

# Having Difficult Conversations

## National Council of Churches / National Council of Synagogues

May 24-25, 2022

First Congregational Church, Washington, D. C.

### MINUTES

**Attendance:** NCS – Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, Martin Budd, Dr. Adam Gregerman, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi David Sandmel, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Rabbi Allyson Zacharoff, Rabbi Harold Berman

**Attendance:** NCC – Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson, Ms. Jeanette Bouknight, Rev. Dr. Whit Bodman, Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock, Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Dr. Peter Makari, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Rev. Dr. Mark Pettis, Rev. Margaret Rose, Rev. Dr. Ted Thompson, Ms. Maryl Walters, Dr. Tony Kireopoulos

**Guest:** Rev. Dr. Allen Hilton

#### May 24, 2022

**Rev. Mark Pettis** introduced, **Dr. Allen Hilton** to serve as moderator for the two days of discussion. Dr. Hilton's participation was sponsored by the United Church of Christ.

**Dr. Hilton** opened with an explanation of his role in helping people talk to each other. Several examples were noted highlighting the benefits of dialogue in a group where community cooperation is the larger goal.

**Dr. Hilton** presented slides that emphasized changes in political dialogue, showing comparisons between political divisions in an earlier generation and divisions in our time. It is common for people on both sides to see the other as closed minded and less intelligent. Since the Covid pandemic, divisions have become even more dramatic. Many people see actual 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.

In his book, *The Religious Mind*, **Jonathan Haidt** suggests that we learn at an early age to identify who can be trusted and who cannot, and we all have a tendency to identify "insiders" and "outsiders" in our relationships. Political partisanship is more divisive than ever before. These tendencies have created divisions in our closest relationships, including our families. In this time of pandemic, even health and health care have been politicized.

After a break, Dr. Hilton continued discussion by identifying four levels of listening:

1. Downloading – receiving information to confirm what we already believe

2. Factual – an open-minded willingness to receive new data that may challenge what we think we know
3. Emphatic – an open heart that allows us to see things through someone else’s eyes
4. Generative – an open will that allows for whole shifts in identity and ideas.

### **May 25, 2022**

The delegations were met at the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and given a private tour as the Museum was closed. Arrangements had been made by **Rebecca Carter-Chand, PhD**, working with **Rabbi Wayne Franklin**.

On return to the First Congregational Church, the group was welcomed by Sr. Minister, **Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss**.

Comments were shared regarding the visit to the Holocaust Museum. Reactions included:

- In addition to the education experience, it was a time of prayer and silent reflection.
- It served 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 the 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.

**Whit Bodman** raised the question of whether it could be possible to craft a joint statement about the things on which we do all agree.

**Mark Pettis** shared a desire that we should be able to report to our constituent organizations about our dialogue and share that we communicate with each other about these issues.

**Tony Kireopoulos** emphasized that it is not our role to solve the problems, but it is our responsibility to talk to each other about them.

**Noam Marans** noted that there is a parallel conversation taking place between the **IJCIC (International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations)** and the **World Council of Churches**. Despite serious differences, there is dialogue and it is strengthened by personal relationships among the participants.

Continuing discussion reflected the desire to be able to share that there is an ongoing conversation, with the concern that there is often a gap between what is said in a public statement and what is heard when the statement is shared.

**Dr. Hilton** expressed a measure of optimism in that we were able to express our concerns to each other.

**Donnie Anderson** suggested that travel together to the region might be a good way to learn together.

It was agreed that we should continue the discussion and that a smaller group of dialogue members might help prepare the way for the next discussion. **David Straus** emphasize the importance of meeting together and continuing the discussion before momentum in the exchange is lost.

**Allen Hilton** shared a closing prayer while all expressed thanks to him for his role in moderating these two days of dialogue.

Respectfully submitted,

**Rabbi Harold J. Berman**  
Executive Director  
National Council of Synagogues