

## Couple seeks renewed dialogue between Christians and Jews

By Sam Hodges  
Post-Herald Reporter

Paul and Mary Filben have spent much of the last 10 years trying to bring together Christians and Jews in the Mobile area.

After a decade, they have learned one important lesson about how to get members of either faith to a joint meeting.

"Offer to feed them," says Mrs. Filben. "They'll come."

The Filbens are founders and sustainers of the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue.

They began to work for better relations between the groups after Paul Filben served on a bishop's ecumenical and inter-religious affairs commission. The work included viewing a film strip entitled, "Christians and Jews, a Troubled Brotherhood."

The film strip stirred Filben and others on the commission.

"A few of us decided we needed to press on with something more profound. We formed a committee to talk about which direction we would like to take it."

The result was Dessert and Dialogue, a regular gathering of Catholics and Jews that began in September, 1975. The 130 people who attended were divided in eight groups, and they met in homes.

Dessert was one feature of the evenings. Dialogue about the differences between Christianity and Judaism was the other.

"We talked about who we were as Christians and who we were as Jews," Mrs. Filben says. "We talked about anti-semitism and we talked about abortion. ... It was all very low-key."

In fact, it was too low-key. The groups met for about two years (enlisting Protestants in the meantime) before the Filbens and others decided a change was in order.

"About midway through the second year we realized there was a danger of becoming a tea and cookie group," Mrs. Filben says. "It would have been easy to avoid talking about our differences."

They decided to invite one distinguished theologian

per month to address the entire group on an aspect of Jewish-Christian relations.

The Filbens didn't forget food. The new title for their meetings was "Dinner and Dialogue," and meals were served.

This format is still used by the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue. Typically, about 80 people attend the monthly lectures. Attendance has been as high as 130. Many of those who attend have been with the group the entire 10 years.

The theologians — who have included Jews, Catholics and Protestants — come for a minimal fee.

"Mary's got a lot of chutzpah," Filben says, invoking the Yiddish word for nerve. "She calls up these theologians and says, 'If you'll come for \$150, we'll pay your expenses and give you a lot of Southern hospitality.' And they come."

Among the specific issues addressed in the sessions have been: anti-semitism, original sin, Ku Klux Klan, Trinity, Soviet Jewry, proselytization, the New Right and prayer in schools. There's usually a lively question and answer period after each talk.

The group also meets for special occasions: a Christmas service, a Hanukkah service and a service in recognition of the Holocaust.

The result, the Filbens say, is better understanding among Christians and Jews in Mobile. They emphasize that the group's primary purpose is to discuss seriously the differences between (and intricacies of) Christianity and Judaism.

But enlightenment isn't the only benefit.

"People have gotten to be good friends," Mrs. Filben says. "That's a big step. It has paved the way for us to work together on larger issues."

Filben directs a rehabilitation program for drug abusers. Mrs. Filben is a homemaker. They work on behalf of the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue in their spare time.

Word of their efforts has spread. They spoke in October to the eighth National Workshop on Jewish-Christian Relations, and last month they spoke to the Birmingham chapter of the National Conference on Christians and Jews.