

The candidate who's in trouble

Specter camp unfairly pillories Bryn Mawr elders

By **DAN ROTTENBERG**

You probably know that Pennsylvania's U.S. Senator Arlen Specter, a solid supporter of women's issues, is being attacked this year as a misogynist. And that his opponent Lynn Yeakel, an unequivocal supporter of Israel, is being castigated as an anti-Zionist. But you may not know that their reckless election-year crossfire has victimized at least one innocent bystander.

Yeakel's church, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian, was accused of anti-Semitism two years ago after three of its leaders, following a visit to Israel, criticized Israel's Palestinian policy. Now Specter supporters have revived the charge.

This summer they have bombarded newspapers with letters and columns characterizing Bryn Mawr Presbyterian as "Israel-bashing" and "anti-Semitic." Since Yeakel is a vice-president of the church's Board of Trustees, these critics claim, she is responsible for the utterances of her church's officials.

To anyone familiar with Bryn Mawr Presbyterian, this is flabbergasting. The church's governance structure prohibits its financial trustees (such as Lynn Yeakel) from influencing the board of elders who determine church policies. For at least a generation those policies have been guided by an enlightened rejection of religious orthodoxy and a belief that unfettered dialogue holds the solution to social conflicts.

To that end, the church has sponsored freewheeling exchanges on controversial viewpoints around many issues — among them a 1990 Middle East forum, a series that included among its speakers Arlen Specter. The church has often engaged in joint programs, religious services and community projects with Catholic and Jewish congregations — including the current biweekly dialogue with Gladwyne's Beth David Reform Congregation — to share feelings about their respective religions, the Holocaust and Israel.

So, what did Bryn Mawr Presbyterian do to deserve its "anti-Semitic" label? In November 1989, two of its seven pastors and four parishioners visited Israel as part of a local Presbyterian task force. In a Sunday sermon shortly after their return, senior pastor Eugene Bay described

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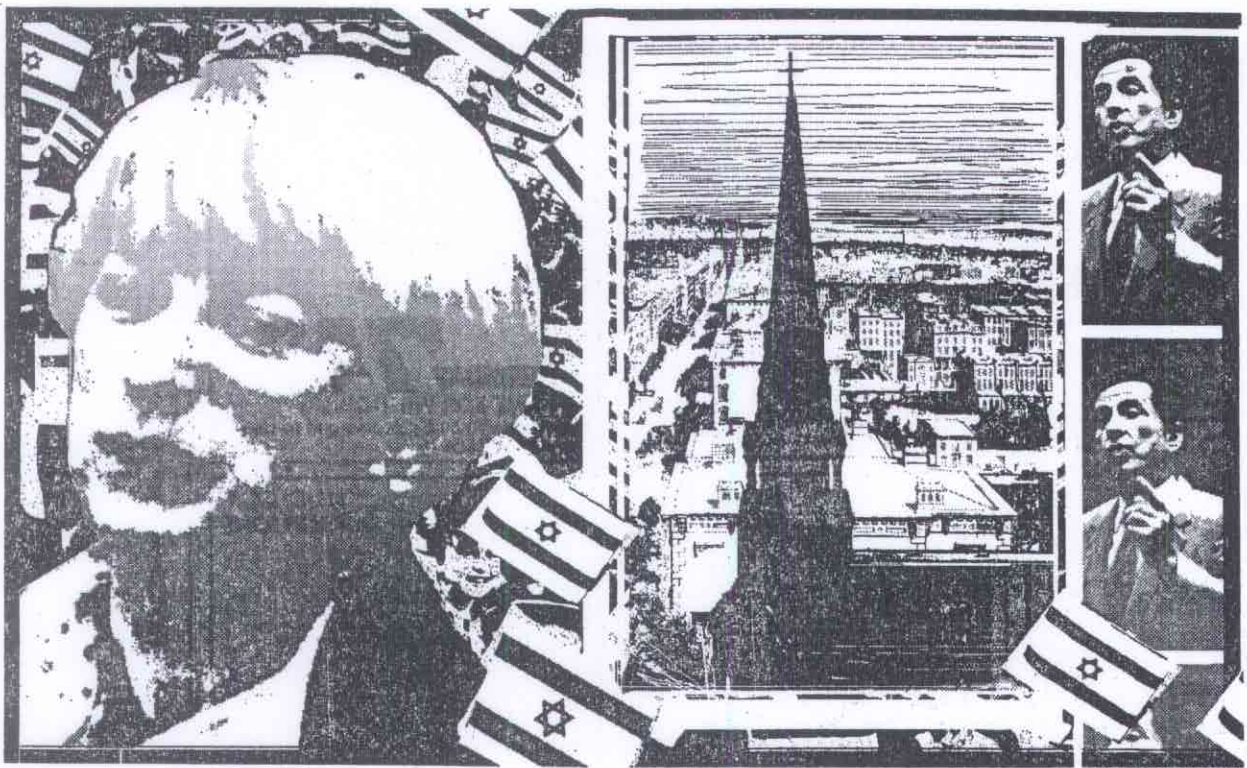
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church

his impressions — which, he stressed, represented his personal views only.

"Israel's passion for security is understandable," Dr. Bay said. "She sees herself surrounded by enemies, but her fear seems exaggerated to me, and her greed for the land indefensible." And: "Israel needs a Lincoln — someone with the grace to admit that neither side is blameless, with the wisdom to see that ancient feuds can be forgotten, and with the courage to believe that old enemies can be reconciled."

Similar views had already been expressed by many rabbis who felt that Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's belligerent posture toward the Palestinians was counterproductive, not to mention a blot on Judaism. Similar concerns motivated Israeli voters this year to remove Shamir from office and elect Yitzhak Rabin.



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Nevertheless, Bay's comments — and similar criticism of Israeli policies uttered at the church's subsequent Middle East forums — were seized upon and wrenched out of context. This, by some Jews who, recalling Hitler's Holocaust, perceive any criticism of Israel as a threat to Israel and to Jews.

In March 1990, Morton Klein of Merion, whose parents perished in the Holocaust, wrote a column in the Main Line Times characterizing a Bryn Mawr Presbyterian women's lunch program as "an afternoon of Israel-bashing." Defending the program, speakers replied that part of their presentation had merely outlined the official Presbyterian Church USA policy — policies which no one at the Bryn Mawr church is bound to follow.

But this response was again twisted so as to appear that the speakers were imposing official church dogma. And B'nai B'rith's Anti-Defamation League publicly chastised pastor Bay for countenancing remarks which "damage the good name of the Jewish people."

Yet a thorough reading of the church members' comments since the onset of this controversy suggests not bigotry but honest concern. The comments call for Christians to repudiate anti-Semitism, for Arab states to recognize Israel as a sovereign state and for provisions to

assure Israel's security.

Some of the ideas — such as church elder Paul Hopkins' apparent belief that the Jewish lobby wields more political clout than the Arab oil lobby — may be simplistic or foolish. But the free exchange of such views is a necessary first step to any kind of understanding between opposing viewpoints.

Since anyone who questions dogma can expect to have his credentials challenged, let me lay mine on the table. I'm a Jew who's lost more than 50 relatives in the Holocaust and whose cousins have served in some of Israel's governments. I'm also obscurely related to the Rev. David Watermulder, who retired in 1986 after 24 years as Bryn Mawr Presbyterian's senior pastor (his grandnephew is my nephew). You might say that on this issue I have a foot in each camp.

But you would be wrong. The Palestinian issue is not a matter of Israeli vs. Arab or Jew vs. Gentile. It's a conflict between those who seek to promote dialogue and those who seek to stifle it, a conflict between those who nurture understanding and those who nurture hatred.

For fostering dialogue on this and other issues, the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church owes nobody an apology. On the contrary, it deserves everybody's gratitude.

Dan Rottenberg, a regular contributor to the Commentary Page, is the author of "Finding Our Fathers," a guidebook to Jewish genealogy.

Yeakel deserves political heat for pastors' stand

By **MORTON A. KLEIN** and
REV. CHARLES OLEWINE

Senatorial candidate Lynn Yeakel has been vice-president of the Board of Trustees of the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church for the last two years, and a member of the Board for the last five. During her tenure, the Bryn Mawr Church has been the scene, and the source, of a flood of anti-Israel sermons, programs, articles, adult-education classes and propaganda films.

Yeakel's continuing refusal to clearly acknowledge, explicitly condemn or promise to fight against these activities raises legitimate questions about her sensitivity to bigotry.

Consider some of the statements made by the Bryn Mawr church leaders, statements that Associate Pastor Stephen Michie, and Church Elder Paul Hopkins described in the Main Line Times as "our official denominational policy regarding the Middle East."

Senior Pastor Eugene Bay has derided Israel's security concerns as "exaggerated," accused Israel of being "greedy," preached that "the real terrorists were the [Israeli] soldiers" and compared the Jewish state to "the rich man [read: rich Jews] who had very many flocks and herds but [who] also wanted the poor man's 'little ewe lamb.'"

Yeakel's fellow church leaders Bay, Michie, Hopkins, among others, have publicly expressed sympathy for the outrageous allegation that Israeli treatment of Arabs is comparable to the Nazi's treatment of Jews (a version of this defamation was used by Pastor Bay in his sermons).

Writing in the pro-Arab propaganda organ, The Link, Church Elder Hopkins claimed that "the pressure of Jewish organizations" leads to censorship of "the press and major publishing houses." Hopkins blamed "the Jews" for what he called "the bondage of Congress to the Israeli lobby . . . the integrity of our democratic system of government has been betrayed."

In a phrase reminiscent of notorious anti-Semitic tracts

of the 19th century, he added: "This, of course, is all part of the plan." During one lecture at the church, Hopkins stood next to posters of "Palestine" (there were none of Israel), calling for a halt to all U.S. aid to the Jewish state.

These are not merely disagreements with specific Israeli policies or specific Israeli governments. This is Israel-bashing and, in some cases, simple bigotry.

Dr. Franklin Littell, an eminent Protestant minister and former chair of Temple University's religion department, describes the activity at Bryn Mawr as "an orgy . . . of Israel-bashing of the harshest kind," which "wells up from a cultural anti-Semitism that is pervasive."

The anti-Israel activities at Bryn Mawr date back to at least 1988, when the Anti-Defamation League complained that Bryn Mawr's attacks on Israel and Jews by some of their church leaders would "harm and damage the good

name of the Jewish people and their relations with their Christian neighbors."

In 1990, a number of concerned citizens including a Protestant minister and one of the authors of this article, Morton A. Klein, wrote numerous articles in the Philadelphia-area press exposing the troubling anti-Israel activities in Bryn Mawr.

In short, this isn't some campaign-related issue, it is a matter of conscience that must be addressed, regardless of the current senatorial race. Neither author of this commentary is on the payroll of the Specter campaign, as some individuals from Yeakel's campaign have falsely claimed. We speak out as a concerned Jew and a concerned Christian, prompted by our sincere conviction that what has taken place at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church is hateful.

How has Lynn Yeakel responded to all of this? When questions were raised back in May, she simply ignored them.

Then she claimed at her June 9 press conference that she had "never heard any of this ever." Finally, after two long months, she issued a vaguely worded statement "acknowledging" her "disagreement" with these "views" and rejecting "all anti-semitism" in the world, but failed to specifically acknowledge, repudiate or combat the deplorable activity.

No responsible person is claiming that Lynn Yeakel herself is anti-Semitic. And obviously no responsible person is claiming that everyone at the Bryn Mawr church is a bigot. But the fact is, that when it comes to Israel-related issues, the church leadership has been controlled by individuals whose attitudes toward the Jewish state and its American supporters is disturbing, to say the least.

Since Lynn Yeakel describes herself as one who has fought "discrimination and injustice throughout my life and career," one must ask, why won't she commit herself to fighting the prejudice at her own church?

Since Lynn Yeakel has no previous record on U.S.-Israel

Elders at the candidate's church don't merely disagree with Israeli policies; they have engaged in Israel-bashing and bigotry.

relations, the public can only judge her attitudes to Israel by what she has done — or rather, *not* done — at her own church.

Do her inactions speak louder than her words? Is she insensitive to bigotry? Will she be influenced by the anti-Israel leaders of her church?

If African Americans, gays or women were the target of the kind of attacks that Jews and the Jewish state have endured in Bryn Mawr, Yeakel would feel compelled to speak out, and rightly so.

She should speak out now, as well.

Morton A. Klein is an economist and statistician who served the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. He is the leader of two Philadelphia area Jewish organizations. Rev. Charles Olewine is a retired Presbyterian pastor.
