



blue ocean church

Rev. Emily Swan
Blue Ocean Church Ann Arbor
2301 Packard St.
Ann Arbor, MI 48104

1 November 2023

Ypsilanti City Council
One South Huron Street
Ypsilanti, MI 48197

Dear Members of the Ypsilanti City Council,

I'm both a resident of Ypsilanti and the founding and lead pastor of Blue Ocean Church Ann Arbor, a faith community affiliated with The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries led by Bishop Yvette Flunder (City of Refuge, United Church of Christ). My congregation shares a building with both an Episcopal Church (St. Clare's Episcopal) and a Reform Jewish Synagogue (Temple Beth Emeth).

I'm writing regarding Resolution 2023-222.

I spent a few weeks in the West Bank in 2007-2008 and bear witness to the oppression of Palestinian people. I share the Council's concern for the ongoing mistreatment of the Palestinians, for the current loss of civilian life in Gaza, and for the inability of civilians in Gaza to access to clean water, medical care, and food; the humanitarian crisis is deeply disturbing. The majority of Israeli citizens also share these concerns, as do the Jewish congregations I've spoken with here in Washtenaw County.

That said, the resolution passed by Council on Nov. 7, 2023, contained glaring holes that, I fear, contribute to antisemitism.

First, the resolution lacked a condemnation of Hamas's initial assault and expressed no sympathy for the 1,400 civilian victims of that attack or for their loved ones who mourn their loss. There is an underlying insinuation in the resolution that "the Israelis had it coming" due to the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians in Gaza. The absence of an acknowledgement of the ferocity of the events of October 7 dehumanizes the Jewish people and demeans their grief and terror.

Second, the resolution lacked care in its use of language. Terms such as *ethnic cleansing* and *apartheid regime* carry specific legal meanings that I do not trust the Ypsilanti City Council has the expertise to assess, in spite of the resolution placing a definition of the former in its content. While I recognize the term *apartheid* has been used to describe the relationship between the Israeli government and the Palestinian territories in other places, I have concerns that language created to describe the sins of white supremacist colonial powers (such as Great Britain, who colonized what today is Palestine, Jordan, and parts of Iraq between the end of World War I and 1948, and whose colonization of South Africa birthed the term *apartheid*) is being employed to

describe Israel. We remember the state of Israel was formed in the aftermath of the Holocaust when more than six million Jews were killed in the name of white supremacy. In the case of Israel-Palestine we have two oppressed people groups involved, with complicated context and history. There may be language for that relationship, but it is distinct from *apartheid*. *Apartheid* implies Israel is a colonizer who “needs to be overthrown.” That is the loaded connotation I hear, and it carries implications for topics of international statehood that are, I believe, beyond the purview of this Council.

Third, my Jewish friends and neighbors report that this resolution makes them feel less safe in our community. It feels like the City of Ypsilanti has chosen a side in a foreign war that could result in local violence. Right now we are in an environment of inflamed antisemitism. Prior to the Hamas attack antisemitic attacks were already on the rise in southeast Michigan

This past summer, at least two of the synagogues in Ann Arbor had to be evacuated because of a swatting incident—an event meant to inflict psychological terror. There were also two off-campus fraternity houses at the University of Michigan that were vandalized with antisemitic and homophobic messages; windows were smashed and at least one swastika was drawn. One of the houses, Sigma Alpha Mu, is a Jewish fraternity. In the last year, antisemitic flyers have been distributed in the neighborhoods surrounding our shared worship building on Packard and on the University of Michigan campus. Last month, similar fliers were distributed in Chelsea and Dexter.

While these acts are local to us in Washtenaw County, they are not isolated in southeast Michigan. Violent threats were shouted at a family attending Temple Beth El in Bloomfield Hills last December, threats were made against Jewish government officials in our state in March, and anti-Semitic graffiti was sprayed on synagogues in Oak Park and Royal Oak in spring. In June, a Michigan man was arrested for planning an attack on a synagogue in East Lansing.

Nationally, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported the highest number of anti-Semitic incidences in 2022—including assault, harassment, and vandalism—since they began tracking in 1979.

All to say, it is important that we not contribute to an environment where antisemitism can ferment and is, in fact, already fermenting. I believe Resolution 2023-222 is clumsy and inadvertently contributes to our Jewish friends and neighbors feeling less safe. While I do not believe it is the job of the Ypsilanti City Council to weigh in on international affairs, if you do so then I advise you to choose language cautiously, listen to those who might be impacted, and not ignore the landscape of victims.

Sincerely,

Rev. Emily Swan
Founding and Lead Pastor
Blue Ocean Church Ann Arbor

Co-signed by Rev. Caroline Kittle
Associate Pastor
Blue Ocean Church Ann Arbor