



# CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) in the United States and Canada

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Rev. Teresa "Terri" Hord Owens, General Minister and President

## A pastoral letter for a time of crisis and suffering

*“All her people groan as they search for bread,  
they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength.”* (Lamentations 1:11)

Dear Disciples, and dear friends of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ! Throughout his earthly life, Jesus walked the lands we currently know as the Middle East, and spent much of his time in major cities throughout the region, like Cana, like Caesarea Philippi, like Jerusalem. His time in Jerusalem had moments of celebration, when crowds shouted: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” His time there also had moments of sadness, such as when Jesus “came near and saw the city [of Jerusalem], he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized the things that make for peace!’” Yet still, his time in Jerusalem had moments of crisis, suffering, betrayal, and ultimately death.

In remembering the experiences and teachings of Jesus’s life, and the crisis and suffering of his last days, we are especially cognizant of the fragmentation of the world around us, near and far. In fact, when we think about Jesus’s last days, and our hearts turn toward Jerusalem today, our eyes are flooded with images of a place nearby to its southwest, the Gaza Strip. We are especially pained by reports of the hunger that the Palestinian people of Gaza are experiencing. Gaza has been under heavy assault since early October, an Israeli response to the horrific Hamas attacks. Following the killing of 1,200 Israelis and the taking of hostages on that day – many of whom remain in captivity – Israel launched a brutal campaign on the Palestinians of Gaza which has, so far, killed more than 31,000 Palestinians, two-thirds of whom are women and children, and injured more than 73,000. The offensive has displaced more than three-quarters of the population and has destroyed homes and communities.

Practically all of the Palestinian people in Gaza are facing levels of food insecurity that are at crisis, emergency, or catastrophic levels. *“All her people groan as they search for bread.”* Emergency airdrops of food and water have begun, but those don’t always reach the people. Some such airdrops have fallen into the sea, and another actually killed five people and injured others when its parachute failed to open. Shipments by sea have begun to be launched as well, but these are far from sufficient. People are desperate for aid, and it is appalling that Israel has prevented the miles of trucks laden with food, water, medical supplies, and other necessities from entering Gaza over land for months. Allowing such aid by truck would be a much more efficient and effective way, and the items are ready.

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A permanent cease fire is urgently needed in order to end the assault on Gaza, for the Palestinians of Gaza to be protected from further siege, to allow for the necessary and sufficient humanitarian aid to enter, and for people to access medical supplies and facilities. There is no military solution. If the violence continues unabated, and access to food and supplies continues to be restricted, then the ongoing death and suffering risks jeopardizing the existence of a whole segment of the Palestinian people. The intensified closure of Gaza must end, along with the 16-year blockade that Israel has imposed on the Gaza Strip. The Israeli hostages must be released, and Palestinian detainees, held without charge, must also be freed. These must happen because they are the right and moral things to do.

The humanitarian disaster in Gaza is grave and must be addressed, but is only a symptom of the denial of rights that Palestinians have experienced for decades. Israel has occupied Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem since 1967. Gaza has been described as an open-air prison for years, due in part to Israel's blockade, and in 2015, the United Nations asserted that Gaza would become "uninhabitable" by 2020. Already pitiable living conditions in Gaza have now been made exponentially worse.

The infrastructure of occupation has been called the "matrix of control." That infrastructure includes the continued construction and expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Settlements are illegal under international law, and Secretary of State Blinken affirmed that recently. 2023 was the most violent year experienced by Palestinians yet, and state-led and state-sanctioned violence toward Palestinians, including settler violence, has continued this year. The rights of Palestinian refugees have been ignored for decades as well. This perpetual discrimination against Palestinians living under Israeli control is a denial of their rights and contributes to the General Assembly's conclusion that "the laws, policies and practices of the State of Israel meet the definition of apartheid as defined in international law." This violence and injustice must end.

In December 2009, Palestinian Christians issued a document called "Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth." In it, they wrote, "[P]art of this reality is the Israeli disregard of international law and international resolutions.... Human rights are violated and despite the various reports of local and international human rights organizations, the injustice continues." For Palestinians, an ongoing history of oppression and injustice is an "ongoing *Nakba*" (or catastrophe), referring to the displacement and dispossession in 1948.

Yet Palestinian Christians have hope in the Church, the mission of which, they assert, "is prophetic, to speak the Word of God courageously, honestly, and lovingly.... If she does take sides, it is with the oppressed, to stand alongside them, just as Christ our Lord stood beside each poor person and each sinner, calling them to repentance, life, and the restoration of the dignity bestowed on them by God and that no one has the right to strip away" (Kairos Palestine).

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The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been engaged in the Middle East for over 170 years. Today, we nurture relationships with a number of Palestinian Christian churches, ecumenical bodies, and Christian agencies. Palestinian Christians, who make up less than one percent of the Palestinian population, are part and parcel of the fabric of Palestinian society, providing important educational, health, and community services. Some, such as the Middle East Council of Churches' Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees and the Episcopal al-Ahli Hospital, continue to provide critical response in Gaza, despite feeling the devastating impact of the assault themselves.

Our partners also are important voices advocating for an end to occupation and for Palestinian rights to be respected, and they have informed our body of General Assembly policy on Israel/Palestine, which dates back to 1973. In 2023, the Assembly adopted a resolution called, "Compelled to Witness," following our pastoral letter of 2022 by the same name. In it, the Assembly clearly stated that "the continued oppression of the Palestinian people is a matter of theological urgency and represents a sin in violation of the message of the Biblical prophets and the Gospel."

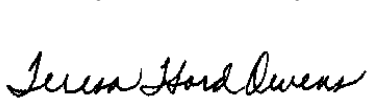
As we witness the devastation of the Palestinian people in Gaza, we stand with our Palestinian partners in solidarity and support. We recognize and lament that the US government has enabled the Israeli aggression through diplomatic cover at the UN, and through the provision of military aid and assistance. We deplore this government's role and urge it to use all of the leverage it has with Israel to press for a permanent cease fire, including ending military aid and assistance, so that the ethnic cleansing we are witnessing does not continue. The US has a treaty obligation to uphold the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

We urge the US to support robust diplomatic efforts consistent with international law to address the root causes, and to end its long support for Israel's settler colonialism. The rights, dignity, equality, and self-determination of all people in the region must be assured.

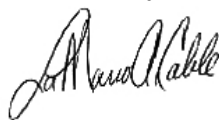
We further deplore the incidents of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim bigotry we have witnessed in our countries, knowing that the perpetuation of conflict in the Middle East only exacerbates such hateful attitudes.

The world – and Palestinians in particular – are hungry for bread and for justice. Jesus wept, for the community did not – and still does not – recognize what makes for peace. Save us now, O God, and endow us with the strength, courage, and wisdom to pray and act in appropriate ways to be a voice of love and justice in the world, and to accompany our partners and the most vulnerable with meaningful solidarity. And may we be instruments of God's peace, a just peace that affirms the dignity of all people.

May the peace of Christ, the hope of whose resurrection sustains us; the love of God; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you in these times and always.



Rev. Teresa "Terri" Hord Owens  
General Minister and President



Rev. LaMarco A. Cable, President  
Disciples Overseas Ministries



Rev. Chris Dorsey, President  
Disciples Home Missions

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