Written by Mark Jaeger
Thursday, 23 December 2010 16:56

St. Peter UCC helps village avoid touchy First Amentment battle

A year ago, the Nativity setting owned by the Village of Saukville was the subject of a philosophical tug-of-war.

This year, the same setting — moved just a few feet west on Highway 33 — has returned to being the simple depiction of the birth of the infant Jesus.

Last December, the village received a threatening letter from a group calling itself Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The Washington, D.C.-based group said the Christmas display was a violation of the First Amendment protection separating church and state.

It demanded the removal of the creche from Grady Park, and assurances from the village that it would refrain from future displays with religious overtones.

A village crew removed the manger display from the park a few days after last Christmas.

The risk of the controversy resurfacing this year vanished when the nearby St. Peter’s United Church of Christ offered to purchase the display for $200.

“When the idea of buying the Nativity for $200 was brought up at our Finance Committee,

everyone dug into their pockets and chipped in. We had it paid for that night,” the Rev. Don Ellermann said.

“We’ve gotten some very nice responses about taking over the Nativity, although it is so close to where it used to be that I don’t know if a lot of people realize the church owns it now.”

Ellermann said congregation members gave the site of the creche a lot of thought.

“As it turned out, from the right angle the light on the shelter in Grady Park looks like a distant star hanging over the Nativity,” he said.

When Ellermann arrived at the church eight years ago, it had its own Nativity scene, but the congregation stopped putting it up because it seemed redundant with the village setting so close.

He characterized the controversy the village was immersed in over the Nativity as “a sign of the times.”

Since the group launched its campaign against the village creche, officials have used secular references in their holiday decorations.

However, Ellermann said, the debate provided an ideal opportunity for the church to show its faith in the world.

“This is a church that takes its commitment to the community seriously,” he said.