

C. Henry Oratorical Peace Contest

Peace Churches and War Profits: A Moment for Courage

March 26, 2010

Jessica Sarriot

This is our Kairos. This is our moment, as peace churches, to lead the way and practice what we preach. Kairos is an ancient Greek word signifying “opportune” or “supreme” moment. It is also the word which resounded with black South African theologians in 1985 when they published the Kairos Document; the historic document which challenged the churches’ response to Apartheid. Twenty four years later the patriarchs and heads of churches in The Holy Land have followed in their footsteps with Kairos Palestine, a declaration about the reality of oppression for the Palestinian people and a call for supporting a just peace. Specifically, they called for universities and churches to use the same tactic used in ending apartheid in South Africa in Israel/Palestine, namely: boycott, divestment and sanctions.

This is our Kairos. It is our opportune moment to respond decisively to the call from our brothers and sisters in the Palestinian church, Israeli peace activists, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and to the prophetic voices within our own churches who urge us to take our investments out of companies that profit from and support the Israeli Occupation. The occupation which puts a 30 foot cement wall between farmers and their land, individuals and their employment, families and communities. The occupation which, in clear violation of the 4th Geneva Convention, has built and continues to build settlement after settlement on Palestinian land. The occupation which allows the demolition of 18,000 Palestinian homes and counting, the death of 355 children the recent war in Gaza, and the occupation which we are all complicit in—but we don’t have to be.

Mennonite Mutual Aid (MMA), the agency through which most Mennonite institutions and many individuals, probably some of you, invest their money is a leader in socially responsible investment. Their standards of not investing in companies that violate human rights or promote warfare mean that most weapons contractors and similar companies are already screened out of their investments. It was surprising, then, to realize that the Mennonite Church, Mennonite Educational Agency (MEA) and Mennonite Mutual Aid have not already divested from all companies that enable the Occupation, such as Motorola and others.

Motorola, up until last April, made bomb fuses for the Israeli army. After Israel dropped thousands of bombs in the 22 day war, they had to restock. Hence bomb manufacturers, and fuse makers such as Motorola, made money. So, everyone invested in Motorola, including EMU and MMA, made money, and profited from the suffering of others. It is a testament to the effectiveness of boycott divestment and sanctions that Motorola finally stopped producing those fuses after a concentrated and continual international divestment campaign. But Motorola continues to produce much of the intelligence technology and communications equipment, such as surveillance towers in settlements, used by the military to facilitate the occupation. And we continue to support that.

I first heard of EMU and Mennonites in general while living in Jerusalem, when I met students from the cross-cultural. At that time many of my classmates and family friends were Palestinians that felt the effects of institutional racism and systemic oppression in a very real and daily way. My friend Saheer, for instance, couldn't visit her parents in Nablus though she lived in Bethlehem less than 35 miles away because she

could not get past the checkpoints. Later, I met Marwan who spent over two years in Israeli jails without being charged with anything and whose brother-in-law died because he wasn't allowed through the checkpoint to the hospital. I met a family who rebuilt their home for the third time after the Israelis demolished it, claiming it was too close to the illegal settlement and illegal wall.

Over the past three years I have immersed myself in Mennonite school, church, and culture and have come to identify deeply with its tradition of pacifism, social activism and prophetic witness. It pains me to think that EMU, MEA and everyone else invested through MMA are still investing in companies that support normalizing settlements, the operation of checkpoints, or the construction of walls. It pains me to be complicit in the suffering of many of my friends in Israel/Palestine. It hurts for the sake of my friends, but also for the Mennonite community which is not living up to its own principles in this area.

The words are all there—MMA's stewardship investment policy clearly states that companies they invest in should "respect and support the basic human rights of all people to self-determination" and not "take advantage of relationships with oppressive political regimes." Their stated policy and award-winning experience in socially-responsible investment make MMA one of the best qualified institutions to divest from the Occupation.

As a student who, along with many others, has been pushing for this incomplete application of MMA's policy to be rectified for over a year, I have to ask myself—why hasn't this move been made? What are the obstacles and how can they be overcome?

The first obstacle is equating criticism of the Israeli state with anti-Semitism. It is not anti-Semitic to hold the state of Israel accountable to the same standards of international law and human rights that we hold everyone else to, including Palestinians. We do not and would not invest in suicide bombers, why should we invest in home demolitions or the siege on Gaza? Too often in our desire to identify with both sides of the conflict we take a “neutral” position which is anything but. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu so aptly put it:

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.” A delegation of representatives from MCC, MMA and other Mennonite organizations that visited Israel/Palestine in 2007 was aware of this. In their open letter to the Mennonite Church they clearly stated that: “The continuing Israeli military occupation and the dispossession of Palestinians is sinful” The letter continued by recommending that Church institutions “avoid investments which violate international law and promote violence”.

However, in a tradition which values relationships so strongly there is also a fear that divestment would mean straining friendships with our Jewish brothers and sisters. But I ask you, what kind of a friendship are we to have with one another? Do true friends not hold each other accountable in truth and love? As 1 Corinthians 13 says “love does not delight in (or, I would add, refuse to talk about) evil, but rejoices in the truth”. If our Jewish friends question our commitment to them or peace based on our divestment policy we need to answer confidently that we do not want to contribute to any of the cycle of violence, be it Israeli structural and military violence, or Palestinian violence. Our love

for God's people, all of God's people, requires that we first do no harm, and then contribute positively towards peace. Divestment falls into the "do no harm" category.

As another obstacle, you may ask: "Won't divestment mean losing money?"

There are several answers to this. Firstly, I would remind you of MMA's stellar work of accruing profits without compromising moral integrity - socially responsible investment is what they *do*, their faithfulness in this means we are closer to divestment than most. Secondly, history shows that in the long run it can be economically disadvantageous to invest in injustice. But mostly, while understandable, I think this is the wrong question. A better one might be "Who are we saying that we are if we *don't* divest"?

If our identity as peace churches is to be bound in the tradition of prophets that cry out:

"Shout out, do not hold back!...Announce to my people their rebellion" (Isaiah 58:1)

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice... to set the oppressed free" (Isaiah 58:6)

"let justice roll on like a river" (Amos 5:24)

"Let us not grow weary of doing what is right" (Galatians 6:9)

and even "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mathew 22)

If we want to claim that, we had better make very sure we have our priorities straight.

Peace churches should not be making war profits, period.

Finally, there's the question of timing. I started off saying "this is our Kairos", I believe that. Not only because the divestment movement is growing worldwide but because I believe that the right time to do no harm is always now. The right time to do what is right is always right now. We do not need to wait until every single voice has

been heard, we do not need to wait until other mainline churches take this step, we do *not* need to wait to stop investing in human rights violation or in the suffering of our brothers and sisters. Dialogue and education about Israel/Palestine and debate about steps forward can and should continued, divestment does not inhibit that. Divestment gives us clean hands from which to start the conversation.

Like most steps towards justice, this step is actually very small. It requires that each one of us which is invested through MMA, individually or institutionally, speak out and hold it, and each other, accountable to the principles of peace we hold to under the rule of the Prince of Peace. It requires that those in positions of power, our boards of trustees, pastors, and decision makers at MMA, *listen* and have the courage to be consistent with their own doctrine and policies. It requires, as always, prayer and humility, honesty and integrity in explaining our decision to others and ultimately, the courage to go beyond words and into action. We *can* divest from the oppression of our neighbor. This is our Kairos.

Sources

A Call for Morally Responsible Investment: a nonviolent response to the occupation, Sabeel Documents, No.3 May 2005

Al Haq, Initials. (2009, August). *Operation cast lead: a statistical analysis*. Retrieved from <http://www.alhaq.org/pdfs/gaza-operation-cast-Lead-statistical-analysis%20.pdf>

Byler, D; Byler, R; Epp, E;Friesen, K; Green,S; Lyndaker Schlabach,R; Meyer, R; Regier, M; Rose, C ; Schmucker, L. An Open letter to mennonite church usa congregations becoming peacemakers in israel/palestine june 2007. (2007). *Letter from the Mennonite delegation to israel/palestine* Washington, DC: Mennonite Church USA.

Halper, J. (2007, October 11). *The Israeli committee against house demolitions*. Retrieved from <http://www.icahd.org/eng/articles.asp?menu=6&submenu=2&article=402>

Hoder, S. Companies Supporting the Israeli Occupation of Palestinian Land (2009, October) Hoder Investment Research

Kairos Palestine, A moment of truth: a word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering (2009, December 15) Jerusalem, Israel

Response Letter from Archbishop Desmond Tutu to Kairos Document
<http://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/Letter%20from%20Archbishop%20Desmond%20Tutu.pdf>

Rossoff, L; Fuchs, K. Understanding and Accessing School Investment Information [PowerPoint slides] retrieved from
<http://www.endtheoccupation.org/article.php?list=type&type=28>

Yoder, John Howard, The Politics of Jesus, 1972, Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, second edition

Mennonite Mutual Aid, (March, 2010) Investments: *Stewardship investing* retrieved from
<http://www.mma-online.org/k1.aspx?id=7332&token=2>