

National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues

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

MINUTES

Attendance: NCS – Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Rabbi Harold Berman, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, Leslie Brier, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Allyson Zacharoff

Attendance: NCC – Jim Winkler, Rev Margaret Rose, Kathryn Lohre, Rev Dr Darrell Jodock, Dr Peter Makari, Rev Mark Pettis, Rev Dr Al Moss, Rev Peter Baktis, Rev Dr Whit Bodman, Maryl Walters, Dr Tony Kireopoulos

December 3, 2019

Opening

Rabbi Harold Berman and **Rev. Tony Kireopoulos** welcomed all to Rodeph Shalom Congregation and to the city of Pittsburgh. Introductions were made and lunch was served.

Interfaith Panel of Local Clergy – Josh Sayles, Rabbi Ron Symons, Imam Wasi Mohammed, Rev. Liddy Barlow

Josh Sayles, Director of the Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, spoke of the day, **October 27, 2018**, when worshippers from the several congregations that used the Tree of Life Synagogue building were murdered at services. He spoke of the emotional reaction of the police at the scene and of the outreach that came from government officials, including the Governor of Pennsylvania, to the community. There were constant vigils and memorial programs and offers of support and assistance from community groups at all levels as well as government agencies.

Imam Wasi Mohammed, formerly **Executive Director of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh** said that it was like a family tragedy. People did not think a lot about their reactions, they joined in to do whatever was needed. Money was an immediate need, so people began raising money throughout the community. People kept in touch with each other constantly and felt a need to focus on “the light” – the blessing of people reaching out to each other as much as, if not more than, the tragedy itself. The result was the building and strengthening of relationships that would continue to be beneficial to all.

Rev. Liddy Barlow, Executive Minister of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, spoke of being immediately overwhelmed by phone calls from groups in the Christian community that wanted to find ways to help. She felt that it was essential to take cues from the Jewish community as to what would be most helpful. People thought the

interfaith connections were remarkable. In each community there was an introspection and a reflection on what faith means to each individual and what faith calls on people to do. Community conflicts didn't disappear, but people effectively worked around them.

Rabbi Ron Symons, Senior Director of Jewish Life, Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, spoke about the connections people made that formed a larger anti-hate movement. In the aftermath of the tragedy, networks were expanded and new models were created for community work. Programming models were published and statements were issued by community leaders to emphasize shared commitments to common ideals. Jewish holidays were used to emphasize the positive (High Holidays of Hope) and to bring community members, Jews and non-Jews together. 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. October 27, 2019 was a powerful observance that in many ways felt like the ritual close of a year of mourning. It was noted that words matter a lot, and people reaching out in prayer make an impact. "There is no such thing as a low impact tragedy."

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. The building has not been reopened, but there was an opportunity to see the memorials that have been placed outside and at the entrance. All who participated found it deeply moving.

Panel of community and congregational leaders

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." He described a continual process of mourning, and noted that there is no prayer book adequately equipped with a response, but also shared the commitment that it must not be allowed to control the future of the community. There is a constant effort to restore elements of "10/26" to people's lives.

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 little less than a year. (It is now renting space at Congregation Beth Shalom.) He shared that the day after the tragedy of 10/27 people from all over North America came together in support and their closeness became a path for healing. Later a visit to Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, with a group hug of 150 people brought a sense to all that there is a path forward.

Mr. Cohen noted the difference between those who came from the outside and those who were part of the community. To outsiders it was anti-Semitism and an assault on everyone's security. It made everyone feel unsafe. To members of the community it was personal. For all there was a positive message in the outreach of so many from all over North America. And there was also the negative message that we live in a very scary world.

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.

There was also discussion of the visit to the site by **President Trump**, when some refused to participate and others, including much of the leadership, felt that it was their obligation to show respect and offer a welcome to the President.

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.

In the continuing discussion it was noted that the **Christian** community did not always have a clear message or agenda. In many churches there is reluctance to deal with negativity so there is resistance to discussion of anti-Semitism and the pain felt in the Jewish community is not always well understood.

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. The program offered a definition of oppression as: “A system of mistreatment, exploitation and abuse of a marginalized group(s) for the social, economic or political benefit of a dominant group(s). This happens within a social hierarchy where people are ranked according to status, often based on aspects of social identity.” Material that was shared noted that: “In any society, there are core belief(s) or ideologies about how the dominant and marginalized groups relate to each other, which are embedded in the societal institutions (e.g. government, economy, criminal justice system, health care, education, media, etc.). These core beliefs are also expressed through interpersonal relationships and communications and in the internalized messages that people have about themselves and how they should be treated.

The program handout highlighted four “I’s” concerning oppression that are essential: “institutional, interpersonal, ideology, internalized.”

Wrap-up

Thought for future meetings:

- Our pastoral roles as the 2020 election approach
- The need for political and/or religious engagement of people beyond our usual groups
- Perspectives from Black Churches
- Further discussion of anti-Semitism as highlighted in various reports (ADL, AJC and others)

Warm expressions of thanks were made toward those in the community and those in the NCC/NCS leadership who coordinated the meeting and made arrangements for accommodations and speakers.

The next NCC/NCS dialogue meeting will take place in **Washington, D. C., April 22-23, 2020.**

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues