

United Church minister stands against boycott

There are people who value relationship with Jewish community

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Staff Reporter

A little while ago, an elderly lady walked into Rev. Greg Smith-Young's office, apparently spoiling for a fight.

The Jewish woman, from the Elora area, wanted to get something off her chest, in particular, the United Church's apparently hostile attitude toward Israel.

"She was ready for a battle, but she didn't know where I stood on it," said Rev. Smith-Young.

It turns out Rev. Smith-Young was more on her side than on the one adopted by the church's national General Council, which is pushing for a boycott of select Israeli companies that do business in the West Bank.

In fact, Rev. Smith-Young is a member of the steering committee of a group of United Church members who call themselves United Against Boycott. They recently issued a public statement in which they said: "We commit ourselves to challenging the decision of the General Council... We will work against the boycott campaign and other policies, including divestment and sanctions against Israel."

Rev. Smith-Young, minister at the Elora United Church and Bethany United Church, said while many members of the church in Canada support an activist campaign targeting Israel, many others oppose it.

"We wanted to signal that the United Church was not of one mind, and there are people in the United Church who really value the relationship [with the Jewish community] and who want to grow it. We see this as hindering the relationship with the Jewish community and want to get over it."

In August 2009, the United Church of Canada passed a resolution at its General Council calling for the boycott of Israeli goods produced on the West Bank. In recent months, the church adopted a three-step program to implement that resolution, starting with a letter campaign to the companies that do business in the West Bank, urging them to withdraw from the territories. That is to be followed by a consumer action program, particularly in the Advent, Christmas and Lenten seasons.

Rev. Smith-Young said he disagrees with the approach adopted by the

church, though he understands where it comes from.

"That's what we like to do in the church, to take stands on things," he said. "It's in our DNA, and it can trip us up. Sometimes it's not the healthiest thing."

The General Council was being pushed "to do something, a good thing," he said. But you need to recognize that doing something can be the wrong thing to do. I think that's what we did at the General Council."

Expanding on his critique, Rev. Smith-Young continued: "We oversimplified and identified Israel as having the primary responsibility as an obstacle to peace. For me, sitting in rural Ontario, to claim to understand what it's like to live in Israel, surrounded by hostile neighbours, with a painful history... The most we should do is listen, pray and support."

A better course of action would have been to focus on "building reconciliation... at the grassroots," he added.

If you change people's hearts "in real communities, then you create the desire for peace and reconciliation." A political solution would follow, he said.

Rev. Smith-Young attributed much of his attitude to the situation in the Middle East to relationships he's had with Jews over the course of his life.

He grew up in Richmond Hill, where some of his friends and teachers were Jews. He admits to "feeling an affinity, a friendship with [Jewish] people."

"I've always had an interest in international politics, including the Middle East," he continued. "I can't say I have strong views, but I'm interested in what's going on in the Middle East since World War II, the founding of the State of Israel. Reading, paying attention, I come at it, hopefully, with a sense of humility."

He recalls a friend who "shared how his family was subject to an economic boycott by Christians." The friend was referring to Germany in the 1930s.

"He said to have Christians take economic action or boycott versus Jewish businesses hurt

him. I don't think those in the church who propose the boycott recognize that."

He wondered how the church thinks it will be able to convince an Israeli that he or she is primarily responsible for continuing the conflict.

"How will you convince him to change? It won't. It will get his back up."

"It looks too much like Christians singling out Jews, and there's too much of an ugly history between our people," he said.



Rev. Greg Smith-Young

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BIALIK BUDS: Bialik Hebrew Day School's gardening club, the Bialik Buds, visited Shores's Kavanah Garden to get some hands-on experience in organic gardening with vegetables and herbs. Students planted seeds, watered plants with water from a nearby stream, made their own tea with fresh herbs, heated it in a solar oven, and went for a nature walk. Pictured are, front from left, Shelley M. Emily W., Lauren G., Billie W., Brooke S., Mika S. and Samantha S-M.