

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES

Annual Report – 2021-2022

We all wish we could say with confidence that the pandemic of Covid-19 is behind us. Regretfully, there is much uncertainty ahead. What we can say, however, is that the pace of our work and the quality of our conferences and programs has not been diminished as a result of the challenges we faced. **The National Council of Synagogues** has moved forward and worked with our partner organizations to increase understanding and to prepare for a brighter future for the religious communities we serve.

As opportunities opened to resume in-person meetings, cautiously, we took advantage, and used our meetings not only to reconnect with our dialogue partners, but also to visit institutions and historic sites together while sharing ideas and planning for whatever the future may bring. It has been a very productive year.

Meetings and Conferences

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

November 3, 2021, Washington, D. C.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture Reflections on Prejudice and Antisemitism in the World Today

For our first in-person meeting under the leadership of **Cardinal Wilton Gregory**, the National Council of Synagogues and the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops met in **Washington, D. C.** for a joint visit to the **National Museum of African American History and Culture** on the Washington Mall. We were met and welcomed by Museum staff leadership, introduced to the concept and goals of the museum and given the opportunity explore its exhibits. Having met first for breakfast at the headquarters of the USCCB, we then returned to the USCCB offices for lunch and for extended discussion.

Ira Forman, former U. S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism at the U. S. State Department opened reflections on the museum visit and review of current concerns. He emphasized that in looking at the history of any people it is far more important to note achievements and contributions to civilization than to focus on discrimination and historic mistreatment. Mr. Forman also emphasized that it is dangerous to argue one group's suffering in comparison with that of another. No group can fight prejudice alone, and all need to work together.

Cardinal Gregory added that it is important for seminarians to learn history and be able to discuss its significance in their lives and their work. He added that change is taking place in the Church, even if it is not happening at the pace we might wish. Current statistics suggest that

approximately 3.5% of America's seventy million Catholics identify as Black, but a much larger number from many different backgrounds identify as People of Color. People who look different from those who are part of the majority of the population often are treated differently as soon as they are encountered. But prejudice exists in many places even for those who, on appearance, may be identified as "white."

Fr. Walter Kedjierski reviewed a statement by Pope Francis that had been made in August, which seemed to denigrate "the law," a statement many Jews found upsetting. Fr. Kedjierski noted that the statement was quickly clarified by the Vatican, and others added that while the media will often highlight controversy, we all do better when we discuss concerns directly and avoid public declarations that can exacerbate tension.

May 9-10-11 – Atlanta, Birmingham, Selma and Montgomery

Civil Rights History and a Journey Together

Cardinal Gregory, who served previously as Archbishop of Atlanta, led the May meeting of delegates as discussions and fellowship focused on historical sites of the Civil Rights movement in Atlanta and in Birmingham, Selma and Montgomery, Alabama.

The meeting began with a visit for lunch at the **Lyke Center**, established in memory of **Archbishop James P. Lyke**, a predecessor of Cardinal Gregory as Archbishop of Atlanta. The Lyke Center serves the spiritual needs of African Heritage Catholics at Clark Atlanta University (CAU), Morehouse College, and Spelman College. The delegation was warmly welcomed at the Center by several volunteers and by its director, who explained the Center's work and described the growing Black Catholic community in Atlanta. Representatives of the Archdiocese of Atlanta, also participated and welcomed the group. After lunch, there was a visit to the Center's small museum featuring artifacts and artworks from the collection of Archbishop Lyke.

At the King Center, delegates met **Bill Planer**, guide for the journey who has developed an expertise in bringing visitors to important sites of the Civil Rights Movement through his company **Etgar 36**. He maintains contact with people who themselves were involved in the struggle and meet visitors to tell their stories. Before visiting the King Center itself, the group paid respects to Dr. King and Coretta Scott King, whose beautiful final resting place, surrounded by a pool of flowing waters, is next to the old Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Dinner in Atlanta was hosted by **Larry and Lois Frank**, members of the Atlanta Jewish community, at their home. **Rabbi Josh Lesser** of Atlanta spoke at the dinner meeting. Before the journey to Alabama, there was a morning meeting at Ignatius House in Atlanta, where the group spent the night. The session was enriched by a Zoom-facilitated conversation between **Prof. Susannah Heschel** of Dartmouth College, and **Prof. Andrew Prevot** of Boston College, who then journeyed with the group to Alabama.

In **Birmingham, Alabama**, delegates toured **Freedom Park**, meeting with **Bishop Calvin Woods, former President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference**. Bishop Woods guided the group through Kelly Ingram Park near downtown Birmingham, where young Civil Rights activists demonstrated and where they were doused with fire hoses, beaten, attacked by dogs and rounded up and sent to jail or a local fairground which was converted into a prison camp. Several evocative sculptures in the Park impressed upon visitors the brutality of the struggle. The

Park sits diagonally across the street from the **16th Street Baptist Church**, poignantly remembered because of the murder of three young Black girls there. Bishop Woods spoke animatedly about the struggle in which he was a leader, often breaking into song as he reflected on the past.

In **Selma**, the group met **Joanne Blackmon Bland** in front of the **Brown Chapel AME Church**, where the march from Selma to Montgomery began. The Church sits in the middle of the **George Washington Carver Homes Project neighborhood**, where many of the marchers lived. She continued the tour in downtown Selma at the **St. James Hotel**, from which we proceeded to walk across the **Edmund Pettus Bridge**, site of the infamous brutal attack on the marchers. In addition to pointing out current needs in the community, Joanne shared stories about having been an 11-year-old girl among the marchers.

The tour in **Montgomery** included visits to the **Rosa Parks Museum**, the **Equal Justice Initiative Museum to Peace and Justice** (the “**Lynching Museum**”) and the **EJI Legacy Museum**, which chronicles the oppression of Black people from Slavery to Mass Incarceration. All three of these institutions powerfully and affectively tell aspects of the Civil Rights struggle.

The trip afforded participants many opportunities to get to know each other more personally, beyond the formality of meetings. At many points along the way, they benefitted from thoughtful moments of reflection stimulated by **Andrew Prevot**, a Black Catholic, who shared some of his personal experiences and insights while inviting others to share reflections, as well.

The National Council of Churches

October 5, 2021 – On Line Meeting

Standing with God Together: Accommodating multiple points of view Professor Arnold Eisen and Rev. Laura Osbourne

We welcomed **Professor Arnold Eisen, Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America** as our main presenter, with text study offered by **Rev. Laura Osbourne, Coordinator for Interreligious Relations of the Reformed Church in America**.

Opening with text study, **Rev. Osbourne** shared **Colossians, Chapter 3**, highlighting the teaching: “Bear with one another...” imploring forgiveness. The wardrobe prescribed in the text includes compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength and dignity. Regretfully, she noted, we have seen, in our time, an increase in division and a loss of middle ground. While God brings things together, people rip things apart. The challenge, **Rev. Osbourne** concluded, is to be able to love even our enemies.

From texts that had been distributed, **Professor Arnold Eisen** quoted the late **Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel** in his remarks from a conference in 1963 at which he came to know **The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** Dr. Heschel taught that the first conference on religion and race was between Moses and Pharaoh and noted that the outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Dr. Heschel spoke of his inability to compromise on certain moral issues. Dr. Heschel said that he identified himself as heir to a great religious tradition, with the need to speak from that tradition even if others may disagree. When the issue was the Vietnam War, Dr. Heschel believed that this war was evil, not simply wrong, because suffering imposed the population

involved was far out of proportion to what good might come from it. Dr. Heschel encouraged Dr. King to speak out against the war.

Professor Eisen cited a quotation from Dr. Heschel's book, **The Prophets**: "**What is the essence of being a prophet?** *A prophet is a person who holds God and men in one thought at one time, at all times.* Our tragedy begins with the *segregation of God*, with the bifurcation of the secular and the sacred. We worry more about the purity of dogma than about the *integrity of love*. We think of God in the past tense and refuse to realize that *God is always present and never, never past*; that God may be more intimately *present in slums than in mansions, with those who are smarting under the abuse of the callous.*"

The prophet has two tasks: to intuit God's will and to translate God's will into language and into action that must be taken. Dr. Heschel taught that Torah is not God's word, but rather is a *Midrash* on God's word. The prophet feels with God. He feels sympathy with God's emotions. God suffers because of human suffering and calls on humans to be partners in relieving that suffering. One of Dr. Heschel's greatest teachings is that: "Some are guilty, but all are responsible."

Professor Eisen encouraged rabbis to speak about moral issues from Jewish tradition and Jewish text and encouraged ministers to find a parallel path in their tradition. The problem is that although the values at stake may be straightforward, the "how" of achieving a goal may be the subject of debate. It is impossible to take a moral stand without being criticized for politicization.

Responding to Professor Eisen, **Jim Winkler** shared his experience in conducting seminars on discussing political issues in congregational settings. He noted that most, but not all, churches avoid political matters. This enables mainline churches to have Republicans and Democrats sitting and worshipping together. What is required is a bit of humility and patience. The stories that are shared are among the most important things that people have. The debate is over how those stories are used. He added that our churches and synagogues, in today's society, are among the last places remaining where people can safely listen to, and share, differing opinions.

Professor Eisen responded that getting people together, so they can know each other and listen to each other, tends to foster a greater willingness to tolerate each other's diverse opinions and backgrounds. He added that in today's context there is a difference between people who claim the mantle of prophecy and people who humbly share the lessons of the prophets. Those who claim the mantle of prophecy can be scary. Those who share lessons with humility are more likely to be heard.

January 25, 2022 – On Line Meeting

Will they come back? What can Religion Offer our Divided, Post-Covid World? Rev. Michael Livingston, Rev. Cameron Trimble and Rev. Jim Keat

Rev. Cameron Trimble, CEO of Convergence, opened with the concern that as so many issues are seen in church life as "problems to be fixed," it is hard to see a need for institutional change. But we are living in an age in which rapid change is a reality in every aspect of our lives. Our opportunity is to shape the collective story we are living. **Rev. Trimble** noted that while there is a decline in median worship attendance, there is an increase in the number of small

congregations. Many older congregations are dealing with aging buildings and limited resources. A clear message is that cooperation and collaboration are both opportunities and necessities for the survival of church institutions.

Rev. Livingston, Interim Senior Minister of The Riverside Church, addressed the question of whether people will come back at the close of a pandemic by arguing that many never left. He posed the question of what the church really is: is it a building, or is it a community of faith? Live streaming of services, while a novelty for some during a pandemic, has been part of congregational life in many places for a long time. Some people are alone and in need of connections that they can't easily make by coming to a physical location. Some people will never be able to come back in the traditional sense of attending worship in person. And for others there is a need to provide incentive for a physical return, if that is what we want, after worship at home has become comfortable.

Rev. Keat began working for Riverside Church before the pandemic as Digital Minister. He expressed the question as being: "Will we go to them?" more than "Will they come back?" Churches need to be where their people are, and more and more of their people are "on line." He noted that Zoom was invented for business needs, but has evolved into a tool for social connection. **Rev. Keat** emphasized that "virtual" is not the opposite of "real," rather it is the opposite of "physical." People are using Facebook and other digital platforms for a great deal of their social interaction. The church needs to connect to people in the way that is most comfortable to them.

The question of rituals was introduced. Some require physical participation. **Rev. Trimble** suggested that there is no perfect answer, but we need theological imagination, and flexibility. **Rev. Livingston** offered that we allow people to use what they have in their home to substitute for the ritual items they would normally use in the church. He asked: "Can I deny Communion to a 93 year old widow who can't come to church?" He added that while congregations are increasingly elderly, it is also true that young people are affiliating and making connections through their churches. **Rev. Keat** noted that technology, all the way back to the invention of the printing press, has changed and challenged worship. We need to create digital spaces that are as inspiring as physical churches. **Rev. Keat** also expressed the concern that clergy need to resist the temptation to perform. Most important is for people to be together and feel a measure of authenticity. Zoom is better at connection than at performance.

May 24-25, 2022 – Washington, D. C.

Having Difficult Conversations – Dr. Allen Hilton - Moderator

Dr. Allen Hilton, whose participation was sponsored by the **United Church of Christ**, served as moderator for two days of discussion at the **First Congregation Church** in downtown Washington. **Dr. Hilton** presented slides that emphasized changes in political dialogue, showing comparisons between political divisions in an earlier generation and divisions in our time. Since the Covid pandemic, divisions have become even more dramatic. Many people see possibilities of civil war, with very low levels of trust regarding their fellow citizens. As well, people report declining confidence in religious institutions, regarding religious groups as prone to the promotion

of violence and suggesting a large gap between the stated values and the actual behavior of religious groups.

On the morning of May 25, delegates met at the **U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum** and were given a private tour as the Museum was closed. Arrangements had been made by **Dr. Rebecca Carter-Chand**, working with **Rabbi Wayne Franklin**. On the group's return to the First Congregational Church, comments included that it had served as a valuable educational experience, as well as a time of prayer and silent reflection. It also helped to re-emphasize why people need to talk to, and listen to, each other.

Dr. Hilton invited people to share thoughts on; "What is at stake in conversation on Israel/Palestine?" Reactions included:

- Pessimism that there will be anything new in the conversation
- The feeling that we are watching siblings in conflict with each other
- Hope that we can express feelings so we may know what is in each other's hearts
- Need to hear voices from all sides of the Palestinian/Israeli divide and all sides of the political spectrum
- Concern for conflicting loyalties
- The challenge that people face when they share so many values in common but feel unable to share concerns about one of the most important issues of our time.
- The complexity of the situation – a need to understand long range history and concern that it is not always part of the discussion.
- How do we control the conversation so the most radical of voices is not the loudest?
- We share the obligation to speak and preach about the issues of the day and about policies of our government for which we share a measure of responsibility.

Participants from both groups raised the question of whether it could be possible to craft a joint statement about the things on which we do all agree. All agreed that it is important to know the views that are held by others, and valuable that ongoing dialogue creates a measure of trust that is strengthened by personal relationships. The idea of group travel to the Middle East was proposed as an opportunity for all to learn and share together.

Evangelical Protestant Leaders

The Evangelical-Jewish Conversation, convened annually under the leadership of **Rabbi Yehiel Poupko** of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago was again held virtually in June of 2022. 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**, **Dr. Adam Gregerman**, **Kenneth Jacobson**, **Dr. Shira Lander**, **Rabbi Daniel Polish**, and **Rabbi David Sandmel**. Presentations, discussions and breakout groups were designed to give all participants a greater appreciation for concerns of 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.

The Islamic Society of North America

Reaching out to the Muslim community for dialogue has long been a goal of the National Council of Synagogues, and we are pleased to report that this year, after a great deal of preparation work by our **Chair, Rabbi David Straus** and **Professor Burton Visotzky, Director of the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary**, we were able to meet virtually and then in person, on May 24, in Washington DC, with a delegation led by **Imam Saffet Catovic, Head of the Office for Interfaith, Community Alliances and Government Relations for the Islamic Council of North America**.

What emerged from the meetings we held was not only a strong desire for dialogue and shared learning, but also a vision of Jews and Muslims traveling together to parts of the world where shared history holds special meaning for both groups. **Al-Andalus**, the historic lands of the Iberian Peninsula that were once home to thriving Jewish and Muslim communities, was identified as a first possibility for such travel. **Rabbi Leonard Gordon** agreed to take leadership responsibilities for the National Council of Synagogues, and several committees are now working on details of fund raising, community involvement, educational materials and logistics. The hope is that an educational program that will reach beyond our organizations and an itinerary for the travel of leaders and community representatives will emerge in the near future.

Finances

For the year 2021-2022, 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, organizations 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. These donations add to the annual dues we receive from the **Central Conference of American Rabbis**, the **Rabbinical Assembly**, the **Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association**, and the **Union for Reform Judaism** and the **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism**. We are grateful 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. **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**, this year as every year, offer enormous amounts of time, leadership, insight, wisdom, humor and patience. They, and all who join with them in our leadership, deserve credit for everything we do successfully.

Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, our founding director, continues to inspire us in every undertaking.

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 be part of a remarkable group of people whose dedication to the field of interfaith relations has built partnerships among groups to the benefit of all people of faith. May the year ahead bring more opportunities for learning and sharing that will strengthen us all.

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director

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