

Protestant, Jewish leaders seek to mend their rift

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue

Prominent mainline Protestant and Jewish leaders are trying to revive an interfaith group that dissolved 18 months ago over a letter the Protestants wrote to Congress about Israel.

The Christian-Jewish Roundtable was founded about a decade ago to deepen understanding between the two groups, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, over which Jewish groups and more liberal Protestant churches have frequently disagreed.

After a private meeting in New York before Holy Week and Passover, both sides announced that they want to work together again.

“It was not a ‘kumbaya, everybody loves each other’ meeting,” said Steve Gutow, president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, which hosted the March 27 meeting.

But the 15 participants and two facilitators—one a rabbi, the other a minister—showed goodwill, he said.

“I don’t want to overstate it, but I’m hopeful,” said Gutow, who convened the meeting with Mark S. Hanson, the former presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

James E. Winkler, president of the National Council of Churches, described the five-hour summit: “You just had the feeling that there are differences between us, particularly on how we view the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but a deep, underlying commitment to each other, and of course to peace.”

Winkler added that he “breathed a huge sigh of relief” after the meeting went well and the two sides agreed to meet again. The group aims for three meetings during the next two years.

The roundtable had broken up after the Protestants sent a letter to Congress asking for more scrutiny over American aid to Israel.

For the Protestants, the letter was an attempt to question what they see as unconditional U.S. financial assistance to the Israeli government and a way to stand up for beleaguered Palestinians who live in Israeli-occupied territory.

For the Jews, who said they were blindsided by the letter, it reflected the Protestants' unwillingness to appreciate threats against the Jewish state and their willingness to subject Israel to standards higher than those applied to other nations.

"We didn't talk [at the March meeting] about the content of the letter," said Gradye Parsons, stated clerk of the Presbyterian General Assembly, whose church has long debated divesting from certain companies that do business with Israel.

"The meeting was about how we talk to each other, about how we begin to get on that road of reconciliation," he said.

The roundtable that fell apart in October 2012 was actually two roundtables—one focused on Middle East issues, the other on theological concerns—and included mostly senior staffers from major mainline Protestant denominations and Jewish groups.

The recent attempt at reconciliation brought together the principals of these organizations. The list of attendees read like a who's who in Protestant-Jewish religious leadership.

In addition to Gutow, Hanson, Winkler, and Parsons, the participants were: Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League; David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee; Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism; Daniel S. Mariaschin, executive vice president of B'nai B'rith International; Julie Schonfeld, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly; Steven C. Wernick, CEO of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism; David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center at the Union for Reform Judaism; Geoffrey A. Black, general minister of the United Church of Christ; Elizabeth A. Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Mary Ann Swenson, ecumenical office of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church; and Sharon E. Watkins, general minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. —RNS

*This article was edited May 13, 2014.*