How You Can Support Divestment Efforts in the UCC

Prominent in Jesus' prophetic ministry are his challenges to unjust and harmful economic practices. He understood the violence and human cost of predatory economic systems and sought to upend them.

Jesus' witness – preaching the currency of love and denouncing the commerce of greed -- invites us, as people of faith, as congregations, and as a denomination, to examine our economic priorities and investments. Are they consistent with our values of love, justice, and compassion? Whether shopping or investing, might we inadvertently be contributing to harms such as unjust labor practices, environmental degradation, the war machine, and genocide? Are we profiting at the expense of others?

UCC MPS's Divestment Team has been addressing these questions. Human rights for Palestinians constitute our plumbline, and Palestinian civil society's 2005 Call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel provides our mandate. We have been focusing, in particular, on the 'D' of BDS: divestment. We seek to engage and support our UCC conferences and congregations in thinking critically about their investments. Do our investment portfolios include companies that profit from Israel's occupation and genocide? If so, we want to point congregations and conferences to socially informed and responsible investment opportunities which avoid harm and instead promote justice for Palestine.

To this end, for the past two years, our Divestment Team has been working with United Church Funds staff members, Matthew Illian, Director, Responsible Investing, and Noah Tabor, UCF's General Counsel. Why work with United Church Funds? Because that is the entity that currently holds and invests the assets of the National UCC, of many of our UCC Conferences, and also of lots of our local UCC churches. And because, as Matthew and Noah have helped us to understand, UCF is conscientious in its application of investment screens that are, as they write on their website "aligned with faith values and General Synod resolutions." (See a full list of UCF's investment screens here).

Many General Synod resolutions over the decades have informed UCF's divestments, for example, from weapons production (1983 resolution), from all corporations doing business with South Africa (1985 pronouncement), more recently, from fossil fuels (2013 resolution) and from companies doing business in Israel's illegal settlements (2015 resolution). Directed by this 2015 resolution, UCF divested from companies like Caterpillar, Motorola, Hewlett-Packard.

UCF's most relevant screen for mitigating harm to Palestinians is "human rights violations, including in the occupied territories." Consistent with that screen, UCF holds no Israel bonds and has no investments in Israel banks. With its weapons production screen, UCF's portfolio has been excluding all defense contractors, like Boeing and Lockheed-Martin, just two examples of companies now profiting from Israel's occupation and genocide. And UCF's "Beyond Fossil Fuel" investment options exclude Valero, a US oil company that provides military-grade jet fuel for the Israeli Air Force.

Matt and Noah have shared with us that UCF engages in rigorous annual reviews of its investments, drawing on research from organizations like the AFSC which has a divestment list for companies profiting from Israel's genocide. Then based on their review process, UCF makes portfolio changes. In January 2025, for one example, UCF divested all its holdings in Palantir, a bad actor for provisioning Israel (and ICE) with AI-powered data analytics tools for intelligence and military purposes.

Tech companies like Google/Alphabet, Meta, and Microsoft present a significant challenge. Rather than divestment, UCF's strategy right now is to engage these companies through shareholder resolutions. This year, for example, UCF is a co-filer of a resolution calling Microsoft to engage in a transparent accounting of its human rights due diligence (HRDD) process regarding the use of their products.

Our Divestment Team appreciates the due diligence with which UCF manages and reviews investments with a faithful commitment to its social justice and human rights screens. Is your congregation and conference already investing through UCF? If not, we recommend UCF as an investment manager for any conferences and congregations not already working with UCF who want their assets to avoid harm and instead to promote human rights and justice for Palestinians.

As we continue our work with Matt and Noah, our Divestment Team would like to see UCF develop the option of investment funds explicitly dedicated to being genocide-free/apartheid-free/occupation-free. The creation of UFC's Beyond Fossil Fuel funds has set a precedent for such customized funds. Even now, however, UCF provides a responsible and easily accessible investment option that takes human rights violations seriously in its investment decisions both in Palestine, and in other places of conflict globally.

Now is the time to ask, are our investment decisions simply about maximizing the rate of return? Or do we also want to maximize our impact on the faith informed mission of the church?

To confer with and learn more about UCC MPS's Divestment Team, contact UCC MPS steering committee member, Stephen Gasteyer, gasteyer@msu.edu