

Panel focuses on 'December dilemma'

By James Radebaugh
staff writer

One woman, settling into her seat in Temple Israel, said it would be just like Oprah or Phil Donahue.

They even had a microphone so the audience could comment and ask questions, she said.

"It" was a panel discussion of the December Dilemma — the conflicts that arise at Christmastime when non-Christians are made aware of the fact that they live in a predominantly Christian society.

The discussion included a local school superintendent and a minister. They attempted to answer questions such as how much public Christmas celebrations should be tolerated and when do such celebrations make non-Christians feel like second-class citizens.

Other than sitting around talking to ourselves, we thought it would be more effective to bring in other perspectives," said Miriam Inerman, of the Jewish Community Council of Metro Detroit, which hosted the Monday evening discussion.

The problem, one currently getting a lot of attention in the Birmingham schools, was dramatized in an introductory skit performed by a troupe from a local Jewish theater.

It focused on a Jewish family taking in the day's events. At school the teenage daughter was offered a part in a Christmas concert — singing in praise of Jesus. She was excited and her mother said it was her big chance. But her father refuses to allow her participation, which he calls a threat to the girl's heritage.

Was it? Was the school's staging a Christmas concert an assault on the family's right to choose their daughter's religious instruction? These are some of the questions the panel attempted to answer.

Much of the tone of the evening was set by Detroit News columnist

George Cantor, who is Jewish and has opposed Christmas celebrations in the schools or other public places. He served as moderator for the evening.

Nevertheless, he said, Christmas hype leaves him with lots of breathing room to practice Judaism and he survived his own experiences singing Christmas songs in school with no apparent harm.

The Rev. Mark Jensen, senior minister at North Congregational Church in Southfield, stressed his own opposition to the celebration of Christmas in public schools. But he also told the mostly Jewish audience that for many people there are deep seated wishes to preserve certain traditions, like school Christmas parties.

Panelist Robert Appleford, a former mayor of Birmingham, said his city learned a simple solution to these conflicts through a lengthy court battle in recent years when the American Civil Liberties Union challenged the city's placement of a crèche on public property.

The solution, he said, is to keep nativity scenes off public property. It can be displayed just as well at a church and no one is made to feel someone else's religion has been sanctioned by the government.

Dr. Seymour Gretchko, superintendent of West Bloomfield schools, said that officials in his district have tried to avoid imposing strict rules governing Christmas celebrations.

Gretchko, who is Jewish, said, that an "obsession with complete separation of church and state" will only make matters worse.

"It seems to me that ultimately, common sense must prevail," he said.

Questions remain about how much was accomplished during the discussion.

Isabel Sweet, of Southfield, said she thought little was accomplished. "I thought it was very poorly presented," she said. "It was just a chance to (be conciliatory) and not seriously address the issues," she said.

Sweet said she thought Jensen was "insensitive" and she felt patronized by comments he made in praise of social activism among Jews.

"And the thought of the school superintendent saying he was going to leave it up to teachers and principals to deal with, God help us," she said.

Alex Bensky, an attorney from Detroit, said he thought the evening was interesting, but not necessarily productive.

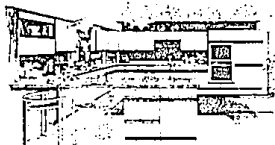
"The issues have been rebashed ad infinitum," Bensky said. "I don't think we're any closer to understanding them."

A Farmington Hills mother of two school-age children, however, said she thought it helped to have the issues aired. She said her children have experienced insensitivity at school, such as having a test review day scheduled on Yom Kippur, and that she would go home and discuss with them some of the points the speakers raised.

"I was really impressed with the speakers," she said.

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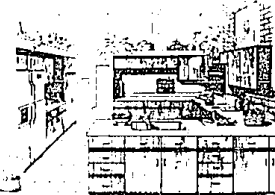
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