Timeline: UCC Palestine/Israel Network

Background

Four related events led to the founding of UCC PIN in 2012

1. In 2005 General Synod 25 passed the “Use of Economic Leverage in Promoting Peace in the Middle East. Among other things, the resolution called on the church to challenge the practices of corporations that gain from the continuation of the conflict and to divest from those companies that refuse to change their practices of gain from the perpetuation of violence, including the Occupation.

2. That same year Palestinian civil society initiated the BDS movement, calling for boycotts, divestment and sanctions as a form of non-violent pressure on Israel.

3. During this period, Gay Harter and Rev. Branwen Cook had organized a Task Force on Israel Palestine in the Massachusetts conference.

4. Leading up to the 2011 General Synod 28, Rev. Cook learned that a group of delegates planned to introduce a resolution that would encourage positive investment in Palestine while committing the UCC to refrain from engaging in BDS activities. The group was composed of people who had visited Israel/Palestine on trips funded by Christians for Fair Witness in the Middle East. Because the proposal was in contradiction to the Kairos Palestine document and the church’s policy in many other areas, the MA Task Force organized to educate and inform GS28 delegates about the resolution’s problems. The Synod Committee recommended “No Action”; the principal proposer withdrew the Resolution.

This experience convinced Gay and Branwen, who as a GS28 delegate had been instrumental in informing the other delegates, that the UCC needed a national grass-roots organization to educate and organize the church around support for resolutions already passed, to develop new initiatives to promote justice for Palestinians, and to support Global Ministries partners in Palestine and Israel.

2012

January – Eleven activists from UCC congregations and institutions from around the country along with support staff from Wider Church Ministries (Jim Moos, Peter Makari, Derek Duncan) and Justice and Witness Ministries (Mike Neuroth) held an organizational meeting in Cleveland. The group selected the name (UCC Palestine Israel Network) and chose Co-Chairs Gay Harter and Branwen Cook (who later resigned due to health issues.) The activists became UCC PIN’s Steering Committee, the PIN’s decision-making body, with the staff persons functioning as non-voting resource persons.

Other 2012 actions and activities

- Massachusetts Conference agreed to fiscal sponsorship
- Developed and approved Mission Statement
- Established Facebook page and began planning for a web page
- Designed card to promote membership stating that members would:
  - Affirm Mission Statement
  - Commit to:
    - Study Kairos Palestine document
    - Visit and Learn about the region
Timeline: UCC Palestine/Israel Network

- Advocate with the US government
- Support denominational partners in Palestine
- UCNews article introduced UCC PIN and invited readers to membership
- Actions related to issues
  - Raised questions with the Pension Boards and United Church Funds regarding their implementation of the 2005 Economic Leverage Resolution
  - Endorsed the SodaStream Boycott.
  - Distributed Collegium Advent letter suggesting boycotts
  - Publicized and provided support for various advocacy initiatives of the UCC
    - Letter to Congress on humanitarian aid to Palestinians
    - October 5 ecumenical letter on foreign aid accountability

PIN Presence in the UCC and among allied groups

- Decided not to bring a resolution to GS29, but to have a literature table and sponsor a workshop.
- Continued monitoring implementation of the 2005 Economic Leverage Resolution through contacts with the Pension Boards, United Church Funds, and the Corporate Social Responsibility Committee.
- Joined the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, some committee members attended the campaign’s annual conference
- Initiated consultations with our allies in IPMN & UMKR on common interests
- Helped publicize the Tree of Life Conferences in the fall of 2012

2013 – A General Synod Year

January - At the Annual Meeting in Cleveland the steering committee met, assessed the work of 2012, and planned for the future. General Minister and President Geoffrey Black and Jim Moos, Executive Minister of Wider Church Ministries participated.

General Synod 29 in Long Beach, California

- Shared a literature table with FOSNA and introduced UCC PIN to delegates and visitors
- Sponsored a workshop with Sidney Levy of JVP, Mira Rizeq of the YWCA Palestine and Shakeel Syed of the Islamic Shura of LA, coordinated with a Global Ministries workshop also featuring Mira Rizeq.
- Signed up 76 new members.
- Kept a close eye on reactions to the Fossil Fuels resolution, comparing reaction of financial bodies.

Other 2013 actions and activities

- Google Groups, similar to listservs, set up for communication— one for steering committee, the other for general membership and friends of the PIN
- System for tracking members, friends, and potential members established
- Catherine Alder created the website - www.ucpalestineisraelnetwork.org/
- Began work on resolution to be presented to General Synod 30
Timeline: UCC Palestine/Israel Network

- Researched actions by UCF and Pension boards related to 2005 resolution
- Researched UCC’s history of boycotts
- Began work on text of the resolution
- Began identification of possible sponsoring conferences

2014

February – At the Annual Meeting in Washington DC we focused on the GS30 resolution by working on the draft of the text and discussing strategy with Katherine Cunningham of IPMN.

Actions Related to the GS30 resolution

- Completed text and distributed to advocates in conferences that we hoped would sponsor
- Eight UCC Conferences voted to officially sponsorship; Central Atlantic Conference (CAC) under the leadership of Rev. John Deckenback, became the lead conference.
- Began actively promoting resolution among delegates, developed a delegate education packet
- Began raising funds to cover synod expenses, including a grant request to Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace (PCAP)
- CAC staff coordinated with synod staff to ensure that proposal’s text and format text conformed to Synod standing rules.
- Developed workshop proposal – rejected because of duplication of issues.

PIN Advocacy and Presence among allied groups

- Agreed that Esther Riley’s Congressional letter re cutoff of funding to the Palestinian Authority could go over the steering committee’s name
- Communicated our support for the Presbyterian Church USAoverture to be considered at the mid-June General Assembly in Detroit. The action would divest from Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard, and Motorola. The overture passed, 313 to 310.
- Gay added UCCPIN to the endorsers of the International Petition on Embargo

2015 - A General Synod Year

February – At the annual meeting in Cleveland we assessed the previous year and strategized on the campaign for passage of our resolution, titled “A CALL FOR THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST TO TAKE ACTIONS TOWARD A JUST PEACE IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT.” Colleagues from PCUSA, UMKR, and JVP joined us offering hints of what to do and what to avoid.

General Synod 30 In Cleveland, Ohio

- Before Synod
  - Promoted the resolution before with presentations to conference delegations
  - Developed of a second web site in support of the resolution
  - Selected a logo and letterhead
  - Actively solicited endorsements from other denominations, religious leaders, allied groups
Timeline: UCC Palestine/Israel Network

- Decided not to take a position on NCNV’s resolution on apartheid
- Received a $5,000 grant from Washington Interfaith Alliance for Middle East Peace (WIAMEP) with possible $2,000 more to come if matched
- Closely monitored PB/UCF resolution
- Set up a media team

**At Synod**
- Set up an exhibit booth with video, printed materials, posters, photos, book-signing by Mitri Raheb; signed up 31 new members
- Promoted the resolution with the support of Jewish Voice for Peace and local Palestinians by meeting with conference delegations, speaking with delegates in the halls and at the exhibit booth, organizing a prayer vigil, distributing materials
- Distributed colorful stoles and pins to supporters
- Coordinated media presence with IMEU; Tweeted several times each day; posted to Facebook regularly
- Vote scheduled for the evening plenary session was postponed until the next day. That plenary session concluded with a rousing sermon by Rev. Mitri Raheb of Bethlehem.
- Next day celebrated passage of resolution – 508 yeas, 124 nays, 38 abstentions, well above the 2/3 requirement

**After Synod**
- Allie Perry agreed to serve as treasurer
- Established standing committees
  - Membership and Contact Development
  - Communications
  - Education and Advocacy
- Endorsed a statement on freedom of worship offered by the American Muslims for Palestine in response to pressures on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem
- Agreed that we will share our names with groups like FOSNA and Tree of Life and can be listed as sponsors of their conferences but can’t guarantee financial support
- Began consideration of 501c3 status
- Fund-raising letter sent to friends and donors – goal $5,000

2016

April – Annual meeting in Cleveland where we met with UCC leaders (John Dorhauer, Jim Moos, Traci Blackmon, Pension Boards (Brian Bodager, Rick Walters), and UCF (Don Hart and Katie McCluskey). We attempted to develop a 5-year plan, did some visioning, then focused on implementation of 2015 resolution and presence at 2017

Implementation of 2015 resolution

- Published 24 page Implementation document in support for 2015 resolution – partially supported by a $500 grant from Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace
- Agreed to endorse any coalition being developed to oppose anti-BDS legislation.
- Initiated coordinated effort to communicate with UCC boards and entities re 2015 Resolution
Timeline: UCC Palestine/Israel Network

Advocacy and Action Steps

- Decided to offer a GS31 resolution on IDF’s treatment of detained Palestinian children, to be sponsored by at least 10 UCC congregations per Synod rules, with First Congregational, Old Lyme as lead congregation.
- Endorsed the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Letter (USCIRF)

Communication/Media/Administrative Steps

- Joined Palestine Portal
- Need for endorsement policy and procedures
- Established new communications feature, E-News a monthly email newsletter sent all members of friends, including those who opted out of the Google Group listserv.
- Central Atlantic became our fiscal agent, offering online donation feature
- Decided to merge the two websites – long time project
- Elected new chair, Rev. John Buttrick, and co-chair, Maryn Goodson

2017 - A General Synod Year

General Synod 31 in Baltimore, Maryland

At Synod

- Promoted resolution titled “A CALL FOR THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST TO ADVOCATE FOR THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN LIVING UNDER ISRAELI MILITARY OCCUPATION”
- 16 congregations sponsored, First Congregational Church of Old Lyme CT as lead
- Implementation workshop for GS30 resolution – standing room only
- Exhibit Booth – about 60 new members, manned partially by Palestinians from Baltimore area and PCAP friends, AFSC friends
- Outdoor vigil supported by Baltimore supporters and Women in Black
- Youth selected our resolution to study, spoke in favor
- Passed 79% Yeas, 13% Nays, 9% Abstentions

Other Actions

- Signed ACLU letter in support of Esther Koontz, Mennonite teacher who refused to comply with Kansas anti-BDS requirement and contributed $250 to have the letter printed in a Kansas paper
- Issued a statement opposing anti-Semitism and Islamophobia
- Donated $250 to Hebron International Resource Network
- Established a committee to review our structure
- Decided to alternate our meeting times between afternoon and evening to accommodate members with work commitments
- John Buttrick resigned, Maryn Goodson became acting chair in September
- Elected Chair, Allie Perry, and Vice Chair, Ann Muir to begin serving February 2018
Timeline: UCC Palestine/Israel Network

- Decided to hold our 2018 Annual meeting in Washington DC, April 17-19, with April 19th as a day for visiting members of Congress, lobbying for positions related to our two resolutions

Summary as of April 2018

Some positive patterns have emerged since 2012:
- We continue to receive solid support from UCC staff.
- Our success with resolutions has been remarkable - two for two.
- Our engagement with allies continues with support going both ways.
- Our consistent support for economic leverage and opposition to anti-BDS efforts.

Some items continue to need more attention:
- Fund-raising
- Documenting our endorsements/pronouncements.
- Developing engagement by UCCers in more conferences/congregations.