

## Dialogue Begins Its 23rd Year

**I**n the words of the recently departed icon of western civilization, Jerry Garcia; "it's been a long, strange journey." The Mobile Area Christian-Jewish Dialogue looks back to its beginning in September, 1975 when a small group of Jews and Christians met together in an 'upper room' in downtown Mobile, Alabama. Bishop John L. May, then Bishop of Mobile Diocese, had asked the Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission to begin implementing the dictates of Vatican II regarding relations with non-Christian religions. The document was *Nostra Aetate*, (In our Times). The charge of beginning this implementation was given to Mary and Paul Filben who served on the Commission.

During this initial get-together, those few Jews and Christians watched a film strip entitled "*Christians and Jews, A Troubled Brotherhood*." When the meeting ended it was clear to everyone there that, at the very least, we would need to meet again. The Dialogue had begun!

As Diane Frank wrote in a submission for The Biennial Award for the Temple Sisterhood: "Dialogue is the sort of project that might well have been developed, executed, completed and closed out. In Mobile, it has been developed, executed, evaluated, reconsidered, restructured and continued. Each year it has been better than the years preceding. Each year it has been a source of pride to Sisterhood and an increasingly valuable resource to the religious community."

In the earliest stages of the dialogue, there were about 135 participants, half Roman Catholic and half Jewish. They were organized loosely into approximately eight groups throughout the city who met in private homes for "Dessert and Dialogue." While the groups were autonomous, each had a Catholic and a Jewish facilitator. These facilitators had met previously and continued to meet for training sessions. During that first year, the groups were encouraged to discuss the predetermined topic. Nevertheless,

they were free to "go with the flow" if and when that seemed appropriate to the facilitators. The second year followed a similar format, however, during that time a few Protestants joined us. The program became known then as the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue. During those first formative years, the groups addressed themselves to feelings and personal ideas about God and Religion. Some of the topics discussed in these home group meetings were: *Anti-semitism, The State of Israel, The Pope, The Trinity, Prayer, Abortion etc.*

The Dessert and Dialogue format was instrumental in bringing together people who had never known members of the other faith and had never had the occasion to visit in the others' homes. A trust was established that would prove to be the kind of strength necessary to advance the dialogue to its next level.

*"Who can set the boundaries of the People of God?"*

*Claud Nelson*

We recognized the need to begin looking at the danger of becoming a "tea and cookie" group only. While that is certainly a worthwhile goal, it was not our sole objective. During the third year, the Dialogue assumed a different look. We began to invite lecturers from the various faith communities in an effort to improve our understanding of each other. Dialogue continued after each lecture. Our socializing did not stop here however. We meet together for Chanukah/Christmas parties, joint Seders and musical extravaganzas featuring the music of gospel, dixieland, blues, big bands, rock and roll and klezmer.

The list of speakers we have brought to the Mobile area is an enviable one to say the least. Some of the 'best and brightest' in the International Christian-Jewish Dialogue have been our guests. The name reversal came about in recent years because of the confusion sometimes

caused by the term "Jewish-Christian", implying that we are a proselytizing group. We began, therefore, with very little fanfare, to call ourselves The Mobile Area Christian-Jewish Dialogue. The purpose of the dialogue has never been, nor will it ever be, to encourage another to change. It is rather, an attempt to achieve understanding and appreciation of each of our individual faiths as well as the pursuit of common goals, undertaken in concert for the good of our community and society. Dialogue is a way of actualizing God's commands to a new "halakha" as well as an historical search for the God Who is One for us all. The Mobile Area Christian-Jewish Dialogue has been recognized nationally and internationally for its record-breaking longevity and its success in meeting its objectives. There have been many life-long friendships that have developed from those early beginnings twenty three years ago on Franklin Street in downtown Mobile, Alabama.

The funding for the Dialogue has come from many sources through the years. Currently, our annual budget is less than \$4,500.00. Some of those who generously provide us with the funds to continue are: The Archdiocese of Mobile (Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb), The Mobile Jewish Welfare Fund, The Gulf Coast Episcopal Diocese (Bishop Charles Duvall), The Springhill Avenue Temple Sisterhood, Ahavas Chesed Synagogue, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mobile, and several anonymous contributors. The First Baptist Church of Mobile (Rev. James Walters) has provided the printing of our brochures and letters for many years.

We look forward to the continuation of this endeavor and welcome any and all who wish to help. We are particularly hopeful that some younger members of both Christian and Jewish faiths will come to the forefront. If we work together, there is no end to what can be accomplished. In the words of Claud Nelson, "Who can set the boundaries of the People of God?"