

National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues

**November 15-16, 2016
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Synagogue
Charleston, SC**

MINUTES

Attendance: NCS – Rabbis David Straus, Alvin Berkun, Harold Berman, Wayne Franklin, Jeffrey Wohlberg

Attendance: NCC – Dr. Tony Kireopoulos, Jim Winkler, Rev. Nicole Diroff, Rev. Peter Baktis, Rev. Aundrea Alexander, Rev. Dr. John Kampen, Rev. Dr. Don Anderson, Rev. Mary Finklea, Rev. Jeanette Bouknight, Sam Purushotham, Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson, Rev. Dr. Paul Tche, Rev. Margaret Rose, Fr. Joseph Verghese, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Rev. Laurie_Anderson, Kathryn Lohre (via Skype)

November 15, 2016 Opening Session – Introductions

Our meetings opened with personal self-introductions and then with explanations of our organizations and their backgrounds.

Rev. Jim Winkler explained that the National Council of Churches was established in 1950 as successor to the Federal Council of Churches, broadening its membership and its programming. It consists of 38 denominations, mainly Protestant and Orthodox denominations, but a number of smaller groups as well.

The NCC downsized its staff several years ago. It now has eight full time professional staff and is based in Washington, D. C. Its funding comes from the denominations and also from a previously established education fund and from its ownership of the rights for the Revised Standard and New Revised Standard Versions of the Bible.

The NCC has a strong record of leadership in civil rights. In its earlier years it moved from being a “pillar of the establishment” to an organizational program that is comfortable questioning the directions of our country. It also respects the integrity of each of its member organizations. A move toward a wider merger of groups was rejected in the 1960’s. It no longer seeks the unification of various denominations as an organizational goal, although in the sense of mergers, its primary goal remains Christian unity.

The NCC supports liturgical work and publishing of religious materials, and is involved in work involving civil rights, racial injustice, mass incarceration, interfaith relations and world peace, as well as environmental, labor and other issues as they arise.

Rabbi David Straus gave the background of the National Council of Synagogues as a successor organization to the former Synagogue Council of America, an umbrella organization that had a full time office and professional staff. The National Council of

Synagogues, established sixteen years ago, includes the congregational and rabbinic organizations of the Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements and does not have a permanent office or full time staff. Its role is to offer a leadership group that can speak in dialogue on a broad range of issues in behalf of the religious community, while other organizations speak as a secular voice for the various national constituencies in American Jewish life.

Evening Session – In the Wake of Dramatic Change

Rev. Nicole Diroff moderated a discussion on concerns and community responses in the aftermath of the 2016 elections.

Already, in a week since the election, people have noted an increase in intolerant expressions, including some violence against persons and property and displays of swastikas and other hate symbols. All agreed that the focus needs to be on work toward building a better future, although there was much discussion on the nature of the political campaign and the inaccurate assumptions that were made by many commentators and journalists during the previous months.

There was particular concern for expressions in minority communities by children and teens who do not feel safe and fear that their government will not protect them. There were many fears that years of work in building community trust and harmony may be wiped away. People expressed frustration that, in places of worship, not enough was said during the campaign to reject unpleasant and demeaning language.

Nonetheless, there was confidence expressed in America and its very strong democratic and legal traditions. Racism and anti-Semitism are far less significant than they were a generation ago, even as they present significant challenges today. The hope is that things will not change in the wrong direction. Several people expressed concerns that we don't spend enough time listening to the voices of people who may hold very different views from ours. While we embrace religious diversity, not everyone around us does. It was noted that the Vice President-elect comes from a state that passed a law on "Restoration of Religious Freedom," but that the values expressed in that law are very different from many of the values we teach in our churches and synagogues, even in terms of religious freedom itself.

People expressed a feeling of vulnerability among adults as well as young people, and a sense that the historical reflection, "it can't happen here," may not be as true as we hoped it was. People now feel more free to say things out loud that they would have felt constrained to say before.

People agreed that all of our clergy need to be strong voices for a prophetic vision that may not have been articulated sufficiently through the months of the campaign. All need to be more direct in responding to language and ideology that are offensive. We have to have the strength to confront and not to avoid confrontation.

November 16, 2016

Priorities, Process and Strategy

Rev. Aundrea Alexander presented a number of concerns and programs of the National Council of Churches regarding mass incarceration and interfaith dialogue focused on peace. She noted many challenges for minorities and for the need not only to offer support and nurturing in communities but also to advocate for change.

Rev. Alexander noted the work of various coalitions involving interfaith groups, including the Washington Interreligious Coalition, the Interfaith Criminal Justice Coalition and the Leadership Council on Civil and Human Rights. She also noted the work of Bend the Arc, under the Religious Action Center of the Reform movement, and the Jewish Council on Public Affairs.

Large groups have come together under various banners to advocate on the issue of mass incarceration. But while much has been said, no bills have been successfully passed in Washington. Some people have made support for change in current laws conditional on also changing various laws on white collar crime which most of us would oppose.

Also discussed were concerns about the Supreme Court and appointments by a new administration, and also the need for Electoral College reform now that a second election in this century resulted in a winner who did not receive the most votes.

There was also discussion of efforts to deal with gun violence.

President Obama's use of clemency, more than any other president, was also mentioned. Efforts are being made to simplify the clemency process and make it possible for people who have served more time than they would have to serve under current laws to be released from jail. Work is being done to prepare them for a better return to society.

Many questions were raised as to how this work goes forward.

There was also discussion of concern for funding for social welfare concerns under a new administration and it was agreed that much work must be done on state and local levels to move forward in a changing political climate.

Rabbi Wayne Franklin discussed the advocacy of various social service groups in the community, including Jewish Community Relations Councils and the Jewish Council on Public Affairs.

The JCPA mission statement outlines three broad areas of concern: human rights, safety and security of Israel and a pluralistic and democratic America.

Rabbi Franklin cited examples from his home community in Rhode Island, noting that many are replicated in communities all over the country. He spoke of the Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty, lobbying efforts against abuses in the payday lending industry (on which efforts for legislation have not been successful,) work against bullying and prejudicial behaviors in schools and gun violence issues. He also discussed work with police to prevent unfair treatment of minorities.

Rabbi Franklin also spoke of congregational initiatives such as the use of the synagogue as a temporary shelter, food and clothing collections and partnerships with neighborhood churches to work on mutual concerns. Dinners that brought together

members of different communities were especially helpful in getting people to know and understand each other and to hear each other's concerns.

“White Privilege”

Reverend Don Anderson and Rabbi David Straus led discussions on issues of “White Privilege” in America.

Rev. Anderson noted differences even within white communities on the basis of national origin based on his own high school experience. He also spoke about the challenge of police forces that are overwhelmingly white and often incapable of responding to minority concerns. Rev. Anderson also spoke about official church structures and how some are dealing with white privilege. In this regard he mentioned congregational resources dealing with the topic.

Rabbi Straus spoke of growing up in a community where most adults had accents. Jews seem to have become “white” somewhat recently. Previously most Jews thought of themselves as minorities.

President Obama's speeches and role model in office have opened many new discussions on race and ethnicity. We are better at understanding that various “narratives” offer different perspectives, and that people can see the same things but react to them differently. Often what seems logical and appropriate to some may seem prejudicial and unfair to others.

Rabbi Straus spoke of the involvement of the Jewish community in the civil rights movement as an expression of values of the community and spoke of, and read part of, Rabbi Joachim Prinz's introduction of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the 1963 March on Washington.

Rabbi Straus also spoke of the issue of intersectionality and the way it has been used to exclude Jews from a variety of programs and organizational groups. He also mentioned the challenge for Jews of dealing with language regarding Israel in the statements issued from within the Black Lives Matter movement.

Israel/Palestine Issues

Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg led a discussion on issues of the Middle East, beginning with a distribution of papers that had been published by various groups, looking at some of the language and terminology used.

Dr. Tony Kireopoulos noted that one of the papers distributed, specifically the recent statement by the heads of the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches at the end of a Mideast consultation held in September, was a personal statement by the two general secretaries, not an organizational statement as reported in the press and as assumed by Jewish groups that responded to the statement.

There was extended discussion about issues regarding peace in the Middle East, with background discussion going back to the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and various partition efforts, to issues of current communities, including Christian churches in the Middle East and the narratives they present. Words and language were discussed, as

well as various efforts toward not only political reconciliation but also immediate work on making people's lives better.

Various organizations were mentioned and their work cited, including Partners for Peace, Seeds of Peace and the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel.

It was stated that, while issues pertaining to Israel and Palestine are not central to this dialogue on pastoral issues, it was important and helpful to have this conversation. It was also stated that the framing of this conversation in pastoral terms at this dialogue was helpful as well, namely in how Mideast issues impact local Jewish-Christian relationships.

Tour of the synagogue and museum

A tour of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim was led by a past president of the congregation, Anita Rosenberg

Wrap-up – Focus on the future

It was noted that meeting in South Carolina was convenient for some, but challenging for others. The delegation of the National Council of Synagogues was smaller than usual because of that. It was also noted that there were no Jewish women in this conference.

Generally the NCC/NCS spring meeting has been a call-in. It was suggested that an in-person meeting would be helpful, perhaps in the early spring.

Ongoing contact through updates and papers would be helpful and many asked about how we make and communicate progress on the goals discussed.

It was suggested that some expression of interfaith worship might also be inspiring.

An issue that had not been discussed was dialogue with the Islamic community, which is valued by all, and concerns about Islamophobia, which we share.

All agreed that much is changing, rapidly, in the world around us, and we need to keep in touch.