

Split ends Thanksgiving ecumenical service

Thursday, 25 September 2003 17:00

Friday, September 26, 2003
By Charles Honey

Press Release

After more than 600 Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and atheists packed a Thanksgiving service last November, a Catholic nun joyfully surveyed the crowd and asked, "If we can pray together, why can we not live together?"

But not everyone rejoiced.

Some Christian churches and clergy objected, saying the interfaith worship at Congregation Ahavas Israel compromised their Christian beliefs.

Now, Grand Rapids' leading ecumenical organization has dropped out as principal organizer of the annual interfaith Thanksgiving service, in the face of the objections and a financial crisis.

The Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism, better known as GRACE, recently notified churches it is backing away from the service, which was so popular last year that ushers hastily set up chairs to accommodate an overflow crowd.

The very success of that third annual event raised doubts that a Christian organization should promote a service with people of other faiths. Some churches threatened to withdraw their financial support if the services continued.

"We wondered how that fit with the Christian belief there is only one God and that Jesus Christ is the only way to him," said the Rev. Stanley Mast, pastor of LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church, one of the churches that helped found GRACE in 1972.

"It had to do with how on earth you could worship side by side with folks who were worshipping a different God or worshipped not God at all."

LaGrave was one of about five churches that registered objections, including Seymour CRC. The Southeast Side Grand Rapids church said it would direct its funds only to the GRACE Hunger Walk if the services continued.

It is dishonest for a Christian to pray with an atheist, Muslim or Buddhist, said the Rev. John Vanderstoep of Seymour CRC.

"We mislead them to say, 'Hey, all roads lead to God,' " Vanderstoep said. "We don't believe that."

see SERVICE, A4

CONTINUED FROM A1

Non-Christian leaders are disappointed by the decision, but said they understand GRACE is in a tough spot.

"It is a bit of a blow to the interfaith movement," said Fred Stella, president of the Interfaith Dialogue Association.

Stella said he worries GRACE could back off from other interfaith activities, such as a prayer service for peace held at the outset of the Iraq war.

Ali Metwalli, a Muslim participant in past Thanksgiving services, said GRACE's decision took him by surprise.

"I think we have built a momentum to get the different faiths together," Metwalli said. "I do not feel we will be able to be organized as effectively" without GRACE.

Rabbi David Krishef, host of last year's service at Ahavas Israel, said he doesn't consider it a major setback for interfaith relations.

"I've been impressed at what I've seen as a movement of GRACE toward a slightly broader mission," Krishef said. "I am disappointed the board thought they were moving a little bit too quickly in that direction."

A GRACE leader insisted that lack of internal consensus about the event, not outside pressure, drove the decision.

"The (GRACE) board has a significant difference of opinion on the issue of what GRACE does in the interreligious arena," said the Rev. David Baak, one of three directors of the nonprofit organization, which has about 300 congregations involved in its programs.

However, GRACE's financial straits were a compelling factor, said Lloyd "Skip" Moseley Jr., president of the 18-member GRACE board. He said GRACE is \$125,000 in debt and its cash flow "close to zero."

"If we don't get more money, in as little as two to three weeks, we're going to have to fold up our tent," Moseley said. The shortfall was prompted by a drop in contributions due to the recession, plus the agency's attempt to continue a work-to-welfare mentoring program after state funding was cut, he said.

"If we lose the support of a lot more churches, we're done for," Moseley said.

That would mean the end of GRACE programs such as the Racial Justice Institute, AIDS Care Network and its annual Hunger Walk.

"We need to decide whether or not we're going to redefine ourselves. It's much more difficult to do that in a situation where your feet are held to the fire because of the finances," Moseley said.

His recent letter to GRACE constituents said the group is suspending its part in the service until a consensus is reached on whether it should be involved. He encouraged interested people to contact others who have organized an alternate interfaith event being held Nov. 24 at Trinity United Methodist Church.

Moseley said he plans to attend, and Catholic, Reformed, Jewish and Baha'i leaders have signed on.

"It may be a little harder to keep it going with an ad hoc committee. But it's vitally important that we do it," said the Rev. Ellen Brubaker of Trinity United Methodist.

Moseley said GRACE still will take part in interfaith events that don't involve worship. It is helping organize an Oct. 23-25 program at Dominican Center at Marywood, featuring an interfaith discussion on forgiveness.

© Copyright 2003, The Grand Rapids Press (MI, USA)

Original story: <http://www.mlive.com/news/grpress/index.ssf?/base/news-10/1064587500100790.xml>