They wanted the Israel-Palestine delegate discussion to happen on Wednesday, before the contentious LGBTQ inclusion discussion. The result was that many workshops and seminars on Israel-Palestine, led in part by Come and See tour alumni, were scheduled for later in the week, after the delegate deliberation on Israel-Palestine had already happened.

On Wednesday, delegates discussed the Israel-Palestine resolution, both at their tables and in floor debates. While there was strong support for the resolution, some raised concerns that it did not address the experiences of Jewish people. The delegates voted to table the resolution and urged denominational staff to revise it and bring it back at the next delegate assembly for further consideration.²⁷

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25 “Come and See Learning Tour Travelogue,” Mennonite Church USA, April 21, 2015, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/come-and-see-learning-tour-travelogue/>.

26 Michael Miller Yoder, “Mennonite Church USA Kansas City 2015 Resolution on Israel-Palestine: Submitted to the 2015 Kansas City Convention Resolutions Committee of Mennonite Church USA,” MennoPIN, February 27, 2015, <https://mennopin.org/2015/03/22/resolution/>.

27 Caitlin Nearhood, “Delegates Grapple with Israel-Palestine Resolution,” Mennonite Church USA News, July 2, 2015, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/delegates-grapple-with-israel-palestine-resolution/>.

Organizing the Base

After the delegates tabled the resolution, an engaged pastor in consultation with authors of the tabled resolution drafted a short resolution to salvage the important work that had been happening. Rev. Alex Awad, a prominent Christian Palestinian and former dean of students of Bethlehem Bible College, spoke gently but firmly to the delegates. They unanimously adopted a “Partners in Peacemaking” resolution, which called on Mennonites to study, discern, and partner with Palestinian and Jewish peacemakers in preparation for consideration of a revised resolution.²⁸

Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Mission Network created a voluntary service position to help implement the Partners in Peacemaking resolution.²⁹ Jonathan Brenneman served for two years as Partners in Peacemaking Coordinator.

As Director of Holistic Witness for Mennonite Church USA, I had the privilege of supporting and supervising Jonathan, who was uniquely equipped for this role. Rather than starting by planning events or producing educational resources, Jonathan approached this work as an organizer. One of his first assignments was to travel to communities with large concentrations of Mennonites and build relationships. He met with people who had deep connection to Israel-Palestine, as well as with pastors and decision-makers. He spent time in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kansas, and Mennonite communities in other parts of the country.

Jonathan built groups in each of these areas, often drawing in recent alumni of Come and See tours. He then worked with local leaders to coordinate multiple speaking tours that included Palestinian and Jewish peacemakers, and to undertake educational and advocacy efforts that engaged hundreds, if not thousands, of people across the church. This organizing work played a critical role in preparing Mennonite Church USA delegates to take action on a revised resolution in 2017.

28 “A Statement of Support for Our Palestinian and Israeli Partners in Peacemaking—2015,” passed by the Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly at Kansas City, Missouri, July 4, 2015, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/a-statement-of-support-for-our-palestinian-and-israeli-partners-in-peacemaking-2015/>.

29 Annette Brill Bergstresser, “New MVS Position Created to Carry Out Partners in Peacemaking Resolution in Local Settings,” Mennonite Church USA News, August 17, 2016, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/new-mvs-position-created-to-carry-out-partners-in-peacemaking-resolution-in-local-settings/>.

Extensive Consultation and Engaging Critics

After the 2015 assembly, comments from table groups were carefully reviewed and considered.³⁰ The executive board approved a broadly consultative and participatory process for rewriting and testing the resolution.

Lisa Schirch, Rod Stafford, and I became a writing team, with support from Jonathan Brenneman. We brought shared commitments and important differing experiences and perspectives. We formed a diverse ten-member reference group with whom we shared outlines and drafts. We consulted with Jewish and Palestinian leaders and partners and incorporated their insights into the document.

The staff and writing team engaged in extensive conversation and consultation with critics of the 2015 resolution. Careful listening led to a fundamental restructuring of the resolution and shaped the language of the text. In some cases, engaging deeply with brothers and sisters involved inviting them into new perspectives.

While the emerging resolution was in significant continuity with the 2015 text, it was a substantively different resolution in two important respects: It adopted a restorative justice frame, and it addressed complicity in antisemitism—while continuing to advocate strongly for justice for Palestinians.

Well before the next delegate assembly, a draft resolution was made public and shared with the church. Seventeen hundred people viewed the draft resolution, and more than eighty responses were received. In March 2017, the executive board approved “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine” for consideration by the delegates.

When MC USA delegates met in Orlando a few months later in early July, the breadth of the church had been engaged on the content of the resolution. Endorsements for the resolution had been collected from a wide range of leaders across the church.³¹ In the delegate session, a range of agency leaders were involved in presenting the resolution. Conversation and careful preparation had taken place for years. Still, it was surprising and gratifying to writers and organizers when 98 percent of the delegates voted in favor of the resolution.

Some observers outside Mennonite Church USA have compared this outcome to contentious delegate action in other denominations and have assumed that the 98 percent vote can be attributed to Mennonites being one of the so-called historic peace churches and naturally leaning progressive. In fact, Mennonites

30 “Process of Drafting ‘Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine,’” Mennonite Church USA, April 2017, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ResolutionProcess_2017April.pdf.

31 “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine” Resolution Endorsements, Mennonite Church USA, April 8, 2017 https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ResolutionEndorsements_2017April8.pdf.

span the theological and political spectrum, with strong influences of conservative cultural evangelicalism. There are, for example, deep veins of Christian Zionism within parts of the Mennonite world. I would suggest other factors leading to this outcome:

- Denominational staff and agencies investing in and leading an extended process of learning and discernment (rather than simply processing a resolution at a delegate assembly);
- Framing the resolution in terms that respected and built on Mennonite theology, tradition, and practice while being attentive to debates and developments outside the church;
- Carefully listening to multiple voices in the church; and
- Writing and vetting the resolution over an extended time frame with broad input and participation.

Wrestling with Contentious Matters: Coming to a Common Mind

The process surrounding adoption of the “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine” resolution is a reminder that with attention and care, patience and persistence, respect for brothers and sisters, and openness to the Spirit, the church can wrestle with important and contentious matters, learn and grow together, come to a common mind, and take concrete and substantive steps together in its journey of faithfulness and witness.