

National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues

October 29-30, 2018

Chicago, Illinois

Headquarters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

MINUTES

Attendance: NCS – Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Rabbi Harold Berman, Rabbi Steve Gutow. **Guests:** Rabbi Vernon Kurtz, Emily Soloff

Attendance: NCC – Dr. Tony Kireopoulos, Rev. Peter Baktis, Rev. Dr. Whitney Bodman, Ms. Donna Bollinger, Rev. Nicole Diroff, Mr. Dennis Frado, Rev. Dr. John Kampen, Rev. Dr. Peter Makari, Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock, Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Ms. Jeanette Bouknight

October 29

Opening Worship

In the aftermath of the murder of eleven congregants in an attack on Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, members of the NCC and NCS delegations joined in a memorial service to honor the victims and pray for those who were wounded. Texts, prayers and condolences were shared.

Session 1 – A new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America statement on Interfaith Relations

Dr. Tony Kireopoulos introduced Kathryn Lohre and Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock to share background and insight into a newly drafted statement of the ELCA on Interfaith Relations. They noted that this statement is intended to take the place of a 1994 statement, enlarging its vision and expressing a greater desire to learn and listen in dialogue with others in order to find greater understanding and more opportunities to work for the common good. It highlights greater sensitivity to minority concerns as it address the ELCA itself to promote more positive dialogue. It states clearly that one group cannot claim to know or evaluate God’s relationship with other religious groups.

The text of the statement is now in its final year of a multi-year process of drafting and discussion.

Session 2 – What’s happening on the ground – Part 1

Leaders of the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago were introduced by **Rev. Nicole Diroff** and **Rabbi David Straus**.

Mr. Nisan Chavkin, Executive Director, spoke of the diversity of the group, noting that more than only Jews and Christians are engaged in ongoing dialogue.

Rabbi Michael Siegel acknowledged the leading role of Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, who is one of the few people in the Jewish community employed full-time for the purpose of outreach to those of other faiths. The reason, Rabbi Siegel noted, is that as a very small faith group, especially in Chicago, which is home to major intellectual centers of the Christian world, Jews want others to “know about us before you talk about us.” Dialogue with the Evangelical community, the Roman Catholic Church and between rabbis and Latino pastors have also been ongoing. Rabbi Siegel also noted that in the past there were too many conversations about Black/Jewish relationships and not enough work on the relationship. Programs to study text together and to visit Israel together have emerged from this kind of dialogue.

Bishop Wayne Miller of the Evangelical Lutheran Church noted the central role of heads of organizations and leaders of congregations that may not have a denominational affiliation. He emphasized that leaders need to join in conversation that emphasizes common goals more than “truth claims.”

Nisan Chavkin traced much of the dialogue structure back to the election of Harold Washington as mayor of Chicago in 1984. There was a strong need for conversation about race and for mutual respect among groups in the community. Communication became critical in an effort to block attacks on any religious or ethnic group in the community. The Council of Religious Leaders has also worked to provide worship spaces at local hospitals and to introduce newcomers in the community to the religious services available and it has issued joint statements on issues of community concern. It encourages leaders to study together and to strengthen mutual respect and functions more as a professional organization than as an independent institution.

Session 3 – What’s happening on the ground – Part 2

Rabbi Wayne Franklin introduced leaders of the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago.

Mr. Teny Gross spoke of the challenge in communities when many of the most prominent people are lacking credibility precisely because of the positions they hold. His preferred solution is to engage the community in solving problems so that people in leadership are recognized for their ability to help those who are in need.

Commander Ernest Cato III of the Chicago Police spoke of the problem of hopelessness, when people in cities are confronted with violence and with threats of violence all around them. He spoke of bringing people together from within the community to determine what resources are needed, including schools, businesses, police and clergy. Churches and other religious communities become an important setting for service delivery and for helping to identify job opportunities.

Rev. Steve Epting of Hope Christian Church emphasized that churches have a role in meeting community concerns beyond their own membership needs. Churches can help

arrange for food and clothing, job training and employment opportunity and can create critical contacts for people in need of hope.

Ms. Tara Dabney spoke of recruiting people to help build community, starting from “a place of love.” People need to feel that the community cares about them.

It was also emphasized that young people need to remain engaged, with places for playing games and engaging in sports, doing homework and getting help so they stay in school and remain out of trouble. Schools are often overwhelmed and cannot provide all that is needed. Nothing works unless violence is controlled, and reducing the number of guns available is only a part of the answer. People need opportunities and encouragement. They have to feel that they are valued by the community around them.

October 30

Session 4 – How to have a constructive conversation about the Middle East

Dr. Peter Makari and Rabbi Steven Gutow served as moderators for a discussion on how to have a constructive discussion on the Middle East.

In a brief review of previous dialogue between Jewish and Christian groups it was noted that the National Council of Churches and the National Council of Synagogues have not been the groups that shared a table for this discussion. The NCC – NCS table, which focuses on pastoral issues, grew out of one table that was dedicated to theological and community issues. The “other” table, arranged to speak about Middle East issues, was suspended in October 2012, after an ecumenical advocacy letter to the U. S. Congress concerning military aid to Israel was signed onto by some Christian church leaders separately affiliated with this “other” dialogue table. Since that time, the pastoral table has avoided Middle East policy questions, until recently when a growing desire to talk about what is obviously a critical issue to both of our communities was acknowledged and attempts were begun to have related discussions. Today’s discussion was a conversation about how to constructively talk about this issue.

Rev. David Heim, Editor of *The Christian Century* and an ELCA pastor, spoke of the longitudinal history of the issue and region, and the diversity of opinions in the Jewish community and also differing opinions in the Palestinian community. He stressed the importance of knowing the concerns and the larger issues that are brought to any discussion by dialogue partners. He noted the challenge of understanding Jewish views in terms of both faith and peoplehood, and the importance of political issues in the wider geographic area of the Middle East. He also noted the significance of trauma and what it means for the communities involved. Finally, he added that one has to consider that this is an emotional issue and the motivations we bring when in entering any dialogue about it with another group, as well as the connections to the region we bring to the dialogue table.

Rev. Nanette Sawyer of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church and **Rabbi David Zinn** of Chicago Sinai Congregation spoke of the ongoing relationship of their two congregations sharing conversations and study about the Middle East.

Rev. Sawyer spoke about preparation for an adult education dialogue program that began with examination of a study guide and then continued with review of a history of challenges in the dialogue. It is continuing with a series of dinners discussing values, fears and personal stories between two congregational groups, the first of which is this evening.

Rabbi Zinn spoke of his participation in the dialogue between members of both congregations, including preparation for the dialogue dinners and a joint trip to study and meet people on both sides of the border. He stressed that all who participated needed to commit themselves to participating in each part of the entire program.

A number of those who participated in the discussion that followed shared concerns about statements from national organizations, their impact on both sides, and the question of how and if organizations should consult in advance before statements are released to the public and the press.

Session 5 - Trending toward the future - Interfaith Youth Core and Religious/Interfaith attitudes among college students today

Rev. Nicole Diroff introduced **Mr. Ben Correia-Harker** of the Interfaith Youth Core, who shared statistics of recent studies about college students today. He noted that in general there is less affiliation and more polarization among students than in earlier generations. The need for building bridges is significant.

Mr. Correia-Harker noted the while 37% of students identified as "religious and spiritual," another 29% identified as "spiritual but not religious" and 23% identified as neither. Overwhelming numbers of students indicated that they are pluralistic in terms of acceptance of others and positive attitudes toward those who are different. His studies suggest that positive interfaith environments and opportunities to meet people who are different will contribute to greater acceptance of others during college years. Having a close friend who is part of another faith, ethnic or racial group is a key element in changing attitudes.

ELCA MEMORIAL SERVICE

The group recessed in order to participate in a memorial service for those who were murdered at Tree of Life Synagogue during services on the previous Sabbath. In addition to participants from the ELCA staff, **Rev. Darrell Jodock** participated and **Rabbi David Straus** offered remarks in behalf of the Jewish Community.

Session 6 – Wrap-up

Discussion began with ideas about future meetings, locations, and format. All agreed that more people can participate when a web format is used, but that there is a value in people being together and building personal relationships through meeting and sharing. Generally people agreed that having local participants and learning about different communities was valuable, although for this meeting, there was a disadvantage in the fact that we were meeting right next to the airport and most people never saw any part of our host city.

Everyone felt the challenge of trying to deal with a number of topics and not really having enough time for any of them. Some people felt the discussion about Middle East issues was very helpful and that a joint trip to the Middle East would be of value. All agreed that it was important to hear the sensitivities and concerns of all those around the table. There was discussion about the question of how much time can be devoted to this area of concern, and how central it should be to future meetings.

All agreed that there was a value in learning about how local communities deal with their problems and create interfaith models. Other communities mentioned as possible locations for future meetings were Atlanta, Baltimore and Austin. After the meeting the idea of meeting in Pittsburgh was also suggested.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues