

The Washington Post
June 22, 2014

“Presbyterians’ divestment vote test church’s ties with Jews”

by [Amy Brittain](#) and [Michelle Boorstein](#)

Members of the Presbyterian and Jewish faiths have long been considered allies across the U.S. religious patchwork, forging bonds in local communities over shared viewpoints on many social issues.

Now, some are warning that their alliance is on shaky ground after the Presbyterian Church narrowly voted in Detroit on Friday to divest in three businesses that supply products and technology used in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

The move elicited wide-ranging responses from across the religious spectrum, with leaders from several national Jewish groups immediately denouncing the vote, while some interfaith leaders raised concerns about the long-term consequences of the decision.

“I know that Presbyterians will be reaching out to Jewish neighbors, colleagues and friends at a local level,” said Katharine Henderson, the president of the Auburn Theological Seminary, an interfaith group in New York. “There will be a lot of repairing the breaches that have been created through this decision.”

Last week, the Presbyterian Church (USA) convened its voting body, the 221st General Assembly, in Detroit to tackle a number of issues. The church, with approximately 1.8 million members and 10,000 churches across the United States, made headlines on Thursday after members voted to reword its constitution to recognize gay marriage.

In the lead-up to the divestment vote, lobbyists on both sides converged on Detroit.

[Rabbi Rick Jacobs, head of the Union for Reform Judaism](#), spoke to the delegates twice in an effort to get them to vote against divestment.

“In the past two centuries, we Jews and Presbyterians have become more loving brothers and sisters, but we are at a crucial junction in our relationship,” Jacobs said. “I pray that the decisions of this General Assembly will bring us closer.”

On Friday, the legislative body voted 310 to 303 to divest the church’s interest in three companies: [Caterpillar](#), [Hewlett-Packard](#) and [Motorola Solutions](#).

In a statement issued Saturday, Jacobs said the vote was “unfortunate” and “calls into question the many ways in which we work together” with the Presbyterian Church.

The American Jewish Committee, based in New York, called it “a very sad day for Presbyterian-Jewish relations,” saying in a written statement that a group within the Presbyterian Church was “driven by hatred of Israel” and had led a campaign of misinformation within the denomination.

“This is an affront to all who are committed to a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” Rabbi Noam Marans, the AJC’s director of interreligious and intergroup relations, said in the statement.

A subgroup of the Presbyterian Church, the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, [started a divestment movement a decade ago](#). In 2004, a pastor in Gainesville, Fla., went before the church’s General Assembly to raise the issue. The assembly then approved an overture to create the group “to advocate for Palestinian human rights and to educate Presbyterians about their plight,” according to a written release.

The Rev. Jeffrey DeYoe, a member of the network’s steering committee, said the movement created “a conflict in the liberal side of the church” as members felt torn between loyalty to their Jewish brothers and sisters and a need to push for social action.

Historically, he said, the church has a “long history” alongside the Jewish community.

“Presbyterians like to be in relationships with people of other faiths,” said DeYoe, of Fort Meyers, Fla. “But the church has a tendency to also stand with people who are being oppressed.”

DeYoe said he personally felt the pains of his decision to support divestment. When he lived in Palm Coast, Fla., he said, the president of the local synagogue officially severed ties with him and his church once he discovered DeYoe’s involvement in the movement.

After the vote, as several Jewish leaders issued statements of outrage, DeYoe said he was saddened but not surprised by the reaction.

“There are leaders in Jewish organizations in America who are attempting to paint this as Presbyterians against the Jews — that’s not true,” he said.

Two years ago, the divestment proposal before the General Assembly fell two votes shy of approval.

Some have said the changing makeup of the Presbyterian Church, which has experienced an exodus of conservative members during the past decade because of fierce debates over social issues such as gay marriage, made it easier for the divestment vote to pass. The conservative stronghold of the Presbyterian Church had traditionally opposed divestment.

“It’s disappointing, but it’s certainly not very surprising,” said Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, a conservative Protestant group. “The conservative side had been pretty unified against it, but they were largely absent this time around.”

The Presbyterian Church's holdings in Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions were estimated at \$21 million, a church spokeswoman told the Associated Press.

Caterpillar has long been the focus of critics who have called for the company to stop sales of its bulldozers and other equipment to Israel. In 2004, Human Rights Watch called on the heavy-equipment giant to immediately stop selling the Israeli army its powerful D9 bulldozer, which it said was used as a "primary weapon to raze Palestinian homes, destroy agriculture and shred roads in violation of the laws of war."

Caterpillar defended its sales of equipment to Israel, saying it has actively engaged in talks with concerned faith-based groups about its practices.

"While proposals specifically seeking to change the company's policies related to human rights have consistently received limited shareholder support, the conversation regarding human rights continues to be important to Caterpillar," the company said in a statement.

In response to questions about the church's actions, a Hewlett-Packard spokeswoman told The Washington Post that "respecting human rights is a core value" within the company.

Cecilia Kang contributed to this report.

Michelle Boorstein is the Post's religion reporter, where she reports on the busy marketplace of American religion.

Copyright©2014 The Washington Post