

A Conversation with U. S. Rep. David Cicilline

National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues

May 10, 2021
On-line meeting

MINUTES

Attendance: NCS – Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, Martin Budd, Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Kenneth Jacobson, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi Daniel Polish, Rabbi David Sandmel, Rabbi David Saperstein, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Allyson Zacharoff, Rabbi Harold Berman

Attendance: NCC – Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson, Rev. Dr. Peter Baktis, Rev. Dr. Whit Bodman, Rev. Dr. Jeanette Bouknight, Rev. Nicole Diroff, Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock, Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Dr. Peter Makari, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Rev. Mark Pettis, Rev. Margaret Rose, Rev. Demetrios Tonias, Ms. Maryl Walters, Dr. Tony Kireopoulos.

Guests: Rep. David Cicilline, U. S. House of Representatives
Jacob Lis – Director of Community Engagement, Office of Rep. Cicilline
Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell

Opening

Rabbi Wayne Franklin, a constituent of Rep. Cicilline, opened the meeting with a welcome to all participating.

Rev. Nicole Diroff led self-introductions by encouraging all who were participating to share very brief self-introductions with their location and mention of what present work was involving them.

Spiritual Reflection

Rev. Dr. Peter Baktis offered insights on gender identity and the question of how it relates to personhood as established at birth. He noted that each individual has unique characteristics of personhood from birth, with gender norms added as we grow in the culture in which we live. Humans, and only humans, are created in the image of God, and all that God creates is good.

The key question, according to **Rev. Baktis**, is how we use what we have been given by our Creator. He added that there is no hierarchy of male or female in creation, and that Jesus, in resurrection, is not identified by gender. For those who are transgender, finding a reflection in

God's image may be a struggle, and the challenge of the clergy is to minister to all who may be struggling.

Introduction of **Rep. Cicilline**

Rabbi Wayne Franklin introduced **Rep. Cicilline** as a former mayor of Providence, Rhode Island, and as a strong voice against current efforts to pass anti-LGBTQ legislation in various states and in Congress.

Presentation by **Rep. David Cicilline**

Rep. Cicilline spoke of the effort to pass **The Equality Act, H. R. 5**, which has now been passed by the House of Representatives twice and has the support of 80% of the U. S. population, with majority support expressed in every state. He said that many people are surprised to find that its provisions aren't in the law already. The bill defines and includes sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity among prohibited categories of discrimination or segregation. It prohibits an individual from being denied access to a shared facility, including a restroom, a locker room, and a dressing room, that is in accordance with the individual's gender identity.

Opposition to the law, according to **Rep. Cicilline**, generally focuses on transgender rights, which may be the least understood of its provisions. **Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell** noted that people who are transgender even face challenges in the gay community.

Rep. Cicilline noted the opposition of some religious communities because of confusion of what the bill mandates. He emphasized that nothing in the bill requires anyone to violate their religious traditions. He noted that religious bodies may still limit their services to members of their faith as they determine. What it prohibits is limitations on public facilities and establishes that gender identity is determined by the individual.

Republican opposition, according to the Congressman, is led by communities and organizations that have long been opposed to rights for the gay community, even though most of their constituents are in favor of its provisions.

Dr. Tony Kireopoulos noted that the **National Council of Churches** is not an official supporter of the bill because, in order to take a position and advocate for an issue, there must be consensus by its member communions. He noted that there is likely not to have full agreement on the Equality Act by all of its members, but at the same time, that it is appropriate to have such conversations as today's dialogue in order to provide education for participants from any and all communities who would want to do advocacy..

Rabbi David Saperstein asked about compromises that may provide for Senate passage. **Rep. Cicilline** expressed the opinion that less protection is worse than nothing. A clear statement of the religious exemptions that exist may help, but it is not certain that this would be sufficient to gain more support.

Rabbi Wayne Franklin asked if the writing of Op-Ed pieces would help. **Rep. Cicilline** suggested that many pieces have already been written, but all are helpful.

Rev. Donnie Anderson, expressing support for the discussion, noted that many people in the transgender community have had only negative contact with the religious community. Others noted that pastoral support is very important to all who are involved, but that many are suspicious or religious communities when personal sexual issues are involved.

Rabbi David Saperstein emphasized the need to understand the concerns of those who are opposed, because if we don't hear their concerns we won't have answers for the challenges they raise. He added that there is serious concern that the Supreme Court could be called on to invalidate the law on First Amendment grounds. But history is clearly on the side of those who support equal rights.

Closing

Rabbi Wayne Franklin thanked all who participated and said that there is an obvious need to carry the discussion forward and consider further action available to us.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues