

# Jewish-Christian dialogue

## leaders note success

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Mobile possibly has the largest dialogue group of Jews and Christians in the United States, participants in the group have learned.

Paul and Mary Filben, Roman Catholics involved in the group, have been attending national workshops for Jews and Christians for the past two years in an attempt to learn from others. The couple discovered they had something to teach others in the country as well.

Said Filben, "At both meetings we were told, first of all, we have the largest group in the country and, second, that we were the only group in dialogue on a personal level — small groups in homes."

This year, which is the third year of dialogues in Mobile, the approximately 100 participants have moved away from the format of small groups in homes, however.

Mrs. Filben explained, "In the beginning, we felt we had to come to know each other before we could establish any degree of trust, but we found out by the end of the second year we had gone as far as we could in that direction. We knew each other well, and we felt we could move on to something else."

Consequently, all dialogue sessions this year are being held at Spring Hill Avenue Temple, and various religious leaders are speaking to the group.

Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs, who became spiritual leader of Spring Hill Avenue Temple last summer, commented, "I feel I entered at the nicest possible time."

He said, "All the groundwork (for dialogue) had been laid. We're now moving into what may be the most unique

kind of dialogue group in the country. Most dialogue groups I know of are still at the stage of dialogueing among themselves — lay person to lay person — and not reaching out for resource persons who are available, both locally and nationally. Because this group is doing so, I think that's what really excited me."

Said the rabbi, "This group was able to bring to our community the kinds of speakers who truly can enlighten all of us, both laity and clergy."

In discussing how the dialogue began in Mobile, Mrs. Filben said it was an outgrowth of the Mobile Catholic Diocese's Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Commission.

Members of the commission, Mrs. Filben said, met in 1975 and viewed a filmstrip titled "Christians and Jews — A Troubled Brotherhood."

At that point, "the commission decided we wanted to do something with the Jewish community to try to build some bridges. It was as simple as that."

The Filbens were asked by the commission to make overtures to the local Jewish community. The result was that Rabbi Richard Messing (then spiritual leader of Spring Hill Avenue Temple who since has accepted a rabbinate in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada) and some members of his congregation attended a meeting with the Catholics.

"There were about 14 to 16 people there," recalled Filben, "and the group was about half Jews and half Christians."

Mrs. Filben remembered the question was posed by one of the Catholics, "Here we are a small group of the Christian community. What can we do?"

The response quickly came from a member of the Jewish community: "Act like Christians."

Filben said another member of the Jewish community declared, "If we stopped right now, it would be worth it to me. This is the first time I have ever realized a Catholic wasn't sure about everything — absolutely certain."

In remembering the comment, Filben laughed, "He wasn't being facetious. I felt what he was saying was that because of the dogma and doctrinal positions the church takes on specific things, he had kind of thought, therefore, every Catholic is absolutely certain in his own mind about what he believes."

According to Mrs. Filben, "That first night everyone came away with the feeling that it was good. Everybody there said, 'Let's not stop. Let's go from here.'"

In the small groups that met thereafter, many topics were discussed. Some that the Filbens recalled included anti-Semitism and persecution, views of God, prayer, abortion, original sin, Israel and Zionism, views of creation.

In the initial stages of dialogue, Filben said, emphasis was placed on having members of the group react to questions as individuals rather than as Jews or Christians. The result was that on some questions, "if you had 16 people, you might have 16 different answers," said Filben, smiling.

Another emphasis, he said, was on having the lay persons in the group openly give their views rather than deferring to the rabbi, priests or nuns present.

This year for the first time, according to Filben, "we're hitting differences head-on. Our challenge is to recognize our differences and accept each other as we are, not as

we would have each other be."

Asked whether any hidden motive exists in the talks, Mrs. Filben replied, "Absolutely not. It was beautiful that we never had to say, 'We have not come to change you.'"

Rabbi Jacobs injected, "I think the ongoing success of the program indicates the thrust has not been conversionary but has been a quest for everyone's understanding, information and genuine respect for differences."

Speaking from a Catholic viewpoint, Mrs. Filben said, "Since Vatican II (worldwide Catholic council of the 1960s), the church has told us, 'Who wants to change the Jews and other communities other than Christians?' We have finally admitted the Jewish people have a very beautiful, necessary place in this life just like they are."

Rabbi Jacobs noted the dialogue group now includes some Baptists, Presbyterians and others besides Catholics and Jews.

However, because the Jewish community is much smaller than the Christian community as a whole, the rabbi pointed out the impossibility for Jews to become involved in dialogue with each particular Christian denomination.

Yet, he said, "I'd like to see the program expanded to open doors so that other religious communities can become involved. That's the potential. For example, this dialogue could become the springboard for a dialogue between Catholics and Episcopalians, etc."

The next session planned for the group already involved in dialogue is next Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at Spring Hill Avenue Temple. Sister Teresa Brethauer, minister of religious education at Holy Family Catholic Church in Mobile, will speak on "The Messiahship of Jesus: Christian Perspective."