

# NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES

## Annual Report – 2018-2019

Rabbi Harold J. Berman

Once again, it is an honor to be able to report to constituent organizations, leadership and donors on the work of the **National Council of Synagogues** through the previous year. At a time when the news is full of concerns about divisions in the society in which we live, the dialogues of our organization that bring together clergy and lay leadership to learn and share offer opportunities to build much needed understanding and mutual respect.

### Meetings and Conferences

#### The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

**June 19, 2019**  
**Fordham University Lincoln Center Campus**  
**New York**

Our meeting in June featured a morning dialogue between **Rabbi Skorka**, distinguished congregation rabbi in the Buenos Aires Jewish community and **Fr. Manuel Rodriguez**, a native of the Dominican Republic now serving in Jamaica, New York.

Regretfully, our fall meeting with the leadership of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, planned for November, 2018, in Baltimore, was cancelled at the request of Pope Francis who requested that U. S. Bishops extend their annual meeting to join in reflection and pray over immediate concerns regarding the Church and current accusations against members of the clergy. We had been scheduled to have **Rabbi Abraham Skorka** as our guest speaker, and we were fortunate that Rabbi Skorka was able to arrange to meet with us in June and follow through with the presentation that had been planned for the fall.

**Rabbi David Saperstein** introduced Rabbi Skorka, noting his leadership over the years in many aspects of interfaith work, including extensive collaboration with Pope Francis during the Pope's lengthy period of service to the Church in Argentina.

**Rabbi Skorka** presented a historical review of the settlement and growth of Latin American communities in general and of Jewish life, particularly in Argentina, beginning in the 1800's. He noted a much different heritage of language, institutions and religious

life compared to the United States and Canada, with slower development of democratic institutions.

Argentina was in various periods a haven for Jews who had been persecuted in Europe, and with few exceptions did not have a history of anti-Semitism. The most significant growth of the community came in the aftermath of World War II, with increased educational opportunities and strong ties to the State of Israel.

Rabbi Skorka paid tribute to Pope Francis, who, during his time of service in Argentina, offered exceptional leadership in interfaith dialogue, and, at considerable personal risk, spoke out for political and economic justice. The future pope was always concerned for, and spoke for, those who had been excluded and oppressed.

**Fr. Manuel J. Rodriguez**, noted many of the challenges, all over Latin America, of dealing with discrimination and imperfect democracy. He also noted, in speaking of the era of World War II, the only country in Latin America that was willing to accept refugees from Nazi Europe in time of danger was his native country, the Dominican Republic.

Fr. Rodriguez also noted the challenge of hate crimes, the largest number of which involve anti-Semitism, in New York today and repeated the commitment of the Catholic Church to fight racism and discrimination in all forms against any group. The Church is also deeply concerned about separation of families of those who are presently trying to find asylum in the United States from other parts of the world.

In the **discussion** that followed it was also emphasized that the cooperative work of the Church with other religious groups never involves one group evangelizing the other.

It was also noted that there are many additional religious groups and movements in Latin America, some of which share the interfaith work of Jews and Catholic, while some do not and some actively exploit differences for their own ends. Muslims in Latin America can be found actively participating in interfaith dialogue, although some Muslim groups do not take part in any dialogue with others.

The goal of dialogue, in addition to increasing understanding, is bringing people together with a greater appreciation for the value and dignity of human life, enhancing the dignity of women in society and fighting poverty and abuse at all levels.

**The papers delivered by Rabbi Skorka and Fr. Rodriguez are both available on the website of the National Council of Synagogues.**

In place of our usual business meeting and discussion, the dialogue group joined under the sponsorship of the Consulate General of Israel for an extended program to celebrate the twenty-fifth **anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the State of Israel**. A lunch program, including participation

by the New York Board of Rabbis, was followed by a panel discussion to reflect on the implications of this anniversary.

**Rabbi David Straus**, Chair of the National Council of Synagogues, served as moderator for the afternoon panel, opening the program with a focus on the success of relationships in the aftermath of Nostra Aetate. He noted that dialogues following the Vatican's declaration on interfaith relations in 1965 led to deepening ties between faiths on many levels. Many positive things emerged as a result, diplomatic ties being only one of them.

**Ambassador Dani Dayan** made note of several previous encounters between popes and Zionist leaders going back over a century. Comments by Pope Francis in praise of Theodor Herzl went far beyond any previous discussions or exchanges between Israel and the Vatican.

**Papal Nuncio Archbishop Bernadito Auza** spoke of agreements that have strengthened the exchange between the Vatican and Israel in the years since diplomatic relations were established. **Cardinal Timothy Dolan** discussed the meaning of Vatican relations with Israel in both theological and political terms. He noted that Pope John Paul II considered recognition to be necessary first because it was the right thing to do, and because Nostra Aetate should not be seen as merely a statement, but also as a mandate for action. Reflected in the Vatican recognition was an affirmation of mutual trust and understanding as well as a promise to work together for human rights all over the world.

**Professor Adam Gregerman** gave an historical background to the relationship, noting how dramatic and unparalleled was the movement from hostility to friendship. From early texts suggesting the destruction of Jerusalem as a punishment from God to the dramatic turning point with Nostra Aetate, with its rejection of anti-Semitism, the evolution attitudes and theology is remarkable.

**Ambassador Dayan** added that Israel is very proud of the growth, security and prosperity of Christian communities in Israel. Remembering the challenges of the past should not prevent us from moving forward together in the future. He emphasized that the most important element of the relationship is trust. **Archbishop Auza** offered the final statement that while much has been done, there remains much work ahead, but we will proceed with the confidence that no challenge is impossible to overcome.

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The next meeting of the NCS/USCCB dialogue is scheduled for **Monday, November 18, in New York.**

## The National Council of Churches

October 29-30, 2018

Offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Chicago

Our fall meeting with leaders of the National Council of Churches, convened in Chicago, Illinois, was initially **overshadowed by the tragic murder of eleven congregants at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**. Members of the NCC and NCS delegations joined in a memorial service to honor the victims and pray for those who were wounded. Texts, prayers and condolences were shared.

In the opening session of our meeting **Dr. Tony Kireopoulos introduced Kathryn Lohre and Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock** to share background and insight into a newly drafted statement of the ELCA on Interfaith Relations. They noted that this statement is intended to take the place of a 1994 statement, enlarging its vision and expressing a greater desire to learn and listen in dialogue with others. It states clearly that one group cannot claim to know or evaluate God's relationship with other religious groups. The text of the statement is now in its final year of a multi-year process of drafting and discussion.

Reflecting our desire to learn about programs and projects in local communities, our second session included leaders of the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago who were introduced by **Rev. Nicole Diroff and Rabbi David Straus**.

**Mr. Nisan Chavkin**, Executive Director, spoke of the diversity of the group, noting that more than only Jews and Christians are engaged in ongoing dialogue. **Rabbi Michael Siegel** acknowledged the leading role of Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, who is one of the few people in the Jewish community employed full-time for the purpose of outreach to those of other faiths. The reason, Rabbi Siegel noted, is that as a very small faith group, especially in Chicago, which is home to major intellectual centers of the Christian world, Jews want others to "know about us before you talk about us." Rabbi Siegel also noted that in the past there were too many conversations about Black/Jewish relationships and not enough work on the relationship. Programs to study text together and to visit Israel together have emerged from this kind of dialogue.

**Bishop Wayne Miller** of the Evangelical Lutheran Church noted the central role of heads of organizations and leaders of congregations that may not have a denominational affiliation. He emphasized that leaders need to join in conversation that emphasizes common goals more than "truth claims." **Nisan Chavkin** traced much of the dialogue structure back to the election of the late Harold Washington as mayor of Chicago in 1984. There was a strong need for conversation about race and for mutual respect among groups in the community. The Council of Religious Leaders encourages leaders to study together and to strengthen mutual respect and functions more as a professional organization than as an independent institution.

**Rabbi Wayne Franklin** introduced leaders of the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago. **Mr. Teny Gross** spoke of the challenge in communities when many of the most prominent people are lacking credibility precisely because of the positions they hold. His preferred solution is to engage the community in solving problems so that people in leadership are recognized for their ability to help those who are in need. **Commander Ernest Cato III** of the Chicago Police spoke of the problem of hopelessness, when people in cities are confronted with violence and with threats of violence all around them. Churches and other religious communities become an important setting for service delivery and for helping to identify job opportunities. **Rev. Steve Epting** of Hope Christian Church emphasized that churches have a role in meeting community concerns beyond their own membership needs. Churches can help arrange for food and clothing, job training and employment opportunity and can create critical contacts for people in need of hope. **Ms. Tara Dabney** spoke of recruiting people to help build community, starting from “a place of love.” People need to feel that the community cares about them.

It was also emphasized that young people need to remain engaged, with places for playing games and engaging in sports, doing homework and getting help so they stay in school and remain out of trouble. Schools are often overwhelmed and cannot provide all that is needed. Nothing works unless violence is controlled, and reducing the number of guns available is only a part of the answer. People need opportunities and encouragement. They have to feel that they are valued by the community around them.

**On the second day** of our meeting, **Dr. Peter Makari and Rabbi Steven Gutow** served as moderators for a discussion on how to have a constructive discussion on the Middle East. **Rev. David Heim**, Editor of The Christian Century and an ELCA pastor, spoke of the longitudinal history of the issue and the region, of the diversity of opinions in the Jewish community and also of differing opinions in the Palestinian community. He stressed the importance of knowing the concerns and the larger issues that are brought to any discussion by dialogue partners. **Rev. Nanette Sawyer** of Chicago’s Fourth Presbyterian Church and **Rabbi David Zinn** of Chicago Sinai Congregation spoke of the ongoing relationship of their two congregations sharing conversations and study about the Middle East as they prepare for a joint trip to study and meet people on both sides.

Focusing on attitudes of young people in our communities today, **Ben Correia-Harker** of Interfaith Youth Core, shared statistics from recent studies about college students. He noted that in general there is less affiliation and more polarization among students than in earlier generations. The need for building bridges is significant. He emphasized that while 37% of students identified as “religious and spiritual,” another 29% identified as “spiritual but not religious” and 23% identified as neither. Overwhelming numbers of students indicated that they are pluralistic in terms of acceptance of others and hold positive attitudes toward those who are different. His studies suggest that positive interfaith environments and opportunities to meet people who are different will contribute to greater acceptance of others during college years. Having a close friend who is part of another faith, ethnic or racial group is a key element in changing attitudes.

The group recessed in order to participate in a **memorial service** for those who were murdered at Tree of Life Synagogue during services on the previous Sabbath. In addition to participants from the ELCA staff, **Rev. Darrell Jodock** participated and **Rabbi David Straus** offered remarks in behalf of the Jewish Community.

**May 21, 2019**  
**Mother Bethel AME Church**  
**Philadelphia**

Our spring meeting was held in Philadelphia at the historic Mother Bethel Church, which was established by the Rev. Richard Allen and served as the founding church of the African Methodist Episcopal movement.

The morning session focused on anti-Semitism, led by staff members of the Anti-Defamation League. **Rabbi David Sandmel** and **Robyn Burstein** gave an introduction to the work of the ADL and its present focus. 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. 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.

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.

**Jim Winkler** of the National Council of Churches reported on the visit to the Holy Land sponsored by the National Council of Churches together with South African churches resulting in a statement that was published on line. Many in the Jewish community saw the statement as one-sided in its focus. **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.

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.

**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. **Christie Duncan-Tessmer** spoke of initiatives in the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends at which all participating are 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. .

**Rev. Steven Lawrence**, board chair of New Conversation on Race and Ethnicity, spoke of discussions built around telling our life stories. The most valuable discussions are held in person, face to face. Small group conversations 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.

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The next meeting for the dialogue group is scheduled for **Tuesday and Wednesday, December 3 and 4, in Pittsburgh**. We are in discussion with leaders of the Jewish community in Pittsburgh as to how our presence in that community can help bring a measure of comfort and healing one year after an unspeakable tragedy.

## **Evangelical Protestant Leaders**

**June 3-4, 2019**

Leaders of the National Council of Synagogues, including myself and our chair, Rabbi David Straus, joined in Washington in June for the **Eleventh Annual Evangelical-Jewish Conversation**, convened annually under the leadership of **Rabbi Yehiel Poupko** of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. This gathering of rabbis, pastors and academics, although not officially part of the work of the National Council of Synagogues, included seven members of the NCS Executive Committee among its twenty-two Jewish participants. Academic presentations, discussions and breakout groups help to foster a greater appreciation in both communities for concerns of the other. Rabbi Poupko's work has helped to inspire better understanding among Jews of the religious, political and social concerns of this very significant leadership group of Christians.

## Finances

We have continued to be blessed with generous support from the **Nathan Cummings Foundation**, with the support and encouragement of Michael Cummings and Hannah Cummings, from the **Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue** of the Jewish Theological Seminary in addition to other individual donors and charitable foundations who have renewed generous funding from years past. We have also received generous donations from members of our Executive Committee and from a number of congregation rabbis who generously support of our work. This funding, in addition to the ongoing support we receive from the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Rabbinical Assembly, The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, the Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, makes our work possible. We are grateful to each and to all.

The Rabbinical Assembly accepts financial responsibility for our administration and our identification as a project of the Rabbinical Assembly makes us part of a designated charitable (501 C 3) organization. We are grateful to **Gina Morales** of the Rabbinical Assembly accounting office for coordinating all of this.

## Minutes and Papers

Minutes of conferences and papers presented at our meetings are made available, as they are edited and approved, on our website, [nationalcouncilofsynagogues.org](http://nationalcouncilofsynagogues.org). We are grateful to **Sharon Cooper** of WebSites 1-2-3 for maintaining our website and offering regular reminders of things that need to be updated.

## Many thanks

**Rabbi David Straus** and **Rabbi Wayne Franklin**, Chair and Vice Chair of the National Council of Synagogues, have been available for calls and questions, advice and support, through every endeavor we have undertaken. Rabbi Franklin retired at the end of June from his pulpit in Providence, Rhode Island. Rabbi Straus continues to serve our organization while also serving as Senior Rabbi of the Main Line Reform Temple in Philadelphia. Their leadership makes everything possible in the work that we do.

**Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal**, our founding director, continues to be available for advice and support. It is his tireless effort in the field of interfaith relations that is the foundation of everything we have been able to accomplish.

As our budgets are limited, all the members of **our leadership** participate in meetings and programs at their own expense. Our **guest speakers** are not paid for their



time or their preparation. We cannot adequately thank them for their generosity and personal sacrifice. We are profoundly grateful.

It is an honor to work with some of the most talented and dedicated people in the field of interfaith relations. I hope and pray that all of our efforts have increased understanding among communities and helped to strengthen the commitment of all who have participated as we work for a better future together.

Respectfully submitted,

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