

OVERVIEW OF SUMMIT, SUNDAY, AUGUST 17, 2008 ORGANIZED BY CHICAGO FAITH COALITION ON MIDDLE EAST POLICY

On Sunday, August 17th, sixty participants, mainly faith leaders but also community activists, from a wide variety of organizations in the Chicago land area, attended a Summit on Peace and Justice in Israel and Palestine at Elmhurst College.

After brief statements by the host committee, we had a short prayer and moment of silence. This was followed by a presentation on the current legislative and political state of affairs. For continued news and analysis from a religious perspective, see Jim Wall's blog at: wallwritings.wordpress.com

Individuals and groups from a wide variety of organizations then introduced themselves and their educational and advocacy focuses, illustrating the wide network of people and organizations in the Chicago land area who share a concern for justice and peace in Palestine-Israel.

The Chicago Faith Coalition gave a presentation on and distributed the aggregate results of a Policy Position Survey conducted with all Illinois candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives

An open forum for discussion followed the presentation. We discussed opportunities and challenges in our legislative, educational, and faith work.

Legislative

We have quite a few opportunities for legislative work. Much of the discussion centered on how to conduct legislative work and the challenges involved.

Opportunities:

- Consistently engage with and build relationships with Congressional staff
- Locate strategic districts and organize interfaith delegations to those Congressional offices
- Locate congressional districts represented by participants of this Summit
- Receive updated legislative information from Churches for Middle East Peace
- Voter registration campaigns
- Address issues that were raised in Policy Position survey directly with representatives
- Invite candidates to homes
- For direct advocacy, participate in Greater Chicago Caucus (www.greaterchicago.org)

Challenges:

- Structural limitations: Connie Baker of the Greater Chicago Caucus (GCC) explained that when a candidate becomes viable, new hand-picked staff replace former staff
- Lobby and Party constraints: representatives are stifled in making independent decisions that represent their constituencies both by a pro-Israel occupation lobby and by their own parties

The limitations of engaging on this issue on an exclusively legislative level highlighted the need to accompany legislative advocacy with grassroots educational and advocacy work.

General Education/Advocacy

Discussion centered on understanding the lobby and party constraints of congressional representatives, finding ways to address them, but also engaging in building grassroots support for our work and initiating and furthering actions such as divestment from companies that benefit from military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Opportunities:

- Examine what unions are doing regarding divestment
- Build grassroots support for educational and economic initiatives designed to end the occupation of Palestinian lands

Challenges:

- Culture of self-censorship
- Pro-Israel occupation lobby

Faith

- Find ways to activate the huge potential of faith communities acting together to counter the impact of the Israel lobby.

Opportunities:

- Ask Peace and Justice Committees to engage with this issue and explore divestment
- Engage with heads of churches to be integral leaders in our efforts
- Encourage our faith leaders to become very articulate and visible on this issue
- Assist in bringing visibility and action on this issue by becoming active on the local level and engaging with individual members of our groups

Challenges:

- Political structure of denominations

Info about upcoming meeting and Alice Rothchild event...