

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

June 9, 2021
Zoom Conference

Attendance:

Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Martin Budd, Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Kenneth Jacobson, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi Daniel Polish, Rabbi David Saperstein, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, Rabbi Jonathan Waxman, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Allyson Zacharoff, Rabbi Harold Berman

Guest: Yolanda Savage-Narva, Director, Racial Equity, Diversity & Inclusion, Union for Reform Judaism

H. E. Wilton Cardinal Gregory, Most Rev. Denis Madden, Most Rev. Mitch Rozanski, Rev. Lawrence Frizzell, Rev. Msgr. Guy Massie, Julia McStravog, Rev. Brian McWeeney, Rev. David Michael, Jan Skrehot, Sr. Anita Baird, Rev. Charlie Cortinovis, Rev. Walter Kedjierski, Rev. Dennis McManus, Rebecca Cohen

Guests: Most Rev. David Talley, Bishop of Memphis and Chair, Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops **Donna Grimes, Assistant Director**, African American Affairs, Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church, U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

MINUTES RECORDED BY RABBI HAROLD BERMAN

Cardinal Wilton Gregory opened the meeting with a prayer and an expression of concern over violence that has been increasing in many communities.

Rebecca Cohen gave a brief introduction to the logistics and etiquette of our Zoom meeting.

Rabbi Wayne Franklin expressed condolences to Fr. Loughran on the passing of his brother and explained that Fr. Loughran would not be able to participate as planned because of this family loss.

UPDATE ON THE WORKING GROUP ON RACE AND RACISM

Rabbi Wayne Franklin discussed the idea, introduced at the last dialogue, of using the narrative that led to and proceeded from Nostra Aetate as a model for examining racial justice. Although many issues are different and parallels are imprecise, there are enough similarities to suggest that the paradigm could be valuable. The challenges include determining to whom we would be speaking and how we first look at ourselves and our own organizations. For this reason we proposed a facilitated discussion for this meeting to help us move forward.

In addition, a proposal by **Fr. Dennis McManus** suggested the development of a curriculum for high school educators and students, building on building on the model and successful experience of the Anti-Defamation League's Bearing Witness program, to advance understanding for the next generation of issues of racial justice and anti-Semitism. It is important for us to determine if this is a project we want to endorse.

DISCUSSION

Danielle Brown, Associate Director of the Ad Hoc Committee on Racism of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, was introduced as the facilitator for the discussion to follow. Ms. Brown asked the initial question: what is the current situation in which we find ourselves regarding the pursuit of racial justice in the United States today.

Among comments:

Franklin - There is resistance by many white people who feel threatened and that resistance is sometimes a barrier to having a good conversation.

Zacharoff - It is important to have conversations so we can move beyond them to action.

Eron - There is considerable insecurity. People feel less safe in their communities and many have a distrust for members of other communities. People hesitate to get involved in too much discussion because they are uncertain as to where it will lead. Leaders need to assure that there is safety in having conversations.

Wohlberg – There are three main elements that need to be accounted for: fear, ignorance and bigotry. These need to be recognized, otherwise it is hard to identify what is holding us back from making progress.

Visotzky – A study group of rabbis and African American clergy in five cities, examining Biblical texts together, showed that trust needed to be established before productive discussion could take place. Serious discussion is only possible when long-term relationships build toward a level of trust.

Waxman – A challenge is that most of us live in communities where there are very few people of color, and our congregations include very few Jews of color.

Rozanski – Nearly all of our communities have a common history of racism and misunderstanding.

Savage-Narva – It is important to recognize that racism has an impact on all of us. It is not simply a matter of bringing people together to work with each other. We need to recognize that many people in our communities don't fit neatly into the categories we usually use.

Gutow – There are places where people are coming together and they set models from which we can all learn.

Polish – We need to recognize the challenges of intersectionality and the realization that Jews are excluded from a meaningful role in many new coalitions.

Berman – We sometimes let collective memories of good things we have done get in the way of our need to work for systemic change.

Marans – There is a feeling among some Jews that although they want to be included in progressive causes, they are often blocked by anti-Semitic and anti-Israel sentiments that make them unwelcome.

Eron – “White” is a definition that has become prominent in conversations. Jews, who previously didn’t seem to be white enough now are identified as too white in some circles.

Zacharoff – Many Jews do not identify as white and don’t fit into discussions of race in any simple way.

Talley – Many of our parishioners are not focused on these issues. Their immediate concerns are more directed toward making a living and keeping themselves and their families healthy.

Madden – Much violence and poverty that exist in black neighborhoods would not be tolerated in white neighborhoods. Even when there are black elected officials, real change is hard to achieve.

Franklin – A key issue is the status of public schools. Segregation in schools has increased and people too often, because they have the resources, remove their children from schools where diverse groups could learn from each other.

Massie – We can’t change everything, but we can use what we have to make positive changes. Brooklyn, which is more integrated than most places, has local parishes where people come together and work cooperatively.

McWeeney – The problem in New York City is paternalism. People are told what’s wrong with them and also what others are going to do for them. The real concerns of people to whom we need to listen are good education and quality housing.

Saperstein – Common threat to all is white nationalism and it is crucial that we stand together. We can’t let intersectionality divide us. Catholics and Jews have always been at the core of the global work we need to do.

Baird – A lack of understanding of history leads to mistrust. Few Black people have much interaction with or understanding of Jews. We have to listen to each

other's stories. There is also a lack of preaching from the pulpit about racism. The result is that many Black Catholics are leaving the church.

Gordon – There are two separate definitions of intersectionality. One notes that identity is fluid and that people can be part of a “privileged” community and also face vulnerabilities. The other sees opposition to Israel’s policies, if not its existence, as central to a liberal agenda, creating obstacles for Jewish partnership on other issues. It is also problematic that many Blacks have heard more about “racist” texts in Jewish tradition than Jews have.

Skrehot – Some of the time we work together, but then we go back to our own less integrated spaces. Education makes a difference but many people don’t have time or space to get together and hear each other’s stories.

Cardinal Gregory thanked **Danielle Brown** for serving as facilitator for the discussion.

REVIEW OF RACIAL CONCILIATION EFFORTS THAT ARE UNDER WAY

Fr. Kedjierski introduced **Donna Grimes** who spoke of the Pastoral Letter and the focus on justice and on relieving poverty in the work of her office, using the umbrella of diversity for offices that deal with a variety of missionary efforts.

Ms. Grimes noted that people often don’t realize how diverse the Catholic Church is. She also noted that Charlottesville was a strong influence in the push to make sure that certain concerns were addressed, including the statement that racism is a sin and that racism is a pro-life issue. The Pastoral Letter goes back to the example of Cain and Abel as an example of hatred and violence. Nonetheless, some were upset that it didn’t say more. But it provided a background and permission for teaching about racial justice from a faith perspective.

Focus of current efforts is on the areas in which we can make a difference, including our educational system, seminary training and teaching from the pulpit. It is important that all Catholics hear the message: This is what your Bishop believes.” The USCCB has facilitated the opening of discussions in many places as well as the production of materials for dialogue.

Rabbi Straus introduced **Yolanda Savage-Narva** who began with mention of a Talmudic text that asks why all of humanity are descended from a single person and answers that because of this no one can say that “my origin is better than yours.” As well, the text says that humanity was created from the earth’s clay, with all colors from all corners of the earth coming together. Ms. Savage-Narva identified external efforts in the work of the Religious Action Center, including voting rights for all, and internal efforts that require us to focus on ourselves in our communities, our synagogues, our camps and other programs, considering how we address and educate for racial equity, diversity and inclusion. She noted the importance of examining governance and board structure as well

as ongoing messages about gender and race. Videos have been created for movement camps and discussion groups.

The ongoing challenge is to work with others and find better ways to teach about equity as well as equality, leveling the playing field to create opportunities for all. As important as anything else is the need to listen to others and get to know each other.

PROJECT PROPOSAL

Fr. McManus introduced a proposal for an educational initiative to help bring a better perspective to our schools. He noted that it is hard for all of us to admit how little we know of each other's stories.

Using the model of an earlier program of the ADL, the suggestion is that starting with educators in Washington, D. C. Catholic and Jewish schools, curriculum ideas will be introduced to share the questions that are essential to all our communities and inspire people to work together to see all those around us as important in all of our stories.

With questions about how the project is to begin, it was clear that considerable committee and staff work is needed to develop materials, bring educators together for workshops and consider how to expand the reach of those involved to the largest number of students.

CLOSING

Rabbi Straus, in thanking all who participated, expressed the hope that the next meeting can be held in person. He also introduced the suggestion that we continue the focus on racial justice and consider meeting in Atlanta, with possible travel to Selma, Birmingham and Montgomery.

A poll will be sent out to determine the interest and availability of members of the dialogue before logistics of the fall meeting are set in place.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues