

Jews and Christians Make History in Edmonton

By Sr. Rosaleen Zdunich

On April 20, 1986, a historic meeting of two faiths was celebrated. Conservative Rabbi Haim Kemelman and Roman Catholic Archbishop Joseph MacNeil prayed together at Beth Shalom synagogue.

Warm greetings were extended to the Archbishop upon his first official visit to Beth Shalom synagogue and to all who were present. This meeting came one week after Pope John Paul II participated in a similar service in the main Jewish Synagogue in Rome. The two visits were coincidental. However, the Rabbi and the Archbishop commented that this service was arranged before the Pope announced his plans to visit the synagogue in Rome.

Rabbi Haim Kemelman opened the service by chanting in Hebrew Psalm 100, "A Psalm of Thanksgiving." "Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into His presence with singing."

He reminded the congregation that "we are custodians of a common ethic." He praised Pope John Paul II for his "one step in a giant leap of faith," and said, "The two faiths should not be strangers or competitors in a pluralistic society."

After leading the congregation in a responsive prayer, Archbishop MacNeil addressed the assembly. He recalled Pope John Paul's II's visit to the Synagogue in Rome the previous Sunday where he said, "You are our dearly beloved brothers; you are our elder brothers." The Archbishop reminded everyone that this shows the important new steps being taken to deepen the relationship and dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish people.

Archbishop MacNeil also spoke about Vatican II document "Nostra Aetate" (In Our Time) which expresses a new attitude of the Catholic Church to Jewish people and to Judaism. He said, "This document is significant not only for Roman Catholic Christians but also for Catholic – Jewish relations. Even though we belong to two different and important religious traditions we are rooted in this common heritage. We can see this in our common spiritual values and especially in the many links between the Christian Liturgy and the Jewish Liturgy. These links are a powerful force that can bring us closer to each other as we come to understand our common roots."

He concluded his presentation by saying, "We have begun a long and important journey together as



Left: Archbishop MacNeil, Right: Rabbi Kemelman



Christians and as Jews. The important thing is that, having begun, we continue and come to a deeper appreciation of our two religious traditions in fidelity to the Most High.”

At the conclusion of the Archbishop’s presentation, questions were welcomed by the two religious leaders. Then, together, they prayed Psalm 133, “The Blessedness of Unity.” “Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.”

The Rabbi and the Archbishop concluded the celebration as they extended their hands in a joint blessing in Hebrew and English.

*“May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you.
May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you
and give you peace.” Numbers 6: 24-26*

The standing-room-only crowd far exceeded expectations. A reception followed. Everyone agreed it was a history-making day in the City of Edmonton and a remarkable and blessed Sunday afternoon.

This service was organized and coordinated by Sr. Rosaleen Zdunich and Rabbi Haim Kemelman. Rabbi Kemelman slipped into eternity in 1988, two years after this service.