

B’Nai Brith Challenges Trinity-St. Paul’s United Church, July 2019.

Just before the July long weekend in 2019, Trinity-St. Paul’s (TSP) Church Board members were alerted to a concern that needed to be resolved. Because many people were away on holiday, communication happened by e-mail and phone, not in person. This was difficult for many to follow as people sometimes missed earlier e-mails or were confused about the facts of the situation.

Earlier in the week, the church had received communication from B’nai Brith (BB) questioning our July 13 space rental to the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM). This organization, a small group of students from York University, had rented one of our rooms to hold a celebration. The event was to honour a young Palestinian writer with a scholarship named after a famous Palestinian author and activist, Ghassan Kanafani. Kanafani was assassinated by Mossad in 1972. BB claimed that Kanafani was a terrorist and that we, therefore, should not be renting to a group that glorified a terrorist.

Several of our Board members checked with outside sources such as the General Council Office of the United Church (GCO), the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG) and others and found no truth in the accusation that Kanafani was a terrorist. The GCO promised to support us in maintaining the rental if there were any further complications. ICLMG offered to provide us with legal support. Board members had mixed views even with these assurances. We were under time pressure as we wanted to give PYM notice in good time if there was to be a change. We did not respond to BB initially.

As we held further discussions, we received a second communication from BB intimating that TSP was “condoning violence” by letting PYM use our space. BB pointed out a PYM website note and Facebook posting that lifted up the actions of a Palestinian activist who had used violence (to defend himself or in pent up anger?), against the IDF during the “March of Return Days” in Gaza. According to BB, that proved that PYM “condoned violence” and that TSP would be complicit in “condoning violence” if we continued with the rental agreement. BB used condescending language to attempt to humiliate and demean TSP members and to attack TSP’s reputation in order to convince us to end the rental contract.

This accusation of “condoning violence” became the deciding factor as the Board held a vote. In the midst of time pressure, misunderstandings, and confusion by some Board members, many felt we could not associate ourselves with a group that “condoned violence” no matter what the cause. (In previous communication with our Building Management Board on July 1, the Vice General Coordinator of the National PYM clearly stated that PYM does not promote or condone violence and would not do so at their event. This message got lost, or failed to be heard clearly, by the Board.) It was decided we would not rent our space to PYM and the group was notified a week before their event. This left many of us upset about the process, the decision, and the meddling by BB.

After the word got out, we were praised by far-right Jewish groups and media and vilified by many we thought were friends. It was clear that many did not have the correct facts and made assumptions about the reasons for our decision, who made it, and when. This was disappointing.

Because the summer was lost time in terms of debriefing with the Board, The Board met in September to share our thoughts and feelings. Between July and September, the Middle East Working Group of TSP and Bathurst UC (MEWG) met with Robert Massoud, a Palestinian Canadian activist, to work on creating a response to the Board, both practical and ethical. Robert helpfully pointed out that the UN Geneva Convention of 1949 and 1977 specifically makes allowances for the use of violence for populations under occupation.