CHAPTER 6

The Presbyterian Church USA: Institutions, Justice, and History

Introduction

Since 2004, the Presbyterian Church (USA), or PCUSA, has been engaged in a process of corporate engagement with several US companies widely documented as engaged in military or surveillance activities in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. Although a major uproar ensued when the mainstream press reported that the Presbyterians had “divested” from Israel at the 2004 General Assembly (GA), the PCUSA had actually initiated a long-standing Church process of Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI), the final step of which—if corporations are not forthcoming with changes after the dialog—is divestment. The organized Jewish community was particularly outraged by the PCUSA’s resolution, despite the fact that Jewish leaders and organizations appealed to Presbyterians both for and against divestment, a division also reflected within the Presbyterian Church. At the 220th GA in July 2012, the MRTI committee recommended that PCUSA divest from Caterpillar (CAT), Hewlett Packard (HP), and Motorola Solutions due to the refusal of these corporations to respond to PCUSA’s ethical concerns. After extensive debate, the Middle East Peacemaking Committee (Committee 15) voted in favor of this resolution by a three to one margin. However, on the plenary floor divestment was defeated by a 333–331–2 vote. This chapter traces the divestment debates through several different Presbyterian GA sessions, examining how conceptions of identity and values are mobilized by each side of the issue and exploring how institutional structures and processes provide both opportunities and obstacles to those pursuing divestment from “corporations that may be profiting from involvement in any of the obstacles to a just peace” (Niva 2010; MRTI 2011, 1). In particular, the chapter
explores how historical patterns of relations between Presbyterians and Jews and between Presbyterians in the United States and Middle East, along with different framings of Christians’ moral obligations, shape current debate. Actors involved on both sides of the debate, as in other cases studied, seek to promote peace and justice and express their concern for the human rights of Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims involved in the conflict. However, these actors put forth differing conceptions regarding how to pursue these goals morally and pragmatically with the best chance of success.

**The Historic Role of the Church in Boycott Efforts**

Historically, the Church has played a leading role in civil rights efforts around the world. From the efforts of Archbishop Óscar Romero in advocating “liberation theology” (BBC 2011) to the role of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the campaign against South African apartheid and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr, in the US Civil Rights movement, Christians have drawn on the teachings of Jesus to advocate for justice for the oppressed and disadvantaged. Local black churches were critical in the organization of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, and pastors worked as community organizers during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The involvement of church leaders was not only strategic, due to their influence and connections in their communities, but also provided moral legitimacy to the antisegregation activists (Kuumba 2002; Skinner 2009; Stockton 2006). Priests and missionaries within South Africa and elsewhere helped make connections between the different political and cultural contexts involved in the antiapartheid movement (Thorn 2009). Father Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican minister, provided a strong voice that influenced British supporters of the movement during his time as a missionary outside Johannesburg. He published a series of letters in *The Observer* starting in the mid-1950s that called out to Christians to share in the suffering of black South Africans and to become a part of the voices speaking out against apartheid. In addition, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, addressed his assembly early in 1954 saying that the “detailed application of the policy of apartheid seems to us a fresh violation of Christian principle and common justice” (“Fisher Papers” 1954 cited in Skinner 2009, 407–408). The sentiment of “fear” that a failure to react to this situation would delegitimize Christians within Africa was built up by the calls to action disseminated in the media and through channels of communication between churches (Skinner 2009). In this way, church