

National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues

November 1, 2017
Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
Washington, D. C.

MINUTES

Attendance: NCS – Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi A. Nathan Abramowitz, Rabbi Elan Babchuck (by computer), Rabbi Harold Berman, Leslie Brier, Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Wayne Franklin (by computer), Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi David Sandmel, Rabbi David Saperstein, Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg

Attendance: NCC – Dr. Tony Kireopoulos (by phone), Rev. Jim Winkler, Rev. Whit Bodman, Rev. Nicole Diroff, Rev. Dr. John Kampen, Professor Darrell Jodock, Rev. Kathryn Lohre, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Rev. Maryl Waters.

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Opening Session – Introductions and study

The meeting opened with self-introductions and continued with a welcome from **Rabbi Jonah Pesner**, Director of the Religious Action Center, who gave the background to the RAC, its building in Washington and its programs. Originally established and funded by the late Kivie Kaplan, The Religious Action Center’s initial work was in combatting bigotry and religious/racial prejudice. The building became the home of the Leadership Conference on Civil rights, and its program has expanded to include extensive work with other agencies and with the government to expand civil rights and opportunities for all.

Rabbi David Saperstein shared a reflection on the Torah reading of the week, Vayera, which includes the stories of Abraham extending hospitality to strangers, Abraham’s argument with God over the fate of Sodom (“the first lobbyist for the innocent”), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the birth and near-sacrifice of Isaac. In the story of the destruction of Sodom, the Hebrew chanting emphasizes the word “*vayitmamah* - he lingered” as Lot is leaving Sodom. Medieval commentators discuss why he might have lingered at a moment of crisis, including suggestions that Lot was concerned for his property, that he was paralyzed by fear or that he was lazy and confused. Rabbi Saperstein noted that people have many reasons for hesitating at times of crisis when action is really needed, and while Lot had the good fortune of angels being with him to take him by the hand and lead him forward, we cannot have the same confidence that someone else will come and lead us. In a time of crisis when there is much to be done, we have to take the lead and avoid the hesitation and paralysis that so often keep people back.

Rabbi Pesner echoed that we are in a time of crisis now, with much at stake and many people afraid. We face a resurgence of white supremacy and a failure of

presidential leadership in response, as well as the failure of police to protect those who marched in the face of white power advocates and an onslaught of policies that defy our values as Jews and Christians. It is essential to bring together groups that will work to defend the most vulnerable, including immigrants, “dreamers” and refugees and women whose rights and safety have been threatened and that we work to help our Muslim neighbors and others who may be marginalized. In the longer term we need to defend the integrity of our democracy, including the right to vote, and we need to encourage all to participate actively.

Rabbi Pesner also spoke of the cancellation of the pre-High Holiday phone call with President Trump and of the need for people who care about various issues to work together, even if we don’t always agree on all of the issues before us.

Some members of the group noted the challenge of working on causes in which opposing advocates have spent enormous amounts of money. They emphasized the need for groups to work together, pool whatever resources can be shared and work on the local and state level as well as in national politics to achieve important goals.

Rev. Winkler also noted the challenge that many new funders supporting progressive causes are looking to give their support to new groups and so offer less to those who have spent years working on critical issues. And many don’t like to fund faith-based groups.

Rev. Jim Winkler continued the program with a review of recent travels in coordination with the World Council of Churches.

In America the National Council of Churches envisions a multi-year project of bringing churches together to fight racism and bigotry and to work toward healing divisions in American life. As part of this effort, a rally is planned on the National Mall on April 4, with the hope of bringing large numbers of people to advocate for issues of concern. (It was noted that April 4 is during the interim days of Passover, which should not preclude Jewish groups from participating.)

Rev. Winkler noted that in the previous administration, the N. C. C. and other faith groups were regularly connected through various consultations with the government. Now those consultations do not take place and a serious challenge is to make sure that the cooperation continues. At present, lack of access to government makes work by our organizations more important than ever.

The National Council of Churches, Rev. Winkler noted, faced serious financial and organizational issues in recent years. It is now a smaller organization, leaner, but prepared, and perhaps better prepared, to respond to issues of concern on the agenda. It is also valued by the World Council of Churches, and in some ways better known outside the U. S. than inside. Recent invitations have involved the N. C. C. in programs in Cuba and Korea and in cooperation with the Middle East Council of

Churches in Lebanon, Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Leadership meetings were held with government officials, opposition groups and church groups.

It was noted that 2015-2024 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Decade for African Descendant people. The National Council of Churches does not have a position on Reparations in the aftermath of American slavery, but sees the issue as something that can emerge from other discussions.

On the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation

Professor Darrell Jodock led a review of the legacy of Martin Luther's challenges to the Roman Catholic Church, noting that Luther himself was reluctant to take the role of revolutionary and would have preferred to be part of a dialogue in which the concerns of many were given a larger voice.

Much began with Luther's challenge to the Indulgences that began as part of the confessional system and gradually became a very significant source of revenue for the Church and a form of exploitation resented by many. Luther rejected the notion of "buying salvation" as he saw it.

Luther was called before the Council of Worms in 1521 and asked to repent. His refusal was based on the goal of promoting debate and dialogue within the Church.

Luther wanted not only religious reform but also social reform, seeking help for those who were in poverty beyond token charity that was extended. He advocated for universal public education, for men and for women, partly because of his desire for all to be able to study Scripture. He opposed the Crusades and educated himself in the traditions and teachings of Islam.

Luther was a "conservative reformer." He wanted to keep focused on his vision and not be sidetracked; he wanted to persuade rather than coerce.

And reformers make mistakes. One of Luther's greatest mistakes was in his attitude toward the Jews and his increasing hostility toward Jews. In his life he probably did not know any Jews, but his rantings against them were used through the centuries that followed, culminating in their use by the Nazis in their rise to power and their perpetration of the Holocaust. These teachings the Church has rejected in various statements over the course of recent decades.

Contemporary Presentation and Discussion

Rabbi Elan Babchuck, National Director of Innovation for CLAL (Center for Learning and Leadership) spoke at the afternoon session by computer connection.

Rabbi Babchuck cited various statistics as to the ignorance of many people in Jewish and in Christian communities about the teachings of their faith and the meaning of the denominational labels that are generally used. For many, young people especially, the labels matter less and less.

Many trends are indicated by the statistics. Although most Jews say they are proud to be Jewish, the majority are not connected to the Jewish community through any organization. Most are “culturally Jewish” and the majority of those who marry are marrying non-Jews. Most Protestants do not understand the actual teachings of their faith, and enormous numbers of Americans are “lapsed Catholics” while most growth in the Catholic Church involves immigrant communities.

Rabbi Babchuck advocated searching for new solutions through the use of entrepreneurial techniques. One is “disruptive innovation”- willingness to modify programming based on an understanding of how social, emotional and functional needs are met, even if it means moving beyond the boundaries of their traditional mission. It is important to know the circumstances of people’s lives and understand what they choose to accomplish through things they do. His examples stressed searches for what is successful instead of analyzing and revising what is not working.

Rabbi Babchuck emphasized that there are things that are working. Institutions are finding ways of including people in smaller groups. Intimacy in worship experiences is valued as opposed to large group experiences. We need to lower barriers for entry, especially in regard to finances. Leaders need to be flexible and seek feedback at every level and look to do one thing, or a few things, well, as opposed to trying to do everything. The challenge of churches and synagogues with large buildings to maintain is a significant problem.

Questions involved the effectiveness of using business metrics to measure church or synagogue effectiveness, and whether research work is most effective in interfaith contexts or in the work of specific churches or denominations. Some members of the group were concerned that innovation becomes a goal in itself instead of advancing the religious and spiritual goals of the institution/organization and some asked whether the goal should be to build what people want as opposed to what we believe is important.

All noted that isolation and separation from the community are major problems in religious life and in mental health.

Closing discussion

Before closing there was a brief discussion about goals for the future, including consideration of areas in which interfaith leaders can work together. Among topics mentioned were efforts to eliminate bigotry and anti-Semitism, human trafficking

and climate change. Generally looking toward the future of interfaith relations was also mentioned as a concern to discuss. Many agreed that with so many public policy issues before our organizations, there is a concern that the agenda is overwhelming, and it is important that we focus on areas in which we have common concerns and can work together effectively.

Next Meeting

Our next meeting will be held **April 30 - May 1, 2018, in Providence, Rhode Island**. Rabbi Wayne Franklin and Rev. Don Alexander are working on the program and the logistics. More information will be shared as soon as it is available.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues