Written by Mark Jaeger
Wednesday, 10 March 2010 17:32

Congregation's deal means a Constitutional showdown will be avoided

A little neighborhood diplomacy has settled a sensitive debate over the separation of church and state in the Village of Saukville.

The Village Board unanimously agreed last week to sell the large Nativity scene the village has maintained in Grady Park to St. Peter's United Church of Christ. The traditional Christmas decoration depicts the
manger where Jesus was born.

The church agreed to buy the decorations for $200.

According to the agreement, if the church decides to sell the Nativity or not put it on display, the village will have the first chance to buy it back at its fair market value.

The creche came under fire last December by called Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a group based in Washington, D.C.

An attorney for the group said it received a complaint about the Nativity because it showed a religious preference. The group demanded that it be removed and that the village avoid using overt religious symbols in its future public displays.

The decorations were removed from the park shortly after Christmas, but village officials realized they needed to do something to avoid future legal battles over

the display.

When the dispute became public, members of St. Peter's UCC, which is located immediately west of the park where the Nativity was displayed, offered to resolve the issue.

Mark Gierach, lay minister at the church, wrote village officials saying the congregation 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."

To receive fair value for the decoration, a $200 price tag was placed on the creche.

When the offer was presented at a meeting of the Church Council and Executive Committee, a collection was taken and the money was quickly raised through donations, Rev. Don Ellerman said.

"Once the Nativity is delivered by the village, it will be completely out of their hands," Ellerman said.

Citing the challenges Christians face in a secular world, he said he was not surprised by the controversy surrounding the village-owned Nativity.

"My sense about all of this is the political landscape continues to change, and nothing about this came as a surprise. We just wanted to make things easy for the village," Ellerman said.

The church offers high visibility along Highway 33, but he said the congregation has not decided exactly where the Nativity will be located.

"There are some in the congregation that think it should be placed on the edge of the driveway, just 20 feet away from where it had been," Ellerman said.

"It is a large Nativity and we wouldn't want to detract from our stained-glass window. This is a decision we will leave to our Buildings and Grounds Committee, but I am sure we'll be able to work something out where people will be able to see it."

Ellerman said the timing of when the creche is displayed will also be determined by the church, noting that the liturgical calendar doesn’t coincide with the countdown of shopping days until Christmas.

“If it is not up early, I am sure some people might be concerned, but in the church we observe Advent before Christmas. When I was a boy, we didn’t put our Christmas tree up until Christmas Eve. I am sure we will work something out,” he said.

The Nativity purchase is not the first time the congregation has come to the aid of the village.

The church paid for the paving of its parking lot, but makes it available to the village whenever community events are held in Grady Park.

The sale of the Nativity means the village won’t have to follow another recommended compromise, which was to introduce secular symbols of the season — such as Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer — to the religious setting.

THE VILLAGE’S CRECHE used to be displayed in Grady Park.