

National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues

**May 21, 2019
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church**

MINUTES

Attendance: NCS – Rabbi Harold Berman, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Dr. Adam Gregerman, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi Daniel Polish, Rabbi David Sandmel, Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, Rabbi Avi Winokur

Attendance: NCC – Rev. Aundrea Alexander, Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson, Rev. Peter Baktis, Rev. Clinton Bennett, Rev. Dr. Whitney Bodman, Rev. Donna Bolinger, Rev. Jeanette Bouknight, Rev. Nicole Diroff, Rev. Christie Duncan-Tessmer, Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock, Dr. Tony Kireopoulos, Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Rev. Mark Pettis, Rev. Dr. Margaret Rose, Rev. Lee Spitzer, Ms. Maryl Walters, Rev. Sharon Watkins, Mr. Jim Winkler

Attendance: Guests – Ms. Robyn Burstein, Rev. Steven Lawrence, Ms. Allyson Zacharoff

Opening

Rabbi David Straus and **Rev. Nicole Diroff** welcomed all to the city of Philadelphia and to the historic Mother Bethel Church. Introductions were made and guests were recognized.

Anti-Semitism: Present Concerns in the U. S. and Around the World

Rabbi David Sandmel and **Robyn Burstein** of the Anti-Defamation League gave an introduction to the work of the ADL and its present focus. Founded in 1913, the ADL is dedicated to challenging bigotry in all its forms against any group or individual. Bigotry may be expressed rhetorically or physically, against people or against institutions.

Regarding anti-Semitism, the ADL definition is discrimination against Jews as a group or as individuals, and also bias against the State of Israel as a Jewish state. Anti-Semitism, as seen by ADL, is not specifically a Jewish problem. It involves others as they focus on Jews. It is enduring, found in many places, generations and situations, and it is potentially lethal. It is embedded in much of Western culture.

Manifestations of Anti-Semitism involve many contradictory accusations and have evolved over the course of centuries from xenophobia in the pre-Christian era, to theological expressions in the earlier Christian era and ultimately to racism in the modern era.

Of specific interest to Jewish-Christian dialogue, looking to the New Testament, many Christians took the notion that Jews were rejected by God for having failed to receive the

Messiah. Many expressions that were anti-Jewish in the early Church period were actually directed at those who were seen at Judaizers within the church.

In the Middle Ages, with Christianity as the official religion of most of Europe, Jews were expelled from many places and subjected to violence and murder during the Crusades. Other expressions of anti-Semitism include blood libel, accusations of desecration of the host and public dramas enacting rejection of the presence of Jews in society.

In the modern period, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion were used to vilify Jews, and were distributed by Henry Ford in his newspaper. Jews were accused of being capitalists and communists and identified as incapable of being loyal citizens in the countries where they lived. Racial anti-Semitism, used by Nazis, suggests that there is no way a Jew can change his essentially negative character. After World War II, much anti-Semitism is related to the emergence of the State of Israel, with the refusal to identify Jews as a people with a national identity and use of anti-Zionism as a cover for anti-Semitism.

Today, while anti-Semitic vandalism has declined, harassment and physical violence have increased. Since 2012 there has been an identifiable spike in incidents of anti-Semitism. Across the world, expressions are highest in the Middle East and in North Africa. But in America right-wing anti-Semitism has also shown new strength. On Twitter, 4.2 million anti-Semitic posts were shared in 2017. Bigotry in general is becoming more mainstream.

While many churches eschew anti-Semitism, such things as the Kairos declaration, which includes anti-Semitic expressions, is deeply troublesome.

Report on the recent African American-South African Church Leaders Delegation to the Holy Land

Jim Winkler of the National Council of Churches reported on some of the history of Jewish/Christian dialogue over Middle Eastern issues. A forum for discussion of political concerns was in place and was suspended in 2012 by Jewish community participants due to disagreement with a Christian church advocacy action unrelated to the dialogue but involving overlapping constituent members. Although there has been discussion of reviving that dialogue, it remains on hold. At the same time, this dialogue, which focuses on pastoral issues, has committed to discussing matters relevant to the Middle East as they pastorally affect our communities.

The visit to the Holy Land sponsored by the National Council of Churches together with South African churches resulted in a statement that was published on line. Many in the Jewish community saw the statement as one-sided in its focus. There was, among the participants, a “sense of profound sadness” at the current state of affairs.

Rev. Aundreia Alexander, also a participant in the trip, spoke of discussions with local leaders and the expressed hope of seeing the end of “occupation” and finding a way for people to live in peace.

Among **questions** that were asked in discussion: is it okay to criticize the ADL? Indeed, many people do, as many people can and do criticize specific policies of Jewish community leadership and of the State of Israel. Criticism is fair if it is based on facts and not levelled at Israel specifically for things that happen in many places all over the world.

Rabbi Steve Gutow noted that it would be helpful if people who support action against Israel because of the “occupation” would also express explicit support for Israel’s right to exist. Many people use the word “occupation” to express opposition to the State of Israel regardless of borders.

Tour of Mother Bethel AME Church – Participants were led on a tour of the sanctuary of the church, the fourth church building on this site, built in 1889 and virtually unchanged from that time except for the use of electricity. There was also a review of the life of Rev. Richard Allen, founder of the A.M.E. movement and founding minister of the church.

Racism: Present Concerns, in the U. S. and in Philadelphia

Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins shared the NCC’s initiative, **ACT** (Awaken, Confront, Transform). Its goal is to force a recognition of the history of racism and the legacy of slavery, seeking a serious consideration of what reparations might be and the impact reparations could have.

Rev. Christie Duncan-Tessmer spoke of initiatives in the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends for all participating to be involved in confronting racism in the religious community. Instead of committees and small groups, the goal is to engage on a much larger scale and have a safe and useful conversation about the challenges of ongoing racism in the community. One of the most important things is finding the right person, not the most available person, to facilitate the discussion

Rev. Steven Lawrence, board chair of New Conversation on Race and Ethnicity, spoke of discussions built around telling our life stories. Drawing inspiration from the writing of Former President Barack Obama, discussions begin with questions of how we define ourselves and work from the understanding that when we tell our life stories we discover truths that we did not recognize before. Discussions among members of the community place an emphasis on active listening. Informal time over activities and refreshments also help to open up discussions. The most valuable discussions are held in person, face to face.

Rules for the conversations include the use of questions everyone can answer, such as: What brought you to this table? What keeps you here? What is your hope for this discussion? Small group conversations, directed conversations using this methodology followed, with opportunities for sharing among all participants. Many of those who participated, even those who had shared in dialogues over the course of many years, noted

that this discussion helped them to learn more about each other and appreciate more about the backgrounds, goals and visions that we individually bring to the table when we meet.

Administration, Logistics

Our next meeting will be held in **Pittsburgh** on beginning on **Tuesday, December 3**, at noon and concluding in the afternoon on **Wednesday, December 4, 2019**. The goal is to learn more about that community and about the murders that took place at Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018 and to offer a measure of support to the community near the time of the first anniversary of that tragedy.

Reflections

Rabbi Wayne Franklin and **Rev. Donnie Anderson** shared thoughts on the value of open discussion with each other and the benefits of listening and learning from the experiences and efforts that others share.

In closing, **Dr. Tony Kireopoulos** and **Rabbi Harold Berman**, co-conveners of the dialogue as well, thanks all for their participation.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues