

Presbyterian Study Guide Equates Zionism With Racism, Say Jewish Critics

Major Jewish civil rights groups are denouncing a new publication distributed by the Presbyterian Church (USA) that rejects the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.

“Zionism Unsettled,” a study guide published last month by the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, a group chartered by the church, writes of the “pathology” of Zionism, the movement undergirding the founding of Israel as a Jewish homeland.

The booklet describes Zionism as inherently discriminatory toward non-Jews. It calls on Christians to see the conflict through the lens of Palestinian Christians who have declared Zionism “heretical” and “a doctrine that promotes death rather than life.”

“The fundamental assumption of this study is that no exceptionalist claims can be justified in our interconnected, pluralistic world,” the booklet states.

But Jewish groups say that in its accusations of Israeli “exceptionalism,” the booklet seeks to mask its authors’ bigotry.

“This publication is not an attack on particular Israeli policies but on the very idea of a Jewish return to Zion,” said Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. The church, he added “has deployed the nuclear option against the vast majority of Jews, calling us inherently racist and abusive. We call on our Christian associates—including those critical of some of Israel’s policies—to denounce this disgusting attack aimed at delegitimizing and demonizing the world’s largest Jewish community and all lovers of Zion. “

The booklet recounts in detail the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, using phrases such as “ethnic cleansing” and “apartheid” and accuses Israel of “cloaking secular nationalism with sacred messianism.”

It laments that the major streams of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist—have included the “Prayer for the State of Israel” in their prayer books, reflecting that “most Jewish theologians have turned a blind eye to the darker implications of the wedding of religion and state power in Israel.”

At the same time, its critics note, the booklet makes scant reference to anti-Semitism, aggression and terrorism suffered by Israelis, or territories Israel has returned, such as the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip.

The Rev. Walt Davis, education co-chair of the IPMN, called the reaction to the study guide “knee-jerk” and “emotional” and said the guide is meant to open a discussion on Zionism and the harm it has done to the Palestinian people.

He said he can understand the strong “blowback” to the study guide, in that he grew up in the South, and witnessed angry responses to the civil rights movement.

The publication of “Zionism Unsettled” comes as Secretary of State John Kerry is trying to broker a new peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, who have been negotiating since July.

Its publication also comes as the 2.4 million members of the PCUSA anticipate a June meeting of the General Assembly, which is expected to take up a resolution to divest church funds from companies, that, in the view of the resolutions’ proponents, further the Israeli occupation.

The “Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions” movement against Israel has an active base of support within the denomination, and a

divestment resolution have failed by a slim margin at the last meeting of the General Assembly. It also strained Jewish-Presbyterian relations.

The study guide will further estrange the denomination from the Jewish community, said Rabbi Noam Marans, the American Jewish Committee's director of intergroup and interreligious relations. He said he does not buy the church's statement that the IPMN "speaks to the church and not for the church."

"This is a distinction without a difference when you are chartering IPMN and selling their propaganda on your home website," he said.

Denominational officials reminded that the IPMN does not speak for it in a statement on the booklet issued in response to a query from Religion News Service.

"Our church has a long history of engaging many points of view when it comes to dialogue on critical issues facing the world around us—it's who we are, part of our DNA," said Linda Valentine, executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency.

"There are likely as many differing opinions as there are Presbyterians—and, like many denominations, we don't always agree."

It affirmed the denomination's support for a peaceful settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

But some within the church came out strongly against the booklet, most notably the Rev. Chris Leighton, the executive director of the Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies, which is not affiliated with the church.

In an open letter to the church, he wrote that "to suggest that the Jewish yearning for their own homeland—a yearning that we Presbyterians have supported for numerous other

nations—is somehow theologically and morally abhorrent is to deny Jews their own identity as a people.”

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