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ISRAEL/PALESTINE MISSION NETWORK of the PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, U.S.A.

peacemaking through partnerships, education and advocacy

January 9, 2012
OPEN LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Eva Stimson, Editor
Presbyterians Today
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202

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Dear Eva,

The membership of The Israel Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (USA) [IPMN] is distraught over the way the holy land was portrayed in the devotional included in your latest issue. Attached to this letter is an email exchange between IPMN member Polly Johnson and Ruth Everhart who is the writer of the lenten devotional.

The response from Ruth Everhart to Polly Johnson's inquiry states that word limit and avoiding politics were restraints she was given. This response leaves a lot to be desired, especially as the devotional has the imprimatur of *Presbyterians Today*. To write a lenten devotion and expressly avoid the political reality of Palestine, while mentioning "a pilgrimage to Israel" is at the very least, insensitive. Your advent calendar also visits holy sites without a word about oppression today or in the time of Jesus.

As one IPMN member put it, "To avoid the 'political realities' on the ground today is to avoid the political realities that Jesus faced – what we need to be encouraging in preaching is the context of Jesus' life and how it matches the context of Palestine today." That is to say, living under occupation.

Another IPMN member says "I wonder on what basis Everhart was asked to write this devotional guide. I am concerned what the criteria are for such writers. Who was saying not to be political?"

These are all good questions, especially when it comes to a sensitive topic such as politics and Israel/Palestine. Is there a written process for making such decisions that comply with our General Assembly policies?

When we in IPMN think about what it means to have a devotional attitude about the events we mark during Lent, culminating in the Crucifixion and Resurrection, we think of what it's like for the Christians who live there today. And we think of the

December 2011 statement from a Christian conference in Bethlehem, entitled: "*The Bethlehem Call: Here we stand -- Stand with us.*" (full text [here](#)). It is a passionate cry for Christians around the world to respond to the injustices in that land, and not to prolong, by their inaction, the conditions that threaten the fulfillment of a just peace for everyone. *The Bethlehem Call* came to our attention in an email from Douglas Dicks, the PC(USA) regional liaison in Jordan and Israel-Palestine, as well as by several network members who attended the conference.

The justice issues mentioned in *The Bethlehem Call* have been known for a long time; they were especially recognized by the 218th General Assembly (2008) when it drew attention positively to the "*Amman Call*," which resulted from a World Council of Churches conference in 2007. At our 2010 General Assembly, a directive called for a two-year emphasis on justice and understanding of the Middle East. How does this devotional fit in with that 2010 commitment?

We are disappointed that these perspectives do not find expression in the Lenten devotional. Rather, the author and the publication seem to exploit pictures of the region and expressly "avoid politics," and the reality that people live with under occupation today, in order to express some amorphous message cut off from reality.

It seems to our network that *Presbyterians Today* does not shy away from justice issues in other parts of the world. How will *Presbyterians Today* help support our sisters and brothers in Israel/Palestine calling for our help? And how will *Presbyterians Today* help make known the GA policies on the region? Can we work together on producing a devotional that addresses justice issues in Israel/Palestine in accordance with General Assembly policy?

Will you publish this letter of concern?

Grace and Peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carol Hylkema". The ink is a dark brown or black color.

Carol Hylkema,
Moderator

cc:

Mr. Amgad Beblawi
Elder Cynthia Bolbach
Mr. Douglas Dicks
Rev. Hunter Farrell
Rev. Christian Iosso
Rev. Grady Parsons
Rev. Bill Somplatsky-Jarman
Elder Linda Valentine
Rev. Charles Wiley

attached: email correspondence

Email correspondence between IPMN member Polly Johnson
and author Ruth Everhart

On Dec 29, 2011, at 9:58 PM, Polly Johnson wrote:

Hi! I just checked out your Lenten Pilgrimage in Presbyterians Today. In the “invitation to pilgrimage” you say that you “were given the opportunity to travel to Israel”, though I see that most of your visits took place in Palestine---the area of the “Holy Land” that is a military occupied territory where Jesus walked and talked. I wonder if you saw any of the occupation, the separation wall, the checkpoints, the prison that is Bethlehem. Is that “the gift that changed my faith”? I hope you did, because Christians need desperately to see the truth of occupation and the lives that the Palestinians Christians—and Muslims live. I would appreciate hearing about any experiences you had in Palestine.

Peace, Polly Johnson,
Presbyterian Ruling Elder and
member of the PC(USA) Israel Palestine Mission Network.

From: Ruth Everhart
Sent: Saturday, December 31, 2011 4:36 PM
To: Polly Johnson
Subject: Re: Your Lenten Devotional Guide

Thanks for writing, Polly.

I have to re-read the devotional -- I may not have included anything at all about the occupied territories, mainly because the magazine wanted to avoid politics and the word count was incredibly tight. It's hard to say something profound in 100 words. Even harder if that includes any political realities! I understand what you are saying about Palestine. FYI, in the book I am writing on the subject, the reality of occupation is a much more prevalent theme. I hope you will read the book when it's available and give me your feedback!

Thanks, Ruth

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Your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions. ~Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 12:15)