Written by Mark Jaeger
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Village officials reluctant to create inclusive holiday scene

Village of Saukville officials think the answer to the ongoing Nativity debate may be as close as next door.

The Village Board agreed Tuesday to work with St. Peter's United Church of Christ to provide an acceptable home for the village-owned creche that has become the touchstone in the battle over the separation of church and state.

The controversy took shape in December, when the village received a letter of protest from the Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The group, based in Washington, D.C., reportedly received a complaint about the Nativity scene the village traditionally displays in Grady Park during the Christmas season.

The legal director for the group asked that the display be removed, and that the village avoid using the religious symbol in the future.

The Nativity was removed shortly after Christmas, but officials have been debating the long-term solution to the matter.

Publicity surrounding the case drew a ready response from St. Peter's UCC, which is located immediately west of the park on Highway 33.

"If the village decides it needs to end this practice, we at St. Peter's would like to offer an alternative that might still keep that wonderful Nativity here in the village

and
perhaps take away the thunder of those that object to it," Mark Gierach, lay minister at the church, wrote in a letter to village officials.

Gierach said the congregation would be willing to allow the village to display the creche, which depicts the manger setting where Jesus was born, in front of the church.

He said the church would also be willing to buy the decorations and display them on church property.

"Both of these options would still continue the tradition here in the village of having the Nativity as a part of the downtown, where everyone going through the village will still
see it, and yet remove any argument that the negative voices might have about it being on display," Gierach wrote.

Village President Barb Dickmann said working with the church would be the best way to resolve the matter.

"Selling the Nativity to the church would be the cleanest approach, because then it would no longer be village property," Dickmann said.

Trustees unanimously accepted that logic, and authorized staff to work with representatives from the church. A final agreement will return to the board for a vote.

Village Administrator Dawn Wagner said she sought advice from the Liberty Counsel, a national organization that describes its mission as "restoring the culture by advancing
religious freedom, the sanctity of human life and the family."

One option the group advocated was the creation of a more inclusive holiday display, that would incorporate religious and secular images of the Christmas season.

The village staff went so far as to create an illustration of what such a display could look like, and the Liberty Counsel said it would be willing to review any proposed design to make sure it would be defendable in court.

That approach, blending symbols like the infant Jesus with Santa Claus, did not sit well with some trustees.

“The problem is you can’t make this a win-win situation. As a Christian, I feel you would be trivializing the Nativity by introducing Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer or Frosty the Snowman,” Trustee Bob Hamann said.

“We already have signs plastered on our village buildings saying ‘Happy Holidays’ and ‘Season’s Greetings.’ What more do we have to do?”

Trustee Dan Sauer also opposed the idea of adding secular symbols to the Christmas display.

“I am in agreement with separation of church and state, but I am concerned we are going to end up with ‘The Island of Misfit Toys’ in the park if we are forced to add secular
symbols to conform to the Establishment Clause of the Constitution.,” Sauer said.

Resident Brian Peschel said the fact that the Nativity issue was raised based on an anonymous complaint to an outside organization offended him.

“I don’t really care if the Nativity is there or not, but I don’t like being bullied — especially by a group from Washington, D.C. claiming to have received a complaint from someone who may have just been driving through town,” Peschel said.

He said if the village pursues selling the creche to the church, it should get an agreement in writing that it would continue to be displayed.

Dickmann said she has received letters, phone calls and e-mails from residents on the issue.

“This is something that is dear to people’s hearts,” she said.

THE VILLAGE OF SAUKVILLE has come up with a plan to save its Christmas Nativity scene, following protests by Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Photo courtesy of James Peterson