

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES

Annual Report – 2016-2017

Rabbi Harold J. Berman

July 1, 2017, marks the first anniversary of my taking the position of Executive Director of the National Council of Synagogues. Much has happened in the world around us in the past year, and the National Council of Synagogues has been involved in many discussions and exchanges that have helped religious communities to gain greater understanding of each other and have helped all of us to achieve a better perspective on events and concerns that shape our world.

Meetings and Conferences

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

November 7, 2016

Our meeting in New York in November at the Jewish Theological Seminary with representatives of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, chaired by His Eminence Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Rabbi David Straus and coordinated by myself and Rev. Dennis McManus, was a warm reunion of interfaith colleagues and a very successful sharing of ideas.

Our originally designated guest speaker, Fr. Patrick Desbois, a distinguished European scholar and fighter for Jewish needs and memorials in Europe, had to cancel his appearance because of illness. We were fortunate that on very short notice, Ira Forman, United States Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, was willing to take the central speaker's position. He spoke eloquently of the challenges and of his work around the world, with concern but also with a measure of optimism, and the delegates heard responses from Fr. McManus and from Kenneth Jacobson, Deputy National Director of the Anti-Defamation League. There was considerable interest from the Catholic bishops over the existence of an office in the State Department concerned with anti-Semitism, and much discussion of the role of the State Department in dealing with other forms of religious discrimination around the world.

In our afternoon session Bishop William Murphy and Bishop Gregory Mansour led discussions concerning the recent UNESCO declaration concerning Jerusalem and its negative implications for Jewish and Christian concerns, and possible responses by individuals and groups were considered, and the status of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East was also reviewed. Deputy Consul General of Israel Amir Sagie updated the group on various current concerns from the perspective of the Israeli consulate.

June 21, 2017

Our June meeting began at Cardinal Dolan's office at the Cardinal Cooke Center in New York. We were honored to welcome back Rabbi Gil Rosenthal, founding director of the NCS, who spoke of the legacy of Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore, a leading light in the field of Jewish-Catholic relations, who passed away in March. Rabbi Rosenthal's presence also gave the USCCB a chance to present him with a special gift honoring his many years of leadership in our dialogue.

The main speaker on June 21 was historian Mark Riebling, author of *Church of Spies: The Pope's Secret War Against Hitler*. Dr. Riebling shared insights from his extensive research on the collaboration of Pope Pius XII and various networks of people working to overthrow the Nazi regime, beginning with Hitler's ascension to power in 1933 and continuing through all of World War II. Dr. Riebling suggested that the Pope held back from much public criticism of the Nazis in part to avoid drawing attention to his clandestine work. He acknowledged the criticism that the Pope might have said more, but argued that the full story shows enormous effort to save lives, Jewish as well as Christian, throughout the war. Copies of Dr. Riebling's book were shared with all of the dialogue participants.

Deputy Consul General of Israel Amir Sagie reported to the group on President Trump's recent visit to Israel and on efforts to revive the peace process. He also shared information on current negotiations between Israel and the Vatican regarding various legal and economic issues which are expected to lead to the signing of an agreement in the near future.

The morning meeting was followed by lunch at the Cardinal's office, and then by dessert and coffee at the Cardinal's residence and the meeting concluded with a tour of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

The next meeting of the group will take place on Thursday, November 9, 2017, with location to be determined and arrangements to be made by the National Council of Synagogues. The June, 2018, meeting will take place on Wednesday, June 20, 2018, under the leadership of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The National Council of Churches

November 15-16, 2016

A group of NCS leadership met in Charleston, South Carolina, at Congregation Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim with representatives of the National Council of Churches, led by NCC President Rev. Jim Winkler and NCS Chair Rabbi David Straus. Rev. Tony Kireopoulos and Rev. Nicole Diroff worked with me on arranging the details of the program.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 Presidential election, there was much discussion of the impact of the campaign and its outcome on religious communities in America. Many participants felt that clergy were not effective in sharing concerns about moral and ethical issues that had been raised in the campaign and that more effort would be needed to protect the interests of minority communities in the years ahead.

Presentations were made concerning programs and priorities in different religious communities by Rev. Aundrea Alexander of the NCC and Rabbi Wayne Franklin of the NCS. Mass incarceration is the focus of much NCC work. Rabbi Franklin spoke of interfaith work on poverty, gun violence and school and police issues.

Rev. Don Anderson and Rabbi David Straus offered reflections on “White Privilege.” Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg led a discussion on the impact of Middle East issues and statements on Jewish/Christian relations.

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, a historic synagogue in Charleston with history that goes back to the colonial period of American history, was gracious in offering hospitality and in leading our delegations on tours of the synagogue and of the congregation’s museum and art collections.

May 16, 2017

Although in previous years it has been the practice to use a telephone conference for our spring meeting with the National Council of Churches, it was decided that the discussion from November, 2016, needed to be continued in person, and so our meeting took place in Philadelphia in May.

What it means to be a “Child of Abraham” was the theme of morning discussions led by Rabbi Daniel Polish and Rev. Peter Baktis. There was a lively exchange of ideas on how a common biblical thread is sometimes used as a theme of unity, yet different interpretations also lead to unique sources of identity within different communities. Discussions brought out a wide range of religious themes and policy goals in our current work.

The afternoon discussion was devoted to: “Our Communities’ Changing Public Witness at a Time of Government Pullback.” Presentations were made by Rabbi Steve Gutow and Rev. Claire Burkat. The discussion revealed a great deal of concern about divisions within our communities and even in many of our congregations on public and social issues. Recent elections and polls suggest that many congregants have opinions and policy goals that are very different from those of the institutional leadership of religious organizations to which they belong. The challenge is to find ways to offer a prophetic and moral voice without alienating people who disagree. All participants felt that interfaith work and the building of community and national coalitions around various issues remain as vital today as ever.

Muslim Contacts

A spirited meeting was held between a group of NCS leaders and a group of American Muslim leaders in June of 2016. It was hoped that another meeting might take place before the end of the year, and then a meeting was scheduled for June of 2017, but conflicting schedules made it necessary to postpone that meeting as well. The date of October 16, 2017 is now on the calendar for a leadership group to meet with a group of Muslim leaders, hopefully to map out a program of future exchanges between the two religious communities.

Evangelical Protestant Leaders

June 5-6, 2017

Rabbi David Straus and I, together with a number of Jewish leaders, through a program organized by Rabbi Yehiel Poupko of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, participated in meetings in June of 2016 and in June of 2017, that serve as an annual dialogue of Jews and Evangelical Protestants. Although not officially part of the work of the NCS, our leadership has been included in recent years and I was invited to make a presentation this year. The dialogue offers an opportunity to interact with a thoughtful and reflective group of academic and pulpit leaders from the Evangelical community. Another dialogue meeting for this group is being planned for June of 2018.

Finances

Thanks to generous funding from the Nathan Cummings Foundation, with the support and encouragement of Michael Cummings and Hannah Cummings, from the Columbus Jewish Foundation and from the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary in addition to other individual donors who have renewed generous donations from years past, our finances are stable. We have also received generous donations from members of the leadership of the National Council of Synagogues and from a number of congregation rabbis who have graciously joined in support of our work. All are deeply appreciated.

Several long-range goals are on hold because of the need for additional funding. We have shared preliminary proposals for possible joint travel of rabbis and ministers, or rabbis and priests, with the goal of advancing mutual understanding on many levels. This will require subsidies and programming expenses that are not currently available.

It is also hoped that a younger leadership group could be included in NCS dialogues, but this also requires funding for subsidies to support travel and other expenses that we have not previously been able to offer. The goal of publishing some of

the materials and presentations that have been shared with our dialogue groups also remains a possibility when and if funding can be secured.

New Members

Several new constituent delegates have been added recently. During 2017 we welcomed Rabbis Leonard Gordon and Anne Lewis of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Rabbis Lauren Grabelle Hermann, Elyse Wechterman and Avi Winokur of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and Leslie Brier of the Union for Reform Judaism. Also Rabbi David Saperstein of the Union for Reform Judaism has rejoined the leadership of NCS on the conclusion of his service as U. S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom.

Minutes and Papers

Minutes of NCS conferences are posted, as soon as they are edited and approved, on our website, nationalcouncilofsynagogues.org.

Many thanks

When Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal joined us for our recent meeting with the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops we had another chance to express our gratitude for all that he did to create and nurture a forum for dialogue through which the voice of American Jewry would be heard in a larger setting. Rabbi Rosenthal was not only an organizer and leader, he was also a teacher and mentor and his impact on every aspect of the work of the National Council of Synagogues will be felt for many years to come.

Over the past year, Rabbi David Straus, our Chair, and Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Vice Chair and Secretary-Treasurer, have made themselves available, constantly, offering leadership, energy, advice, wisdom and support. Both are senior rabbis of major congregations in their communities and both offer leadership in many other interfaith endeavors. Their time and effort as leaders of the National Council of Synagogues is deeply appreciated.

Thanks also to the Rabbinical Assembly, specifically to Gina Morales, who administers our finances and keeps our books up to date and pays our bills, and to Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, whose encouragement and support has helped make a number of things possible behind the scenes.

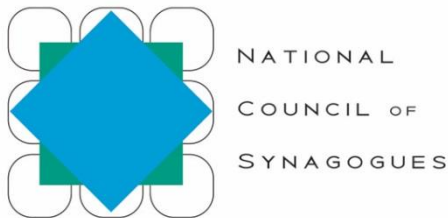
And thanks again for the financial support that makes everything possible. In addition to those mentioned above, we receive direct funding from our constituent organizations, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Rabbinical Assembly, the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, the

Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Support from our constituent organizations, materially and spiritually, sustains our work.

It is a privilege to work with a remarkable group of people who care deeply and work diligently to promote better relationships among clergy and religious groups of different faiths. I am profoundly grateful for all who are involved and all who lend their support, and many who do both, to make this possible.

Respectfully submitted,

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