

December 2, 2005

Presbyterians Say Meeting in Middle East Isn't Official

By [JODI WILGOREN](#)

CHICAGO, Dec. 1 - Scrambling to maintain fragile friendships with Jewish groups, local and national officials of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are distancing themselves from a meeting in Lebanon between a Hezbollah commander and a Presbyterian delegation that included the denomination's Chicago leader.

Jay Rock, the church's national coordinator for interfaith relations, promised Jewish leaders in a letter this week that Presbyterians would develop guidelines for members traveling in troubled regions, saying those at the Hezbollah meeting should have made clear the church's positions "against terrorism in any form, and for the security and vitality of Israel."

At the same time, the Rev. Robert Reynolds, Chicago's executive presbyter, said in a letter Thursday that he regretted attending the meeting because Hezbollah "used the group's visit for political purposes." Leaders of the church's local governing council wrote a letter emphasizing that Mr. Reynolds was not functioning in his official capacity on the trip.

Not satisfied with the statements, Jewish leaders expressed outrage at a news conference here Thursday that revived festering tensions over the church's strong support of the Palestinian cause.

"Terrorists are to be isolated and scorned, not embraced and praised," said Jay Tcath, director of Chicago's Jewish Community Relations Council, likening a meeting with Hezbollah to one with the Ku Klux Klan. "No friendship, no partnership can endure a divide as great as ours on the issue of terrorism."

Ira Youdovin, executive vice president of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, denounced the local church leaders for writing a "disheartening" letter that "constitutes an abdication of moral responsibility" and said they owe an apology to the Jews of Chicago and Israel and "victims of terrorism everywhere."

The flap is the latest struggle between Presbyterian and Jewish leaders over the Middle East. The church has led a campaign among mainline Protestants to divest of companies that sell equipment to Israel for use in the occupied Palestinian territories. Last fall, another Presbyterian delegation's meeting with a Hezbollah representative prompted so much controversy that two church officials who had attended were fired partly as a result.

"This is stirring up concerns all over again," said Dr. Rock, who worried that the incident could threaten bridges he helped build in September during an interfaith mission to Israel. "There are

people who don't understand how any Presbyterian could do this again after last year," he said. "There are people who don't understand that this is not some sort of official trip."

The meeting, with a Hezbollah leader named Nabil Qawuq, came on the third day of a three-week seminar in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and the West Bank organized by Robert Worley, a retired professor from a Presbyterian seminary in Chicago as well as in Beirut. Hezbollah is designated as a terrorist organization by the State Department, but Mr. Worley described it as "the group that's brought peace to that region of the world."

"Is 'terrorists' the right word? They are resisters," he said in an interview. "To listen to their side of the story is important to getting at truth."

Mr. Worley confirmed Lebanese television accounts that he said at the meeting that the Presbyterian delegation did not support the Bush administration's policies and that Americans don't hear about Hezbollah's "concern for the people of the south."

In their letters to local Jewish leaders, Mr. Reynolds and his bosses on the governing council emphasized that Mr. Worley has no role in the church hierarchy and said that the seminar's sponsor, the Presbytery's Middle East Task Force, does not represent the church's official position on the matter. Both national church officials and members of the local council said Mr. Reynolds, who has headed the Chicago Presbytery for six years, would not face any discipline over the incident.

Mr. Reynolds, who did not speak at the Hezbollah meeting, attended the Middle East trip at his own expense. "This was for me an educational experience," he said in an interview. "It's very important for us to be able to learn from people and to let the learning process inform us about the realities of a very complex situation."

Welcoming the national church's plan for new guidelines on such trips, Mr. Reynolds said he would consider meeting again with Hezbollah leaders, but that "in the future I would set forth a clear statement that the church and I stand against violence and against terrorism and we are seeking peace in the Middle East for all parties."

Gretchen Ruethling contributed reporting from Chicago for this article.