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U.S. churches respond to the Kairos Palestine document

John Dear S.J. | Jun. 19, 2012 On the Road to Peace

On Dec. 11, 2009, Palestinian Christians issued a heartfelt, sober, prayerful, urgent cry for help to end the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation. Their Kairos document [1] was called: "A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering." Yesterday, after two years of work, Christian leaders from around the United States, calling themselves Kairos USA [2], released an official response [3]. I urge every Christian in the U.S. to read the response (as well as the original Kairos Palestine document), to pray over it, talk about it and join the growing movement to end the occupation.

"Call to Action: U.S. Response to the Kairos Palestine Document: A word of confession and faith from the churches in the United States" begins with a confession and a call to repentance. In their document [3], they reflect on the "signs of the times -- the systemic injustice in Palestine"; theological implications; and interfaith relationships; and finally call us to join the global movement to end the occupation of the Palestinians and help create a new nonviolent Middle East. Here are excerpts from their introduction:

> We begin with a confession of sin to Palestinians in the State of Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, the diaspora and in refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. As U.S. Christians we bear responsibility for failing to say "Enough!" when our nation's ally, the State of Israel, violates international law. Our government has financed Israel's unjust policies and has shielded its government from criticism by the international community. At the outset of the current U.S. administration, our government led Palestinians to believe that at last we would pursue a political solution based on justice. But the "peace process" has continued to be no more than a means for the ongoing colonization of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the imprisonment of Gaza and the continuation of the structures of oppression.
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> In humility and love, we add a word to our Jewish sisters and brothers in the State of Israel and around the world. As Christians, we acknowledge with broken hearts our forbearer's responsibility for the suffering of the Jewish people throughout our shared history. The origins of this suffering reach deep into our past. Our predecessors perpetuated anti-Semitic stereotypes, practiced scape-goating and cloaked prejudice, hostility and murder itself in the robes of our religion. In so doing, they betrayed the teaching and example of the one we claim to follow. We speak for and with our forbearers in expressing deep remorse. With a commitment to never forget those failures and to be instructed by them, we pledge ourselves to growth in faithfulness, compassion and justice. In light of these tragic failures, we must repent. We must work and even suffer for peace, filled with a heart of love for both Israelis and Palestinians.
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> We acknowledge and affirm "the reality on the ground" described in the Kairos Palestine document. Many of us have seen with our eyes, heard with our ears and felt in our hearts the painful realities of life in the Palestinian territories. We have witnessed the daily, grinding humiliation of women and men, young and old; the deaths of civilians; the demolition of homes; the ethnic cleansing of Jerusalem; the destruction of hundreds of thousands of olive trees; the unlawful and brutal practice of administrative

> detention; the relentless land taking and construction of illegal colonies that have made a contiguous and viable Palestinian state impossible. None of these actions has brought the State of Israel the security it seeks. Israel is pursuing a course that is fruitless and corrupting, both morally and politically. We have also observed with deep sadness the damage inflicted on Israeli society, particularly its young people. We can no longer be silent; we can no longer betray the core of our Christian faith as expressed in Matthew 25: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

The U.S. response invites Christians across the United States to learn about the Palestinian struggle and join the nonviolent effort to end the occupation, pursue the Jewish vision of *shalom* and institute human rights for Palestinian children. Here are some steps they recommend:

> **Learn**: Move beyond stereotypes, longstanding prejudices and biased, oversimplified reporting, toward a well-considered, more complex understanding of the Middle East, its conflicts and the yearnings of its peoples for justice, peace and co-existence.
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> **Build personal relationships**: Visit the land and meet Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians, and Israelis working for justice and peace -- listening to their stories, understanding their pain and hearing their hopes and dreams.
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> **Enrich worship and congregational life**: Take initiative in our places of worship to pray and preach justice and peace in Palestine and Israel, pursue opportunities to learn and study about the situation, explore cultural and economic exchange and challenge your congregation to participate in the blessed calling of peacemaking.
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> **Engage in theological reflection**: Examine flawed biblical interpretations and unexamined theology that have shaped attitudes and perceptions leading to and allowing the present injustice to continue unchallenged. Pursue open and active theological inquiry and encourage study and reflection, in order to guide your actions in striving to follow Jesus' injunction to "interpret the present time" (Luke 12:56).
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> **Participate in nonviolent action**: Translate concern into action. Support those -- in Israel, the occupied territories and throughout the world -- who work to end the illegal occupation through peaceful means. We urge Christians to become educated about the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment and sanctions and to explore this and other forms of legitimate, nonviolent resistance.
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> **Advocate with the U.S government**, as Christians who are committed to justice, peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. Support political candidates who do the same.

"The favorable time is now!" they write. "We invite you to read and study this document; to see it as a spur to action. It is a call to individuals, churches, schools, human rights organizations and interfaith partners to join with all who embrace nonviolent resistance to injustice. It is a call to listen to the same Spirit that inspired the Civil Rights movement in this country and the struggle to end Apartheid in South Africa. We issue this call in the absolute conviction that God calls us to compassion -- to join the struggle for justice and equality in the spirit of Matthew 25. We issue this call in the faith that, even when the cause appears most hopeless, God's light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it."

The original Kairos Palestine document is a powerful statement well worth everyone's prayerful consideration. This considered U.S. response hears their cry for justice and takes it to heart. It admits to the long list of violence and injustice outlined in the original December 2009 document, addresses the misguided theology that

supports the occupation and takes a fresh look at the complicated realities of the situation, including the evil history of anti-Semitism and its impact, as well as Islamaphobia. For example, they write:

"The situation in Israel and Palestine is not a struggle among religions, as some would maintain, in which age-old enmities among Jews, Christians and Muslims fuel unending conflict and violence," they note. "It is, rather, about human rights and equality: about land, water and access to work, education and worship. At the same time, however, religious identity plays an important role in the ongoing conversation about Israel and Palestine in the United States, where "interfaith politics" has had a profound effect on political discourse and on the ability of the churches to take positive action."

In supporting the BDS campaign ("Boycott, divestment and sanctions"), they point out that BDS is directed at Israeli policy, not the state of Israel itself or its citizens, and certainly not against the Jewish people:

> Divestment and other forms of socially responsible investing are not directed against groups, nor are they intended to hurt individuals, corporations or states. They are, rather, directed at unjust, oppressive policies and are about promoting our own values and stated commitments by noncooperation with evil. Furthermore, methods to exert economic pressure on governments and companies, in addition to being a legal, ethical and time-tested way of influencing the political process and corporate behavior, serve to increase awareness, promote open discussion and create the grassroots support required to urge our government to take effective action. We urge congregations, clergy and church leaders to become educated about the BDS movement and to consider the many forms that it can take on personal, local and national levels. A just and sustainable peace in Israel and Palestine depends on a political solution based on justice and fairness. We hold our own government largely responsible for the continuation of conflict and suffering on the part of both Palestinians and Israelis because the conditions that stand in the way of such a peace are financed and diplomatically protected by our government.

"We therefore urge Christians in the U.S. to advocate with our government for a foreign policy that demonstrates a commitment to justice for both Israelis and Palestinians and we urge all Americans to support political candidates who do the same," the statement concludes.

Kairos USA yesterday launched an impressive website [2] with its document, list of signatories and actions that can be taken. If you wonder how to respond to the systemic injustice waged against the Palestinian people, or even what a Christian response might be, I urge you to read this U.S. response and join with groups such as Friends of Sabeel North America [4] that work in solidarity with Christian Palestinians to end the occupation of the Palestine.

"In writing this statement we are declaring that the time has come for us to do some shouting," they conclude. "We offer this Call to Action in gratitude for the gift of this Kairos, this divine summons to read the signs of the times and to recognize that the favorable time has arrived. Let us celebrate the appearance of this time as we set out the path we will follow, as individuals and as communities. It is a path that may bring pain, loss and cost, but one that leads to the fulfilling of God's will: to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God."

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John Dear will speak Friday and Saturday with Jim Wallis, Vincent Hardin and others at the Wildgoose Festival [5] in Chapel Hill, N.C. John will also speak Aug. 26 near London at the annual Greenbelt Festival, which is usually attended by 20,000 Christians. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [6], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [7]. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [8]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [9] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other

recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings [10]*; *Put Down Your Sword [11]* and *A Persistent Peace [12]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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[1] http://www.kairospalestine.ps
[2] http://www.kairosusa.org
[3] http://www.kairosusa.org/images/kairosusabooklet.pdf
[4] http://www.fosna.org
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[13] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup