

# Let's keep talking

...about just peace in Palestine and Israel

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**A resource for courageous conversations**



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The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada

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Let's keep talking...about just peace in Palestine and Israel: A resource for courageous conversations  
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## About This Resource

This resource can be used to hold courageous conversations about action for just peace in Palestine and Israel. It can be used for

- workshops
- small group discussions
- meetings—committee, board, UCW, presbytery...
- personal reflection

## Some background

In 2012, the General Council of The United Church of Canada joined others in the international community in supporting the end of Israel's decades-old military occupation of Palestinian territories by approving a focused economic action against products made in illegal Israeli settlements.

This step responded to the spirit of the historic "Kairos Palestine" ecumenical call from Palestinian Christians ([www.kairospalestine.ps](http://www.kairospalestine.ps), "Kairos Document"). The call for economic action was one of a number of steps the General Council approved to put into action its position that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a major contributor to the injustice that underlies the violence in the region.

Some in the church welcomed this decision and the launch of the accompanying Unsettling Goods economic action campaign, while others opposed these actions. In between, many United Church people still struggle to know what to think.

## Daring to listen and talk

More than anything else, it's important to talk about these barriers to engagement or myths, and others that are relevant in our own communities. Courageous conversations take energy. In the midst of busy lives, it's understandable to want to avoid difficult topics. But within hard conversations lie the seeds of new understandings and new relationships.

Courageous and risky conversations can be life giving, especially if the goal is not to force agreement or to "fix" anything. If the goal is to listen, to stretch, and then to reconsider our response, it's possible to at least learn something about ourselves and our neighbours along the way.

## Naming barriers

Certain barriers and questions come up again and again in conversations about Israel, Palestine, and the economic action against settlement products. These concerns express why many have chosen not to get involved. Regard this resource as an invitation to move into conversation about these difficult topics.

Think about your own response. Which ones have you heard? Which do you struggle with?

The “Let’s keep talking” poster and brochure address some of the most common questions that have been raised about the United Church’s Unsettling Goods Campaign. They add to the Frequently Asked Questions already available on [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca).

The World Council of Churches suggests: “Rather than reacting to the political controversies around economic measures, churches should thoughtfully and prayerfully consider how they might respond from the foundation of their faith.”

Please consider organizing a conversation in your worshipping community or committee using these “Let’s keep talking” worship and conversation resources, videos, brochure, and poster, as well as other Unsettling Goods campaign resources (search [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)).

## **Ideas for Your Courageous Conversation Sessions**

Each community will have its own priority concerns. This resource offers suggestions only; in your planning, try to identify what concerns have come up in the congregation, committee, or community. Add these concerns to your sessions.

In the first session, focus on group-building; in the final one, on taking action. Sessions should be planned for **1½ to 2 hours** each.

Suggested resources are the [Let's keep talking](#) videos, the poster, and the accompanying brochure. The [Unsettling Goods](#) webpages (search [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)) have many other resources. Many excellent videos, resources, and books are available. If this discussion catches on, consider setting up a longer-term reading or video group.

### **Session 1: Getting to know one another, speaking from the heart, and naming our fears and barriers**

*Suggested barriers to address:*

- Will there ever be peace in Palestine and Israel?
- Is the United Church antisemitic?
- Should the church be involved in politics?
- Is the church taking sides?

*Recommended introductory video from Jewish Voice for Peace:*  
<https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/israeli-palestinian-conflict-101>

*Recommended "Let's keep talking" video:*  
"Be Not Afraid"

*Community covenant:*

Allow an extra 10 minutes at the beginning of Session 1 to create a community covenant. Lay out your commitments for how to talk and listen and how to be with each other. The sample covenant on page 7 gives some general ideas, and one specific idea related to discussing the United Church's economic action against settlement products. Post your covenant, and review it as needed at each session.

### **Session 2: What are settlements, anyway?**

*Suggested barriers to address:*

- Did God give Israel the land?
- Is the United Church boycotting Israel?

*Recommended "Let's keep talking" videos:*  
"Did God give Israel the land?" "Is the United Church boycotting Israel?"

*Maps:*

- B'Tselem—The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories provides detailed maps of settlements and their “footprints”: [www.btselem.org/maps](http://www.btselem.org/maps). View, in particular, the most recent “Map of the West Bank, Settlements and the Separation Barrier.”
- Americans for Peace Now also offers an interactive map at <http://archive.peacenow.org/map.php>. (See also the accompanying video, “Settlements 101.”)

**Session 3: Overcoming stereotypes**

*Suggested barriers to address:*

- Are Palestinians terrorists?
- Do Muslims hate Israel?

*Recommended “Let's keep talking” videos:*

“Are Palestinians terrorists?” “Do Muslims hate Israel?”

**Session 4: Is boycotting wrong?**

*Suggested barriers to address:*

- Do boycotts accomplish anything?
- Doesn't boycotting settlement goods hurt Palestinians?
- Is the United Church boycotting Israel?

*Recommended “Let's keep talking” videos:*

“Is the United Church boycotting Israel?” “Doesn't boycotting settlement goods hurt Palestinians?”

**Session 5: What action can we take?**

*Suggested barriers to address:*

- When we consider action on this issue, what fears and obstacles do we encounter? How do we move past these?

*Recommended “Let's keep talking” videos:*

“Is the church taking sides?” “Should the church be involved in politics?”

This quote may be helpful in your action sessions or when you focus on concerns about boycotting and economic measures:

“When I boycotted California grapes to support farm workers, I was not anti-Californian. When I boycotted South African wine to protest apartheid, I was not anti-South African. When I protest the lawless treatment of indigenous and landless peoples in Australia, Africa, Central America and North America, I am not anti-anyone. When I share the shame of my United Church's treatment of children in residential schools, I am not anti-me. When I participate in BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) I'm a human protesting a national government's inhumane treatment of some of its citizens. It is the least I can do.”—P.K.

From sampling of e-mail responses received in 2012 to the Report of the Working Group on Israel/Palestine Policy “In favour of report” (Search “Israel Palestine report” on [www.commonsonline.ca](http://www.commonsonline.ca))

## Community Covenant

### Principles for Courageous Conversations

(Post in the meeting area. You might also want to print and hand out this list.)

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*Disagree; don't attack.*

*Listen carefully; listen with your heart.*

*Share the space and time.* If you are comfortable speaking and tend to speak a lot, step back. If you are reluctant to speak, push yourself gently and try to step up.

*Keep confidentiality.* What is said in the group stays in the group.

*Take very seriously how our own faith, theology, church, and country may have contributed* to issues at the heart of the conflict, including antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism, and colonization.

*Don't be frightened by strong reactions,* including your own; but don't let strong reactions define or derail the entire conversation. If you react strongly during a conversation, ask why you're reacting and to what you are reacting. Try to reflect on how a comment or conversation might be challenging a wider set of values or a personal framework.

*Question your own biases and frames:* All of us approach life with a set of values, learned from our cultures, communities, families, and faith. These can surface abruptly when we get into difficult conversations or disagreements, especially when we're passionate about a given topic. Few of us start any conversation about Israel and Palestine with a completely blank slate, because it has been a hot topic for so long.

*Use your own thoughts and reflections,* not talking points from someone else. Use "I" statements, and don't speak for others.

*Don't use talking points from someone else.* When we talk about Israel and Palestine, it's easy and tempting to repeat standard talking points and myths—"Palestinians don't really want peace." "The church should not be involved in politics." "There will never be peace in Palestine and Israel." Sometimes it seems that the dominant dialogue is made up of people picking their one-liners from a basket and throwing them at each other. Too rarely do we stop and ask how the basket got there, where its contents come from, and whether they're even partially true.

## Setting Up

### Space and materials

- Internet connection or downloaded copies of the “Let’s keep talking” videos
- A computer with speakers and a larger screen (depending on the size of the group)
- At least one copy each of the “Let’s keep talking” brochure; preferably one copy per participant (extras can be ordered free of charge from [unsettling-goods@united-church.ca](mailto:unsettling-goods@united-church.ca))
- Fact sheets from the Unsettling Goods website (Ahava and Keter Plastic): search [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)
- Copies of sample community covenant (page 7)
- Comfortable chairs in a circle
- Flip chart, paper, and markers
- Olive oil and za’atar: Palestinians and Israelis share much in common, including a love of the land and a love of good food. Consider starting your meeting with pita bread, oil, and the mixture of sesame seeds and herbs that is za’atar, along with other treats. You can order these from Zatoun ([www.zatoun.com](http://www.zatoun.com)) or Ten Thousand Villages ([www.tenthousandvillages.ca](http://www.tenthousandvillages.ca)).

### People

- A small planning team to identify which barriers will be your focus; the poster and brochure can be your starting point, but please discern and add topics as needed
- A facilitator or two for each session, to keep the agenda moving
- A timekeeper
- Minister or someone to take on the role of “chaplain” to follow up with people who may get upset during or after these conversations

### Preparatory work

- Create a small planning group to identify barriers and myths for focus, and to check in midway through the sessions if you’ve planned for multiple sessions
- Order free “Let’s keep talking” brochures from [unsettling-goods@united-church.ca](mailto:unsettling-goods@united-church.ca)
- Identify hosts, if you’re not meeting at the church
- Identify facilitators, if you have a large group

#### For facilitators

The following statements are policies of both The United Church of Canada and the Government of Canada. They are also part of international human rights law. Reopening the debate on these policies could derail other conversations we need to have:

There is a military occupation of the Palestinian Territories (the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza)

The (Jewish-only) settlements built in the West Bank are illegal.

Israel (or Hamas) has the right to self-defence within the limits named in international law. Both Israel and Hamas have violated related international law, particularly in their targeting of civilians.

## **Agenda Outline**

Each courageous conversations session will require **1½ to 2 hours**, depending on the size of the group. Use and adapt this flow as you see fit for every session. This outline can be used for successive sessions addressing different sets of barriers.

In the first session, schedule an extra 10 minutes at the beginning to develop a community covenant.

*Welcome and overview of the session* (5 min.)

*Opening prayer* (5 min.)

Choose a prayer from the “Let’s keep talking” worship resource or another source.

*Focus barriers* (5 min.)

Name one or two focus fears or barriers for discussion: either those suggested, or others that the planners or entire group have chosen together (e.g., Do Palestinians really want peace? Is the United Church antisemitic? Should the church be involved in politics?). Write these topics on a flip chart.

*Continuum exercise* (15 min.)

Choose one of the questions named in the “Let’s keep talking” poster or brochure.

Invite people to stand or sit along an informal continuum line across the room. One end is a strong yes, the other a strong no, and the space in between is a continuum of opinion.

Ask the group: On this question, where would you say you stand? Leave time for participants to sort out where they want to stand or sit. Then invite those who are willing to share why they chose their location.

The facilitator can note that one of the challenges of any conflict is moving past easy slogans and talking points that over-simplify or dehumanize. Slogans that shut down the conversation also block our ability to hear diverse opinions. Most of us actually don’t occupy a set place or immovable position; we sit with doubts or questions. Recognizing ambiguity and struggle and dealing with differing opinions are part of the reality of any conversation about difficult issues such as violence and occupation.

*Flip chart* (15 min.)

Invite participants to add to the flip chart words or phrases speaking to the questions you’ve chosen:

- What do you think about this question? (e.g., Will there ever be peace in Palestine and Israel? Is the United Church antisemitic?)
- When you reflect on this question, what is your gut reaction? What do you feel?
- What words might our faith offer to this conversation?

Leave the flip chart posted.

*Commentary from brochure* (5 min.)

For your chosen questions, read the commentary found in the “Let’s keep talking” brochure. Ask for any brief questions of clarification or comments.

*Videos (10—20 min.)*

Allow about 7 minutes per video for viewing and discussion.

View at least one “Let’s keep talking” video. After each video, or at the end, ask:

- What questions remain for you?
- What insights or new information did you learn?

*Conversation (15–30 min.)*

Begin to talk through one or two questions in direct, respectful conversation that leaves space for both truth-telling and disagreement. One person at a time should speak; either go around the circle, or ensure that the facilitators are keeping track of who might want to speak and has not.

Start off by looking again at the flip chart notes about feelings, thoughts, and words of faith.

- Circle 1: Describe, in no more than 5 minutes, one key question, thought, or insight as your response to the questions we’re focusing on in this session.
- Circle 2: Describe some of your frustrations and hopes.

(Time keeping is very important here, especially if some voices are louder and longer than others. A group norm to consider is formal time keeping, using a timer and a colour card to note when someone is within one minute of their time limit. If you are doing a more open-ended workshop series, you could also turn one session into two and give everyone more time. Whatever you decide, ensure equitable time and space for everyone.)

*Space for clarity (15 min.)*

- What questions of clarification do you have for each other?
- What new information do you need?

*Closing review (10 min.)*

- What is one new thought or question you are sitting with?
- What would help you engage tonight’s question) more fully? (e.g., more information—be as specific as possible; more chances to talk with others—with whom?)

*Closing prayer or reading (5 min.)*

*For your action session(s):*

- The goal here should be to determine what actions and follow up you might do as a group, individuals, or church. Review the action options in *Unsettling Goods* for specifics (search “Unsettling Goods Resources” on [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)).
- Consider what educational or worship opportunities might help your community engage.

## **An Outline for a Meeting**

This short workshop can be used with a committee, board, UCW, presbytery, and so on.

### **Time**

- 20 minutes, including two videos (add 20 minutes for discussion if you have a longer slot)

### **Materials**

- a copy of the “Let’s keep talking” brochure
- a copy of the courageous conversations Agenda Outline (pages 9–10)
- Unsettling Goods resources, such as product fact sheets (search [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca))
- a computer
- a projector and a screen
- computer speakers and, if possible, a microphone for boosting the soundtrack of the videos
- downloaded copies of the videos you’ve chosen

### *Recommended videos*

These are suggestions only! You know your context best.

- For congregational use: “Is the United Church antisemitic?”; “Should the church be involved in politics?”; “Be Not Afraid”
- For presbytery: “Do Palestinians really want peace?”; “Did God give Israel the land?”; “Doesn’t boycotting settlement goods hurt Palestinians?”
- For educational events, UCW, and others: “Be Not Afraid”; “Is the United Church antisemitic?”; “Did God give Israel the land?”; “Doesn’t Boycotting settlement goods hurt Palestinians?”

See the “Let’s keep talking” worship resource for video suggestions for worship or coffee hour.

### **Goals**

- To introduce some of the barriers blocking participation in the Unsettling Goods campaign
- To introduce new materials that address these barriers
- If time permits, to invite the group into exploration of one of the barriers

### **Text**

The following can be used as a script, to be adapted as needed. By itself, it will take 15 minutes. Where possible, reference any previous pastoral charge, presbytery, or Conference decisions or comments:

#### *An invitation to conversation; an invitation to action*

In 2012, the General Council of The United Church of Canada joined others in the international community by approving a focused economic action against products made in illegal Israeli settlements built on Palestinian territory. The goal of this decision is to work non-violently toward the end of Israel’s decades-old military occupation of Palestinian territories.

Some parts of the church welcomed this decision and the launch of the accompanying Unsettling Goods economic action campaign. Others opposed these actions. In between, many United Church people still

struggle to know what to think. Many of us have avoided the conversation altogether or have been busy with other matters.

*If not economic action, then what?*

As a church, we have made a commitment to partners in the region. We agreed, after much debate, discernment, and prayer, that their call to non-violent economic action is one we can support.

If large numbers of our members don't support it or don't want to get involved, what then is our alternative?

In 2010, at a World Council of Churches meeting in Bethlehem, local Lutheran pastor and theologian the Rev. Mitri Raheb posed a question to participants who asked about the boycott of settlement goods and resistance to it. He said, "I need to ask those who oppose the non-violent strategy of boycott, divestment, and sanctions: What do you suggest instead?"

This is a powerful and difficult question. The Israeli military occupation of Palestinian lands has gone on for longer than most current residents of Israel and Palestine have been alive. Non-violent options for creating real change are few. As more and more Israeli settlements are built in the West Bank and Jerusalem, as the blockade of Gaza continues, and as more and more people question whether a Palestinian state is possible or viable, it is easy for violent resistance to become the easiest and the only path.

If we don't agree with violent resistance (and historically, the United Church does not), what do we support instead?

And if many of us say we cannot support the focused economic action against settlement goods, it is fair enough for our partners in the region to ask: Why not? What do you support?

*Let's keep talking*

These new resources revolve around a collection of questions that surface again and again when we have discussions about the decisions made by the 41st General Council. These barriers or questions often block conversation because of embedded stereotypes or apathy, even if this isn't the intent.

For example:

- "Will there ever be peace in Palestine and Israel?"
- "Are Palestinians terrorists?"
- "Do Palestinians really want peace?"
- "Is the United Church antisemitic?"
- "Doesn't boycotting settlement goods hurt Palestinians?"
- And so on.

This "Let's keep talking" brochure details some of the common barriers and questions that come up in conversations.

General Council offers the “Let’s keep talking” resources to help encourage these conversations (search [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)).

- A series of “Let’s keep talking” video shorts from solidarity partners and friends, addressing—from their personal experience—some important and common barriers and questions that block involvement in Unsettling Goods.
- A “Let’s keep talking” poster summarizing the most common barriers and questions that block participation in Unsettling Goods.
- A “Let’s keep talking” brochure expanding on barriers and questions (copies available from [unsettling-goods@united-church.ca](mailto:unsettling-goods@united-church.ca)).
- A “Let’s keep talking” resource for courageous conversations for groups who want to begin talking about their own responses to the call to economic action against goods made in illegal Israeli settlements.
- “Let’s keep talking” worship resources for three Sundays that can be used anytime during the year.

These join earlier, important resources that offer creative worship options, explain the GC41 decision in detail, and go into more depth about settlements and the negative impact of settlement products.

The goal? Talking honestly and listening openly, whatever the action we are eventually moved to take. Today/ tonight, we want to make this request:

Don’t be afraid to discuss, discern, and disagree. Please make the space to discuss, discern, and even disagree.

We’re not telling you what to think. In faith and hope, we’re asking you to talk. We think conversations about Unsettling Goods will be both unsettling and good, and a reflection of our commitment to our partners in the region who are meeting violence with non-violence.

## **Videos**

We’re going to show two of the 11 “Let’s keep talking” videos produced by the General Council Office. Global solidarity partners and Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Canadians respond to questions about common barriers to conversation.

## **Small groups (if time) (15 min.)**

Post one question/barrier for group discussion. Invite people, in small groups, to discuss:

- What are your feelings after seeing this video?
- Have you heard this question (barrier) used? What is your response to it?
- How does the video address this question and the thinking behind it?

## **Wrap up**

It’s unlikely you will have time to get reports from table or knee groups. Ask people to sit with the discussion they’ve had, and note that conversations like this are one part of the hoped-for outcome of this phase of the Unsettling Goods campaign work. If there is to be a committee or task group looking at the campaign, please mention this now.

## **Ideas for Personal Reflection**

All of these resources, including the videos, are designed for group or worshipping community use. Yet many of us struggle more personally with the call to economic action. The ongoing violence in Israel and occupied Palestinian territories can seem endless and hopeless. When we hear partner perspectives, they can seem challenging in both positive and difficult ways. All of these are important responses. Taking the time to be aware of them in prayer and thought is very important, wherever we are on this journey.

You may want to use the video, poster, brochure, conversation, and worship resources in your own prayer or meditation time (search “Unsettling Goods” on [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)).

### **One possibility for reflection**

Pick any one of the scriptures included in the worship service, and any one of the prayers. Then choose one or two of the videos and make sure you can easily access them on your computer or mobile.

Take half an hour if you can. Sit by yourself or with interested friends or family.

Light a candle. If you have access to olive oil and or the spice mixture za’atar, place them in front of you. Place a bowl of water in front of you. Include a piece of bread or pita.

Open with the prayer you have chosen. Read one Bible passage. For five minutes, sit with the passage. What stands out for you? Write these down.

Have a sip of water and/ or pita dipped in olive oil and/ or za’atar.

View one or two of the videos. Have a sip of water and/ or pita dipped in olive oil and/ or za’atar.

What words or moments stand out for you? How are you feeling? Which words challenge you? How? Which words comfort you? Why? Write these down next to your notes on the scripture.

Say the prayer again. Have a sip of water and/ or pita dipped in olive oil and/ or za’atar.

Close by focusing on and praying for at least one of the solidarity partners named in the worship services, giving thanks for their witness to non-violence and their refusal to hate.

*If you wish, note the ways in which you struggle with and/or affirm the United Church’s decisions related to settlement goods. If you are able to take this reflection time once a week over a month, see how your thoughts and feelings change, move, or stay the same.*