

Looking to the Future from Where We Are:

How has Covid-19 impacted our churches and synagogues, and what will be different when the pandemic is behind us?

National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues

**September 3, 2020
On-line meeting**

MINUTES

Attendance: NCS – Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Rabbi A. Nathan Abramowitz, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, Martin Budd, Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Dr. Adam Gregerman, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi Daniel Polish, Rabbi David Sandmel, Rabbi David Saperstein, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, Allyson Zacharoff, Rabbi Harold Berman

Attendance: NCC – Rev. Michael Azar, Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson, Rev. Peter Baktis, Rev. Dr. Whit Bodman, Rev. Jeanette Bouknight, Rev. Nicole Diroff, Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock,, Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Dr. Peter Makari, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Rev. Mark Pettis, Rev. Dr. Margaret Rose, Ms. Maryl Walters, Rev. Dr. Don Thorsen, Rev. Dr. Leslie Copeland Tune, Mr. Jim Winkler

Guest: Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan, Jr.

Opening

Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson and Rabbi David Straus opened the meeting with an invitation to those participating to briefly identify themselves.

Text Studies / Reflections Introductions

Maryl Waters read from Psalm 131, which speaks of calling out to God, then introduced texts from other Psalms and from the book of Lamentations to reflect on violence and loss and affirmation of trust in God in times of heartbreak. She also cited other Old Testament and New Testament sources on resolve and refusal to give up in challenging times and quoted as well from the writing of Mary Baker Eddy.

Rabbi Leonard Gordon spoke of resilience in Jewish texts that respond to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Using Rabbinic texts, which brought new insights into Jewish life while connecting themselves to Biblical tradition, he spoke of the mandate to help the poor and on new traditions of leadership as changing circumstances made possible new roles for those whose scholarship, as opposed to genealogy, earned them the respect of the community.

Presentations

Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, CEO of the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, used texts from Jeremiah and from Ecclesiastes to speak of the constancy of God's love.

Rabbi Blumenthal suggested hints of the future in things we are seeing presently:

Concerning geography: the world is shrinking and so some great speakers located in different communities can be resources where they could not have been before. But some things, such as pastoral services, must always be local.

Loneliness was a problem before, and that problem is even greater in many places. We need to find new ways to share with each other.

Technology is both a blessing and a curse. It has made it possible for more people to gather together, but how it will be used in a post-pandemic world remains to be seen.

We need to answer the question: what is my role in making the world a better place?

Every great challenge in American history has brought on a religious revival. Can we take advantage of that tradition to strengthen commitments to our faith communities?

Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan, Jr., Executive Director of the Ohio Council of Churches, reflected on his own Baptism in 1968 after the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He lamented the loss of physical settings that provide essential personal connections at critical times. He posed three fundamental questions:

1. What are we as church bodies/congregations? Are we buildings or are we congregations of people?
2. Are we connected as members of a group or are we organized to provide services beyond the scope of our membership? Clearly we reach more people on Zoom. Does that strengthen our membership?
3. What is the role of science in our lives? Does it enhance our experience or distance us from each other?

Is church a place we go, or is it who we are? When we share our gifts beyond our walls are we still essentially a church? Is the struggle for justice something we take beyond our walls, and as we have been forced to look beyond our own local spaces and connect with a larger world? Can we include our concern for racism and of other larger issues as part of the work of expressing our faith?

Breakout Groups

Participants were divided into small discussion groups and ideas shared in those groups were brought back to the full dialogue.

Notes from the discussions included:

In all of our discussions, there was very little hand-wringing. Indeed there was optimism about the future. Some wondered whether that was wishful thinking or a sign of genuine leadership.

Regardless of our optimism, it is clear that some congregations will be in deep financial trouble looking toward the future.

A number of people in the group had experienced deaths in their own family circles during the previous months. They noted the unusual circumstances of being isolated at a time when being together with friends and community is so important.

Much energy and creativity has been devoted toward getting through the present crisis in congregations and in communities. Will that energy and focus last?

Many people have lost their jobs. Can we help them in material ways now and can we continue to be with them as they face the future?

There has been more time for learning, and some people have been able to take advantage of that, while many have not.

Multi-generational contact has suffered as in-person gatherings have been curtailed.

Some people appreciate more than ever the blessing of having a loving spouse/partner and of being alive and safe.

Churches and synagogues have more problems in common than we usually realize.

We miss the presence of physical things that are part of our church/synagogue rituals.

Like ancestors who returned from exile, it will be a challenge to take new things that have been learned through experience and share them with those who had been left behind.

It will be important to make sure that concerns for social justice and dignity for all remain central to our religious lives. Many churches have found a new focus in larger community concerns, something that African American churches have never been able to ignore.

Closing

Rev. Sullivan exhorted the group not to allow concerns about justice to fade from our agenda. Many issues that have been shared more widely as community boundaries have blurred must remain central to our focus.

Rabbi Blumenthal, appreciating that challenge, suggested that the challenge before us has to be not only getting into heaven but also bringing some of heaven to be shared among us.

Rev. Donnie Anderson expressed appreciation to all who participated and presented.

The next gathering will be an informal dialogue among members of the group on December 1, followed by a dialogue program on February 2.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues