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http://chuckcurrie.blogs.com/chuck_currie/2006/01/antidefamation_.html

Anti-Defamation League Wrong To Attack United Church Of Christ

Today the Anti-Defamation League, a group whose work I often respect and cite, sent out a press release attacking the United Church of Christ for supporting the work of the Palestinian Christian organization Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center.

ADL's charges against the UCC and Sabeel are groundless and harm the important relationships between Christian and Jewish groups in the United States.

From their press release:

New York, NY, January 10, 2006 ... The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is troubled by the United Church of Christ's continuing partnership with the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, a radicalized Palestinian Christian group whose leaders have openly questioned Israel's right to exist.

"While it is heartening that the United Church of Christ has come out strongly against those who advocate for Israel's destruction, it is troubling that church leaders continue to embrace the Sabeel Center while ignoring statements from its leader questioning Israel's right to exist," said Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, ADL Director of Interfaith Affairs. "You can't have it both ways."

In October, leaders of the UCC, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Common Global Ministries Board issued a statement condemning both suicide terrorism and recent statements from the Iranian President calling for Israel's destruction. "With our partner the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center," the church leaders said, "we assert the moral reprehensibility of suicide bombing."

While welcoming UCC's clear denunciation of violence, ADL is troubled by the church's continuing partnership with the Jerusalem-based Palestinian Christian group until such time as they recognize Israel's historic validity and right to exist. Sabeel's founder and leader, Rev. Naim Ateek, has on several occasions openly questioned Israel's right to exist, at one point telling an audience of Christian and Jewish interfaith leaders: "I have come to the point of the reality - but not the right - of Israel's existence."

Charges of anti-Semitism have been flying against Sabeel since several Protestant denominations adopted resolutions over the last year critical of the Israeli government's policies toward Palestinians. Groups such as Human Rights Watch have also been critical of Israel. The same is also true for Jewish peace groups like Jewish Voices for Peace. ADL has charged that Sabeel has somehow manipulated American Christian denominations to adopt divestment resolutions targeting Israel (only the Presbyterian Church USA has in reality adopted a divestment resolution and that statement only targeted companies profiting from the military occupation of Palestine).

James M. Wall, senior contributing editor at The Christian Century, wrote this past fall:

This move did not start, as some critics would claim, with Naim Ateek, an Anglican priest in Jerusalem who directs Sabeel, the Jerusalem-based ecumenical peace center. Aggressive supporters of Israel have been attacking Ateek and Sabeel. The focus on Ateek is ironic, since he advocates a nonviolent approach to ending the occupation.

In mid-October, those attacks included picket lines in front of the first of Sabeel's annual series of conferences in the U.S., presented this year in Chicago, Denver, Toronto, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. After attending the Chicago conference, Dexter Van Zile, Boston-based David Project's Christian outreach director, wrote on the Stand with Us Web site that "to these folks, the Jews are the new Nazis." That comment, designed to evoke the Holocaust, has no basis in fact. (I attended the Chicago

conference; no such statement was made or implied.) Sabeel describes the "moral basis" for its work this way: "We acknowledge the sufferings and injustices committed against Jews by the West, especially those inflicted in the Holocaust. Nevertheless, anti-Semitism does not justify the injustices committed against Palestinians."

Ateek was not the initiator of the divestment movement. The movement began with an overture from a Jacksonville, Florida, Presbyterian church, sponsored by a pastor who saw Israel's occupation up close while on a Christian Peacemaker Teams mission to Palestine. The Florida overture worked its way up to the General Assembly and was endorsed by the national church.

Dexter Van Zile is also a contributor to an anti-UCC web site known for taking liberties with the truth and supporting conservative political causes and groups.

Colleagues of mine that have visited Sabeel and talked with Rev. Ateek praise the clear commitment to non-violence advocated by the center.

Rev. Ateek, writing in a piece on Sabeel's web site condemning suicide bombings, says quite directly:

As a Christian, I know that the way of Christ is the way of nonviolence and, therefore, I condemn all forms of violence and terrorism whether coming from the government of Israel or from militant Palestinian groups.

In their press release ADL calls Sabeel "a radicalized Palestinian Christian group." Several statements on the web have been particularly critical with Sabeel for advocating "liberation theology."

Liberation theology is an important movement in Christianity - it was the center of the movement to abolish Apartheid in South Africa and other oppressive regimes around the world - and is only as radical as Jesus' teachings. Sabeel's mission statement reads:

Sabeel is arabic for 'the way' and also 'a channel' or 'spring' of life-giving water, is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians which encourages women, men, and youth to discern what God is saying to them as their faith connects with the hard realities of their daily life: occupation, violence, discrimination and human rights violations.

Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, Sabeel's liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, to lead them to act for justice and love, to work for the unity and renewal of the church, and to transform society. Sabeel is committed to a prophetic ministry in solidarity with the oppressed and to the holistic liberation of all people. Sabeel strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities.

Sabeel strives to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

The United Church of Christ has a long history of supporting Israel. Support for Israel - as evidenced once again by the UCC's recent statement condemning the Iranian president's call for Israel to "be wiped off the map" - is not a new development for the UCC.

ADL marginalizes themselves with such attacks on a Christian denomination that has done nothing more than prominent Jewish groups - support the peace process and those working for non-violent solutions to the crisis in the Middle East.