

open

MINDS

*Dialogue group fosters
good relations between
area Jews and
Christians*

S.J. Ripps, left, and Gil Laden carry on a discussion at a meeting of Mobile Jewish-Christian Dialogue, the country's longest-running inter-faith group organized by laymen.



DILL STADLING/DAVID PHOTOGRAPHY

By PAMELA H. LONG
Religion Reporter

OVER the years, Mobile has experienced only a few acts of overt anti-Semitism. So it's not surprising that the Mobile Jewish-Christian Dialogue has been operating uninterrupted for 21 years.

"It's the longest-functioning, consistently meeting group in the country," said Mary Filben, who with husband Paul founded the group in 1975.

That claim is backed up by the National Conference, formerly known as the National Conference of Christians and Jews, a group that combats religious, ethnic and cultural bigotry.

Even if the Mobile group were not the longest-running group, a national expert on interfaith dialogue is impressed. "This is unusual, there's no question," said Gunther Lawrence, executive director of the Interreligious Information Center in New York.

Lawrence said that there are numerous groups formed between clergy members, but a successful dialogue that combines clergy and lay people is unusual. "One of the biggest problems is that too much interreligious dialogue, whether on the international or national level, never filters into the grassroots. That's where we're failing in interreligious relations."

The Mobile group, he said, could serve as a national model for a successful interfaith dialogue.

The group began as a function of the Catholic diocese's Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Commission under the leadership of Bishop John L. May. The Filbens invited the rabbis of the two Jewish congregations, and any members they wished to bring along, to watch a film titled "Christians and Jews: A Troubled Brotherhood."

"At first I think we were all a little fearful because we

didn't know where we were going, but we wanted and we needed to go somewhere," Mrs. Filben said.

As it turned out, the Springhill Avenue Temple already had in place a discussion group it called "Dessert and Dialogue," which it opened up to the interfaith group.

A steering committee was formed, and Temple records show that "almost 200 Jews and Catholics (evenly split) signed up to participate." Home group meetings, or "havurot," were formed for Jewish and Catholic participants to meet and get to know each other. Soon they invited Protestant laymen and clergy to participate.

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—Co-founder Mary Filben

needed to go to the next level. "There was a real danger of it being a tea and cookie group because we were getting so comfortable, just patting each other on the back. We knew we had to get beyond that," Mrs. Filben said.

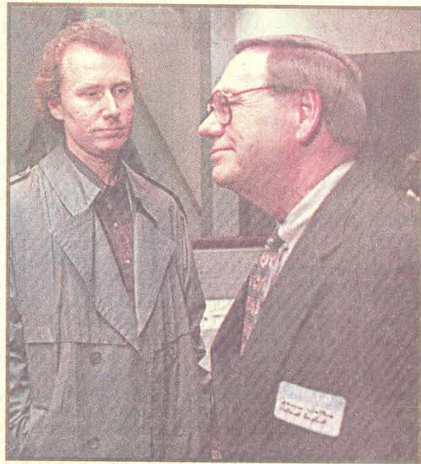
The dialogue group began inviting guest speakers who were experts on Jewish or Christian theology, and moved the meetings out of homes and into various houses of worship.

At the last meeting, held this past Tuesday at the First Baptist Church, the discussion hinged on a lecture by Clark M. Williamson, a professor of theology at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis.

His talk, titled, "Should Christians Have a Mission to

Currently the dialogue operates on funds from the Mobile Catholic Archdiocese, the Gulf Coast Episcopal Diocese, the Mobile Jewish Welfare Fund, Ahavas Chesed Synagogue, the Springhill Avenue Temple Sisterhood, the Unitarian Fellowship of Mobile and other anonymous donations, according to Paul Filben.

For a while the home groups met monthly, but after about 1½ years, the members decided the discus-



Rabbi Donald M. Kunstadt of Springhill Avenue Temple, left, talks with James Walters, pastor of First Baptist Church of Mobile, during a Jewish-Christian Dialogue meeting.

the Jews?" examined recent denominational statements on proselytizing Jews. Recently, the Southern Baptist Convention reiterated its commitment to evangelizing Jews, and sparked heated debate among religious groups around the country. (See story on Williamson's lecture on Page 2D.)

But despite such recent conflicts, Mrs. Filben felt that interreligious relations have improved since the group was formed in the 1970s. "They are better. I don't know that we've seen any miraculous changes, but when people begin to open their minds to each other and respect each others' differences, that's a big change."

The dialogue's long-running success may be a result of the relatively cordial relations that have existed

Please see DIALOGUE on 3D ▶

How to reach group

The Mobile Jewish-Christian Dialogue now has its own home page on the World Wide Web. You can find it at:

<http://www.webspawner.com/users/jcdialogue>