

## Response of Christian Organizations to the Situation in Israel

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*Compiled by the Commission on Interreligious Affairs of Reform Judaism and the American Jewish Committee - Department of Interreligious Affairs*

Given the violence in recent weeks in Israel, Gaza, and Lebanon, many religious organizations are issuing statements of concern. While some take a more balanced approach the current conflict, others view one side as more or less responsible for the violence. The following report describes the latest responses, to date, of major Christian organizations.

### The Anglican Communion

On July 19, 2006 the Anglican Communion issued a statement “condemn[ing] the escalating violence in the Middle East.” In writing to the heads of Churches in Lebanon, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, stated that he has been “alarmed at the spiral of violence, the vicious circle of attack and retaliation, that has developed over the last few days.” The Archbishop also stated that his “sympathy” lies “with the principal victims, the innocent civilians on both sides of the border, who now live in terror and are powerless to prevent the collective suffering at the hands of Hizballah and the Israeli military.”

### Churches for Middle East Peace

A July 21, 2006 letter to President George Bush, from Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP), implores the President to “work with other world leaders to secure an immediate ceasefire in the violent conflict raging now between Hezbollah and Israel.” CMEP is “deeply concerned for the innocent victims of the attacks and reprisals between non-state parties in Lebanon and the government of Israel.” They call for “the full weight of the United States, acting in concert with the international community” to be “applied now to launch an immediate cease-fire and to launch an intensive diplomatic initiative for the cessation of hostilities.

The CMEP letter is signed by:

- Mennonite Central Committee
- Church World Service
- Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
- American Friends Service Committee
- National Council of Churches USA
- Church of the Brethren
- Reformed Church in America
- English Speaking Conference, JPIC Council
- Episcopal Church in America
- Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- United Church of Christ
- Alliance of Baptists
- Friends Committee on National Legislation
- United Methodist Council of Bishops
- Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Roman Catholic Conference of Major Superiors of Men’s Institutes
- Presbyterian Church (USA)

### Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

In his July 17, 2006 statement, Rev. Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, called on the international community and the United States to do everything

possible to put an end to the violence in the Middle East. In the statement, he notes that the “kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah militants has caused a severe reaction from Israeli forces.” The ELCA is providing humanitarian relief to the region through the Middle East Council of Churches and offers suggestions for how congregations can further respond to these needs in Lebanon.

#### International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (Evangelical)

On July 17, 2006, Rev. Malcolm Hedding, of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ) issued a statement strongly “condemn[ing] the unprovoked aggression unleashed against Israel by Hizb’Allah in recent days.” ICEJ also “fully support Israel in her right to self-defense and in her measured military campaign now being waged against this terror militia.” They are also “not without sympathy for the vast majority of Lebanese citizens who have been forced into war by Hizb’Allah.” Rev. Hedding ends the statement by declaring, “we will defend Israel’s right to exist in peace and security in the region and we will pray for Israel’s unqualified victory over these terrorists.”

#### Lutheran World Federation

On July 18, 2006 Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, The General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, issued a statement, “denounc[ing] the current grave escalation of conflict in Israel, the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.” Dr. Noko remarks that “violence does not bring peace” and “talk of ‘appropriate means’ and criticism of ‘disproportionate responses’ are simply inadequate.”

To rectify the situation, Dr. Noko calls on “the international community [to] finally move beyond platitudes, [and do] what is necessary to calm the violence, to restore hope, and to push forward towards peace with justice.”

#### National Council of Churches and Church World Service

The July 14, 2006 statement issued by the National Council of Churches and Church World Service questions the effectiveness of using violence to solve the Middle East conflict. In doing so it describes the conflict saying, “Any hope for peace, itself a miracle in the midst of occupation, was stifled with Israel’s missile strike and Gaza and the death of innocent Palestinians.” It then goes on to call the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier by Hamas a “retributive attack” and in doing so depicts Israel as the primary cause for the current violence. The statement calls for the following measures:

- The government should encourage negotiations between opposing parties and work through the United Nations to address the humanitarian needs
- All parties in the Middle East should end the current violence and develop strategies for non-violence engagement
- Religious communities in the region and throughout the world should pray, teach, and lead their people in peace
- Member communions should pray for those who are suffering and engage in humanitarian and advocacy actions for peace

#### Presbyterian Church - USA

A July 17, 2006 letter from Rev. Cliff Kirkpatrick to President Bush calls on the President to work with the United Nations and Israeli government to find a diplomatic solution to the current violence in the

region. While denouncing the “provocative actions” of Hezbollah and recognizing Israel’s right to self defense, the letter also notes that Israel’s use of “disproportionate force... caused the indiscriminate death of scores of Lebanese civilians...” Rev. Kirkpatrick urges President Bush to take three primary actions:

- Put pressure on all parties to find a diplomatic solution
- Work with the United Nations to put pressure on Hezbollah and its supporters to stop attacks on Israel and return the kidnapped soldiers
- Work in partnership with Israel to restrain the disproportionate use of military force

### The United Church of Christ

On July 13, the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ (USA), Rev. John Thomas, wrote a pastoral letter to “Palestinian friends and partners” in which he speaks of his “horror and outrage as Israel punishes an entire population for the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier in Gaza, and as belligerence escalates with Hizb Allah’s attack on military personnel near Lebanon.” While making a brief reference to praying for the release of the Israeli soldiers, the letter demonizes Israel’s actions, including the separation barrier, speaks of the possible use of economic pressures such as divestment, and expresses its disappointment at U.S. policies which “reward Israel.” In reference to the American Jewish community, Rev. Thomas notes, “Many in our own churches are subject to intense lobbying by Jewish groups demonizing the Palestinian community in general, and many of you in particular.”

### United Methodist General Board of Church and Society

On July 17, 2006, the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society issued a statement calling for an end to the attacks on both sides of the conflict as well as the release of the captured soldiers and political prisoners held by Israel. The statement notes that “it is impossible at this point in time to declare that one side or the other started it” and instead chooses to refer to the situation as a cycle of violence. At the same time, however, it goes into detail criticizing Israel’s “grossly disproportionate” response and the humanitarian crisis it has caused. The statements supports a “safe and secure Israel, which will only be possible with a safe, secure, viable and contiguous Palestinian state” and calls on the United States to use its influence to create peace in the region.

### U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

On July 18, 2006, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement calling for a ceasefire, an end to the cycle of violence, and greater leadership from the United States to secure peace. In the statement, Bishop Thomas G. Wenski, Chairman of the Committee on International Policy, comments on the need to break the cycle of violence before it worsens. The “provocative acts of violence by extreme factions of Hamas and Hezbollah” as well as the disproportionate military responses from Israel” are seen as undermining peace and stability in the region. Responsibility for the violence is also placed on Syria and Iran for their support of the “extreme armed factions.” In order to end the current crisis, the Conference calls on the United States to take on a leadership role in working “more intensively and multilaterally to end the provocations and violence, to secure a ceasefire, to restrain Israel, [and] to move toward negotiations...”

## The Vatican

In a series of statements given to the press, Pope Benedict XIV and the Vatican have called for an immediate cease-fire, “reasonable and responsible” negotiations aimed at ending injustices in the region and humanitarian aid to ease the suffering. The Pope has also called for more prayer in the face of a worsening Middle East conflict. A July 20<sup>th</sup> Communiqué from the Vatican declared that “the Lebanese have the right to see the integrity and sovereignty of their country respected, the Israelis the right to live in peace in their state, and the Palestinians have the right to have their own free and sovereign homeland.”

On July 18<sup>th</sup> the Pope “endorsed the Group of Eight declaration that criticized Hamas and Hezbollah for fueling an escalation in current hostilities and urged Israel to exercise restraint in its retaliation.” On July 16<sup>th</sup>, the Pope offered his first public comments about the current crisis, saying that “Neither terrorist attacks or reprisals, especially when they have such tragic consequences on the civilian population, can be justified.” On July 14<sup>th</sup> the Catholic Church produced its first response to the current crisis as articulated by Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Vatican secretary of state, who said “the latest dramatic episodes... risk degenerating into a conflict with international repercussions.” He noted that though Israel had the “right to self-defense” it did not “exempt it from respecting the norms of international law, especially as regards the protection of civilian populations.” The Cardinal noted the Holy See’s “closeness to those people who have suffered so much in the defense of their own independence.”

## World Alliance of Reformed Churches

On July 24, 2006, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) issued a statement in which they declared their continued “[horror at] the hostilities, loss of life, injuries and destruction in the Middle East.” WARC calls for “all acts of violence to end immediately.” They also call for “prisoners held by all sides [to be] returned.”

WARC has also stated that they “deplore the devastating acts of violence on civilians in Lebanon, Palestine and Israel.” However, they are “deeply concerned” that “military responses by a nation [Israel] with so much might only aggravate the situation and lead to further destruction of people, infrastructures and even hope itself. An escalation of violence threatens the whole region.”

## World Council of Churches

On July 13, the World Council of Churches General Secretary, Rev. Samuel Kobia, issued a statement urging “all parties to immediately stop and reverse the escalation of the conflict and all use of the rhetoric of war.” The statement calls on the need to protect Lebanese, Israeli, and Palestinian civilians but also singles out the actions of “the destruction of roads, bridges, and airport runways and the blockade by sea of Lebanon as is already the case in Gaza.” By implementing international law, Rev. Kobia asserts, there can be an end to the “cycle of incursions, occupations, violent counter-attacks and international inaction.” The statement reiterates the previous World Council of Churches call to end violence in Gaza, release “those detained on both sides,” and for Israel to engage in negotiations.