

# Uniting for Peace in Palestine

## Suggestions from the Forum

### Introduction

The purpose of this document is to pull together all the suggestions made at the Uniting for Peace in Palestine forum about how the Uniting Church in Australia might do more to promote peace in Palestine and Israel. It is intended firstly for all members of the Uniting Church, as working for peace is not the sole responsibility of a few peace workers or of any one level of the church, but a call for all. It is also intended as a document for our colleagues from across Australia who are already working for peace and expresses the Uniting Church's willingness to work with others in this important work.

### Disclaimer

This document captures the diverse voices and hopes shared at the Uniting for Peace in Palestine forum held in Canberra on 23 February 2025. It includes contributions from Uniting Church members, Palestinian speakers, peace advocates, medical professionals, legal experts, and civil society members.

The inclusion of views and suggestions from various participants do not represent official positions of the Uniting Church in Australia or its President, but rather a commitment to deep listening and transformative dialogue. The Uniting Church is a broad church embracing diverse perspectives, and encourages respectful, informed discernment in every context.

Uniting Church President Rev Charissa Suli offered her reflections as a spiritual leader, drawing from her theological and cultural heritage. Her words are not policy statements, but an invitation to reflection, prayer, and faithful action. With humility, we continue on the path to peace, following Jesus—the Prince of Peace—with courage, compassion, and integrity.

## Context

The Uniting for Peace in Palestine forum was held in Canberra on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2025. At the forum were three main speakers: the Rev Charissa Suli, President of the Uniting Church in Australia, Dr Sue Wareham, National President of the Medical Association for Prevention of War and Ms Lama Qasem of the Australian Palestine Advocacy Network.



The forum was attended by 50 people in person and 30 more on zoom. During the evening the in-person forum attendees sat at tables to enhance discussion and the zoom participants were split into groups. Less than half the attendees were members of the Uniting Church. Integral to the evening was a [background paper](#) that had been prepared previously and distributed to attendees. The paper gave both a summary of the Uniting Church’s work in this area as well as several initial suggestions for further action. The overall topic for the evening was “What more can the Uniting Church practically do to promote peace in Palestine and Israel.”



## How were the suggestions collated for this paper?

Initially transcripts were made of the video of the proceedings and transferred to word documents. In addition, the handwritten suggestions from the table groups were transferred to word documents, as were the email replies from the zoom groups. Included in the scope of the forum were the suggestions from Isaac Munther in the background paper, as well as the initial suggestions in that paper.

This provided the raw material for this paper.

We have interpreted the word “suggestion” rather widely and included not only what people stated specifically, but also what they have seemed to imply, even if not stated explicitly. Suggestions we have found are not static and can change and grow as discussion occurs. So, the suggestions in this paper are not simply a “to do” list, but ideas to be thought about and incorporated into each reader’s own situation.

We have organized the material centring first on the Palestinian voice. This is consistent with [the resolution](#) of the Assembly Standing Committee of the Uniting Church in Australia of March 2024 which encouraged congregations to

*offer support and comfort to those who are living with grief and fear in their communities as a result of the current escalation in the conflict and acts of racial and religious hatred happening in Australia including by:*

- i. praying for, **listening to, and promoting the voices of those who are suffering**;*

While the question for this forum was “What **more** can the Uniting Church practically do to promote peace in Palestine and Israel?” several suggestions were of things that the Uniting Church was already doing. Though a [background paper](#) had been prepared and circulated before the forum it was clear that it had not been universally read. In hindsight we realise it might have been better to have distributed a one-page executive summary. However, the suggestions and discussion did highlight how little is known of the Uniting Church’s work in this area. A summary of the Uniting Church’s work from the background paper can be found in Appendix A of this paper. It is worth reading for a quick if incomplete summary.

## Palestinian Voices

The Rev Dr Munther Isaac is a Palestinian Christian pastor and theologian. He pastors the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem and the Lutheran Church at Beit Sahour. In August 2024 he spoke at the Riverside Church in New York at which time he spelt out in some detail what the church needed to do in response to the grave injustices enacted on the Palestinian people.

A summary of his address appeared in the background paper to the forum along with a summary of practical suggestions for Church involvement. Dr Sue Wareham in her address noted that the list from Munther Isaac, “was a terrific list. I can’t improve on that. I commend it to you all as a basis for consideration. And one of his main points is listening to voices from the region such as his is absolutely important.”

Rev Dr Munther Isaac’s list

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

## Ms Lama Qasem

Ms Lama Qasem gave the opening address, responded to several suggestions from the tables and gave a final summing up. The following is a summary of her major points in regard the Uniting Church and further action.

Ms Qasem spoke movingly of the need to recognise the human in what is happening in Palestine using the dress that she was wearing as an example. The dress had been made by an aunt in the Jenin refugee camp. "... behind every number there was a life, a home, a family, a story and a dress like this one that I am wearing today."

Part of the dehumanising of Palestinians has been the redefining of Palestinian resistance to oppression as terrorism.

*But resistance is not an institution. It isn't confined to armed struggle or political faction. It is a spirit. It's a means of survival. A way of life. A refusal of Palestinians to disappear. And I want to repeat this. It is a refusal as Palestinians to disappear.*

At the end of her first address she said,

*The world's attention may fade, but the need for the action does not. Supporting Palestine is not just responding to the latest war, it is about ensuring Palestinians can survive the fight in the next one. it is about sustaining resilience, it is about providing material, financial and moral support long after the headlines have moved on.*

*Because Palestine will be free, the only question that I have is when?*

In responding to a suggestion from Table A about how the media is treating the issue of antisemitism, Lama Qasem spoke about the Muslim faith and how it had been criminalised in the media. She went on to say,

*This is something that the church can be helping out with. There is a lot of anti-Palestinian racism with Palestinian voices being censored. I am honoured to be in a safe place – there is not a lot of safe places for Palestinians to be these days. It is a great idea I think. How can we take it to the **next level**; how can the church send the message that we are anti any racism, whether it is anti-semitism or anti-Palestinian or anti-Muslim.*

In her final summing up, she reiterated these points when she said,

*We all agree that this conversation is not just about politics and policies it is about people, their dignity and the rights to live in peace. Civil society plays a big role in putting our governments in place and helping basically the Palestinian people to gain their liberation and we count on you. The impact of our collective voices cannot be underestimated. What I have picked up, we must listen, truly listen to Palestinians, Palestinian voices really matter. We need to humanise their struggle, recognise their pain, resilience and their right to self-determination. I ask every single person in this room as we said to educate, listen carefully, understand which media outlet you guys need to listen to.*

## Mussa Hijazi

Mussa Hijazi, a prominent Palestinian activist and lawyer in Canberra gave feedback from one of the tables and made several points.

1. While it is important to recognise that there are two sides to every story, repeating that line can be dangerous if it is not qualified. There is only one side that is being dispossessed. So, there is nothing wrong with saying we want peace for everyone but at the same time it is important to qualify by saying in the meantime this is what is going on.
2. As far as Church congregations are concerned from a Palestinian point of view what would really be important is to educate people, and that can be a little bit dangerous because people don't want to be told what to do and I don't suggest that they should be told what to do. Perhaps it is more encouraging people to look widely for information about things, encouraged to look at different points of view, to read more widely, to listen to different TV stations, not the same, to read different newspapers, because one of the biggest challenges for Palestinians has been misinformation and propaganda.
3. We don't all have the resources to gather the resources to present it to our congregations and being in that situation I think it is important for faith organisations to give proper recognition of those international organisations, the United Nations, the International Criminal Court of Justice etc, because if you are stuck following media you could easily be led one way or another. Those international organisations were created for the purpose of maintaining some sort of world order. It is important, and I think this church may have done so, to basically stand steadfastly by those organisations because until we have a better option that is as good as we've got.

## Further Voices from the Forum

### Dr Sue Wareham National President of MAPW

During her initial presentation Dr Wareham made the general point that

*The pressures to remain silent in the face of the most appalling violence and injustices against Palestinian people are extremely strong. So, the need for civil society to speak up is great, as our government appears virtually paralysed by fear of upsetting powerful interests, and our government is displaying the most terrible double standards in terms of whose actions they will condemn and whose actions they will turn a blind eye to. ... And while the notion of governments taking a moral stance on this or on most other matters right at the moment seems like a bit of a dream, once we lose the expectation that governments will uphold what is legally*

*and morally right then we're really losing our way as a society and faith organisations I think have a really important role to play in upholding this expectation of governments acting in accordance with what is legally and morally right.*

She then made several points about what the Uniting Church could do:

- Listen to voices from the region, such as Dr Munther Issacs's
- Speak up
- Write to our Government
- When we take action in support, e.g. writing to the Government it is very important to, let people in the region such as our partner organisations know what we are doing and how we are trying to stand up for them.
- Ensure that people in the Middle East know that we haven't forgotten them, because it must seem to them as if we have.
- Attend rallies
- Refuse to be silenced as Lama so eloquently described to us
- Bear witness to what is happening
- Distribute information and reports from the Palestinian people themselves on what is happening in Palestine
- Stand in solidarity - with ourselves
- Stand in solidarity with other groups
- Work in collaboration with others
- For churches, working in collaboration with Muslim and Jewish voices for peace is particularly important
- Support those Australians who have gone to Gaza to work in healthcare and other humanitarian areas, knowing that they risk death or severe injury in a place with hardly any health services. They also know that they will almost certainly be hungry and will suffer every other deprivation that the Palestinian people are suffering. Let these people know how much their courage and their humanity mean to us and how they can give us courage.
- Emphasise in *all* our communications, no matter where, within or outside Australia, or who is the audience - the inextricable link between peace and justice, and that there cannot be one without the other. Many Israeli people understand this, but too many do not seem to.
- Particularly important for faith and other institutions – Consider BDS - Boycott divestment and sanctions.
- Provide practical support in the form of donations for humanitarian work to the extent it is happening. This is very important to the Palestinian people, particularly as this sort of work by UNRWA – United Nations Relief and Works Agency For Refugees In The Near East has been targeted and criticised, brought under attack by Israel and its supporters.

In response to a question from the floor about the influence of the Uniting Church on the US Church, especially the fundamentalists, Sue Wareham commented

*I am not sure the we are up to that one (huge challenge). I want to come back to the power of good example. If churches in Australia and other places are setting a really fine example of following Jesus' message of love and peace etc then hopefully that will spread.*

In response to a comment from the floor about the news from Gaza not getting out because of the killing of journalists, Sue Wareham commented,

*I think the UN has done an outstanding job in that respect, in getting out the nature and extent of what is happening. Certainly in relation to health they have documented it extremely well. ... I think the data is there. So the role of our main stream media ... is a huge issue, and you have raised that too. That is absolutely a huge issue. Silencing people through the media, and even media that we have traditionally thought of as fairly reliable and unbiased are no longer unbiased. So, I think it is media attention and priorities, rather than any lack of data.*

In her summing up at the end of the evening Sue Wareham made three main points:

1. There isn't one single way to advance; there are multiple ways. We all have different life paths; we belong to different groups, different organisations, different professions, trades, whatever. So, we all have something different to offer in this space. And all these things are complementary and I think we need to recognise there is no single thing that is going to bring peace between Israel and Palestine. But the thing that unites us is our humanity. That's about all we have in common, our common humanity and that's the thing that matters above all.
2. Encouragement has come up a number of times tonight and Mussa raised it in an important way about encouraging those who disagree with us or who are unsure, encouraging them to just read more, read widely, seek out different sources of information. And given the monopoly on media in Australia by one particular man and the decline of other media. But on the other hand, the rise of other alternative media which is invaluable. We do need to encourage people to seek out media that is giving a different story from what the mainstream media is telling us. The other part of encouragement that is really important is I think encouraging of one another. ... We do need to stand in solidarity with one another, encourage one another's efforts and we all at different stages of life have different capacities to contribute. And some people in our society, a lot of people are just so busy getting through surviving each day they don't have much time to contribute on issues like this. But even just an encouraging word is really valuable. If someone is doing good stuff that you really like just tell them. "That's terrific work you do. I would really like to help more, but I love what you are doing." You can support financially. That helps quite a bit too. So words of encouragement and encouragement in any other way is really important.

3. “If we are to prevail we must never delegate in the presence of challenge, and we must never whisper in the presence of wrong”. A final quote from Dr Bernard Lown who was one of the cofounders of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

## Rev Charissa Suli

In her opening address Rev Charissa Suli put her comments in the context of the Tongan proverb “Fofola e fala kae talanoa e kainga”, Let us roll out the fala (the mat) and begin the conversation. She explained that

*The rolling out of the Fala is an invitation to fala (which means to tell) and falamoa is not merely story telling, but it is a transformative dialogue that encompasses the telling of stories, of memories and longings and the rich conversations that unravel from them. And it invites us where our narratives intersect, challenging us to weave together our diverse experiences into a coherent tapestry that honours each thread.*

In her address, she emphasised that she did not have all the answers or all the strategies that will bring peace, but as a daughter of the Pacific, a religious minister who currently serves as the president of the Uniting Church willing to wrestle, to listen and to act with courage, faith and love.

She emphasised that though Jesus was a Palestinian Jew living under occupation, he did not respond with violence. He responded with the radical vision of justice, reconciliation and peace. The one who said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called Children of God”. “Whatever you did for the least of these you did to me, and to love your neighbour as yourself.” Hence

*So, if we as a church are to be faithful followers of Jesus then neutrality is not an option. Silence in the face of injustice is complicity and this is why the Uniting Church has long stood for Peace built on Justice. The call of Jesus to stand with the oppressed is not theoretical. It is real.*

Towards the end of her initial address Charissa Suli made several specific suggestions with regard the Uniting Church.

- We need to deepen our theological reflections on peace and justice. And a need to develop theological resources that directly relate to Christian teachings with the principles of human rights and international law.
- We must continue to strengthen our partnerships with Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers and think about what are the kind of financial and spiritual support that we can offer to churches in Bethlehem, and Gaza and the West Bank. Support Israeli peace movements like we currently do with the organisations like the Jewish Council of Australia, Rabbis for human rights or the Parents Circle Family Forum.

- We need to be louder. We need to affirm the dignity and security of both Israelis and Palestinians. And remember that we reject antisemitism in all its forms while also opposing policies that harm the Palestinian people.
- It is important that we continue to raise awareness for the next generation and the new migrants that are migrating into Australia. Although our young people are growing and can identify what's real and what's authentic and what's not. I am standing here as a young person who heard the cry from leaders from the front who spoke about why the church should get involved. Why we should advocate for justice and for peace. So, it is important that we invest in digital story telling campaigns to amplify the Palestinian and our Indigenous voices. And interfaith and intercultural dialogue to include migrant communities in these discussions. By doing this we ensure the Uniting Church remains a prophetic voice for justice across generations and into the future.

Charissa Suli finished with the observation that her whole list of what the Uniting Church can do just continues to grow.

*... if we can find a way in which our councils can work together, and find a way where we are leaning into one another and ensure we are amplifying our voices, not only within the Uniting Church but in the public sphere, I truly believe we can make a difference in working toward peace and justice for Palestine and Israel.*

During the table discussions Charissa Suli responded to several suggestions and questions.

Group B thought that the Uniting Church could have the experience of sharing the mat with Palestinian Muslims.

Charissa Suli responded:

*Sharing the mat with Palestinian Muslims – I would say yes. The beauty of the Fala is that when the first Fala is filled that you get another Fala out. The length of a Tongan fala can be as long as you want it to be; it doesn't stop. But I believe that it is as a symbol to invite varied voices, all voices for advocacy to gather to have a conversation.*

Group B thought that it would be good to see a Uniting Church banner at a Palestinian or a pro-Palestinian supporting rally

Charissa Suli responded.

*UCA banner. I am sure that I have seen UCA banners and if not make one. Make a UCA banner. You asked if a UCA banner can be at a proPalestine rally – make one. That is what I am saying. What are the ways we can show our solidarity for our Palestinian siblings, if it is not through social media, if it is not through a forum like*

*this, sometimes it is images of the Uniting Church symbol, then that is the Uniting Church standing beside people who are marginalised. So don't wait for someone from the Uniting Church to do it, if you're at a rally do it, is what I am saying. And really you have free choice and free will in how you want to advocate in this space for justice and peace. I think where the Uniting Church stands has always been clear. And where we strive for peace and justice for the Middle East, so that's on you and all of us to work out how we can clearly show our solidarity with our Palestinian brothers and sisters who are suffering.*

Group C wanted to hear more about what the Uniting Church had done.

Charissa Suli responded.

*When I was asked to respond to the question what more can the Uniting Church do, I had assumed that everyone read the paper that was prepared for today, and if you go back to that paper, it clearly states what the Uniting Church has done and I honestly did not want to bore you with what is already in the paper and for me I was thinking outside the box, If we did all of that what else can we do. What do we need to strengthen as a Uniting Church.*

A question from the floor about the influence of the Uniting Church on the US church especially the fundamentalists.

Charissa Suli responded: "From a structural point of view we don't have partnerships with churches in America."

A suggestion from the floor. About the rolling out of the mat on which there are various insignia in front of Parliament house. I think we also need lessons in how to roll out the mat, and that is a thing that could be fostered through the young people in our congregations. Even though it is symbolic it could be very visual and very important.

Charissa Suli responded:

*I am going to take that on as a comment and also take that away and ponder how we could do that. Definitely there is a way that we can use but it would be great to gather the whole uniting church nationally and having a flag pop up in every state on a particular day. I think that would be more powerful than just one popping up in Canberra. I am taking that as a great idea and seeing how we can bring that to life.*

A question from the floor. Has the World Council of Churches taken a stand on the situation?

Charissa Suli responded:

*Yes most definitely. Just from that last question I was just thinking through the World Council of Churches, our NCCA (National Christian Churches of Australia) have all made the stance and advocating for the injustices that our Palestinians. But even*

*what has been happening in Gaza – it's wrong – and the clear message that has come out of WCC and also NCCA too, like the Uniting Church are calling on governments, are calling on churches, on how they advocate, support financially practically for the injustices that a lot of our Palestinians are facing, but also how we work together for peace, for Palestine and Israel. So yes, I can confirm the Council of Churches and NCCA are definitely supporting.*

Mussa Hijazi raised several issues from the floor as noted above.

Charissa Suli responded to the issue of education

*Like we all have smart phones. Just picking up a phone. Do you have a church website where we can share the human story? That helps give people the education. There is wisdom in this room. How have you advocated for peace and justice for these communities? Share that more widely so that the wider church, so that our younger people can better understand that they can be better part of this movement. And I do want to affirm that we do want to raise education and awareness to help inform our members of our church about how they best respond. So I am affirming what has been said (pointing to Mussa). I agree with you.*

Final question from the floor. What publications are the World Council of Churches is responsible for which can give us some information on this sort of thing?

Charissa Suli responded:

*I will take one next step further I will send Len (a link) where we can subscribe to their newsletter and you will be able to see the advocacy work that they do across the world and I am sure that you will be able to go back and see the past advocacy work that they have done on this topic of peace for Palestine and Israel.*

In her final summing up Charissa Suli reiterated several important points.

*As a Uniting Church this is an urgent call for us to act in how we do the truth telling we need to do. Particularly as we hear the dispossession of Palestinians. We are not called to remain silent, and as you know the Uniting Church's history has been one of speaking out against oppression. This is not new for us: to speaking truth to power, from indigenous justice, to asylum seekers rights. But today I want to reaffirm our commitment to stand with Palestinian Christians, Israeli peacemakers and global justice movements. Gone are the days when one organisation can respond to the needs or resolve the injustices Palestinians are facing in their communities, even in the diaspora. So as a Uniting Church to work towards peace for Palestine and Israel, it needs to be collaborative and it needs to be a wholistic approach of community connections. On this table you see the wholistic approach: you have health, you have our Palestinian sister here and also the church. We have got to involve our health departments, our law, other religious institutions and educational networks and work*

*together. While the Uniting Church does play an important role, we must acknowledge that we cannot, can no longer do this work alone. ... It is not just the Uniting Church – but how do we as people who have found a home in Australia work towards justice and peace. And this issue is complex, and so rather all of us.*

*Or if I can pick on the Uniting Church, we are part of a larger collective, striving collaboratively towards peace, so that our Palestinians can finally feel that they no longer are being erased in their own land. And supporting Israeli peacemakers who do want to be living together with Palestinian people. So, I want to say that this work is holy work as we strive for peace and justice. And just maybe we draw from my Pacifica heritage and we allow the women to roll out the Fala and let us continue the conversation that leads us to actionable steps that strives for justice for all people, but also acknowledging the voices and the real hurt and pain that our Palestinian people are facing back in their homeland, but also here in the diaspora.*

*May God be our guide as we continue to strive for peace and justice.*

## **Additional aural reflections from the table discussions**

It would be useful for the members of the Uniting Church to become familiar with the peace teachings of the Quran.

We were surprised at how little was known about Australian health professionals in Gaza and what that situation is for them particularly given the targeting of health professionals by the IDF.

How to work through, particularly with the settlements on the West Bank, how is there a solution? Peace and justice absolutely yes, but what does that look like, and how do we get there is something that we tried to grapple with and sadly we didn't find a way forward but it was something we discussed.

## **Additional Reflection from Emeritus Professor John Minns of the ACT Refugee Action Campaign**

*A number of us on this table have been involved in the campaign to change the terrible policies about refugees for many years and one of the things that we have done here in Canberra going into particularly the Christian churches. Lessons we have learned over the years from that*

*1. It takes time because we found a lot of automatic resistance to what people see as being political. It may be an obvious humanitarian issue but many people in the churches will say well that is fine but we don't want to take a political stance. It's not political in the sense that we are supporting one candidate against another or something like that but as a protest etc.*

*2. It has been a gradual process of winning people's trust that what we are doing is important. What we are doing is something that really aligns with their own beliefs in lots of ways and explaining that thoroughly over time.*

*3. You have to expect opposition and opposition internally. It is not a smooth process and even today I got an email from one of the people in our faith based saying that a priest who was going to put a banner advertising our Palm Sunday rally but got push back from the congregation on the grounds that last Palm Sunday there was a Palestinian contingent in it, in the Palm Sunday march. So to me, it seems people talk about a struggle for peace and justice and rights. The struggle I think is usually with the people closest to you. The people in your own community, convincing them and also going ahead even when they disagree. That's a hard process, but one in the end in the Palestine campaign as in the refugee campaign and in all the others that are so important – it is very important to pursue.*

## Written suggestions from the table discussions.

In addition to the aural suggestions from the tables, each table and each zoom group were offered the ability to write down their suggestions which would be integrated into this document. Below is the list of suggestions as they were collected.

The following are not in any order of priority but simply as the feedback sheets were worked through

### **Sheet 1**

Call out emphasis on antisemitism

Strengthen govt wording eg DFAT descriptions

Funding to directly support Palestinians

Sharing the mat with Muslims

Individuals and church councils to support Gaza and Israel together

Publicise statement from UCA concerning peace and justice in Palestine

### **Sheet 2**

Support groups in Israel aiding Palestinians

### **Sheet 3**

Support the Palestinian protests here

### **Sheet 4**

Connect churches to churches (like in bushfires connect and support an affected church)

Attend at rallies and show solidarity

More vocal call for support (letter campaign – prewritten to sign)

Awareness raising forums

### **Sheet 5**

Education

Encourage congregations to look widely for info

2 sides !!

Support of ICJ and ICC UN etc

### **Sheet 6**

Strengthen interfaith dialogue to promote Peace in Palestine and Israel

### **Sheet 7**

Communicate more. Tell us what UCA has been doing.

## **Communications from the zoom groups**

### **Group A**

One suggestion I made in my group is that the UC join up with online organisations and support them who are working on establishing peace in Israel and Palestine and to circulate that to its congregational members.

For example, groups like the Eko group who just today are asking for donations to support their campaign to put pressure on the Danish shipping giant who are supplying massive weapons of destruction to Israel produced by the company Maersk.

This organisation and many others have done the research and are addressing the problem in many inventive ways.

### **Group B**

Prof Ilan Pappé's book should be compulsory reading for all followers of Palestine's story.

A very short history of the Israel - Palestine Conflict.

### **Group C**

From our group. Roll out the mat in every congregation. There is limited knowledge and activity at the Congregational level with a few great exceptions. Congregations need facilitated conversations and more knowledge about the history of the genocide. Most of the conversation and action is limited to Councils but not all councils. The body of

the church needs to be engaged and active as followers of Jesus teaching on love and peace and justice for all. This will only happen when it is encouraged and fostered.

## **Group D**

How do we know what UC is doing?

My group raised issue of being clear on language e.g. terrorists, labelled by whom.

## **Suggestions from the background paper for the forum**

Several suggestions were made in the background paper. Some were discussed in the forum and some were not. They are repeated here.

### **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.

## Discussion

This discussion does not seek to limit the wide range of options mentioned in this paper but rather highlight some important points.

One of the most important aspects of the forum was the engagement of different voices in dialogue, especially the involvement of Palestinian voices. The forum created a space where Palestinians felt safe and could express both pain at what has been happening and suggest ways that the Uniting Church could do more to promote peace and justice in Palestine. This fitted nicely with the President's hope that "Fofola e fala kae talanoa e kainga", Let us roll out the fala (the mat) and begin the conversation. There was broad support for this approach to be a feature of the Uniting Church's ongoing response.

One of the highlights of the forum for many was the realisation that the Uniting Church, at Assembly, Synod, and locally, is doing far more for Peace in Palestine than is generally realised. While good at one level, this indicates a failure in the way that the Uniting Church communicates with its own members and the wider community. The exception to this may be the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania whose communication systems appear the most robust. It is beyond this paper to analyse the complex reasons for this communication problem. However, until communication systems are improved much effort by the Uniting Church to address issues of peace and justice in Palestine and more widely will largely go unnoticed. It also means that actors for peace at the local level will be left feeling unsupported, despite acting in accordance with the stated intentions of the Assembly.

As part of any future communications' strategy, it is hoped that this "Suggestions from the Forum" document will be circulated widely by the various levels of the Uniting Church, particularly as it helps amplify the work of the Assembly and those already involved in the work of peace making. It would also be useful for the Assembly to arrange one-page summaries of their position on Palestine to be distributed to each of the congregations, as well as to politicians and the media.

At various points in the discussion, the role of the Uniting Church in addressing poor theology, (that either fails to see the significance of justice in the Christian tradition, or worse, justifies the oppression of Palestinians), was discussed. As an aid to further this discussion nationally a bibliography of useful theological resources is attached to the end of the document as Appendix B.

Finally, it is hoped that this document will encourage all members of the Uniting Church to consider what more they might do to work for a just peace in Palestine and Israel. We hope that via the initial forum and discussions that we have shown that there are many ways of working for peace and that it is something everyone can do.

Len Baglow, Facilitator, Against the Wind. April 2025

## Appendix A.

### Previous Uniting Church actions from the background paper – Feb 2025

#### 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 Andreama 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)

## Appendix B.

### Theological resources to help reflection on the situation in Palestine.

#### Palestinian voices

Munther Isaac, 2020, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope*

Munther Isaac, 2024, [Speech at the Riverside Church in New York](#)

Munther Isaac, Mitri Raheb, and Omar Haramy featured on the Freedom Road Podcast entitled [The Cross, The Resurrection and Gaza](#).

Mitri Raheb, 2014, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian eyes*.

Mitri Raheb, 2023, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible*.

Mitri Raheb, (ed), 2023, *In the Eye of the Storm: Middle Eastern Christians in the Twenty-First Century*.

Rafiq Khoury, 2001, “The Theological Implications of the Current Situation in the Holy Land: From the Point of View of a Christian Palestinian”. In William T Cavanaugh et al (eds), 2012, *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*. pp. 566-584.

#### Other voices

Desmond Tutu, 2000, “Without Forgiveness There Really Is No Future”. In William T Cavanaugh et al (eds), 2012, *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*. pp. 482-502.

#### Islamic Theology

Shadaab Rahemtulla, 2017, “Theology of the Margins: The Reading of Farid Esack” In *Qur’an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam*, pp. 10-52.

#### Other relevant resources for this time

Mariann Edgar Budde, 2023, *How We Learn To Be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith*.

Jurgen Moltmann, 2012, “The Righteousness of God and Human and Civil Rights” In *Ethics of Hope*, pp. 217-230