

FINAL REPORT NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES 2015-2016

This is my final report as I conclude over 15 years as Director of the National Council of Synagogues. I was slated to have retired at the end of 2015 but Rabbi David Straus urged me to stay on until my successor was named and to help ease the transition. Consequently, I delayed my retirement until June 30, 2016. I am most pleased that Rabbi Harold J. Berman will succeed me: he has served with great distinction for over three decades at Congregation Tifereth Israel in Columbus, Ohio where he is now Rabbi Emeritus. He has also been deeply involved in interfaith work in the midwest and then as a member of the NCS board for some ten years. I am confident that he will fill his new role admirably.

CATHOLIC AFFAIRS

The December 14 meeting with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops featured talks by Rabbi Steven Gutow on understanding American Judaism and Bishop James Massa and Rabbi David Sandmel who discussed the visit of Pope Francis to the USA. The afternoon business session was highlighted by a briefing on Israel/Palestine by Ilan Sztulman, Minister of Public Diplomacy of the Embassy of Israel in Washington.

The June 20, 2016 meeting with the USCCB featured a description of the structure of Eastern Catholic Churches by Rev. Ron Roberson and an analysis of the recent Orthodox Jewish Statement on relations with Christian faiths led by its primary author, Rabbi Irving Greenberg. The highlight of the business session was a discussion of the recent anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish episodes in Newton, Massachusetts, led by Fr. David Michael.

Perhaps the highlight of my long career in interfaith work was my participation in the conference at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome to mark the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* from October 26-28, 2015. It was thrilling to see several hundred delegates from all over the world and of every faith group gather together to mark that singular event. But meeting personally Pope Francis was an unforgettable experience. I had met Pope John Paul II in 1995 at the office of the late Cardinal John O'Connor in New York City. I had also met Pope Benedict XVI in 2008 in Washington, DC. But this encounter was particularly special and very moving.

PROTESTANT AFFAIRS

The NCS held an overnight meeting with the National Council of Churches in Philadelphia from November 18-19, 2015. The topic was: "Anti-Semitism and Anti-Christian Persecution Around the World." The two presenters were Kenneth Jacobson of the ADL and Professor Elizabeth Prodromou of Tufts University and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. The group engaged in text studies and discussions of the topic.

On May 19, 2016, we conducted a webinar for the NCS and NCC. Jim Winkler of the NCC and Rabbi Jonah Pesner, head of the Religious Action Center, discussed politics and religion and the role of religious beliefs in the current political campaign for the US presidency.

MUSLIM AFFAIRS

After several failed attempts over the past ten years, Rabbi David Straus was finally able to arrange a meeting with Muslim Imams and leaders in Washington, DC on June 8 with over 20 attendees.. He and Imam Abdullah Antepli of Duke University chaired a most successful session with Muslim and Jewish participants. All agreed, it was an auspicious beginning and all hoped for future contacts.

EVANGELICALS

Several of our members attended the annual informal meeting with Evangelicals from around the country. This is rather informal and invites are somewhat desultory.

WEBSITE

We continue to add material and resources to our Website which was generously established by a gift from the late Maria Finkle.

FUNDING

We have met our budget of \$35,000 again. When I first started in 2001, this was not a problem since the philanthropist, Harold Bernstein, donated \$25,000 annually and together with the dues of \$2,500 from each member organization, the budget was easily reached. But alas he died of cancer after two years and I had to hustle to raise the money. Thanks to generous support from philanthropic friends and generous colleagues, I raised over \$300,000 through the years and we never ended in the red.

MEMBERSHIP

We have several problems in the membership area.

1. Each organization is entitled to up to four delegates. Several have filled their quota but several have not.
2. We need to enlist more young folks and more female delegates who are concerned about interreligious affairs.
3. We need to resolve the Reconstructionist group's status. They have been in some degree of turmoil and I hope they can settle their affairs and once more fully participate with us. I brought them into the the NCS several years ago and I should hate to lose their valuable participation.

CONFERENCE CALLS

In the past, we would meet several times a year face to face but the prohibitive cost of travel has made that all but impossible. Consequently, we hold bi-monthly conference calls for our Board and that seems to have worked out rather well.

Aside from those calls, I am in regular contact with my counterparts from the NCC and the USCCB: Tony Kireopoulos, John Crossin and Dennis McManus. That is how we do our planning for the year's programs.

EMBASSY BRIEFINGS

I have held briefings several times yearly for many years with the Israeli Embassy in Washington, DC. We concentrate on religious liberties and freedoms in Israel and we also discuss the status of the relations between the government of Israel and the Catholic and various Protestant and Eastern Orthodox groups in Israel—their problems, issues and successes.

CONCLUSION

It has been my *zekhut*—my privilege, my honor, my joy to have served these past 15+ years in an area which I consider vital but which the various religious movements seem to have basically ignored or downplayed. I am grateful that the late Rabbi Mordecai Waxman, Rabbi Joel Meyers, and the then Executive Vice President of the CCAR, Rabbi Paul Menitoff, convinced me to take this post in 2001. I consider it vital for the various religious groups to speak to one another and dialogue with each other. We have the task of tearing down walls of suspicion and ignorance and erecting instead bridges of understanding and trust.

We have come a long way since those dark days when we did not speak but vilified one another. I am grateful to the men and women—Jews, Catholics, Protestant, Eastern

Orthodox—who have broken down those barriers and I thank God for all we have achieved. My guiding spirit has always been Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, let us reason together.”

May those sentiments continue to inspire and direct us.

RABBI GILBERT S. ROSENTHAL
JUNE, 2016