

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES

End of Year Notes - 2016

Rabbi Harold J. Berman

We approach the end of 2016, and I approach the end of my first six months as Executive Director of the National Council of Synagogues with many concerns about the world around us and with the strong feeling that the mission of the NCS, maintaining good relations through dialogue with other faith groups, is perhaps as important as it has ever been. With that in mind, and with many things uncertain about the year ahead, I wanted to share some reflections on where we have been and on some directions and goals for the future.

Special thanks

I can't even begin without expressing profound thanks to Rabbi Gil Rosenthal for all he did over the course of the previous fifteen years to establish the National Council of Synagogues and secure for it a place of distinction in the work of representing the religious voice of American Jewry. Gil has been a source of help and counsel and vital information as I set to work for the NCS and as we work together toward the future.

For the most part, the work of the NCS is the work of volunteers. Rabbi David Straus, our Chair, and Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Vice Chair and Secretary-Treasurer, have been constantly available for consultation, advice, wisdom and support. Nothing would have worked without them.

Thanks also to the Rabbinical Assembly, specifically to Gina Morales, who administers our finances and keeps our books up to date and pays our bills.

And thanks for special support to those who make our work possible. We have received new funding this year from the Cummings Foundation, which has been extremely generous, and also from the Columbus Jewish Foundation, as well as from others who have been generous in the past. And nothing would be possible without the support of our constituent organizations, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Rabbinical Assembly, the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, the Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Vital support from our constituent organizations, materially and spiritually, is what sustains our work.

Catholic Affairs

Our meeting in New York in November at the Jewish Theological Seminary with representatives of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, chaired by His

Eminence Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Rabbi David Straus and coordinated by myself and Rev. Dennis McManus, was a warm reunion of interfaith colleagues and a very successful sharing of ideas.

Our originally designated guest speaker, Fr. Patrick Desbois, a distinguished European scholar and fighter for Jewish needs and memorials in Europe, had to cancel his appearance because of illness. We were fortunate that on very short notice, Ira Forman, United States Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, was willing to take the central speaker's position. He spoke eloquently of the challenges and of his work around the world, with concern but also with a measure of optimism, and the delegates heard responses from Fr. McManus and from Kenneth Jacobson, Deputy National Director of the Anti-Defamation League. There was considerable interest from the Catholic bishops over the existence of an office in the State Department concerned with anti-Semitism, and much discussion of the role of the State Department in dealing with other forms of religious discrimination around the world.

In our afternoon session Bishop William Murphy and Bishop Gregory Mansour led discussions concerning the recent UNESCO declaration concerning Jerusalem and its negative implications for Jewish and Christian concerns, and possible responses by individuals and groups were considered, and the status of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East was also reviewed. Deputy Consul General of Israel Amir Sagie updated the group on various current concerns from the perspective of the Israeli consulate.

The next meeting of the dialogue group will take place on June 21 at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Protestant Affairs

A smaller group of NCS leadership met in Charleston, South Carolina, at Congregation Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim with representatives of the National Council of Churches, led by NCC President Rev. Jim Winkler and NCS Chair Rabbi David Straus. Rev. Tony Kireopoulos and Rev. Nicole Diroff worked with me on arranging the details of the program.

As we were meeting in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 Presidential election, there was much discussion of the impact of the campaign, and of its outcome, on religious communities in America. Many participants felt that clergy were not effective in sharing concerns about moral and ethical issues that had been raised in the campaign and that more effort would be needed to protect the interests of minority communities in the years ahead.

Presentations were made concerning programs and priorities in different religious communities by Rev. Aundrea Alexander of the NCC and Rabbi Wayne Franklin of the NCS. Mass incarceration is the focus of much NCC work. Rabbi Franklin spoke of interfaith work on poverty, gun violence and school and police issues.

Rev. Don Anderson and Rabbi David Straus offered reflections on “White Privilege.” Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg led a discussion on the impact of Middle East issues and statements on Jewish/Christian relations.

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, a historic synagogue in Charleston with history that goes back to the colonial period of American history, was gracious in offering hospitality and in leading our delegations on tours of the synagogue and of the congregation’s museum and art collections.

Muslim Affairs

A spirited meeting was held between a group of NCS leaders and a group of American Muslim leaders in June of 2016. It was hoped that another meeting might take place before the end of the year, but conflicting schedules and communications issues made that impossible. Rabbi David Straus has been keeping in contact with our Muslim partners in the hope that a meeting can be arranged for a larger NCS group in the early part of 2017.

Evangelical Protestant Leaders

Rabbi David Straus and I, together with a number of Jewish leaders, in a program organized by Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, participated in a meeting in June that has become an annual dialogue of Jews and Evangelical Protestants. Although not officially part of the work of the NCS, our leadership has been included in recent years, and the dialogue offers an opportunity to interact with a thoughtful and reflective group of academic and pulpit leaders from the Evangelical community. Another dialogue meeting for this group is on the schedule for June of 2017 in Washington, D. C.

Finances

Thanks to generous new funding from the Nathan Cummings Foundation, with the support and encouragement of Michael Cummings and Hannah Cummings, and the Columbus Jewish Foundation, in addition to others who have renewed generous donations from years past, our finances are stable. Nonetheless it will be necessary, as it has been in previous years, to reach out to individual rabbis for sustaining support. The goal of finding more stable support for our work continues. Anyone who has insight or connections to individuals or foundations that might be able to offer support to the work of the NCS – please be in touch.

New Members

Several new constituent delegates have been added recently. We welcome Rabbis Leonard Gordon and Annie Lewis of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Rabbis Lauren Grabelle Hermann, Elyse Wechterman and Avi Winokur of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association in addition to Rabbi Steve Gutow who joined us earlier this year and Leslie Brier of the Union for Reform Judaism.

Future meetings

On the calendar for now we have our meeting with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops set for June 21, 2017, in New York. We are in the process of scheduling our next meeting with the National Council of Churches and with American Muslim leaders as mentioned above.

Minutes and Papers

We are in the process of reviewing minutes of our recent meetings with our partners so they can be posted and distributed. Our larger goal is to be able to publish some of the papers and statements that emerge from our meetings. That involves some complicated discussions with leadership of various groups, but it remains an important goal.

Once again, it is a privilege to work with a remarkable group of people toward the cause of better relationships among clergy and religious groups. There is much work ahead. I am profoundly grateful for all who are involved and all who lend their support, and many who do both, to this work.

Respectfully submitted,

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