

CHURCH AND STATE
OCTOBER, 23 2008

“Hey, good morning, your Holiness. Pour me a cup, will you?”

“Turning to see Josh Green amble into the room, the man dressed in black reaches for a clean cup.

“Shalom, my friend. Black with sugar, right? No offense, 'Sheckles', but you look a little rough around the edges. Not used to this hour?”

“Hour! ... hour! ... what hour, Bob?” Josh asks, good natured exasperation in his voice and a twinkle in his eye. “Five a.m. isn't an hour; it's a penance. Bless me Father for I have sinned.”

“Hey, monks get up at three or four every day.”

“Yea, right. Let me guess, they're trying to get purgatory out of the way early.”

Handing his friend his coffee, Father Bob chuckles and shakes his head. “Penance, huh?”

“Yea, that's one good thing about being a rabbi, no 6 a.m. morning mass.”

“Ahhh, it's not that bad. You get used to it after a while.”

Rabbi Green winks at his friend. “Yea, Bob, but I've gotten used to the morning paper and my wake up coffee at eight.”

Hi, I'm Tony Baggz. Welcome to the neighborhood. Dawn is breaking here on the South Side; a beautiful October morning promising to be sunny, warm and dry. Just perfect for today's festivities. We're in the meeting room at St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Nine people are gathered around a table set with coffee and pastries and all by one are church leaders. Let's see, there's Temple Beth Shalom's Rabbi Joshua Green, known to his friends as 'Sheckles'. Then there's St. Mark's Episcopal's rector, Mike Daniels, Reverend Paul Jacobson of First Presbyterian, St. Katherine's Father Bob Scanlon, Christ the Redeemer

Lutheran's Pastor John Randall, Liberty Street Assembly of God's Pastor Billy Swanson, Mt. Nebo Baptist Assembly's Pastor Martin Williams, the Reverend Dave Walsh of First United Methodist and Dr. Norm Rogers, Chief of Thoracic Surgery at the University Medical Center. They're the driving force behind today's activities.

You see, it's the first morning of the Interfaith Council of Churches' semi-annual yard sale. A three day event, it's become a tradition here in the city. It started as an effort between two Catholic churches and a synagogue to help the less fortunate with medical expenses. Now a joint effort with the University Medical Center, it has grown to include over twenty churches and synagogues, and in ten years it's raised over eight million dollars. A lot of people look forward to this day ... a lot of people need it ...

In a few hours the place will be jumpin'. You see, this ain't your Grandma's yard sale. You can find anything here ... sky's the limit ... furs, appliances, jewelry, antiques, furniture, all sorts of collectibles, toys, clothes, knick knacks, art, used cars ... and even houses. And now with rides and games for the kids, it's taken on the air of a carnival. And the food; it's a smorgasbord of the best the city offers. Osso bucco to burritos and everything in between. You name it, it's all here, and it's all good. Everyone pitches in; churches, schools, civic groups, restaurants, car dealers, local artists, musicians, businesses both large and small, and even the pro football team. The O'Grady family has owned the "Boys in Black" for years and they can't do enough to help this effort. The city lets the vendors use the parks, the streets, and parking facilities and provides an array of services. And for the folks gathered around the table, therein lies a problem.

Reverend Daniels blows the steam off his coffee and walks over to the Baptist minister.

"Hey Martin, got a minute ..."

This ought to be interesting. Let's listen in ...

"Sure Mike, what's up?"

"Haven't talked to you in a while. What's the latest on Gaffner's lawsuit?"

“Well, as of Wednesday, it’s on the docket for mid November. He claims that the event violates the First Amendment, and he’s rounded up the usual suspects.”

Looking up from the pastry table, a wary look ambles across John Randall’s face. “Usual suspects?” he asks.

“The ACLU.”

Wary turns to disgust, and I don’t think it’s the coffee.

Reverend Williams chuckles at the look on Pastor Randall’s face and continues.

“Anyway, Nate Kramer and Judge Zaleski are working on it. Nate’s dealt with this kind of thing twice before and the judge has handled a few similar cases himself.”

Picking up a cherry danish, Billy Swanson joins the conversation.

“I’m confused, exactly what is Gaffner’s complaint? I mean it’s not like we’re nailing the Ten Commandments to the courthouse door.”

“No, we’re not. But his argument isn’t a religious one, it’s economic.”

“How? We pay the city all the required licenses and fees. Where’s his problem?”

“Well, Gaffner claims we’re a commercial activity masquerading as a religious event. He says the city loses tax revenue because regular business is interrupted, sales taxes aren’t collected on the raffles and donations, and the city isn’t compensated for the use of city services, streets, utilities, police, that sort of thing. Economic intangibles, he calls them.”

A mischievous look crosses Reverend Williams face. Sipping his coffee and winking at Billy Swanson, he looks in John Randall's direction. “You want to hear something really rich, Billy, get this; he’s gone as far as claiming that Brownie Troop 25’s lemonade and jellybean stand violates code for failing to collect state and city sales tax. He says they’re no different than any restaurant.”

The sound of someone choking startles the group. Everyone turns to see the Lutheran minister with coffee running down his shirt.

“Don’t drown, John,” says Dave Walsh, laughing at the sight.

“Yea, throw me a life preserver, will ya? For heaven’s sake, my little Jennifer’s in Troop 25.”

A devilish grin crosses Doc Rogers face. “At least that orange prison jumpsuit will go good with her freckles, John. Who knows, maybe you can sneak a hacksaw into her next birthday cake.” He pauses a moment. “Tell me, does she have an accounting merit badge?”

“Sure, Doc, it’s right between the ones for jacks and double dutch. C’mon, she’s six for heaven’s sake.”

The levity of the moment lightens the mood. Father Bob smiles to himself and sets down his coffee cup. “Look, it’s simple,” he says. “It’s an end run, a Trojan horse, if you will. The guy simply detests religion.”

“And this is his way of attacking it,” Reverend Walsh says, muted disgust in his tone.

Reverend Daniels nods in agreement. “Exactly. But what I don’t get is this; do people like him understand the hit his wallet would take if churches couldn’t do what we do?”

“Or stopped doing what we do,” Reverend Jacobson says softly.

“Sure he does, Mike, Dave Allen says. “Gaffner’s an intelligent man; he just chooses to ignore it.”

“Okay, but even so, how can he ignore the benefits society realizes from just the cost of education alone? Every kid in a parochial school saves the taxpayers, what, about eight, nine grand a year, or more? In the city and county there are eleven Catholic schools, and seven run by other churches. We’re talking over 8000 kids. That’s about seventy million dollars. And that’s not counting the home-schooled kids supported by various churches. There’s probably another thousand or so there. And that’s just education. How about food, clothing, and medical care? Martin’s church runs a food pantry program that’s the model for the area, and we all have some sort of outreach beyond the Thanksgiving and Christmas programs. Now, add in everything else, counseling, legal assistance, monetary assistance to seniors on fixed incomes to help pay utility bills or medicines, “intangibles” as Gaffner calls them, and I’d bet the combined efforts save the taxpayers another five million, at least. Do guys like Gaffner understand that? Sure they do. Do they care, no, of course they don’t. The

only thing people like him care about is their own self-righteous indignation.”

“Well, I’ve learned never to underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups,” the Rabbi says, looking out the window.

“Or self-righteous people in groups of one,” Reverend Jacobson says, chuckling softly.

“So, Martin,” what’s the outlook?” Josh asks.

“Well, Nate doesn’t see a problem at the local level; but it could get sticky in the appeals process if Gaffner pursues it. And when it comes to Washington if it were to go that far, no one knows anymore how the Supreme Court would rule.”

Reverend Walsh nods subtly. “Well, at least the Supreme Court has some new blood. Some younger judges,” says Pastor Walsh. “Maybe that’s a good sign.”

Rabbi Green chuckles. “Forget the fountain of youth, Dave; what we need is a fountain of smart.”

Pastor Williams pours himself another cup of coffee. “Well, it’ll all take time ...

... meanwhile, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

Someone once said that wisdom is simply common sense in an uncommon degree.

Okay, so what does religion contribute to society? Want to find out? Simple, shut down the food banks, the clothing, housing, and health care assistance, the counseling services, and park every kid in a parochial school on the doorstep of the nearest public school next Monday morning and you’ll get an idea. Want to see taxes go through the roof? Just let the government provide those services that churches now do.

Do you ever wonder why, when the self righteous call for elimination of tax breaks on churches, they never express their outrage at the faithful who, at their own double expense, educate their kids in private schools and lift a considerable burden off the taxpayer? Where’s the ire when the less fortunate are fed, clothed, or provided the basic necessities to keep themselves warm, dry, and housed in bad times? Something that government would have to

supply with the contents of the taxpayers' wallet. Taxpayers like Mr. Gaffner. Again, where's the outrage?

How does shackling the efforts of churches benefit anyone except the self-righteous, or the myopic? Where's the sense in that?

Talk about "straining at a gnat ... and swallowing a camel"...

... Thinkaboutit. I'm Tony Baggz...