

November 30, 2009

Doug Smith

Israel-Palestine Task Force and Jewish Organizations

Working Together for Peace with Justice in the Holy Land

Sitting in the ballroom of the Grand Hyatt in Washington DC, I stood and applauded with 1500 others as the speaker at the podium passionately called for an end of the occupation of the West Bank by Israel, a freeze of settlement building and a peace that will provide for the security of Israel and the creation of a Palestinian state. With a voice filled with passion, Jeremy Ben- Ami, Executive Director of J-Street, made his position very clear.

“Yes, it is a voice that loves Israel as the state of our people, but one that expresses love not in unquestioning embrace, but in caring partnership;[...] a voice that cares not simply about our people but about the future of the Palestinian people. Not just because it is in our interests, but because Palestinian children deserve a future and freedom, hope and happiness every bit as much as Jewish children.

This majority will be silenced no more. Our voice will help guide the way to a safe and secure future for the state of Israel, the creation of a Palestinian state beside it, and to American policies that help secure a better future not only for the children of the region but for our children here at home.”

The J-Street website at www.jstreet.org publishes the following statement on the purpose of the organization.

J Street was founded to promote meaningful American leadership to end the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts peacefully and diplomatically. We support a new direction for American policy in the Middle East and a broad public and policy debate about the U.S. role in the region.

J Street represents Americans, primarily but not exclusively Jewish, who support Israel and its desire for security as the Jewish homeland, as well as the right of the Palestinians to a sovereign state of their own - two states living side-by-side in peace and security. We believe ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in the best interests of Israel, the United States, the Palestinians, and the region as a whole.

In 2004 and again in 2008 our General Conference affirmed a position on the Israel-Palestine conflict that calls for an end to the occupation.

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"The UMC opposes continued military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, the confiscation of Palestinian land and water resources, the destruction of Palestinian homes, the continued building of illegal Jewish settlements, and any vision of a 'Greater Israel' that includes the occupied territories and the whole of Jerusalem and its surroundings;" [Bk of Res, 2004, #312];

This position is well-aligned with that of J-Street. During my chairmanship of the conference Israel-Palestine Task Force from 2008-2009, a significant part of our work was developing interfaith dialogue to find common ground with the Jewish community. And we have found that common ground to be significant.

In the Fall of 2008, our Israel-Palestine Task Force sponsored a series of three events in Contra Costa County that brought together up to 50 Christians, Jews and Muslims to listen with respect and without debate, to the various perspectives on peace in the Holy Land. New hope and new connections emerged as we found common ground even in the presence of many differences.

In Spring of 2009, we worked with Jewish Voice for Peace and AFSC in the East Bay on two events in response to the Gaza War a presentation by Dr. Abuelaish – a witness from Gaza, and a Citizens Hearing .

Our Task Force co-sponsored a dialog of Presbyterians, Jewish leaders, and Methodists in the East Bay Area. We had over 30 participants including Rabbi Michael Lerner and other Rabbis.

At the recent Annual Conference, a Rabbi co-presented a luncheon session for CCUIC focusing on "Finding the Common Ground". Conference attendees and representatives from the Jewish Community Relations Council of Sacramento participated in the session.

And the work continues this year as we participate in J-Street, lobby on the Hill in teams that include Jewish and Methodist lobbyists, enter into dialog with Brit Tzedik v'Shalom continue on-going relationships with Interfaith Peace Builders, Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions; B'tselem, and of course Sindyanna--a Jewish and Palestinian Women's agricultural cooperative in Israel. The Israel-Palestine Task Force is committed to reaching out to Jewish groups interested in finding common ground so that we may work together towards peace with justice for Israel and Palestine.

Shalom, Salaam, Peace.

Doug Smith,

Israel-Palestine Task Force of the California Nevada Conference, UMC