

MINUTES OF THE MEETING BETWEEN THE NCC AND THE NCS

WASHINGTON, DC, NOVEMBER 12-13, 2014

Rev. Jim Winkler welcomed the delegates. He noted the two priorities of the NCC these days are the mass incarcerations in America and interfaith dialogue. Gil Rosenthal welcomed the delegates, expressing regret over the 2 1/2 year hiatus in our relationship. He noted that he and Tony Kereopoulos had been quietly planning behind the scenes for the resumption of our dialogues and he rejoiced that we are talking once again.

Jeff Wohlberg taught biblical, rabbinic and medieval texts on dealing with the "other." A lively discussion followed.

PANEL ONE

Darroll Jadock focused on the generosity of God which includes even people unexpected in His grace, e.g., the stranger, Rahab the harlot, Jacob (often a scoundrel), Ruth, the tax collector and Jesus, the Samaritan woman, Peter's outreach to the gentiles. We humans benefit from God's generosity. Hence, our calling is to be generous as well. There are limits to our knowing about God and His reality. But change is part of His being (cf. Ex 3--"I shall be, etc"). We must be cautious of how much we claim. Welcoming is never a passive stance--we must go out to welcome the stranger (e.g., Abraham) for welcoming transforms us. Persons needn't agree with our beliefs to be welcomed to our community. Christians tend to emphasize belief instead of wonder and gratitude, and connections with nature. Moral standards can sometimes be used selectively and that is contra Scriptures. The family that joins together despite differences is a good analogy and challenge: How can we all get together?

David Straus discussed the concept of *hesed*, usually translated as "grace" but better translated that God does something for us not because we deserve it but out of pure love. Note Gen 18 where Abraham breaks off his conversation with God to invite in three strangers (a Saracen, Nabatean, and Arab--all non-Jews). To be sure, there are also negative themes regarding non-Jews as well. But note the Passover Seder invitation, "let all who are hungry come in and eat." The Talmud (Sotah 14) stresses that we must emulate God's qualities of concern for the needy, lonely, etc. The principle of , "for the sake of peace," requires us to behave properly towards others.

In the discussion, several raised the issue of why some non-Jews helped Jews during the Shoah while most did not. Was it a religious motivation? Or was it simply a sense of caring and compassion? We must learn to accept the "other" on his/her terms. How do we deal with *fear* of others? How shall we deal with gay, lesbians and transgender folks?

Harold Berman observed there are few relevant Biblical texts and little in the commentaries on this issue which is basically a "closed door and a wall." Recently, we have begun to open our homes, churches and synagogues. He mentioned that his own son is gay, living in Binghamton with his partner. We want and need them out of the closet, he observed. Today, we understand this issue differently: it is a matter of genetics rather than choice. We have discarded the notion of "don't ask and don't tell," and

are now even marrying gay couples. We have learned in our synagogue to accept them, allow them to safely be themselves, and support Gay Pride events with a special Shabbat dinner.

Rev. Cheryl Wade described her Baptist congregation in the Germantown section of Philadelphia, 70% black and many bi-racial couples. The church is 148 years old and has 200-300 members. They commissioned a study of human sexuality and issued statement that they are intent on diversity despite the incompatibility of gay/lesbian behavior with Christian teachings. We are intent on diversity. All eight clergy have remained silent on the issue of gays/lesbians. There were those who cited the Bible, which is critical in the Baptist tradition, and its historic opposition to such sexuality. But we do interpret Scripture constantly and believe that the individual has the right to interpret the Bible with the guidance of the Holy Spirit (the priesthood of the individual). Baptists believe in the sole responsibility, the freedom of the soul, etc. The church finally engaged professional counselors on the issue of "Who is the 'other' among us?"

Christine wondered what is "safe space" among us and expressed a concern for the danger of exclusivity. Don Anderson worried that these folks feel excluded from the community. Recently, the Rhode Island clergy passed a resolution espousing same-sex marriage. Joel Meyers wondered about the danger of schism in our congregations. Harold Berman noted that very few left his congregation after his decision to welcome gays/lesbians. Demetrios noted that people are afraid of new or "democratic" space. He observed that the Greek Orthodox do not have a central mechanism similar to the Roman Catholic system for change. Jeff observe that we are witnessing geometric changes and transformation. Noam worried that "otherness" has disappeared (viz., intermarriage). Others observed that college kids don't see this issue as an issue.

Father Demetrios taught the text from Luke 16:19-31. It is the tale of the rich man and Lazarus. The point is that we must be welcoming to all--even sinners. Jesus eats with the sinners and Abraham was the ideal for hospitality to all. He discussed John Chrysostom's homily on Luke: the tent of Abraham is the world and welcoming becomes a dynamic exercise.

PANEL TWO

Whitney Bodman analyzed Mark 7 where Jesus seems to be dismissive of women. Discernment is a community activity and the "other" can help us in our work of discernment. It is demanding and challenging and even insulting work but the "other" enables us to grow. Bodman is terribly concerned about the incarcerated--the vast prison population. He stressed that re-entry into society is terribly difficult--a "different form of incarceration in a different guise." There are over 2.3 million in jail and on parole--37% are blacks and the cost to the US is \$78 billion annually.

In the discussion, Wayne expressed concern about the vexing issue of intermarriage which is a threat to the very survival of the Jewish people. He noted that Ezra was confronted with this issue (see the book of Ezra and Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*). In the US in 1960, the Jewish rate of intermarriage was below 20%; by 1980 it rose to 50%. The latest study by Sasson of Brandeis University indicated that there is a rise in the intermarriage rate of offspring of mixed marriages. The Conservative movement had barred honors to the mixed married and non-Jewish spouses could not be buried in a Jewish

cemetery. This policy drove many into the Reform movement which was far more accepting. Today, the Conservative movement is much more open. Wayne's congregation is welcoming to mixed married couples and non-Jewish parents are invited to the bimah at bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, in leadership roles, and under the marital canopy. They are not officially members but are unofficially accepted and purchase plots in non-sectarian cemeteries. But it has proved to be a "delicate balancing act."

Peter Baktis discussed the Russian Orthodox tradition of not fearing the "other" and it also takes the tale of Abraham and the three strangers as a paradigm. The act of washing the feet is a real instance of serving the "other." Our relations to others is an understanding of who God is. The Eucharist is an encounter with God and engenders the mood of hospitality in that God is in the place of the stranger. How do we remain true to our tradition in this complex American culture? Chrysostom stressed the need to aid the poor and the strangers for God is manifest in service to others and in reaching out to them. Veterans of military campaigns are emotionally wounded and many ask God to forgive them for terrible acts and non-normal deeds, They want to get back to normal lives. How do we reach out to them and their families? How can we enable them to normalize their family lives?

The discussion grappled with the issue of modernity. How to handle the veterans and their deep problems? How to welcome them back into normal, civilian life? There is a high rate of suicide among veterans because when they return to the community they are isolated. Is there a change of character of faith as our numbers decline? several wondered.

Lewis noted we are redefining what Judaism means from peoplehood to more spiritual religious movement. The Presbyterians' critiques of Judaism and Israel have forced us to open up our conversation and pay more attention to the "lost" voices in our community. Joel noted the tension between going to synagogue and home-based faith or peoplehood. We sense less of the mood of peoplehood these days and more stress on the spiritual--but much experimentation is popular today. There are voices heard calling for a return to "the purity of tradition" versus the world in which we live currently

EVALUATION

Wayne thanked those who worked so hard to reconvene our group. Alvin thanked Tony and noted the many new faces present at this dialogue. He observed that we avoided the issue of the State of Israel and the Arabs and hope we might deal with that issue the next time. Alvin and others wondered about the future of the "two tables" and whether they will continue. Noam Marans and David Sandmel are present as observers but we sought to avoid complications of political talks. Can we work them in as part of our group and meld the two tables into one in the future? Peter wants us to produce specific recommendations re: the incarcerated people and how we deal with them in our religious communities. Lewis wants us to address the matter of the new generation and the gender balance. He urged us to invite seminarians and perhaps meet at a seminary in the future as we have done in the past (e.g. Princeton Seminary). We might also explore how to give non-Jews a non-liturgical role in our synagogues and how to give non-Christians a similar role in the churches At the same time, we must be wary of

detrimental acts to our community and its religious integrity. Don Anderson urged us to encourage local dialogues similar to our national conversations.

FUTURE TOPICS AND TECHNIQUES

1. Breakout groups as we did in the past would be helpful.
2. Social justice programs that would garner press attention.
3. Wayne and Don have experience in this area in Rhode Island and have garnered media attention. We would welcome their input.
4. Discuss the "sandwich generation."
5. Discuss the young generation and why they feel disaffected from religion--e.g., no clergy needed at weddings, our irrelevancy to their lives, etc.
6. Seek support from foundations to fund us.
7. Study millennials and interfaith couples.
8. Leadership for the future. The need to find young blood to enter the clergy.
9. How does theology lead to and influence political action?
10. The relationship between religion and the government.
11. Mission and conversion. Outreach to the unaffiliated.
12. Send out the study material and formal presentations in advance for the delegates to study them.