

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES

Annual Report – 2019-2020

Rabbi Harold J. Berman

At a time of great uncertainty, our prayers for the health and safety of all the members of all our communities are paramount. The current Covid-19 pandemic has caused enormous disruption in our religious environment, as it has in all other aspects of our lives. It has also brought forward much dissension, confusion and hostility. But it has at the same time given more people a chance to join in virtual meetings and has helped us to envision new ways of learning and sharing. Hopefully, this time of social distancing will yield to greater appreciation for what we can and create in the future.

Meanwhile, the work of increasing understanding among our communities becomes even more significant, and we are moving forward, with the help of modern communications, bringing people together in different ways. As we do, we pray for the safety and health of all who share and support our work and we look forward to new opportunities yet ahead.

The 2019-2020 year saw very productive meetings through the fall, and valuable exchanges through computer links in the spring.

Meetings and Conferences

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

November 18, 2019 / Museum of the Jewish Heritage, New York

Our fall meeting with the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops focused on immigration, highlighting current issues and immediate concerns for those who face very challenging conditions as they seek to enter U. S. borders. It was striking to be speaking of these issues as we looked out from our conference room on the Statue of Liberty and New York Harbor.

The meeting was chaired by **Cardinal Timothy Dolan** and **Rabbi David Straus**. Delegates were also welcomed by representatives of the museum and invited to tour the facility at the close of the meeting.

Guest speakers were **Eleanor Acer, Senior Director for Refugee Protection, Human Rights First**, who spoke of her work challenging the United States Government to be a champion of Human Rights around the world and **Mark Hetfield, President and CEO of HIAS** (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), whose organization assists immigrants of

all backgrounds and was originally established, in 1881, in the New York neighborhood where the Museum of Jewish Heritage now stands.

Ms. Acer listed the standards that are binding on all nations as principles of international law, enacted in the aftermath of World War II, including not returning a refugee who has a well-founded fear of persecution and not punishing refugees for illegally crossing a border. These were enacted into law in the United States in 1980. Ms. Acer noted that various U. S. policies now contravene these principles.

Mr. Hetfield noted that there are more than seventy million displaced persons in the world. He explained that the 1980 law, passed overwhelmingly by Congress, created a resettlement process as well as asylum principles. A recent unpublished study by the present administration, seeking to determine how much refugees cost the United States, concluded that refugees contribute to the economy more than \$60 billion more than the costs expended to settle them.

Resettlement has unfortunately become a partisan issue, and an Executive Order of the current administration not only allowed states and municipalities to opt out of resettlement programs, it also requires states and municipalities to opt in if they want to participate. Enormous resources of various agencies have been required to lobby for inclusion and has led to great uncertainty for those who need help.

It was emphasized that many Americans know little or nothing of what is happening on our borders. Strong voices of faith leaders are needed. Family separation is still an issue and the status of young people under DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) is still uncertain. There remains the potential of seeing huge numbers of people who have spent most of their lives in the U. S. being deported. Advocacy for bills before congress is needed as well as lobbying to assure that states and municipalities will participate in programs. Many people think that legal options remain available to most who want them and do not understand how hard it has become for people to find asylum in the United States.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, Bishop of Brooklyn, offered Catholic insights on immigration, highlighting the right of people to migrate as proclaimed through papal encyclical. The papal message enjoins us to welcome, protect, promote and integrate those who migrate. Bishop DiMarzio noted that integration proceeds much more quickly than in previous generations. Assimilation that took several generations in earlier years takes place in one generation now. He also noted that the labor market is the least studied and most misunderstood element of our economy.

It was also noted that foreign aid is important, and that the goal of helping people live better lives in their home nation continues to be a value as well.

The group entertained and supported the suggestion of a Catholic/Jewish clergy visit to the U. S. border. A goal would be to offer support through clergy presence and prayer, and to connect with local congregations that are trying to help. A great deal of

effort and energy was put into planning this mission; unfortunately the Covid-19 pandemic made it impossible for us to go as planned. We hope to reschedule when we can.

Because of the Covid-19 challenges and with travel restrictions and limits on in-person meetings, the scheduled **June** meeting of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Synagogues had to be canceled.

In the interim, we were notified that **Cardinal Timothy Dolan** has decided to step down from the chairmanship of the dialogue, although he expressed a desire to remain a part of the group. While we will miss Cardinal Dolan's leadership, we were pleased to hear that **Archbishop Wilton Gregory** has accepted the invitation to serve in this position. Presently serving as Archbishop of Washington, D. C., having previously served as Archbishop of Atlanta, Georgia. Archbishop Gregory is well known to members of the dialogue group, having previously served as interim chair when Cardinal Dolan chaired the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Archbishop Gregory has a national reputation as a forceful spokesperson on issues of civil rights and justice.

Although we look forward to an in-person meeting to express our **thanks to Cardinal Dolan** and to **welcome Archbishop Gregory**, we will gather first on Zoom on Wednesday, August 12, to check in with delegates of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and to hear remarks from Archbishop Gregory. At that time we will also discuss plans and options for the fall and consider when, how and if it will be possible to meet in person before the end of 2020. It is if not possible, we will plan on another opportunity to meet electronically and continue our dialogue. Also, a leadership meeting is planned with Archbishop Gregory in the early fall so we can better come to know one another.

The National Council of Churches

December 3-4, 2019 / Rodeph Shalom Congregation / Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Marking the passing of a year since a brutal and deadly assault on the several congregations that met at **Tree of Life Synagogue** in Pittsburgh, the National Council of Synagogues and the National Council of Churches joined to learn more, not only about what happened on **October 27, 2018**, when eleven worshippers were murdered, but also about the aftermath of the tragedy, the response of the interfaith community and the work of healing that was undertaken through the year that followed.

Delegates heard from an interfaith leadership panel, **Josh Sayles**, Director of the Community Relations Council of the Pittsburgh Jewish Federation, **Rabbi Ron Symons**, Senior Director of Jewish Life for the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, **Imam Wasi Mohammed** of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh and **Rev. Liddy Barlow**, Executive Minister of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania. All spoke of joining together and rallying support for the community on October 27, 2018. Outreach also came from government officials, including the Governor of Pennsylvania. There were constant vigils and memorial programs and offers of support and assistance from

community groups and government agencies at all levels. **Imam Mohammed** said it was like a family tragedy. People did not think a lot about their reactions; they joined to do whatever was needed. The result was the building and strengthening of relationships that would continue to be beneficial to all. **Rev. Liddy Barlow** spoke of being immediately overwhelmed by phone calls from groups in the Christian community that wanted to find ways to help.

Rabbi Symons spoke about the connections people made that formed a larger anti-hate movement. Programming models were published and statements were issued by community leaders. Interfaith conversations “From the Heart of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” were co-led by Rabbi Ron Symons and Rev. Liddy Barlow. It isn’t clear where all this will lead, but it has already had a profound impact on the community. The discussion that followed included concerns over the overwhelming nature of attention focused from all over the world, which can sometimes be exhausting and challenging, even if always well-intentioned.

Delegates participated in a bus tour of central Pittsburgh and the Squirrel Hill neighborhood, led by **Rabbi Jamie Gibson**, Senior Rabbi of Temple Sinai, with a stop at the **Tree of Life** building. There was an opportunity to see the memorials that have been placed outside and at the entrance. All who participated found it deeply moving.

Rabbi Jeffrey Myers of Tree of Life Congregation, spoke of the pain that is felt throughout his congregation and the community, saying: “We will forever be healing; we will never be healed.” Rabbi Myers also shared the realization that: “It will happen again in America.” Anti-Semitism is on the rise, and our elected leaders are not generally capable of confronting it. **Stephen Cohen**, Co-President of New Light Congregation, spoke of the experience of his congregation, which had left its building after 55 years and had been renting space at Tree of Life for less than a year. He also spoke about a visit to **Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina**, where a group hug of 150 people brought a sense to all that there is a path forward. **Josh Sayles** spoke of government attention, including mental health services and much more from local and state governments. He also spoke of the realization that costs for security in this and in other communities will be enormous as plans are put in place for the future.

Discussion that followed highlighted the fact that white supremacy is an issue, but not the only one. Challenges of hate come from the left as well as the right, and isolation of different communities makes understanding more difficult. Too many people know very little about their neighbors, and people who live in places where they have little contact with others sometimes find it hard to see those others as people. Technology has made it easy to spread hate, and monitoring of on-line discussions is important, but expensive and imperfect. One of our greatest challenges is how to keep people secure but not drive people apart. It was also noted that for many people there was a new perspective on the police and their role in the community. The police came to help and their help was deeply appreciated at every level.

After dinner, the short version of the longer film **SKIN** was shown and discussed. Discussion highlighted that some barriers cannot be bridged. Personal racism is one phenomenon and systemic racism is another and is far more complex. The film emphasized the problem of pervasive racism at all levels of society in our country and there are not enough moral voices speaking against it

December 4, 2019 - ADL Program on Implicit Bias

Delegates took part in an interactive program led by the **Anti-Defamation League** focusing on **Implicit Bias**. The program asked each participant to consider issues that may not be obvious but exist in our consciousness to separate people into community groups and divide them from others.

Washington, D. C. – Projected meeting for April

The next NCC/NCS dialogue meeting was scheduled to take place in April in Washington, D. C., April 22-23. It was to have included discussions with community leaders and with members of the Congressional Black/Jewish Caucus and was to include a guided tour of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. We hope that this will be the location and the agenda of our next in-person meeting of the dialogue.

Virtual Meeting – June 4, 2020

Delegates of the National Council of Churches and the National Council of Synagogues did meet on a Zoom connection on June 4 for discussion of the impact of the **Covid-19** crisis on our communities, especially on the most vulnerable among us and on the challenges our communities are facing in dealing with inequity and limited resources in the face of a world-wide pandemic.

Text study was led by **Rabbi Steve Gutow** and **Rev. Donnie Anderson**. Major presentations on change, resources and power dynamics were led by **Dr. Jennifer Harvey**, Professor of Religion at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, and **Rabbi Elyse Wechterman**, Executive Director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. Much discussion related to proposals about reparations for the African American community and challenges, in all communities, to be more inclusive and to take concrete action so that opportunities and power can be more evenly distributed.

Another virtual meeting is scheduled for **September 3, 2020**, focusing on how our communities have changed since we were forced to deal with a world-wide pandemic and how those changes will impact on all of us as we emerge into a **post Covid-19** world. Text study will be led by **Rabbi Leonard Gordon** and by **Maryl Waters** of the Christian Science Church. Presentations will be made by **Rev. Jack Sullivan**, Executive Director of the Ohio Council of Churches and by **Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal**, Chief Executive Officer of the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

Evangelical Protestant Leaders

June 8-9, 2020

Leaders of the National Council of Synagogues, including myself and our chair, Rabbi David Straus, have joined annually for a number of years in Washington, D. C. for **Evangelical-Jewish Conversation**, convened under the leadership of **Rabbi Yehiel Poupko** of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. This year's meeting, instead of being held in person, was held virtually on June 8 and 9. This gathering of rabbis, pastors and academics, included academic presentations, discussions and breakout groups to foster a greater appreciation in both communities for concerns of the other. Rabbi Poupko's work continues to inspire better understanding among Jews of the religious, political and social concerns of this very significant leadership group of Christians.

The Islamic Society of North America

With the hope of opening a dialogue contact has recently been made with leadership of the Islamic Society of North America. Many members of our leadership have worked with **ISNA** leadership in the past, as well as with other Muslim organizations, and we are hopeful that further outreach during the months ahead may make it possible for us to establish and maintain fruitful conversations.

Finances

In previous years we received very generous support from The Nathan Cummings Foundation for the work of the National Council of Synagogues. In 2019 that support was extended through the personal philanthropy of **Michael Cummings**. We also received generous funding from the **Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue** of the Jewish Theological Seminary in addition to other individual donors and charitable foundations who have renewed generous funding from years past. We have also received donations from members of our Executive Committee and from a number of congregation rabbis who continue to support our work. This funding, in addition to the ongoing support we receive from the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Rabbinical Assembly, The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, the Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, makes our work possible. We are grateful to all.

The Rabbinical Assembly accepts financial responsibility for our administration and our identification as a project of the Rabbinical Assembly makes us part of a designated charitable (501 C 3) organization. We are grateful to **Gina Morales** of the Rabbinical Assembly accounting office for coordinating all of this.

Minutes and Papers

Minutes of conferences and papers presented at our meetings are made available, as they are edited and approved, on our website, nationalcouncilofsynagogues.org. **Sharon Cooper** of **WebSites 1-2-3** maintains our website and offers regular reminders of things that need to be updated. We are most grateful.

And thanks

Rabbi David Straus and **Rabbi Wayne Franklin**, Chair and Vice Chair of the National Council of Synagogues, are the leadership team that initiates, reviews, reconsiders and shares the work of everything involved in the National Council of Synagogues. Especially during this period of increased electronic communication, they have constantly made themselves available and have helped to make everything possible. Rabbi Franklin is Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Emanu-El of Providence, Rhode Island. Rabbi Straus serves as Senior Rabbi of the Main Line Reform Temple in Philadelphia. Their leadership makes possible everything we do.

Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, our founding director, continues to be our inspiration.

As our budgets are limited, all the members of **our leadership** participate in meetings and programs at their own expense. Our **guest speakers** are not paid for their time or their preparation. We cannot adequately thank them for their generosity and personal sacrifice. We are profoundly grateful.

It is an honor to work with some of the most talented and dedicated people in the field of interfaith relations. I hope and pray that the year and the years ahead will give us all many more opportunities to work together to increase knowledge and understanding among all faiths and create a better and more hopeful future for all.

Rabbi Harold J. Berman, Executive Director



Suite 108
614-253-2438

1354 East Broad St
fax: 614-253-6323

Columbus, OH 43205
hberman@tiferethIsrael.org