

Deep South Jewish Voice

The Only Jewish Newspaper in Alabama and Mississippi

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2000

CHESHVAN 5761

VOL. 10 ISSUE 11

Celebrating 25 years of communication

*Mobile Christian-Jewish Dialogue considered
longest-running continuous interfaith group in country*

What is regarded as the longest-running, consistently-meeting interfaith dialogue group in the country began with a film strip.

In 1975, the Mobile Catholic Archdiocese's Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Commission viewed "Christians and Jews: A Troubled Brotherhood." Shortly after viewing the film-strip, commission members asked Mary and Paul Filben to approach the Jewish community and pursue a dialogue.

Twenty-five years later, many of the original members of the Mobile Christian-Jewish Dialogue gathered to celebrate the dialogue's silver anniversary.

The celebration took place Sept. 19 at the Bienville Club, marking the dialogue group's transformation into a public force, with an eye toward future challenges.

As an example, some of the evening was devoted to discussing a recent proclamation from the Church, which was portrayed as claiming non-Catholic faiths were deficient (see below).

Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb of the Mobile Archdiocese said the document was "a straightforward, very honest representation about Catholic teaching about the uniqueness of Christ's teaching," but the media portrayed it as be-

ing intolerant of other faiths.

He said the document did not say that Catholic Christianity was necessary for salvation. "That is not what the document says, that is not what the Catholic Church teaches." Instead, the Church teaches "affirmation of the salvation of all people of good will."

Even at an anniversary celebration, the learning aspect of the dialogue was also emphasized by Barbara Paper. An original member of the dialogue who now lives in Atlanta, she said the Mobile celebration "marks a milestone in my life as well" through the friendships made through the dialogue.

"Whenever this group gets together, another brick in the wall of misunderstanding and distrust is shattered, lead-

ing to shalom," she said.

Before the meal, she explained the significance of sharing food, and that by saying Hamotzi, the blessing before meals, "we can give thanks to our creator for providing us the opportunity to continue to engage in Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, for ours and future generations."

History of dialogue

Mrs. Filben said the Sept. 19 celebration "is really in celebration of all of you" for participating in the dialogue.

Lipscomb said the dialogue "probably is not possible in a community that does not know each other fairly well and can

See **Dialogue**, page 7

Deep South Jewish Voice

P.O. Box 130052

Birmingham, AL 35213

Address Service Requested

BULK RATE
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BIRMINGHAM, AL
PERMIT No. 3905

Mobile Jewish-Christian Dialogue
1537 Deerwood Drive East
Mobile, AL 36618-3089

Dialogue

trust each other... that has been a part of the background that has made the dialogue as successful as it has been."

For the first meeting in 1975, the rabbis in Mobile were asked "to bring whomever they chose" from the Jewish community, said charter member Isabel Siegal.

Rabbi Richard Messing represented Springhill Avenue Temple. About 15 attended the first meeting.

Siegal, now living in Birmingham, said "that first meeting was a wonderful night." They viewed a recently-broadcast special from NBC, "An Hour with Abraham Joshua Heschel."

At the end of the evening, Julian Lewis stated that the group had to come together again. After some discussion about "where do we go from here," the group decided to model itself after a "dessert and dialogue" Springhill Avenue Temple had done as part of its adult education classes. The Catholic-Jewish Dialogue, as it was then known, soon began meeting in members' homes. Soon, there were eight groups of about 14 participants per group, meeting four times a year.

Soon, the dialogue members hungered for more, and decided to start bringing in speakers and expanding to the Protestant community. Siegal said "that format changed the whole complexion of the dialogue."

The group soon began taking public stands. In 1979, a Holocaust memorial resolution, signed by many area churches, was published in local newspapers.

In 1984, the Filbens were presented with the B'nai B'rith

Award of Meritorious Achievement at the District Seven convention, held in Mobile that year.

The group also enjoyed being selected for an advance screening of "Heritage: Civilization and the Jews" which aired on public television in 1984.

Among the many notable figures brought to Mobile by the dialogue were Marc Tanenbaum, the national religious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee; Eugene Fisher, executive secretary of the secretariat for Catholic-Jewish relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops; best-selling author Rabbi Harold Kushner; and storyteller Peninah Schram.

Each year, the group has four to six major events, including national and local speakers and forums. A look through the years of programs and newspaper articles shows a willingness to take on major, thorny issues where Judaism and Christianity have sharp differences.

But there is also a large element of building coalitions and discovering similarities.

Curriculum Trunk

At the dinner, Rickie Voit stunned the Filbens with a special presentation on behalf of the Jewish community, a Holocaust Curriculum Trunk.

Filben heads the recently-organized Alabama Holocaust Commission, which has organized teacher education workshops in the state. One teaching tool from the Holocaust Museum in Houston, Tex. is the Holocaust Curriculum Trunk. The trunk contains books, videos and reference material about the Holocaust, themed to

different age groups. Schools can "check out" the trunk, free of charge, for a week.

Filben had expressed interest in such a curriculum trunk, and placed it on the commission's wish list. The trunk will be housed at Ahavas Chesed, and made available to schools in the state.

Eileen Susman read a plaque, which will be placed on the trunk, honoring the Filbens.

Voit noted how the Filbens have become "a positive force extending into the Jewish community," attending community events and celebrations. "Remaining strongly rooted in the Catholic faith, they remain strong allies to the Jewish community."

She recalled a comment from her then 14-year-old daughter after a Mobile community Holocaust commemoration, which the dialogue sponsors. Reacting to a prayer Filben offered, her daughter "felt totally valued and understood as a Jew from a non-Jew."

Filben, who calls himself a "Post-Holocaust Catholic," first saw the trunk on a trip to Houston. He asked Voit to look into acquiring a trunk for the commission. "Little did I know..." he said.

"What a strange and wondrous journey it has been," Filben said of the dialogue's 25 years.

Filben said there are still plenty of topics to explore, and shared some of his vision for the dialogue's future. Some of the topics he is eyeing for future consideration include:

- Understanding new research on the first century that shows the separation between Judaism and Christianity was a



Eileen Susman, right, and Rickie Voit, left, present Mary and Paul Filben a Holocaust Curriculum Trunk

"long-term process"

- How to continue bearing witness to the Holocaust as the generation of survivors dies out

- Discussing the Dominus Jesus and Dabru Emet documents, the latter being a recent statement by Jewish leaders on the progress Christianity has made in dealing with the Jewish community

- Bioethics and the human genome project

- Expanding the dialogue to the evangelical/fundamentalist

community, and the "fastest growing (religious group) in the country," Islam.

He expressed thanks that, even in the beginning, "you trusted us even when you didn't know if we were trustworthy."

Many in attendance credited the Filbens with being the driving force keeping the dialogue going for 25 years.

Filben said "we look forward, G-d willing, to being with all of you as we enter the 26th year of seeking meaning."