

Presbyterians put pressure on Caterpillar



[Paul Gordon](#)

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Another group is taking Caterpillar Inc. to task for having the audacity to sell the machines it manufactures.

OK, perhaps that's being facetious, but Caterpillar is again being blamed for contributing to the violence and other woes in the Gaza Strip because the Israeli military has used Caterpillar bulldozers to destroy houses there.

For years Caterpillar has heard from the Jewish Voice for Peace, including a myriad of protests, with demands it stop selling the machines in the Mideast.

Now Caterpillar is one of five U.S. companies being targeted by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the leaders of which are threatening to divest it of the millions of dollars worth of shares it owns in those companies.

Late last Friday the church - which voted last summer to put economic pressure on companies it says profits from Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip - said it will initiate a "progressive engagement" process against those companies.

Others named by the church were Motorola Inc., Citigroup, ITT Industries and United Technologies.

The Presbyterian Church said it wants to use dialogue, shareholder action and **divestment** - with that being the last resort - to get the companies to "act responsibly."

As expected, Caterpillar denounced the campaign, and did so with its longest statement yet on the matter.

"As a well-respected and responsible global citizen, Caterpillar fully complies with all local, U.S. and national laws and policies governing sales of our products around the world, including the U.S. Foreign Military Sales Program. In addition, we clearly have laws and policies governing sales of our products around the world, including the U.S. Foreign Military Sales Program. In addition, we clearly have neither the legal right nor the tangible ability to regulate how customers use their machines," the company said in a statement.

"While it's disappointing that a small number of activists continue to use our international visibility, leadership and reputation to draw attention to their cause, we have no intention of participating in a debate that appears aimed not at our company, but at the policies established by the governments of the United States and Israel," the statement said.

The action isn't sitting well with all Presbyterians, either, at least not in Caterpillar's back yard.

"We favor trying to help the oppressed, but there are problems in many places in the world. This type of selective righteousness is shallow and arrogant," said Rev. Kenn Shedenhelm, co-pastor of United Presbyterian Church in Peoria.

He said it was wrong for Presbyterian U.S.A. to threaten to divest itself of the money invested in Caterpillar shares - more than \$3 million worth - when the church "has a moral obligation to invest our money where we can get the most gain and not use it to play politics."

The Rev. Charles Spencer, co-executive of the Presbytery of Great Rivers in Peoria, said his organization still is analyzing what Presbyterian Church U.S.A. plans to do.

He said his group would like to facilitate meetings between the national church and his own members - particularly those who work for or are related to employees of Caterpillar - so they can get a grasp on what the church wants. "The national church needs to be aware of those members who are part of the Caterpillar family and be sensitive to them," he said.

Otherwise, he wasn't ready to opine on the national church's campaign until he knew more about it. "I do want to emphasize the national church has not made a decision to divest at this time, and this Presbytery has not taken any action. We are open to play any positive role we can in this matter," he said.

While Presbyterian Church U.S.A. has said it wants to meet with executives of Caterpillar and the other companies, no meetings are scheduled at this time, said Caterpillar spokesman Rusty Dunn.

He said of the **divestment** threat, "It is obviously the right of any individual or group to spend their investment dollars as they see fit. But our position on this has been clear. And as a business, the most prudent position we can take (on the Mideast issue) is to remain neutral."

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