

# Mobile Catholic archbishop favors voluntary meetings of religious groups on public school grounds

Mobile, Saturday, Jan. 29, 1983

By SYLVIA HART  
Press Register Reporter

Mobile Catholic Archbishop Oscar H. Lipscomb has made a suggestion for easing a modern dilemma about religion in U.S. public schools.

**THE ARCHBISHOP** presented his opinion in an address to the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue group in a program at Government Street Presbyterian Church.

Lipscomb said he believes students of a particular religious persuasion should be able to meet on public school grounds during activity periods, and the students should be able "to invite their minister, their priest, their rabbi in to talk with them every so often."

**THE STUDENT** meetings focusing on religion should not be mandatory but voluntary and should not be sponsored by schools, Lipscomb said.

He asked, "Will the courts permit it? I think the courts will eventually be responsive to the kinds of needs that are in this country if those who make the laws and those who elect the officials can make sufficiently forceful (their needs) so that the courts cannot ignore them."

Lipscomb presented his view in the latest meeting of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue on Jan. 13.

On Jan. 17, the U.S. Supreme Court left in tact a decision of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans that a policy of the Lubbock, Texas, public schools is unconstitutional.

Declared unconstitutional was the

Lubbock plan for elementary and high school students to "gather at school with supervision either before or after regular school hours on the same basis as other groups ... so long as attendance at such meetings is voluntary."

Last Monday U.S. Sen. Jeremiah Denton of Mobile announced he will introduce a bill in the current congressional session that would allow religious groups to hold meetings on public school grounds.

Lipscomb talked to his audience in the Presbyterian church about the history of U.S. public education in relation to religion.

**HE SAID** those persons who came to colonial America from other countries "did not come hunting universal religious liberty on these shores. They came hunting a particular religious liberty that had been denied to them in other places, and once they got here they established their freedom very often to the exclusion of other freedoms."

Among examples Lipscomb named: "There was precious little tolerance in Puritan Massachusetts if you weren't a Puritan."

**THE SPEAKER** said the ideal of religious liberty was not implanted from the beginning in the United States but instead developed as the result of interaction among people, who for the sake of their own liberty had to concede liberty to others.

The ideal of religious liberty developed along with a philosophy which viewed religion, not as a pervasive entity, but "as something that is altogether private and apart from the art of statecraft, at least in Western democratic

thought; that is, basically English thought," according to Lipscomb.

**THE ARCHBISHOP** said colonial schools were not established to bring about literacy. The goal of education was to enable persons to be able to "read the Bible and be saved."

Early public education was "under the aegis of a church. Religion in the schools was the norm, and this meant sectarian (denominational) religion," the archbishop said.

A change came about in the 1830s and 1840s, when Horace Mann made his influence felt. Mann is known as "the father of American public education."

**BY THE** 1830s, according to Lipscomb, generally the United States had no established churches that were receiving tax benefits, and no religion held a position of privilege because the United States had "too many Protestant denominations to be comfortable in saying one or the other was right."

Still, according to the speaker, until the end of the 19th century, "a thrust of religiosity" was present in public education which mirrored the geographic backgrounds of local school boards. That religiosity worked "to the advantage mostly of the Protestant churches."

The religiosity in the schools rarely worked to the advantage of Catholic or Jewish minorities.

**MANN LED** U.S. public educators into a promotion of "what they called a non-sectarian religion in the public schools," Lipscomb said. A practice developed of reading the Bible without comment.

Catholic immigrants soon learned, however, that "to read the Bible almost always provoked some comment," which generally was pre-

judiced against Catholics. Thus the Catholics developed their own independent school systems.

**LIPSCOMB SAID** the public schools under Mann's influence in actuality "established interdenominational Protestantism," which remained in effect until the end of the 19th century.

From the turn of the 20th century and thereafter, Lipscomb said, "the normative voice in public school education in our country" as John Dewey.

Dewey "saw the school as the chief agency for making sense out of life for the young. It had to fill the vacuum which was being left by family and church in the growth and development of children."

A vacuum developed in immigrant families, including Irish, German, Italian and others, as the children grew up in a different context of life from their parents.

**THE SCHOOL**, according to Lipscomb, became the agency for "fashioning a united American people."

Lipscomb said that Dewey "considered his vision (of education) as religious, a matter of principle, a matter of dedication in spite of the fact that he opposed religion."

One problem with Dewey's vision of education as an instrument of "unity and oneness," Lipscomb said, was that Catholics, Jews and others did not wish to lose their identity and their roots.

**NONETHELESS**, under Dewey's influence, the schools expanded into the lives of children and communities. "Eventually the school

became the dominant social institution in many communities," Lipscomb said, adding that churches and synagogues assumed smaller roles in the lives of people.

For the sake of unity, Dewey established "a secularistic religion based — whether or not upon a revealed or theological content — upon what his age perceived as the end (ultimate) in life predicated upon the United States of America."

**DEWEY BEGAN** to establish "a religion of democracy in the schools."

Churches continued to think they were part of the educational process, Lipscomb said, because educators continued to read the Bible without comment.

By the 1940s, Lipscomb said, "the schools had become the central socializing agency for the children of our nation."

**HE CONTINUED**, "By and large, into the '40s the public schools represented the most comprehensive normative value system in our country."

Besides bringing unity within the country, the schools were to "raise up moral citizens. We could translate that today to say good law-abiding citizens."

The school, in the archbishop's view, "became the formally unestablished national church."

**WHAT DEVELOPED** in public education was "not necessarily all that terrible," Lipscomb said, except that patriotism and unity, rather than God, should never have been perceived as "the ultimate good or the final value."

After World War II, during the so-called "cold war" between the United States and the Soviet Union, Lipscomb said that for Americans "our American way of life took upon itself the aura of part of the ultimate good."

He added, "I'm not saying that saving the world for democracy is wrong. I'm just saying that to elevate it to the status of a religion is to establish a religion, and this was in effect done in our country."

**DURING THIS** period, Lipscomb said, religion in the schools "had been so desecularized that it had become

thoroughly secularized. We had established a religion, but it had nothing of the sacred about it. The religion was closely tied with patriotism."

Today the United States is in a state of confusion about religion in public schools, Lipscomb said, partly because of two U.S. Supreme Court decisions.

He named the Engel vs. Vitale case in 1962 in which the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the use of a prayer composed by the New York Board of Regents.

**HE ALSO** named the Murray vs. Curlett case in 1963 when the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the use of the Lord's Prayer and devotional Bible reading to open the school day.

The second decision "hit at the heart of Protestant ethic," Lipscomb said, "when it was unconstitutional to read the Lord's Prayer in the school."

Said the archbishop, "The courts have proceeded according to the laws of logic and precedent and brought us to a stage where common sense and experience tell us this is not where we want to be with our families, our daughters and our sons as they grow up."

**THE ARCHBISHOP** said, however, "I'm not one who thinks we ought to legislate religion into the schools. I just don't think it can be done the way the schools are currently set up."

Besides suggesting that schools ought to be allowed to provide voluntary participation in religious meetings during activity periods, Lipscomb made another suggestion for solving the modern dilemma.

**HE SAID** families must return to a practice of the past of inculcating religious values within homes.

A generation gap occurred, Lipscomb said, in modern America when grandparents and older aunts and uncles ceased to live in the families with children.

He called grandparents the conservators and transmitters of culture and religious values.