

# Pittsburgh Jewish-Protestant talks endure here amid tiff

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By Ann Rodgers / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

While formal dialogue has been shut down on a national level between major Jewish groups and their mainline Protestant counterparts over a Protestant request for Congress to consider whether military aid to Israel should be stopped, Jewish and Protestant leaders in Pittsburgh are continuing their 30-year tradition of monthly discussions.

"It was never in doubt. We discussed it among ourselves and decided that no matter what happened on the national level, the local dialogue must continue. Its value only increases in times of conflict," said Deborah Fidel, executive director of the Pittsburgh Area Jewish Committee, which sponsors the dialogue.

Nevertheless, she convened a special session of the dialogue last week to discuss the rift that occurred in wake of the Oct. 5 letter to Congress. The letter was signed by top officials of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Methodist Church, American Baptist Churches, United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ, as well as the National Council of Churches. Signers from several other traditions did not formally represent their entire denomination.

The letter acknowledged that Israel has suffered from terrorism and rocket attacks but accused it of using U.S. military aid to attack innocent civilians and destroy their homes.

It asked Congress to investigate whether Israel has run afoul of a law that prohibits sending military aid to nations with consistent patterns of human rights violations, and to stop military aid if Israel is found to be out of compliance with those human rights standards.

The letter to Congress was sent two weeks before that Christian-Jewish Roundtable was scheduled to meet, without any warning to the Jewish participants.

The special local session drew about 25 participants from the Reform Jewish, mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The Pittsburgh dialogue is more than two decades older than the now-suspended Christian-Jewish Roundtable, which was created in 2004 to ease growing tensions between Jews and liberal Protestants over relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Although at least one Jewish peace organization has praised the letter, major Jewish groups, including those representing the Reform and Conservative movements, called it "repugnant, regrettable and morally misguided" and canceled the roundtable discussion.

The major problem with the letter wasn't that it criticized Israeli policy and conduct toward the Palestinians, because many Jews share those same concerns, said Rabbi James Gibson of Temple Sinai in Squirrel Hill, a co-convenor of the Pittsburgh dialogue. The major problem was in how it was done, he said.

"The idea that an approach was made to Congress that would fundamentally affect Israel's ability to defend herself in difficult times, without any consultation or notice, set off tremendous anger and pain in the Jewish community," he said.

"The letter may have substantive points that [the writers] and I might agree on individually, but putting the [interfaith] relationship in danger makes it hard to work together to achieve that goal."

Among the questions Jewish leaders are asking, Rabbi Gibson said, is whether the unilateral action was revenge by advocates of a narrowly failed effort to have the Presbyterian Church (USA) divest its funds from companies whose products Israel uses to enforce occupation of the West Bank. The divestment initiative failed by two votes at July's Presbyterian General Assembly.

"Are people so frustrated by the lack of progress in peace talks that they felt there needed to be a game-changer? If so, are we in the organized Jewish community not a party to the game?" he said. "What about the strategic interests that depend on Israel as a stable democracy? What about other areas where there is more day-to-day violence, such as Syria? ... What about Turkey placing missiles on the Syrian border? Are these not more pressing from a religious, social justice point of view?"

The Rev. Donald Green, executive director of Christian Associates of Southwestern Pennsylvania, the region's major ecumenical body, further criticized the Protestant leaders for unilateral action but said he was speaking only for himself, not any group he represents.

He apologized, speaking as a Lutheran, that the letter was sent without prior consultation, either within the Lutheran body's leadership or with Jewish dialogue partners. He said he could find no evidence that the denomination's other bishops were consulted or that the Lutheran bishop for the Holy Land had been consulted.

"I am angered by my presiding bishop, Mark Hanson, signing that letter, even though he may have had the best of intentions in helping to move us along that road to peace. Thus the letter became just another shot across the bow, alienating our Jewish partners, who come to the table often in the face of ridicule from their own communities for engaging us in dialogue," he said.

On a more hopeful note, Rev. Green said, on Oct. 25 Bishop Hanson, with Bishop Donald McCoid, the former Pittsburgh bishop who now heads the Evangelical Lutheran office for ecumenical and interfaith relations, sent a letter to the Jewish groups asking for a return to dialogue.

"We acknowledge that there is a need to consider more fully how we relate to each other as Christians and Jews when we are moving in directions that we anticipate might strain our relations. Specifically in this instance, let us address together a better communications process going forward," they wrote.

The Rev. Randall Bush, pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church, isn't a regular participant in the local dialogue but came to the special meeting to speak for the concerns of those who

wrote the letter.

He acknowledged that it might have been done in a more diplomatic fashion, but he said work for human rights in the occupied territories mustn't be sidelined by a dispute over tact.

When Presbyterians ask for an investigation, that doesn't mean they assume that Israel will be found guilty, Rev. Bush said.

"Presbyterians, while prone to an occasional shot across the bow ... are chronic committee folk," he said. "When language is used about exploring something, it doesn't have violence to it. We really want to study the issue, even though the answer might be that we are wrong."

Rev. Bush criticized some of the reaction to the letter, saying that its concerns were being obscured by other issues.

"Often the pattern is that when a substantive issue is raised, immediately it is blurred by throwing other issues on the table at the same time, so that Middle East peace as a whole is put on the table," he said.

The result of that "messiness," he said, "is that the original matter of substance is not able to be talked about."

Ms. Fidel took issue with part of his response.

"What Pastor Bush calls messiness, we might call context," she said. "When you are talking about military assistance, it's not confusing the matter to talk about what is happening in the Middle East. There is so much instability and insecurity in the area that, if you are talking about taking away Israel's military advantage, it's only fair to talk about what's going on in the region."

That said, Ms. Fidel attributed some of the national rift to "personalities and egos getting in the way."

Studies show that three-quarters of both the Israeli and Palestinian populations agree on the same general parameters for peace, but they also show that three-quarters of each side distrust the other and don't believe it is telling the truth about what it wants, she said.

"The same dynamic exists in Jewish-Christian relations," she said. "We still don't trust that our interlocutors want what they say that they want. Most Jews and Christians want the same basic outcomes."

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