



**The United Church
of Canada
General Council**

GC44 Interim Report on the Use of the Principle-Based Approach to The United Church of Canada's Justice Work for October 2024

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Background

The Executive of the 42nd General Council received the report—Towards Peace in Palestine and Israel: A Call to Costly Solidarity (PMM20) calling for a process to review the church's policy on Palestine and Israel in light of the changing context and partner calls for solidarity. In November 2018, the Executive of the 43rd General Council of The United Church of Canada appointed a reference group of four persons to:

- a. undertake a review and consider current United Church of Canada policies on Israel and Palestine in light of the current reality and partner requests;
- b. receive perspectives from members of the United Church, partners and other relevant organizations; and
- c. provide advice and recommendations to The Executive of the General Council.

Based on partner requests, the team decided to address three specific issues, which had proven to be challenging in the existing policy:

- a. the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement;
- b. the use of the word or term apartheid in relation to Israel; and,
- c. the implications of United Church policy supporting Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state.

The United Church has used a policy-based approach to its justice and advocacy ministry for decades. For the most part, the policies are reflective of a particular time in history and limited by the current realities of the time. Changes to policies are often slow because of our governance processes. With dynamic and evolving contexts, policy statements made in specific moments in time find us out of sync with the calls of partners and with rapidly changing global realities. Increasingly, because of changing global and political contexts and requests from partners and civil society organizations, the United Church finds it difficult to be responsive due to the limitations of its policies (TICIF02 report).

As the work evolved, over almost three years, it became clear to the task group that what was needed was the articulation of a set of principles to guide both policy and practical decisions for the Executive of the General Council and staff in the General Council Office who are tasked with addressing these issues. In particular, they sought to frame the conversation through a lens of decolonization.

The report of the task group was received by the Executive of the 43rd General Council and forwarded to the 44th General Council (2022). The Council also received a set of proposals around Palestine and Israel.

GCE03: A Principle-Based Approach to Justice Work in The United Church of Canada

[GCE04: A Just Peace in Palestine and Israel](#)

Along with the following proposals from regional councils considered collectively:

[CS01](#), [SW09](#), [FSL01](#), [PM02](#), [RC1501](#), [SW02 Peace in Palestine and Israel](#)

Emerging from this Task Group and its report, Proposal [GCE04, Just Peace in Palestine and Israel](#) asked the church to agree to use a principle-based approach in its engagement in Palestine and Israel and suggested several principles that could be applied in determining advocacy and policy statements and responses to concrete requests from partners or other bodies. The proposal did not ask the church to take particular actions beyond applying this principle-based approach on an ongoing basis. This proposal was postponed definitely until work could be done on the development of principles as mandated in GCE03 Principle-Based Approach to Justice Work. The Council, also decided to *postpone definitely* the seven regional proposals - CS01 Just Peace in Palestine and Israel, SW09 Justice and Peace for Palestine and Israel (NEW), FSL01 Responding to our Global Partner Kairos Palestine, PM02 A Living Commitment to the KAIROS Palestine Cry of Hope, RC1501 Responding to our Global Partner

Kairos Palestine, SW02 Raising our Voice for Human Rights until work on the principles was completed for approval (Record of Proceedings (ROP), p. 107).

The General Council tasked The Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee (TICIF) with developing principles for the October 2023 annual meeting of the 44th General Council. The principles were approved in principle by the 44th General Council annual meeting in October 2023, which authorized their application. The 44th General Council requested that revised principles (based on learning from applying the current principles) be brought to the 45th General Council (2025) for consideration and possible full adoption.

The hope in shifting to a principle-based approach to our justice work was that it will enable the church to respond more quickly to situations of injustice, while at the same time being guided by a consistent framework. The principles give direction and guidance to national staff and national committees in the church's work to seek justice and fullness of life.

The principles as adopted, are intentionally interdependent and are informed by the United Church's policies, affirmations, and commitments. The principles give direction and guidance to national staff and national committees in the church's work to seek justice and fullness of life. Other councils, staff, lay people, and ministry personnel of the United Church may choose to draw on these principles to guide their own speaking and acting (TICIF02).

Both the report and the preface to the motion give direction to national staff and national committees to act on the principles without specifically authorizing action on the questions of BDS and apartheid. With the dynamic and evolving situation in Palestine-Israel, the benefits of a principle-based approach are clear.

The issue is that: The General Council

- a. adopted a principle-based approach that was intended to enable staff to respond to justice concerns in a timely way AND ALSO
- b. held discussions in which it named discomfort with certain responses and decided that the General Council itself (not its staff) would consider the specific topic of a Just Peace in Palestine and Israel.

Application of the Justice Principles to Palestine and Israel advocacy

As Israel's war on Gazans escalated after Hamas' attacks on October 7 2023, the Justice Principles enabled the church to advocate with the Canadian government in a more timely and responsive way that is limited under the existing static policy. Canada's failure to respond to Israel's violations of international law as it has done without hesitation in the cases of Myanmar and Russia called for robust advocacy from the church in line with its stated support for international law. Canada has not upheld its obligations under the IV Geneva Conventions following Israel's bombardments of civilians in hospitals, schools, refugee camps and in the Israeli Defense Force's own designated "safe zones". Given the Israeli government's genocidal statements and the military's multiple war crimes as outlined in the ruling of the International Court of Justice stating that Israel is engaging in plausible acts of genocide in Gaza, applying the principles allowed the church to advocate that Canada embargo its arms trade and suspend diplomatic and economic relations with Israel.

Learning from the use of the Principles

In conversation with staff who have been applying the principles to various situations and partner requests, TICIF members have learned the following:

- The principles are more contextual and flexible; they allow the church to respond more quickly to rapidly changing and complex situations on the ground
- The principles centre the lives and experiences of the partners with whom we work
- The principles enable us to respond to situations where we didn't previously have policy
- The church needs to wrestle with applying the principles to concrete requests, with people who hold differing perspectives on the issue, to help us hear one another and perhaps start to understand one another; to have discussions in meaningful and frank ways
- We need conversation with the Indigenous church about the principles: how they are perceived, understood, reflected on by the Indigenous church
- The language of the principles could be more accessible and less wordy
- The question of whose "voice" the principles reflect
- The principles call us to continue to decolonize and we aren't there yet
- The principles are interconnected and can't be separated out from one another; this needs to be more clearly stated.

Addressing Antisemitism, Anti-Palestinian racism

The Countering Antisemitism Working Group was established soon after General Council 44 (2022), composed of members from the Anti-Racism Common Table and the Theology, Inter-Church, and Interfaith Committee (TICIF). The group created educational resources—including a course on ChurchX, Round the Table blogs, a [website presence](#) on www.united-church.ca, and a Good Friday worship service— as ways of living into its mandate of challenging antisemitism in Christian theology and worship. Earlier this year, after those parts of the work were finished, the working group has completed its work. However, the work of countering antisemitism is still very much needed.

Further education planning has been completed for the rest of 2024 and the first half of 2025 to engage the church in examining the ways that anti-Judaism and antisemitism show up in how we read and interpret scriptures, in our theologies, and in our hymnody. One of the live events for the 40 Days of Engagement on Anti-Racism will feature Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, who will explore The Texts of Advent: Finding Good News and Avoiding Antisemitism on November 19, 2024 (with English-French interpretation). The plan for later 2025 and into 2026 is to develop learning opportunities to help the members of the church engage in advocacy to counter antisemitism.

Moving Forward

The General Council will need to act on the proposals it set aside definitely. Depending on its action, it could be seen as reverting to a policy-based approach to Palestine-Israel and setting a policy on Palestine-Israel that will be at odds with its own decision to employ a principle-based approach to justice issues. Apart from the internal contradiction this represents for the General Council, it also raises the question of identifying which topics would be the responsibility of staff and which ones would be the work of General Council, potentially resulting in the delays the principle-based approach is trying to address. The General Secretary, as the senior staff and administrative officer of the General Council, its executive, and its sub-executive (The Manual D.4.2.3) has received two sets of instructions:

1. the General Council, in receiving the report and adopting TICIF02 on October 21, 2023, set in place a process that calls for the General Secretary to respond to emerging justice

concerns;

2. at the same time, the General Council signalled its intention to deal with this topic itself through the guidance offered by the summary the Facilitation Team provided from the discussion groups and the decision to return to the topic of a Just Peace in Palestine-Israel through postponed proposals.

Some parts of the church are impatient for action (as noted by correspondence and an additional proposal on this topic received from a Commissioner in the interim by the GCE in May 2024 and included for the General Council as NEW 04 Join the Apartheid Free Communities Movement, but it is unclear whether the General Secretary is to act based on the principles or the General Council wishes to act on the matter itself, based on the principles. This report brings to the attention of the General Council, the dilemma posed by its two decisions, each of which agree on the value of applying a principle-based approach to justice work in The United Church of Canada, but offer competing advice as to who will apply the principles concerning a just peace in Palestine and Israel.

Clarifying who is authorized to apply the principle-based approach to the justice advocacy in the United Church, especially in reference to the occupation and war in Palestine, will enable this work to proceed.

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