

OUR FIRST WEBINAR June 9, 2015

The NCS joined the NCC in a first ever webinar on June 9, 2015. The topic was: "Attracting our young people to churches and synagogues." The presenters were: Kathrine Lohre, executive for ecumenical and interreligious relations at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Rabbi Sharon Brous who heads an organization called Ikar in California, an organization dedicated to reanimating Jewish life. Rev. Dr. Tony Kireopoulos and Rabbi Gil Rosenthal hosted the webinar and introduced the speakers and Keith Swartzendruber moderated the discussion.

Ms. Lohre, who spoke on "abundance in the face of decline," cited the recent Pew Report that indicated that Christianity has lost 8% in America with the largest losses in the Roman Catholic churches and mainline Protestant churches, accompanied by a significant increase in "nones" (those who have no religious affiliation). New and controversial issues such as sexuality have divided many churches. Additionally, the rapid demographic changes such as the huge influx of Hispanics has made the US the most religiously diverse land on earth. The tragedy of September 11 and the growing challenge of Muslim fanaticism is another challenging factor, as is the soaring intermarriage rate and the challenge of greater female roles in church life. The 2015 Pew Report has stressed that the role of Christianity in America is slipping faster than ever before.

How can we attract young people to churches? The churches must learn new roles because they simply cannot continue past patterns. They must share the good news of Jesus at the same time that they deal with injustice, division, war, and intergenerational dialogue. Immigration is another vital issue to be addressed, especially in several states of the union. Ms. Lohre deals with this question in her new book, *For Such a Time as This*. In the book, she cites several vital issues that must be addressed intergenerationally: 1) Religious people are hypocritical; 2) We are too focused on rules, viz., homosexuality. After all, we do not hold the Bible to be a book of rules; 3) No religion is totally true; 4) Religious organizations desire money and power and not truth; 5) Religious people reject science in favor of superstition. Still, the Pew Report did offer this hopeful fact: 7 of 10 Americans do identify with a religion.

Rabbi Sharon Brous also stressed the powerful impact of the Pew report of 2013 as well as the latest one. But she was not surprised by their findings. She noted that the older generation of Jews (born in the 1920s) listed only 7% as "nones." But today, one of four indicates they have no religion or are not affiliated. She observed that she has been working with young people for 11 years in an attempt to draw them to Jewish life. Today she finds a greater sense of alienation and a willingness to drop out of Jewish life. In the past, when Jews were excluded from country clubs there was a greater tendency to join a synagogue. Today, technology has advanced so greatly and has affected us as has the new generational thrust of "doing whatever I want." We confront the most narcissistic generation ever that possesses a deep sense of over-entitlement.

The various areas of discontent are: 1) social; 2) intellectual and; 3) spiritual. There is no real connection. But Rabbi Brous does not find Jews who want to change religion. Rather, they do not reject Shabbat or reciting the morning prayer, "Thank God for restoring me to life." Many who don't keep kosher do find value in the laws of kashrut. What they *do* reject is the 20th century iteration of Jewish life. They are not rejecting religion but rather the last century's iteration of Jewish life. They seek authenticity (not shtick), creativity (imaginative new ideas) and moral courage (challenge the system and don't just seek to preserve the present institutions). Rabbi Brous finds that people in this age group will travel and sacrifice for something worthwhile. Rejecting conventional synagogues doesn't mean rejecting parents and their values. What do the seminaries do about this? Our educational objective is: Literacy and love of learning. We strive for a way that inspires us as teachers and rabbis. We wonder: What can attract young people to worship? We create powerful experiences and via word of mouth we

start with small house parties and the friends invite others to join them at synagogue. Once they are in the door, we challenge them with striking rituals, e.g., prostration on the High Holidays. Above all, we must listen to the young people and learn: Why are they disconnecting?

A discussion and question-and-answer period followed. Based on the positive feedback to the webinar, we will consider conducting other webinars more frequently than previously planned.