

Breaking the Silence

Joining the Apartheid-Free Movement as a First Step toward Costly Solidarity

The Rev. Dave Grishaw-Jones,
Community Church of Durham, NH (United Church of Christ)

Let it be clear: Silence is complicity, and empty calls for peace without a ceasefire and end to occupation, and the shallow words of empathy without direct action – are all under the banner of complicity... this genocide must stop now.

(The Rev. Munther Isaac, Lutheran Pastor & Palestinian Theologian)



Gaza, 2024

1. BREAKING THE SILENCE

For some time now, and since 2023 in particular, Palestinian Christians have expressed honest frustration with the Western church, and with our silence in the face of ethnic cleansing, apartheid and genocide. Recognizing the decisive responsibility of the United States in their ongoing *nakba* (catastrophe), [these same Christians have challenged churches and leaders to speak up and act bravely](#) for justice, liberation and human rights. To keep silent is to betray baptismal promises and the Gospel itself.

While some U.S. denominations have issued prophetic statements of support, local congregations have been cautious to a fault. Rather than organizing fearlessly, and impacting both public opinion and political will, we have been hesitant to speak out and join organized efforts to dismantle

apartheid, end genocide and jam the gears of the U.S./Israeli military-industrial complex.

At the same time, on college campuses, young people have worked, often at great peril to their own careers, on consequential strategies to bring about justice and peace. Within anti-imperialist circles, Jewish activists have also moved boldly to challenge Zionism, advance boycott strategies, and insist on human rights and international law. Still, our churches have been slow to act.

I want to suggest here that we challenge our congregations to join [the Apartheid Free pledge](#) as a strategy not only for liberation and justice for Palestinians, **but for the liberation of our Western churches.**



In 2026 and 2027, denominational hand-wringing simply isn't enough. Rising Christian Nationalism blinds the nation's moral vision. Militarism deifies violence. We mock international law and finance genocide. In such a time as this, more is being asked of the church. And this begins in local communities, in neighborhood churches, in the choices we make, priorities we set, and networks we join. In the words of Palestinian Pastor Munther Isaac, "silence is complicity." And it is indeed time, within local congregations, to break that silence.

When leaders challenge congregations to take on the Apartheid Free pledge, work through resistance, and educate themselves around the Palestinian cry for freedom—**the process itself provokes a healthy kind of crisis, a gospel crisis**, and the kind of discernment that can indeed break the silence of the church around oppression and apartheid. I suggest here that the crisis itself is important and necessary, and can even be transformative. The process is not easy, but it is faithful and right. It draws on ancient practices that are urgently needed: prayer and discernment, biblical study and lamentation. It's consistent with Jesus' gospel of liberation and peace.

[W]ords matter. Churches are called to use the word apartheid, whether they find it helpful or not. The word apartheid points— in both its definition in international law and its description of realities on the ground—to a truth. Truth matters, and it matters most when it is named. As churches recognize but hesitate to use

the word, we fail to name a fundamental motivation for our taking up the ministry of Jesus “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, to let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:16ff).” Further, to denounce apartheid affirms Palestinian experience and motivates the international community to explore, embrace and strengthen the framework of international law in a time when it is being eroded though systems of racism, authoritarianism, and other oppressions based on economic, patriarchal, political, and military power—including antisemitism. To call out and denounce Israeli apartheid is extremely helpful.

(A Dossier on Israeli Apartheid, Global Kairos for Justice, 2022)

Discipleship requires, on the local level, moral courage and solidarity. Local congregations can and should play a dynamic role in public life: speaking truth to power, evoking a world beyond apartheid and war, and even giving birth (through action) to that world in our time. We can organize broadly within local communities; we can build coalitions of substance there; and we can generate strategies of nonviolent activism. We can also serve as catalysts for conversation, debate and urgent political change. Neighbors are watching. Neighbors are listening. And we are responsible. We can impact individuals and institutions through ways that we engage urgent matters of peace, justice and liberation.

Indeed, in all of this, our own liberation is at stake.

If your congregation is struggling, as so many do, to address apartheid, genocide, and the ongoing *nakba* in Palestine, I offer our experience in New Hampshire by way of encouraging you:

Take on the Apartheid Free pledge, challenge your people to make a decision, and then join the Apartheid

Free movement. It may well be a difficult process, and it will surely stir among your people a range of feelings, dissention and even controversy. But, and this is the key, even the nub of the matter, it will also move many of you to break through the inertia, and the silence, that has for too long hand-tied the



church around the cause of peace and liberation in the Holy Land. **“Truth matters, and it matters most when it is named.”**

2. RESISTANCE AND CAUTION: OUR EXPERIENCE IN DURHAM (PART ONE)

When I first brought [the Apartheid-Free Pledge](#) to my United Church of Christ congregation, in 2023, the Pledge was met with angst, caution and even cynicism. While many were sympathetic to the Palestinian experience of occupation and injustice, others were concerned that support for Palestinian liberation was “too political” and would test and even dishonor important relationships with local Jewish friends and communities. They justified Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza by calling out Hamas and playing on Arab stereotypes that have long warped the American conscience. What else was Israel to do? They had, as the papers told us, every “right to defend themselves.”

And, in a difficult congregational vote, in January 2024, our Durham church rejected the Pledge and endorsed instead a simpler and toothless motion to “oppose apartheid.” A “compromise.” Rather than purposefully joining a coalition of empowered and empowering communities, we chose something much simpler and safer. We “opposed” apartheid. And watched as Israel’s assault on Gaza destroyed tens of thousands of lives.



It so happened that I was serving that same year as a Co-Chair of our UCCPIN (soon to be renamed the [UCC’s Movement for Palestinian Solidarity or UCCMPS](#)). I was challenged and profoundly motivated by that work, and by Palestinian and Israeli partners I’d come to know over two decades, women and men whose commitment to mutual liberation and freedom had come to shape my faith and ministry in

almost every way. In Durham, our Women’s Book Group read [The Lemon Tree](#) (by Sandy Tolan), and we invited Zoughbi Zoughbi (Palestinian leader and President of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation) to preach on Zoom for the whole church.

I also got involved with a broad-based effort in my community—involving Jewish networks, student leaders, religious supporters and a diverse mix of

secular peace activists. Among other things, that coalition insisted on congressional accountability and a radical change in U.S. policy. In the face of apartheid and now genocide, we would not be silent. Several of us joined weekly vigils at congressional offices calling on elected officials in Washington to cut off funding to Israel's war machine.

And in May 2024, five of us organized a sit-in at our congressman's office, insisting on accountability and conversation. He had repeatedly voted with the Biden administration for billions of dollars of U.S. weaponry and technological assistance proffered for Israel's Gaza assault. When he refused to meet with us, or answer our concerns in any way, [we remained and were arrested](#)



Mother's Day Arrest 2024

[in an act of nonviolent civil disobedience.](#) We were convicted in October, surrounded by dozens of allies and friends, from all kinds of communities and networks. (One of these allies—inspired by our action and arrest—has since decided to run for the open U.S. Senate seat in N.H. as a fearless champion of peace and human rights.)

3. AN ACTION AGAINST OURSELVES: OUR EXPERIENCE IN DURHAM (PART TWO)

There must be accountability. The international community must work to stop Israel's impunity. Israel must respect its obligations under international law. Both victims and perpetrators must speak about these abuses and make them known to the public – so that the public, then, can truly and effectively engage with putting pressure on Israel to abide by international law.

(Rifat Kassis, Kairos Palestine)

That experience—[and their pastor's arrest](#)—moved many in the congregation to think again about our commitment to peace and what it required of us. And the ongoing genocide in Gaza continued to unsettle the community and shake our confidence in longtime assumptions and habits of the heart. As more and more Jewish friends spoke out, and students of all kinds worked bravely on

campuses across the country, church leaders reconsidered the first Apartheid Free vote and wondered if we might revisit the pledge.

I spent two months in the West Bank on a sabbatical in 2025. When I returned, I met with several key leaders to reflect on where we'd been and where we might be called to go. We decided together to form a new Palestinian Solidarity Team, a team that included longtime members, several new members, and one young graduate student whose energies were significant and deeply rooted in her faith and commitment to human rights. The team decided to put the Apartheid Free pledge before the congregation again. And they quickly organized a series of events—speakers from varied backgrounds, online sessions with Palestinian Christian leaders, movies—to encourage conversation, debate and deeply prayerful discernment.

There was work to be done. At every level, there was some of the same resistance we'd encountered two years earlier. Worries for longtime relationships in the Jewish community. Fears for a divided congregation. But the new team was earnest, committed and (perhaps most importantly) connected to a wider community of congregations and communities. First the Mission Committee and then the Church Council voted to endorse the Pledge and take it to the congregation. We insisted that the congregation have another opportunity to choose.

Three events during that month of discernment are worthy of note. In the first, we invited a pastor from a Boston church to preach on a Sunday morning. His congregation was one of the first in our area to make the Apartheid Free pledge, and he spoke powerfully to that experience and what it meant to the prophetic imagination and outward facing mission of his church. He made an explicit connection between the Apartheid Free movement and anti-racism work here in the States. In the second event, [a Jewish activist in our area](#)



Banner, Community Church, Durham

[spoke about her journey](#) into the work of resistance and human rights advocacy and ending the Israeli assault on the occupied territories. Interestingly, she too linked her evolving commitment to anti-racism work she'd been doing for decades. And she spoke appreciatively of the church's courage in taking on the Apartheid Pledge a second time.

The third event was an online event—hosted by our Methodist PIN colleagues—featuring Munther Isaac and Rifat Kassis of the Kairos Palestine network. Munther and Rifat lamented the silence of so many Western churches and the devastating impact of Christian Zionism in Palestine. And they spoke eloquently (and passionately) about the church's responsibility “in a time of genocide.” They brought to life “A Moment of Truth: Faith in a Time of Genocide” (the 2025 Kairos Document)—naming their community's passion for freedom and its call for ‘costly solidarity’ in the West.

**APARTHEID
-FREE
CONGREGATION**



THE PLEDGE:

WE AFFIRM our commitment to freedom, justice, and equality for the Palestinian people and all people;

WE OPPOSE all forms of racism, bigotry, discrimination, and oppression; and

WE DECLARE ourselves an Apartheid-Free Community and to that end,

WE PLEDGE to join others in working to end all support to Israel's apartheid regime, settler colonialism, and military occupation.



APARTHEID-FREE.ORG

Lastly, our Palestinian Solidarity Team introduced the church to the [“Let Children Live” campaign](#)—a program initiated by Amnesty International and promoted in the U.S. by Churches for Middle East Peace. Using an accessible online registry, individuals were asked to take the name of one Palestinian child still living in the Occupied Territories and to hold that child, their family and their village in prayer over the weeks and months to come. Dozens gladly

did just this. And the reality of apartheid, the devastation of genocide became just a little bit more real.

I have a very vivid memory of a specific soldier taking out a man, an older person, taking him out of the car and toying with him, threatening him, harassing him, slapping him around, threatening him with his weapon, humiliating him in front his entire family that sat there and watched. For no reason.

(First Sergeant, Israeli Defense Forces)

[On March 22, 2026, our congregation voted overwhelmingly](#) (with just three votes against) to join the Apartheid Free movement by making the Apartheid Free pledge. Against the backdrop of genocide and a new war in Iran, there was no time for celebration. But it was a sign of the church's willingness to "break the silence" that had squelched our prophetic voice for far too long.

In the several months since, we have been sought out by Jewish allies and partnered with them on events with Peter Beinart and Omer Bartov. We have hosted films like "The Voice of Hind Rajab" and "Five Broken Cameras." And we have taken active steps to join boycotts of AirBnB, Booking.com, Chevron and Palantir. It's just a beginning. But we have stepped into a world of new opportunities and responsibilities.

And all of this is possible because we organized—in the language of broad-based organizers—"an action against ourselves." We put before the church a challenging proposal, insisted on education, debate and decision. We welcomed the difficult conversations that followed. And that process broke the silence that had weakened our resolve and compromised our witness.

4. AN APPEAL: LIBERATE THE CHURCH

This, then, is my appeal: to pastors and leaders in churches like mine. To conferences and associations in regional settings. Take up the Apartheid Free pledge. **Do it as "an action against yourselves," and embrace the debate, the discernment, even the crisis that comes.** Allow the process itself to work the Spirit's liberating ways in your community. It is, perhaps, in just this way that the cautious heart of the church is quickened at last and shaken, even transformed into gospel courage and costly discipleship.

Our Palestinian siblings are crying out for justice. From the heart of their suffering, they are insisting on love as the one thing, the only thing that can break the bonds of oppression. But that love requires everything of the church: our voice, our resolve, our witness and our friendship. And it must be noted, too, that many, many Jewish siblings agree. The time for acquiescence is long past. The time for accompaniment is now. Only love—made flesh in our communities and ministries—will see us through.

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

(Lilla Watson, Australian Aboriginal Activist)

When it comes the genocide and violence, and modern warfare in all its terrible guises, the church’s integrity is at stake. The gospel compels us. Mutual liberation is the only Way. One among us is calling the church to beat swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, and study war no more. Will we rise up to follow?

The Rev. Dave Grishaw-Jones
Pastor, Community Church of Durham (UCC)
Durham, NH
DavidGJ@CCDurham.org
831-706-6819

A FEW KEYS TO THIS ACTION:

- 1. Leadership.** Pastoral leadership can and does make a huge difference—in teaching, preaching and disciplined advocacy. Dig deep. Cast a vision of a church brave enough to do hard things for love, even to risk heartbreak and division. [Speak directly to the Palestinian call for costly solidarity.](#) In our case, we drew deeply on the church’s longtime commitment to the UCC’s “Open & Affirming” movement. In taking that step years before, the congregation had faced dissent and even lost friends. But the purpose was clear, and the legacy of that decision is faithfulness and the expansion of a wonderfully inclusive community. If your congregation trusts you and your heart, they can deal with

discomfort along the way. **And learn from you, and with you, and through you!**

2. **Form a team.** Whether or not pastoral leadership is engaged, form a team of folks to advance the Apartheid Free pledge. You don't need many, but at least 3 or 4. Read through all the Apartheid Free resources; connect yourselves with Kairos Palestine and the marvelous curriculum developed around their 2025 document. Do it together.
3. **Connect with leaders from adjacent communities.** Find other Apartheid Free congregations nearby and invite them into your conversation. Meet Jewish Voice for Peace (or If Not Now) activists and do the same. If there are Palestinian communities nearby, by all means reach out. Show your community that the Pledge joins the church to a dynamic and deeply committed network of justice-doers and peace-makers. Bring them in for forums and Sunday sermons.
4. **Do everything you can to bring the Pledge before your congregation to a vote.** If it fails, it fails. Some may say: Why not just do it quietly, without any fanfare? But the process is the point. The process itself breaks the silence. The process IS the action that transforms tentative ideas into living, breathing ministry. If the vote fails, it's still a process of breaking taboos, feeling the hard work, learning from it. And the experience will continue to impact your congregation moving forward...

My sense is that the 'sting' of not passing the Pledge the first time—in Durham—proved powerful and instructive in our ongoing efforts. We had “missed the mark” that first time, and we wanted very much to move forward in solidarity AND repentance. And that counts for something.