

Statement in support of Rev Dr Stephen Sizer

Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network (PIEN): May 2022

On behalf of the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network (PIEN) in Australia, I write to issue this statement in support of Rev Dr Stephen Sizer, in the context of the recent hearing of the Bishops' Disciplinary Tribunal in the Diocese of Winchester. I and others within PIEN have met Stephen Sizer, attended seminars he has delivered on Christian Zionism and, as Facebook friends, seen his regular Facebook posts on the reality of life in the Holy Land today.

Many supporters have critiqued the whole process by which Stephen Sizer has come under scrutiny. I reiterate a few salient points.

The Board of Deputies of British Jews, which brought an accusation of antisemitism against Stephen Sizer in 2018, purports to represent Jewish people in the UK. Whilst it is a significant voice for the Jewish community in Britain, there are other voices within the British Jewish community that take a more inclusive view toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, including anti-Zionist, non-Zionist or progressive Zionist positions that are contrary to the Board's conservative position. The Board of Deputies invariably adopts a stance of defending and promoting the policies and actions of the Israeli Government.

Other Jewish groups have publicly defended Stephen Sizer and distanced themselves from the Board of Deputies on a number of levels.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism has been wrongly used here and elsewhere to make accusations of antisemitism towards people seeking peace with justice for the people of the Holy Land. The illustrative examples within the IHRA definition do not preclude criticism of the Israeli government. Vexatious charges such as those against Stephen Sizer then take the focus away from real antisemitism which is a phenomenon that ought to be addressed.

The charge which the Tribunal is hearing has also been cloaked in religious language to suit this internal church procedure. I would counter that Rev Sizer has not exhibited "behaviour unbecoming and inappropriate" but rather followed the well-worn path towards righting the wrongs which are evident in the Holy Land today where the Occupation is ongoing, and the freedom of the Palestinian people is denied.

Of the specific instances which are being used as evidence for the charges of antisemitism, each has a context and a ready refutation. Two in particular that are striking are as follows. To a charge of causing offence to Jewish people, Stephen Sizer's barrister aptly asked, "Was the offence justified?". Anyone can claim to be offended. And second, Stephen Sizer once attended a meeting held in the House of Lords. It was not a speaker who had spoken amiss but rather a member of the audience had risen to make a (real) antisemitic remark. Other erroneous claims can also be dismissed.

We in PIEN welcome those who expose the dangerous ideology of Christian Zionism and seek to reclaim the Scriptures which indeed hold high a God of justice. In Stephen Sizer's body of work around this subject, it is largely Christians who are his target and projected audience. There are many who would ignore the presence of Palestinians, Muslim and Christian, in the Holy Land. Stephen Sizer is not one of them.

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