

Religious leader foresees generation of dialogue about unresolved questions in Jewish-Christian relations

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Christians are grappling with questions in their relations with Jews which may take "a generation or more of real dialogue" with Jews "before we can begin to have coherent answers."

THAT VIEW WAS presented by Dr. Eugene J. Fisher during a dialogue of Christians and Jews at Dauphin Street Synagogue in Mobile. Fisher, a layman, is executive secretary of the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, based in Washington, D.C.

Noting that true grassroots dialogue between Jews and Christians primarily is centered in the United States and is only about 15 years old, Fisher said the two faiths have come to many understandings and agreements. These understandings also are coming from official levels in international exchanges.

HOWEVER, CHRISTIANS still are dealing with questions.

Catholics dealing with questions surrounding Jewish-Christian relations tend to suggest that the church's mission to the world should not be "in competition with the Jews but possibly in a sense of partnership ... because we are proclaimers of the name of the one God..."

Yet, according to Fisher, "there are questions that are left without answers in the framework that this presents." Christians are facing questions about their traditional belief in the intended universality of their religion. Questions surround "the Christ event" in relation to Jews. Other questions are unresolved.

DESPITE THE QUESTIONS, Catholics have developed "a fairly official stance" in their relations with Jews which is quite clearly understood, according to Fisher.

The Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s, various groups of Catholic bishops and others have focused on some points in an attempt to clarify them.

Catholic leaders have said that "there is nothing in the New Testament that leads to a conclusion that Judaism was abrogated with the coming of Jesus."

Said Fisher, "Hebrew Scriptures are the living word of God on their own. They need no explanation, qualification."

HE QUOTED POPE John Paul II as saying a spiritual link exists between Christians and Jews. The pope "doesn't put that in the past tense. He talks about there is a spiritual link, a living link. This linkage, a sense of bindingness, is a present reality."

Moreover, the church must remember "it draws sustenance" from its roots in Judaism.

Because of the church's views of Jews and the relations between Jews and Christians, according to Fisher, "the church needs dialogue with the Jewish people in order to understand its own essential mystery."

ANOTHER SPEAKER DURING the local program called dialogue a form of "Christian witness" which should not be disturbing to Jews.

Presenting that view was the Rev. Dr. William L. Weiler, Washington affairs officer on the national staff of the Episcopal Church.

WEILER SAID Jewish-Christian dialogue "is a valid form of Christian witness" because "there is not the

desire to convince or convert, proselytize, but freely and openly share one's faith."

Another legitimate form of Christian witness, Weiler said, is "proclamation," or preaching in which the Christian "proclaims his faith forthrightly, honestly, without any deceptions or without trying to take advantage of anyone."

A third form of genuine witness, the Episcopal priest said, is "living the life, the ethical life we are called to live."

HE SAID JEWS must understand that "Christianity is a missionary religion. Jesus called his disciples to be a light to the world.... Christianity by its very nature is a proselytizing religion."

Unfortunately, according to the speaker, during the history of Christianity, including today, Christians too often have not simply "proclaimed the gospel as their Lord had called them to do but used tactics of deception, in some cases force, to convert others to Christianity."

Weiler said the practice of proselytization is not unique to Christians.

IN A TALK sprinkled liberally with Hebrew phrases, Weiler, who earned his doctorate in biblical studies from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, said that "even in the earliest pages of Scripture the concept of proselytization was known to the Hebrew writers, and in fact proselytization was carried on. Abraham and Sarah ... serve as the first proselytizers, or the first missionaries, if you will, converting men and women to Judaism."

He continued, "As we make our way through Scripture, we find that proselytization in various stages of Hebrew history was carried on sometimes very vehemently... with great vigor."

SINCE THE SIXTH century before the common era (the Jewish term used rather than the Gentile term of "before Christ"), more Jews have lived outside of Israel than within it, Weiler said.

In their dispersion throughout the world, Jews "shared their culture, their religion with their neighbors."

The Episcopal leader acknowledged that "the rabbinic attitudes toward those converting to Judaism were quite mixed, to be sure. Not all the rabbis thought it was a good thing that people should abandon their religion and turn to Judaism."

JEWS' PROSELYTIZATION has been largely discontinued during "the very painful period of history during the Christian centuries" when Christians often have subjected Jews to deception and force in order to convert them.

However, said Weiler, "it's interesting to note that just during the past year a leader of one of our national rabbinic movements, Alexander Schindler, has actually called for Jews to reach out to those who are unchurched, that is to people who have practiced no particular religion, to encourage them to become Jews." (Schindler, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the association of Reform Jewish congregations in the United States and Canada, with headquarters in New York, visited Mobile last year.)

Weiler agreed with Fisher that dialogue must be a priority for Christians and Jews as they seek to solve dilemmas of proselytization.

SPEAKING SPECIFICALLY to the Mobile dialogue group, Weiler said, "I noticed in the caption that describes your dialogue you mentioned that you reach out to touch, and I think that's part of the task we have in dialogue with one another."