

# “What more can the Uniting Church practically do to promote peace in Palestine and Israel?”

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to act as background for the Against the Wind forum entitled “Uniting for Peace in Palestine” in which the Rev Charissa Suli, President of the Uniting Church in Australia will address the question “What more can the Uniting Church practically do to promote peace in Palestine and Israel?” During the forum two other speakers will formally participate in the discussion, Dr Sue Wareham, National President of the [Medical Association for Prevention of War](#), and Lama Qasem of the [Australian Palestine Advocacy Network](#). In addition, there will be questions and suggestions from the forum participants.

It is hoped that this paper will help the discussion by clarifying the range of ways a church might become involved in the work of peacemaking, as well as noting some approaches that have been tried in the past. It is not meant to be a prescriptive document, but one which opens possibilities.

## What is a Christian church?

At its simplest, a Christian church is made up of a group of people who try to follow the life and teaching of a Palestinian and Jew, Jesus of Nazareth.

Unfortunately, history tells us that there have been complications. One of the most significant has been that while the early Christian communities were oppressed by empire, specifically the Roman empire, churches later often came to be associated with and supporters of kingdoms and empires which were themselves oppressive. The unique teachings of Jesus about a kingdom in which the poor are first and where peacemakers are honoured as children of God was lost.

This tension of church as supporter of oppressive empire, and church as resistor - as one who risks imagining a new type of empire - continues into our modern era.

Though not entirely free of this ambiguity, the Uniting Church in Australia, because it has never been an establishment church i.e. namely a church formally associated with the ruling establishment, is freer in some ways to address issues of injustice in innovative and imaginative ways. In doing so, however, it needs to avoid several potential hazards:

1. It cannot assume that it has the answer to complex moral and political problems. Answers must be found by listening carefully to those who are currently oppressed and walking with them.

2. It cannot assume that Australia as a State is immune to the destructive influence of empires principally motivated by the will to power. Indeed, a reading of history through the lens of the Aboriginal people quickly reveals that Australia has always been subject to this influence. This was firstly a British empire influence. More recently this role has been taken over by the US.
3. A subgroup of Christians operating at an immature level of faith inappropriate for adults means that the centrality of love and justice and its implications for the world is poorly understood by many. More importantly such Christians are often attracted to order and security and look for strong leaders who reinforce their immature sense of self. This stunting of the spiritual life is reinforced by fundamentalism and can become perversions of Christianity in such things as Christian Nationalism, Christian Zionism and Christians for Trump. The Uniting Church must act to support a more just society despite the protests of such immature Christians while at the same time encouraging them to grow in a more mature faith.
4. The mainstream media and the large social media platforms are increasingly being controlled by billionaires and their right-wing supporters. Voices for justice and a more equitable world are sidelined and demonised. One pernicious effect of the media is to make most people believe that real change is not possible.

## What is to be done?

In September 2024, Rev Suli, echoing the earlier words of the Assembly Standing Committee of the Uniting Church, (the Assembly) “called upon members of the Uniting Church to pray for, listen to, and promote the voices of those who are suffering...”

## Listening and promoting

One of those voices has been the Rev Dr Munther Isaac. Munther Isaac is a Palestinian Christian pastor and theologian. He now pastors the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem and the Lutheran Church in Beit Sahour. He is also the academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College and is the director of the highly acclaimed and influential Christ at the Checkpoint conferences.

Rev Dr Isaac is grounded in Christian scripture and the Christian tradition but also brings a post-colonial lens to understand what is happening in Palestine. In September 2024, the Rev Dr Isaac spoke at Riverside Church in New York. (Back in April 1967 Martin Luther King in the same church delivered his famous Beyond Vietnam address against the sins of poverty, racism and militarism.) Munther Isaac used his address to spell out in some detail what the church needed to do in response to the grave injustices, indeed the genocide being enacted on the Palestinian people. A recording of his speech can be found [here](#). I encourage every reader of this paper to listen to the address as the summary that follows cannot hope to include all its complexity, nuance, power or grace.

In essence, Munther Isaac, chastises the church for being silent on the genocide in Palestine and in their silence being complicit in what is happening. He reflects on the fact that the Palestinian people have been dehumanized and demonized for generations, and their stories not told. In response he reminds the church of the teachings of Matthew 25 that we will be judged by what we do or do not do to the “least of these”, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked and the prisoner. In other words, *victims of structures of injustice*. He goes on to make a very explicit theological case for the involvement of the church when at the end of his address he says:

- ‘These are the least of these. Those victimised and marginalised by our systems of injustice and oppression and supremacy, left hungry and thirsty and naked and imprisoned. This is how we will be judged, by how we treated the least of these. And it’s not only that. On whether we have seen the image of Jesus in each one of the least of these. For Jesus said, “Whatever you have done to the least of these, you have done to me. And whatever you have not done to the least of these, you have not done to me.” You see why I say it is the credibility of our Christian witness that is at stake when we continue to do our religious stuff and yet are silent about injustice literally at our doorstep.
- And this is one of the reasons behind what we did as a church back in December when we were ready to commemorate celebrate Christmas. We could not celebrate Christmas when our people were massacred. We were troubled by the fact that the world was justifying and rationalizing and dehumanizing the children of Gaza, to the extent that they justified their killing. We couldn’t believe it. And that’s why we said, “We see the image of Jesus in the children of Gaza. In every child pulled from under the rubble, we see the image of Jesus.” We are trying to reclaim the dignity and worth of these precious people given to them by God, yet stripped by the Empire and colonisation and those who support them. So we insisted that we see Jesus in them. That is why we said, “Jesus is under the rubble.”
- ‘Today we see the image of Jesus. In Asa and Isa, 4 year old twins, killed in Gaza in a very brutal way. Jesus is under the rubble. This is God’s solidarity with the marginalized, with the oppressed. This is God’s solidarity with the people of Gaza. Jesus is under the rubble is our response to the dehumanisation, the systematic dehumanisation, over the years of Palestinians, and Palestinian children to the extent of justifying this genocide.
- And here’s the point, God’s solidarity with the marginalized must become our solidarity, our people of faith with the very same marginalized. If God’s solidarity is with those oppressed, we must be in solidarity with those oppressed. It is time to rise. It is time for the people of faith to act with courage, with justice, with integrity.

- ‘So with one voice we say, “Ceasefire now.” And with one voice, “May Justice Reign and Righteousness fill the world like water fills the oceans.”’

Practically Isaac Munther makes a number of suggestions for Church Involvement.

1. Call for a Ceasefire Now
2. Call for a Weapons Embargo
3. Make support for Israel conditional on respect for human rights instead of being unconditional as it is now.
4. Recognize Israel as a settler-colonial entity – 800,000 Palestinians were displaced, were ethnically cleansed, when Israel was created.
5. Recognize apartheid in Israel and act accordingly
6. Call for accountability of those who have committed war crimes.
7. Understand that without US military and financial support and diplomatic cover this war could not go on.
8. Address the poor theology in churches that has led to both Christian Zionism and conservative and liberal theologies that have forgotten the basics of the Christian religion of love of neighbour, and which has ended up supporting oppressive Colonial structures and empires.
9. In particular support the students.
10. Make alliances with others seeking justice for Palestine
11. Think in new ways
12. Praying for Peace and making a statement is not good enough
13. Continue to talk about Gaza and hear the stories and know the names.
14. The church belongs on the streets

## The Australian context

**Politically** at a national level Australia has been slow to recognize that there is a genocide occurring in Gaza or to criticise the state of Israel. Initially in the United Nations they voted with the US when most of the other member states were calling for stronger action. More recently a stronger position has been taken, but it is still politically relatively weak.

Certainly, Australian politicians are not treating Israel as an apartheid state, in the way that South Africa was last century.

**Militarily** there has been no attempt to impose a Weapons embargo and Australia continues to export weapon parts and components that will end up in Israel via the F-35 supply chain. There are likely other weapons exports too, but the blanket of secrecy the Australian Defence Department imposes on its weapons exports makes it impossible to

know. Attempts by activists to get clarity on this issue have been met with misinformation and bureaucratic intransigence.

At a wider level, Australia's ties to US military policy have been increased by the AUKUS agreement, and this makes it even more difficult for Australian political leaders to carve out an independent military or defence policy.

**Socially** there continues a great deal of support for the state of Israel despite the war crimes which have been condoned at the highest levels. There are complex reasons for this. Partly, this is a genuine concern for Jewish people in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Partly however it is skilful use of the media and behind the scenes lobbying by Zionists (both Jewish and Christian). In this context, certain immature Christian theologies have given the state of Israel unconditional support.

## How has the Uniting Church in Australia responded to date?

### The Assembly

In July 2021, the Assembly of the Uniting Church issued an important policy document, [Our Vision for a Just Australia](#). Under the heading Contributing to a Just and Peaceful World it read in part:

The Assembly resolved to:

- a) Receive the requests from the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, the Kairos Palestine movement and the World Council of Churches to act in response to the plight of the people of Palestine.

The UCA has issued a number of statements in solidarity with our partner churches in response to communal and religious conflict, and political tension in the life of their societies.

This was consistent with the earlier decision by the Assembly in 2015 to establish a campaign to raise awareness throughout the Uniting Church on the plight of Palestinian Christians and the Palestinian people.

The [educational material provided](#) for this campaign contained a succinct analysis of the situation as it was understood at that time.

Palestine has been under Israeli military occupation since 1967. The West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza are officially controlled by Israel. Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005, but over the years illegal Israeli settlements and land confiscations have taken over nearly half of the West Bank.

Palestinians living under occupation endure daily harassments and privations at the hands of Israeli occupiers, which have brought a deep sense of hopelessness and

despair to the people of Palestine. Violent conflict in recent years has cost several thousand Palestinian lives and dozens of Israeli lives as well.

The prospects for negotiated peace and the desired "two-state solution" are bleak and Palestinians have little hope for a better future.

On October 11 2023 the Rev Sharon Hollis, at that time President of the Uniting Church in Australia issued [a statement](#) on a just peace in Palestine in which she said in part;

“We lament the violence that has already taken place and the precious lives that have been lost. We join with the World Council of Churches and Christians around the world in calling for an urgent end to hostilities and for a lasting peace to prevail.”

On October 24, 2023, the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) released a [public statement](#) on behalf of 13 Australian denominations, including the Uniting Church in Australia, addressing the conflict in Palestine and Israel and escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The statement read in part,

“We reject completely the continuing use of strike weapons that are also impacting vulnerable populations and civilian infrastructure including homes, hospitals and clinics in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.”

On November 15, 2023, the Rev Sharon Hollis [reiterated an appeal](#) made by the World Council of Churches.

“We join the World Council of Churches in demanding an immediate ceasefire, the unconditional and safe release of all hostages and the opening of humanitarian corridors,” Rev Hollis said. “Likewise, we appeal for all parties to uphold international humanitarian law by ensuring the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, places of worship and holy sites.”

In January 2024 the Assembly promoted the [Gaza Ceasefire Project](#) to raise awareness and funds for humanitarian and refugee relief.

In February 2024 the Rev Hollis [raised concerns](#) about the people who were sheltering in Rafah.

In March 2024 the Assembly Standing Committee made [a number of resolutions](#) in regard a just peace in Palestine and Israel. In part it called upon the Australian government to “support the International Court of Justice’s provisional measures for the prevention of genocide including calling for a sustained ceasefire, ending weapons exports to Israel and providing greater transparency over Australia’s weapon exports.”

This document was sent to the Australian government and opposition leaders, Israeli government leaders, and to other churches.

During her presidency the Rev Hollis advocated directly the church's position on Palestine in two separate meetings with Minister Penny Wong.

In September 2024 the Rev Suli issued [a statement](#) during the World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel. In part it read:

Out of our longstanding commitments to justice, peace, and reconciliation, we have consistently expressed our deep concern about this ongoing conflict which is a grave wound in the heart of God. We have called for the protection of human rights and international law, an end to illegal occupation, and a commitment to peaceful coexistence.

We have urged the Australian government and international community to engage in meaningful dialogue towards a permanent ceasefire and actions to uphold the safety and dignity of all people in Israel and Palestine. We have called upon our government to support the International Court of Justice in its measures to prevent genocide and to end weapons exports to Israel.

In our faith tradition, we believe that peace is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of justice. Justice and reconciliation are the foundations upon which a peaceful future can be built.

During Advent (the period before Christmas) in 2023 and 2024 the Assembly hosted two national prayer vigils which included panel participants from Bethlehem.

On January 16 this year, Rev Suli issued [a further statement](#) on the announcement of a ceasefire. It read in part:

The Uniting Church in Australia remains steadfast in its commitment to advocating for a world where every person can live with dignity, safety, and hope. We pray this ceasefire will be not an end but a beginning – a pathway to healing and reconciliation for a future shaped by lasting justice and peace.

To the people of the Middle East, including the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, we stand with you in prayer and solidarity in your longing for justice and peace. To the Christian church in Gaza, we hold you in constant prayer as you speak prophetically and witness to Christ's love in the lands of Jesus' own birth.

As followers of Christ we are called to be bridge-builders and bearers of hope. May this historic day inspire us all to pursue a world where swords are turned into ploughshares, and peace flows like a mighty river.

## State or Synod level of the Uniting Church

### *Synod of Victoria and Tasmania*

This Synod has in the past conducted several letter-writing campaigns asking members to write to the Australian Government to support Israelis and Palestinians who yearn for a just and lasting peace with an end to the murders, extrajudicial executions and acts of terrorism. In April 2024, it requested members write to the Australian Government to urge they follow the lead of other governments and place sanctions on Israeli settlers and members of the security forces responsible for murders, extrajudicial executions and other serious crimes against Palestinians where the Israeli criminal justice system has failed to deal with such cases fairly and transparently.

In June the letter writing campaign urged the Australian Government to prohibit the sale of all weapons and ammunition to Israel, given the significant risk that such weapons might be used to murder or intimidate Palestinian civilians.

The Moderator of the Synod has written at least twice to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Hon Penny Wong.

### *Synod of Western Australia*

Through their Social Justice Unit and its Social Justice Update, this Synod has called for support for Palestine via prayer, participating in petitions, social events and distribution of statements on the need for a ceasefire.



At the 19th Annual Meeting of the Presbytery of WA in June 2024 a proposal was passed as a "Response to the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) resolution on the Holy Land", which includes encouraging congregations to use worship and educational resources developed within the Uniting Church to learn about the issues faced by Palestinian Christians."



## Congregations and individuals of the Uniting Church

Throughout Australia individuals and congregations have responded in a variety of ways.

A number of UC members/churches are connected to the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network (PIEN) and have taken up acts of solidarity - eg participation in the [YouTube of Christians holding signs calling for action in relation to the Gaza situation](#).

Uniting Churches and individuals who participated in the YouTube include: The Village Uniting Church, Ascot Vale Uniting Church, Blackwood Uniting Church, Leichhardt Uniting Church, Parramatta Community Uniting Church Leigh Fijian, North Essendon Uniting Church, St Kilda South Port Uniting Church, Rev Andreana Reale, Balmain Uniting Church, Parramatta Community Uniting Church, St David's Uniting Church Haberfield, Shepparton Uniting Church, Centenary Uniting Church, Ferntree Gully Uniting Church, Rev Rob Hanks, Mark the Evangelist Uniting Church Parkville, Hope Uniting Church, Gail and Alastair Pritchard Retired Uniting Church Ministers, Glenbrook Uniting Church, Seacliff Uniting Church, North Balwyn Uniting Church, Colonel Light Gardens Uniting Church, Brunswick Uniting Church, Parramatta Community Uniting Church.

Individual churches have also invited speakers to speak to their congregations about the situation in Palestine.

And individual church members with either direct experience in Palestine or commitment to a just peace have spoken to other congregations, other community groups or at rallies, or run forums.

At least one Uniting Church member has experience as an Ecumenical Accompanier in Palestine under the auspices of the World Council of Churches.

Other church members are members of community groups associated with peace in Palestine such as the Australian Friends of Palestine Association (AFOPA)

## Some suggestions about what the Uniting Church might do to promote peace and justice in Palestine and Israel

The following are a starting point for discussions on February 23. They have been created based on the earlier discussion in this paper. Some may prove impractical, or not timely, or even wrong-headed. There are likely to be good suggestions that come out of the February 23 meeting which haven't yet been considered.

### Vision

Already the Uniting Church through the work of the Assembly and recent presidents has begun to spell out a vision for a just peace in Palestine and Israel. It is a vision that rejects violence and oppression, whether it be by Hamas, or the State of Israel or by the United States of America and its allies.

More needs to be done to flesh out this vision, especially in dialogue with the Palestinian people themselves. The Christian tradition, born as it was during a time of oppression in Palestine/Israel when its leader was tortured to death by the agents of an oppressive empire, has at its core a vision of hope when all seems hopeless. Empowering vision is particularly needed currently.

### Communication

Most people outside the Uniting Church on reading this document would be surprised at how much the Uniting Church has been involved in advocating for peace in Palestine. In fact most members of the Uniting Church would also be surprised. This indicates that the Uniting Church may have a communication problem. It is in part a matter of priorities and resources.

One low-cost way of addressing the issue might be for the President to nominate directly some people already involved in this work to promote the vision and activities of peacemaking both to the community and to individual congregations. These need not be paid positions but have the status of answering directly to the President.

### Speaking Truth to Power

While the Uniting Church has made some statements that might make the powerful uncomfortable, for example the calls for a ceasefire, the opposition to the use of strike weapons on civilian infrastructure including homes, hospitals and clinics, and the call for a weapons embargo on Israel, such calls have largely been muted and are little known. They do not appear to be taken seriously by those in power.

If the Uniting Church is to be serious about speaking truth to power, it must be well researched in what it says, astute in its manner of delivery and persistent in its voice. It must also be aware that if it begins to be effective that it will come under attack by powerful players who will seek to discredit it.

## Working in Partnerships and Unity

One of the marks of the Uniting Church has been its ongoing commitment to unity. In the beginning this was first identified as being a unity with other Christian churches. In this current era it may well be that the Uniting Church is called to emphasize a unity with all organisations of good will that seek justice and peace.

## A Servant People

A church that follows a Palestinian named Jesus does not only have a prophetic role, it also has a servant role. Such has been the destruction in Gaza and the West Bank there will be a great need for practical aid. Already, as noted above, the [Gaza Ceasefire Project](#) has raised money for the people of Palestine. This certainly needs to be continued and encouraged and is a way to continually raise the awareness of Uniting Church people.

## Opposing Australia's involvement in the Arms Trade

This seems an appropriate time to reinvigorate the Uniting Churches opposition to the arms trade. In 1988 the Assembly made [a strong and prophetic statement](#) in opposition to Australia's increasing involvement in the arms trade. During the destruction of Gaza weapon systems manufactured in Australia have been used in that destruction. As the General Assembly pointed out back in 1988, "Every Australian arms export contract would be killing people, or decreasing their wellbeing, even if the arms are not used in battle." Australia's enthusiastic involvement in the arms trade, which has support from both Labor and the LNP, does not make the world safer or more peaceful but only enriches the few to the misery of the many.

## Conclusion

This paper was prepared as background for the Uniting for Peace for Palestine forum on February 23, 2025. It was prepared by [Against the Wind](#). It is not a Uniting Church of Australia document at either, local, regional or national level. It is simply a document to aid the wider discussion.

Len Baglow, Facilitator, Against the Wind.