

# **National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues**

**April 30 – May 1, 2018  
Providence, Rhode Island**

## **MINUTES**

**Attendance:** NCS – Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Harold Berman, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi David Sandmel, Rabbi Elyse Wechterman

**Attendance:** NCC – Dr. Tony Kireopoulos, Rev. Dr. Don Anderson, Rev. Peter Baktis, Rev. Dr. Whitney Bodman, Rev. Donna Bollinger, Rev. Nicole Diroff, Ms. Shannon Hudgins, Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock, Rev. Susan Jostyn, Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Rev. Dr. Mark Pettis, Rev. Dr. Margaret Rose

**April 30, 2018**

**First Baptist Church**

**Session I - The birth of an idea: Separation of Church and State**

**Professor Stanley Lemons**, Professor Emeritus at Rhode Island College, introduced the group to some of the history of the First Baptist Church of Providence, in which we were meeting, and the early history of Rhode Island. It was the first colony to receive a charter from the British Crown in which there was no mention of religion at all. State and religion were designed to be separate entities in Rhode Island, as conceived by Roger Williams. Williams, who was an ordained Anglican Priest, emphatically taught that religious coercion by the state was a “blasphemous idea.” A deeply religious man himself, with strong convictions, he defended the idea that others had the right to their own opinions and doctrines.

Williams’ notion of separating church and state made Rhode Island an opportune place for various religious groups, Jews included, to establish roots in America. Williams also called for a democratic system of government, with opportunities for all to participate.

Williams was considered something of a heretic in his own time and his books were burned in various places. His burial place is unknown and many of his ideas were ignored and/or forgotten after he passed from the scene, to be revived generations later. His key idea was that government had no role in religious life other than to guarantee freedom of conscience for all.

**Session 2 - Professor Lemons and Rev. Jamie Washam** led a tour of the church with explanations of many of its traditions.

**Session 3 - Interfaith Cooperation in Rhode Island - How does it work so well?**

**Rabbi Sarah Mack** of Temple Beth El, **Rev. Chontell Washington** of the United Church of Christ and **Professor Arthur Urbano** of Providence College joined in a panel discussion on the history, programming and leadership of the **Rhode Island State Council of Churches**.

The council, which dates back to 1937, identifies itself with the spirit of Roger Williams, and credits part of its success to the fact that Rhode Island is small enough for connections and contacts to be made easily among people in all parts of the state.

The council is specifically focused on offering help to different groups in time of need, including anti-poverty efforts and outreach at times when anti-Semitism or anti-Muslim attitudes have become public concerns. The council sponsors a great deal of interfaith dialogue and multi-denominational programming.

It was noted that unanimity has not always been necessary or even possible. Sometimes, on issues such as, for example, marriage equality, it has been important for people to be able to agree to disagree.

Professor Urbano noted that in the 1920's and 1930's a significant part of the Providence College student body was Jewish, even though the college is under Catholic sponsorship. The college continues to be involved extensively in dialogue across religious lines and interfaith programming.

The discussion that followed included the importance of sharing experiences, including possible arranging for travel of different groups together for learning opportunities and noted the importance of bringing in experts who are not part of the group to share knowledge and insight on background for various discussions.

#### **Temple Emanu-El Session 4 - Middle East issues of concern**

Tony Kireopoulos and Harold Berman offered brief introductions to some Middle Eastern issues, including current violence on the Gaza border, the Status Quo and taxation of Christian properties, and the move of the US Embassy to Jerusalem, which is related to the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and what this means moving forward regarding the capital of Palestine and ultimately the two-state solution. The group felt in general that the timing and the lack of others from our communities did not make for extended dialogue. A number of people expressed a desire for more opportunity in the future to reflect on how these issues affect our communities, work, and local interfaith relationships, and consensus was found in the idea of making space at future meetings to discuss these effects on us. There was also substantial support for the idea of travel, as a group, to the Middle East.

#### **Session 5 - Presentation by the Center for Reconciliation**

Elon Cook of the Center for Reconciliation, introduced and presented a film, *Traces of the Trade: Stories from the Deep North*, about the slave trade and its history in Rhode Island, noting that much of the economy of the colony in its early years was fueled by the slave trade. The question of reparations was discussed as well, with the larger question of how the wrongs of the past can be set right in our generation and in the future.

**May 1, 2018**

**Center for Reconciliation**

**Session 6 – Slavery in Jewish and Christian Tradition**

**Rabbi Lewis Eron** presented texts and sources on slavery, noting that slavery is consistently regarded as immoral in Jewish tradition, but the idea of total abolition of slavery is a somewhat modern idea. Through most of history, some form of slavery in common practice nearly everywhere. And slavery continues in some places, even today.

In America, Jews were involved in slavery, and notably and significantly in the Jewish community of Rhode Island, as slave owners and slave traders, and Jews were vehemently opposed to slavery, but Jews were a very small minority in America and overall clearly marginal in the slave economy. For the most part, Jews, and their rabbis, reflected regional ideas and loyalties.

**Rev. Nikita McCalister** spoke of the continuing ramifications of slavery in our time, even as we recognize the significant Christian participation and justification of slavery in times past. At the same time, she used Christian sources, such as the Sermon on the Mount, to affirm that to be a follower of Jesus is to believe in liberation as God is on the side of the oppressed. She used the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden to say that our eyes have been opened to good and evil, even though we often close them and ignore what is around us.

Rev. McCalister argued that slavery is always for the pursuit of economic goals, and its justification led to centuries of exploitation of free labor with enormous profit to those who exploited it. She noted that negative attitudes about race are entirely post-Biblical. It is up to us not only to change the language, but also to change to society in which we live.

### **Session 7 - Healing our Society in Matters of Race and Addressing White Privilege**

**Judy Kaye**, President of Judith Kaye Training and Consulting, spoke of the importance of critical listening and learning how to respond. Many people don't understand white privilege beyond the simplest surface obligations. And many people don't understand their potential for helping.

**Dr. Delbert Glover** of the Center for Reconciliation emphasized that any positive step must begin with recognizing the need to confront our history. The Center was established as a meeting place for secular and spiritual discussions, enabling conversations among

different groups and sponsoring educational programs, tours and partnerships among community organizations.

**Rev. Betsy Aldrich Garland** of the United Church of Christ spoke of the importance of sharing personal stories and spiritual autobiographies as part of developing curriculum for discussions about race. She emphasized that it is critical for all people to understand how race has shaped our self-perception, our opportunities and our education. More conversation in more places help to bring a wider perspective and more understanding in different groups.

**The Rt. Rev. Nicholas Knisely**, Episcopal Bishop of Rhode Island, spoke of what is achieved when congregants recognize that they don't look like the neighborhood that surrounds them. Work begins with the realization that racism has a significant impact on experience and outlook even among very well-meaning caring people. We can change that with effective narratives that are able to reorient people's thinking about race and about their own roles in society. It has been important in the work of the cathedral to bring different communities together at a common meeting ground.

**Discussion** – speakers emphasized that relationships develop because there is an opportunity and people choose to take it. It was noted by some of the Jewish participants that Jews sometimes have a hard time, after a history of oppression, recognizing that they also have benefitted from white privilege. We need to educate our children to understand the vocabulary and the commitment they will need to build a better future.

What do we do next? Suggestions were made concerning a joint statement on reparations. Next steps are needed to continue the conversation.

All agreed that coming to a community and listening to its leaders and workers was a very useful model for future meetings. Organizers agreed to share ideas as to how we might move next to carry on what was discussed in Providence while expanding our perspective in other places.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman  
Executive Director  
National Council of Synagogues