

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES

Annual Report – 2020-2021

Rabbi Harold J. Berman

The 2020-2021 year was undoubtedly one of the most challenging years for all of us and for the world around us. Partial reopening in many places is under way, giving us hope that better times and renewed connections may soon return.

We have all been touched by the pandemic of Covid-19. We all know people who have died and others whose health was severely damaged this past year. We know even more people whose lives have been painfully disrupted, whose health and whose health care have been compromised and whose families have been painfully separated for many months on end. We all look forward to a better tomorrow.

The National Council of Synagogues became not only a virtual center for interfaith dialogue, it also offered an anchor of support for colleagues of various faiths as unique concerns were shared and ideas for the future were exchanged. While in-person meetings could not be held, additional opportunities for exchange were created and even more colleagues than in previous years were able to participate in programs. While we look forward to a more normal future, we have many reasons to be proud of what this past year produced.

Meetings and Conferences

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

August 12, 2020 – A Catholic Reflection on Black and Jewish Relations Today

Archbishop Wilton Gregory, soon to be elevated to the College of Cardinals, had invited the NCS leadership to come to Washington in order to have us all better acquainted as he was preparing to take over responsibility for the USCCB dialogue with the National Council of Synagogues. Travel and in-person meetings being impossible, a virtual meeting for our larger delegations was arranged instead, with Archbishop Gregory invited to share his reflections on interfaith dialogue and on relations between the Jewish community and the African American community.

Archbishop Gregory opened his remarks reflecting on the significance of this moment in American history, as many forces are seeking to create divisions, noting, however, that positive trends of the recent and of the distant past, still remain with us. He

emphasized that *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican's landmark statement about relations with the Jewish people was issued at the height of the Civil Rights movement in America. At that time it was well recognized that both communities faced "equal opportunity haters," as prejudice against some was generally an indication of hatred against many minority groups. Responses that worked well were collaborative, with leaders recognizing that what hurt some was likely to hurt many others as well. That realization brought people together.

Archbishop Gregory reminded the group that we must still work in unity and support one another in the face of forces that challenge us both. There is much misinformation about Catholics and Jews and a strong need to communicate, to work in solidarity and to face obstacles together.

November 13, 2020 – Dialogue as Exchange of Gifts: What we have learned as a Possible Model for Pursuing Racial Justice in America

The November USCCB/NSC dialogue, convened virtually, gave the group an opportunity to pay tribute to **Cardinal Timothy Dolan**, concluding eleven years as chair. Comments were initially offered by **Archbishop Wilton Gregory**, who praised Cardinal Dolan's warmth, joy, integrity and constant encouragement on a personal level as well as in his leadership of the dialogue. Additional comments were made by **Rabbi Noam Marans**, who described Cardinal Dolan as an ally and a friend, sharing challenges and joys, a strong voice against anti-Semitism and any other kind of bigotry anywhere in the world. Rabbi Marans added that Cardinal Dolan was also a personal friend and pastor in times of need.

Dr. Adam Gregerman described the background of the sculpture, "Church and Synagogue," which was commissioned for St. Joseph University. **Rabbi David Straus** displayed a miniature of the sculpture that members of the dialogue had commissioned as a gift for Cardinal Dolan. **Rabbi Harold Berman** made the (virtual) presentation of the miniature, which bears the inscription:

Grateful for your Leadership and Friendship
Timothy Cardinal Dolan
Co-Chairman, Catholic-Jewish Dialogue
2009-2020
בָּנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחִיכְמָךְ (Gen. 45:4)
I am Joseph your brother

Cardinal Timothy Dolan accepted the gift and spoke of his gratitude to Archbishop Gregory for his willingness to assume the role as chair. Cardinal Dolan spoke of his plans to continue as a participant in the dialogue in which he has been active since 2001. He became chair following the leadership of the late **Cardinal William Keeler**. While reflecting on those who had inspired him, Cardinal Dolan also paid tribute to the memory of **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**, late Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom.

Rabbi David Straus, Chair of the National Council of Synagogues and **Fr. Walter Kedjierski**, Executive Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical Affairs of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, shared a presentation they had prepared on the potential for Catholic-Jewish dialogue to serve as a model for racial healing.

Rabbi Straus noted that throughout history, times of great upheaval have led to introspection and transformation. *Nostra Aetate*, in the aftermath of the Shoah, was another example, and perhaps, at a time of racial unrest in America, our experience in its aftermath suggests potential for dealing with questions of justice, health care, judicial reform and other lingering challenges. Rabbi Straus suggested that we have always been family, but often a somewhat dysfunctional and abusive family. From the Jewish side our relationship has not generally been on the basis of equality or of mutual respect for each other's sacred texts.

Fr. Kedjierski explained that following the Shoah, the Catholic Church began a serious moral and theological reckoning with what the writer Jules Isaac referred to as a "teaching of contempt." Pope John XXIII knew that this needed to involve an openness to admitting mistakes of the past and a study of history not only from one's own perspective but also from the perspective of the other.

Rabbi Straus referred to racism as America's "Original Sin," and suggested that even people who moved to America long after slavery was abolished still need to examine the privileges they acquired for coming to a nation as free people while others endured a history of enslavement and racial discrimination. A careful study of each other's history would be a valuable beginning, with serious attention to each other's narratives. Dialogue needs to be enhanced by a self-examination that includes consideration of the voices of others.

At the conclusion of his presentation, Rabbi Straus shared a working document prepared to serve as a foundation for ongoing discussion and action.

RESPONSES

The Most Rev. Shelton J. Fabre, Bishop of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, re-emphasized the importance of allowing others to define themselves in dialogue. Too often in the past, he noted, people have been unable to envision a future because they were limited by their personal understanding of the past. He also noted that racism is a moral problem that requires changing minds and hearts in a way that can only take place with God's help. He added that the process of seeking and receiving forgiveness is essential.

Yolanda Savage-Narva, Executive Director of Operation Understanding and incoming Director for Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion of the Union for Reform Judaism, emphasized that race and racism are embedded in every interaction among communities. An honest dialogue involves understanding how all of these issues affect

us and also those around us. We also need to be able to celebrate who we are, even as we see that we have much more to do.

Rabbi Straus and **Rev. McManus** proposed that we establish a working group which will share recommendations at our next meeting. It will be important to be able to include representatives of the African American community who are not usually part of our Jewish-Catholic dialogue. One of the initial challenges will be finding partners for dialogue in communities where there is enormous diversity. **Archbishop Gregory** suggested that working groups report back to the dialogue group at our next meeting.

A **working group** of five representatives each from the National Council of Synagogues and the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops met virtually several times in order to consider and share ideas for further action by the larger group. **Recommendations were prepared** to share with the larger group on June 9. Among the recommendations was that a facilitator would be helpful in guiding the next discussion of concerns and goals.

June 9, 2021 – Update on the working group on Race and Racism A Facilitated Discussion on the Present Moment

Cardinal Wilton Gregory opened the meeting with a prayer and an expression of concern over violence that has been increasing in many communities.

Rabbi Wayne Franklin discussed the idea, introduced at the last dialogue, of using the narrative that led to and proceeded from *Nostra Aetate* as a model for examining racial justice. Although many issues are different and parallels are imprecise, there are enough similarities to suggest that the paradigm could be valuable. The challenges include determining to whom we would be speaking and how we might first look at ourselves and at our own organizations. For this reason a facilitated discussion was proposed for this meeting to help us move forward.

In addition, a proposal by **Fr. Dennis McManus** suggested the development of a curriculum for high school educators and students, building on previous work by the Anti-Defamation League, to advance understanding for the next generation of issues of racial justice. It is important for us to determine if this is a project we want to embrace.

Danielle Brown, Associate Director of the Ad Hoc Committee on Racism of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, was introduced as facilitator for the discussion to follow. Ms. Brown asked the initial question: what is the current situation in which we find ourselves regarding the pursuit of racial justice in the United States today.

Among comments it was noted that there is considerable insecurity felt by many. People feel less safe in their communities and many have a distrust for members of other

communities. People hesitate to get involved in too much discussion because they are uncertain as to where it will lead. Leaders need to assure that there is safety in having conversations. It is also important to recognize that racism has an impact on all of us. It is not simply a matter of bringing people together to work with each other. We need to recognize that many people in our communities don't fit neatly into the categories we usually use. **Rabbi David Saperstein** highlighted a common threat to all which is white nationalism and it is crucial that we stand together and not let intersectionality divide us. Catholics and Jews have always been at the core of the global work we need to do. **Sr. Anita Baird** noted that few Black people have much interaction with or understanding of Jews. We have to listen to each other's stories. There is also a lack of preaching from the pulpit about racism. The result is that many Black Catholics are leaving the church.

Fr. Walter Kedjierski introduced **Donna Grimes** who spoke of the Pastoral Letter and its focus on justice and on relieving poverty in the work of her office, using the umbrella of diversity for offices that deal with a variety of missionary efforts. **Rabbi Straus** introduced **Yolanda Savage-Narva** who noted the ongoing challenge of working with others to find better ways of teaching about equity as well as equality, leveling the playing field to create opportunities for all. As important as anything else is the need to listen to others and get to know each other.

Fr. McManus introduced a proposal for an educational initiative to help bring a better perspective to our schools. He noted that it is hard for all of us to admit how little we know of each other's stories. Using the model of an earlier program of the Anti-Defamation League, "**Bearing Witness**," the suggestion is that starting with educators in Washington, D. C. Catholic and Jewish schools, curriculum ideas will be introduced to share questions that are essential to all our communities, inspiring people to work together and see all those around us as important in all of our stories.

A poll will be sent out to determine the interest and availability of members of the dialogue before logistics of the fall meeting are set in place.

The National Council of Churches

September 3, 2020 – Looking to the Future from Where We Are

The **National Council of Synagogues** and the **National Council of Churches** joined virtually to review presentations on **How has Covid-19 impacted our churches and synagogues, and what will be different when the pandemic is behind us?**

Opening reflections were shared by **Maryl Waters**, who introduced texts to reflect on violence and loss and affirmation of trust in God in times of heartbreak. **Rabbi Leonard Gordon** spoke of resilience in Jewish texts that respond to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, including a mandate to help the poor and create new traditions of leadership.

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. He noted that the world is shrinking, 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. **Rabbi Blumenthal** added that technology can be 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. He concluded with the reflection that 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 and 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? We may reach more people on Zoom, but 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?

Dr. Sullivan concluded with the challenge to all as to how we may look beyond our walls in the future and take the struggle for justice into the larger world around us.

Participants broke into small **discussion groups** and ideas shared in those groups were brought back to the full dialogue. Notes from the discussions included that in all of our discussions, there was very little hand-wringing. There was, in general, optimism about the future. Some wondered whether that was wishful thinking or a sign of genuine leadership. But regardless of our optimism, it is clear that some congregations will face deep financial and organizational challenges looking toward the future.

It was also noted that within the dialogue group, a number of people 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.

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 issue before has to be not only getting into heaven but also bringing some of heaven to be shared among us.

December 1, 2021 – Check-in with colleagues

Having realized that the opportunity to offer each other personal support in a time of pandemic had been extremely valuable, a time was set aside in December for members of the dialogue to check in with each other and share conversation and support. Twenty-eight members of the group engaged in general conversation and all agreed that the discussion had been personally helpful and professionally uplifting.

February 2, 2021 - A Conversation with Dr. Julian Zelizer

Dr. Julian Zelizer, Professor of History and Public Affairs at Princeton University, author and CNN commentator was guest speaker for a dialogue session to focus on “**Moral Leadership in a Post-Covid World.**”

In their opening reflections, **Rev. Jeanette Bouknight** spoke of the power of unity and faith in sharing and **Rabbi Burton Visotzky** shared a Talmudic teaching about respect and dignity as reflected in each and in all of God’s creatures.

Dr. Zelizer spoke about the current moment in American politics and noted that since the 1960’s, liberal religious voices have had a strong impact on American political developments. Movement activists, with leadership from churches and synagogues, using the umbrella of the **Leadership Conference on Civil Rights** and other national coalitions, made possible much that defined the Civil Rights era. But at this point, the leaders of the religious right are often the loudest and most identifiable voices. On both sides of the spectrum, religious groups retain unique organizational resources and important moral stature. But **Dr. Zelizer** suggested that it is not exclusively a matter of numbers that determines impact on society and on politics. He used the example of the **Black Lives Matter** movement to note that something which began as a cause among a small number of people emerged to have significant resonance among politicians and voters. He noted that there will always be divisions and disagreements within coalitions, but the important goal is to find common ground and not to allow the discussion to shut down.

In discussion following Dr. Zelizer’s presentation, it was mentioned that it becomes harder for churches and synagogues to raise their moral voice when their resources are weaker and they are concerned for their very survival. But **Dr. Zelizer** observed that strong moral stands may bring some people back to institutions they had not previously been part of.

Dr. Zelizer encouraged all those participating not to underestimate the role they can play when they unite people who care and when they advance the quality of life in all parts of our country.

May 10, 2021 – A Conversation with U. S. Rep. David Cicilline

We were honored to have **U. S. Rep. David Cicilline** as our guest in May for a discussion about the **Equality Act, H. R. 5**, which he has co-sponsored.

In an opening reflection **Rev. Peter Baktis** discussed gender identity and the question of how it relates to personhood as established at birth. He stressed that humans, and only humans, are created in the image of God, and all that God creates is good.

Rabbi Wayne Franklin introduced **Rep. Cicilline** as a former mayor of Providence, Rhode Island, and as a strong voice against current efforts to pass anti-LGBTQ legislation in various states and in Congress.

Rep. Cicilline spoke of the effort to pass **The Equality Act, H. R. 5**, which has now been passed by the House of Representatives twice. He said that the bill defines and includes sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity among prohibited categories of discrimination or segregation. It prohibits an individual from being denied access to a shared facility, including a restroom, a locker room or a dressing room, that is in accordance with that individual's gender identity. Opposition to the law, according to **Rep. Cicilline**, generally focuses on transgender rights, which may be the least understood of its provisions.

Rep. Cicilline noted that opposition of some religious communities may be at least in part because of confusion of what the bill mandates. He emphasized that nothing in the bill requires anyone to violate their traditions or mandates. He noted that religious bodies may still limit their services to members of their faith as they determine. What it prohibits is limitations on public facilities and establishes that gender identity is determined by the individual.

Rev. Donnie Anderson, expressing support for the discussion, said that many people in the transgender community have had only negative contact with the religious community. Others noted that pastoral support is very important to all who are involved, but that many are suspicious of religious communities when personal sexual issues are at stake.

Rabbi David Saperstein emphasized the need to understand the concerns of those who are opposed, as there is serious concern that the Supreme Court could be called on to invalidate the law on First Amendment grounds. But he suggested that history is clearly on the side of those who support equal rights.

Evangelical Protestant Leaders

The Evangelical-Jewish Conversation, convened annually under the leadership of **Rabbi Yehiel Poukko** of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago was again

held virtually in June of 2021, following a number of presentations, also virtual, that were shared through the preceding months. This gathering of rabbis, pastors and academics, included our chair, **Rabbi David Straus**, myself and other members of the National Council of Synagogues leadership, including, **Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Dr. Adam Gregerman, Rabbi Daniel Polish, Rabbi David Sandmel and Rabbi David Saperstein.** Presentations, discussions and breakout groups were designed to give all participants a greater appreciation for concerns religious leaders of other faiths. **Rabbi Poupko's** work continues to inspire better understanding among Jews of the religious, political and social concerns of this very significant leadership group of Christians.

Finances

For the year 2020-2021, again, we were honored to receive a major portion of our annual funding through the personal philanthropy of **Michael Cummings**. We also received renewed generous funding from the **Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary** in addition to grants from individual donors and charitable foundations who have helped sustain our work in the past. Donations from members of our Executive Committee and from congregation rabbis who continue to support our work supplemented our budget as well, with an unusually generous gift from our colleague **Leslie Brier**. These donations add to the annual dues 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**. We are grateful to all.

The late **Charles Dimston** was a generous supporter of the work of the National Council of Synagogues for many years. We join many members of the Jewish community in mourning his recent passing.

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. **Gina Morales** of the Rabbinical Assembly accounting office keeps track of our finances and makes sure that bills are paid. Her efforts are deeply appreciated.

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. **Sharon Cooper** of **WebSites 1-2-3** maintains our website and offers regular reminders of updates that are needed. We are most grateful.

And thanks

Our chair **Rabbi David Straus** and vice chair **Rabbi Wayne Franklin**, have been on the phone and on Zoom constantly through this very complicated year. Their commitment to dialogue and their wisdom in sharing ideas and directions for the National Council of Synagogues is essential to everything we have been able to achieve and their warmth and good humor have made it a pleasure to work with them, always. Rabbi Franklin is Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Emanu-El of Providence, Rhode Island, and Rabbi Straus is now concluding his service of many years as Senior Rabbi of the Main Line Reform Temple in Philadelphia. We are fortunate to have them leading our organization.

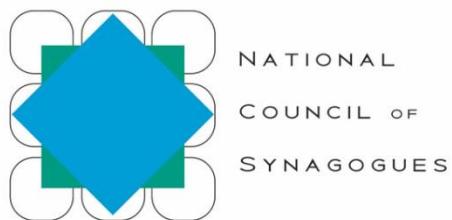
Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, our founding director, has, over and over again, given perspective and background to the mission of the National Council of Synagogues. His example and his insight continue to inspire everything we do.

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 thank them all for their dedication and generosity.

I am honored to serve with some of the most talented and dedicated people in the field of interfaith relations. May the coming year, as we emerge from the unique limitations of a pandemic crisis, help us all to grow closer as we learn from each other and work for greater understanding among peoples and faiths all over the world.

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