

# MFSA Plumbline

Free Speech and Justice Advocacy

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## Understanding the Issue

Around the world, we are seeing rising threats to basic freedoms, including freedom of speech, even in supposedly democratic societies. Christians have a responsibility to defend our freedom to speak the truth about injustice wherever we see it. We also must protect the right to act on our values and address systems of injustice with nonviolent methods such as boycotts and divestment. We know that speaking truth to power will incur repercussions, including misinformation, defamation, and intimidation. We must employ wisdom to discern when important concerns about racism are manipulated to silence opposition to injustice.

## Values

- Free Speech
- Nonviolent action
- Civil and Human Rights
- Dismantling Racism

## Legislative Overview

There are four petitions to be considered that are related to our freedom to advocate for justice according to our values. In the first (“Protecting the Right to Peacefully Address Injustice”), The United Methodist Church is asked to defend the right to use economic tools such as boycotts and divestment to address injustice. The remaining three petitions are impediments to free speech and we urge you to vote against them. Two pieces of legislation (“Acceptance of a Working Definition of Anti-Semitism” and “Confronting Twenty-First-Century Anti-Semitism”) that seem to combat antisemitism would actually promote language being used to silence and punish advocacy for Palestinian human rights. The final petition (“Church Funding of Church-Rejected Agendas”) denigrates an excellent national organization working for Palestinian rights, USCPR, and it calls for actions that would not be possible to fulfill.

## Analysis

The freedom to speak the truth in love, especially when it is an uncomfortable truth, is essential for Christians, if we are to fulfill our calling in seeking God's justice. Our freedom of speech also applies to engaging in boycotts that reflect our values. Political boycotts have long been considered a protected form of speech. Today that freedom is under threat from laws that penalize and intimidate citizens for supporting boycotts that are unacceptable to the government. These laws are being applied in dozens of U.S. states and countries around the world. From Gandhi's independence movement for India, to the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and the global movement to end apartheid in South Africa, boycotts and divestment have been successful nonviolent methods to achieve social and political change. Our church has long supported such boycotts and encourages us to engage in them. The church should defend our right to boycott now.

Racism in every form, including antisemitism, is a serious concern for United Methodists. We need to work together to oppose and abolish it in ourselves, in our church, and throughout the world. However,

we must beware of attempts to falsely label honest, prophetic speech as racism. We should oppose the use of the accusation of antisemitism as a weapon to silence the truth about Israeli [apartheid](#) and the oppression of the Palestinian people. The language that is supported in two antisemitism petitions is being used in just that way. These petitions promote misinformation about advocacy for Palestinian rights, and they would have our church falsely equate accurate and much-needed criticism of Israel's harmful policies and practices with bigotry against Jews. This is a devious and dangerous method of protecting an oppressive apartheid regime.

We should commend, support, and seek partnership with reputable and successful justice advocacy organizations like U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights (USCPR). United Methodists help to found the organization and several have served on its board. In recent years, a task force convened by GBCS and GBGM recommended continued cooperation with USCPR, due to "their commitment to equal rights for all, international law, nonviolence, and rights of refugees." Furthermore, it would not be possible to withdraw UMC boards from membership in USCPR or to withhold dues, as this petition calls for, because USCPR no longer has member organizations, nor does it receive dues.

## Resources

- Resources about each of these petitions:  
[https://www.kairosresponse.org/gc2020\\_resolutions\\_resources.html](https://www.kairosresponse.org/gc2020_resolutions_resources.html)
- Webinar [The Fierce Urgency of Now: Legislation for the United Methodist General Conference 2024](#)

## Recommended Action

### Petition to support:

*On Free Speech and the Right to Boycott*

**Vote YES on Petition #20783-CA** page 1201 ADCA "Protecting the Right to Peacefully Address Injustice"

Note, there is also an earlier version: Petition #20613-CA page 189 ADCA

The later version, on page 1201 ADCA, would be the best one to adopt, having broader and more current information. However, adopting either one would be a positive action.

### Petitions NOT to support:

*On Free Speech and Antisemitism*

**Vote NO on Petition 21084-CB** page 1244 ADCA "Acceptance of a Working Definition of Anti-Semitism"

**Vote NO on Petition Number: 20611-CB** page 253 ADCA "Confronting Twenty-First-Century Anti-Semitism"

*On Advocacy for Human Rights*

**Vote NO on Petition 20627-GM** page 707 ADCA "Church Funding of Church-Rejected Agendas"

*This document was prepared in collaboration with United Methodists for Kairos Response (UMKR). MFSA and UMKR are members of the Love Your Neighbor Coalition. Learn more [www.lyncolalition.org](http://www.lyncolalition.org).*