

# We're accountable to do what's right



REV. RONALD P. BYARS

The car just ahead of me on Southfield Road bore a bumper sticker that read, "God Loves You." What does that mean? The bumper sticker doesn't know who is reading it. It seems to be addressed equally and without discrimination to anyone who might see it. Does it mean that God holds nothing against the Unabomber who sent loopy-lunatic packages to people he didn't even know? Or that God holds in equal esteem the nurse who runs an understaffed clinic in Appalachia, and the man who planted the bomb in the federal building in Oklahoma City? The word "love" would seem to require some definition.

Some have described ours as a "therapeutic society." In other words, if we knew everything there was to know about a person, we would forgive them anything. To know all is to forgive all. This becomes evident in court cases in which the defense pleads for mercy on the grounds that the defendant experienced abuse as a child, or was drunk or under the influence of drugs while committing the crime. Presumably, if we could trace a person's history, we would find behind every act of antisocial behavior some bad experience for which someone other than the accused is responsible. Once we strip away the negative impact of other persons, we will discover a wholly innocent human being. If that line of reasoning is true, then no one should be found guilty in a court of law. More importantly, no one should be held accountable for anything. A "love" that holds no one accountable is a purely sentimental kind of love. Who could respect a God who does not hold us to account? The love of such a God would certainly be a trivial affair!

American Christmas has become separated from the

faith that gave it birth. The holiday has taken on a momentum of its own, released from doctrinal concerns or from a specific religious tradition. American Christmas belongs to everyone — believer or non-believer, devout or secular, Christian or something else. In the process of becoming distanced from its specifically Christian origins, Christmas has become a sentimental holiday. We all enjoy a healthy dose of sentimentality now and then — and particularly at Christmas — but sentimentality is dangerous if we allow it to drive our theology. It is true, I believe, that God loves us, one and all. It is not true, I think, that God's love is the kind that just can bear to hold us accountable.

In the liturgical calendar, the four weeks preceding Christmas form a special season of their own, called "Advent." The scripture readings for Advent are jarring — especially for those who have already begun the season of American Christmas just before Thanksgiving! These readings are about accountability. We read from the Hebrew prophets who speak of days of judgment and of divine cleansing. We read of John the Baptist, whose rough sermons made no concessions to sentimentality, but promised that God would take vigorous action against the corrupt and the indifferent. How can we reconcile these images of a God of judgment with the image of a God whose love for all can be expressed in the carol "Away In A Manger?"

If God loves human beings, then surely God cannot love the terrible things people do to each other! If "love" means anything, it must mean that God is big enough, and strong enough, and determined enough to confront us when we need to be confronted. If "love" is worth anything, it will not simply overlook the behaviors that corrupt us to the very heart and disfigure our common life. The God who loves us is the God who judges us, and the God who judges us is the

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## BELIEFS Values

# Oakland Christmas service on ABC

BY RENA FULKA  
SPECIAL WRITER

The spiritual aspects of Christmas came 12 days early for members of Antioch Lutheran Church in Farmington Hills and their two partnership churches in Detroit.

Blending their own unique perspectives with a wealth of Christian resources, the three congregations joined forces in Oakland County to create a special Christmas worship service to share with television viewers across the country.

The 58-minute, 23-second program titled, "Welcome In The Child," is scheduled to run commercial-free on Christmas Eve on most, if not all, of the 140 ABC affiliates nationwide.

"It's the Protestant answer to the Vatican midnight Mass," said the Rev. Robert Rimbo of Grosse Pointe Park, Antioch Lutheran's senior pastor. "I've been thrilled by it. I think it's a great opportunity for us to give witness throughout the community and throughout the nation."

The Christmas program, televised each Dec. 24 since the 1950s, is sponsored by the New York-based National Council of Churches and features a different denomination each year.

The last Lutheran Christmas service was taped seven years ago in Manhattan.

Playing into the decision to select Antioch Lutheran from 11,000 affiliates of the Chicago-based Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was its ongoing relationship with the 252-member Christ Lutheran



STAFF PHOTO BY JOY KIMBLE

National broadcast: The Revs. Robert Rimbo (left) and Don Kreiss and Cantor Amy Studd led Antioch Lutheran Church members and their two Detroit partnership congregations in a special Christmas service, which will be televised on ABC affiliates on Christmas Eve.

Church at Third and Philadelphia and the 170-member Truth Lutheran Church at Russell and Lantz. The partnerships allow for pulpit and choir exchanges while encouraging both suburban and inner city members to worship together.

"The ELCA wanted to model the inclusivity of this church," explained Rimbo, who heads a

congregation of 900 baptized members. "The ELCA is committed to inclusiveness as one of its operating principles."

The \$50,000 project was financed by the ELCA with support from Lutheran Brotherhood, which has a regional office in Rochester Hills.

It was produced by Al and David Eicher of Bloomfield Hills-based The Program

Source International. The ELCA's director for the television video was John Peterson of Chicago.

"We all know folks who cannot get out on Christmas Eve for one reason or another who are going to be delighted to see this," said the Rev. Don Kreiss of Farmington Hills, Antioch's associate pastor.

Please see ANTIOCH, B10

# Interfaith families explore Jewish roots together

BY RENA FULKA  
SPECIAL WRITER

As statistics on interfaith marriage continue to climb above 50 percent, more and more families with Jewish ties are becoming unaffiliated in their faith practices.

"We're concerned about continuity and the future of the Jewish people," said Sue Stettner of Huntington Woods. "If there is no outreach to couples with children and no invitation on the part of the Jewish individual to connect to the community, then only 20 percent of those children will connect. As a result, 80 percent of

those children will not be Jewish."

In her role as director of the Interfaith Connection, Stettner works hand in hand with Marilyn Hertzberg, special projects coordinator for Jewish Family Service, to create an entry point for interfaith couples and their families into the Jewish community at large.

"Interfaith couples often don't know how to be part of the community," said Hertzberg, who served as staff liaison to the study group on the Interfaith task force. "Our purpose is to acquaint interfaith couples with

what's available in a warm and welcoming way and to help them maintain whatever piece of Judaism they are currently maintaining."

Interfaith Connection is a cooperative venture of the Bloomfield Hills-based Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, the Southfield-based Agency of Jewish Education and Jewish Family Service, headquartered in Southfield with a branch in West Bloomfield. It was launched as a central source of interfaith information and programming after a two-year study analyzing the needs and issues facing Jews

involved in interfaith relationships.

"A lot of people feel quite alienated," said Stettner, who has been involved with Jewish education for 21 years. "People are looking for a connection. That's why we called it Interfaith Connection."

Programs reach out to individuals of all ages, from preschool-age children experiencing self-identity stress to grandparents wishing to share their Jewish heritage with their grandchildren. Eight-week workshops on interfaith dating will soon be held

Please see INTERFAITH, B9

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