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Community

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice condemns synagogue protests

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice calls for end to synagogue protests, criticizes religious harassment by group that "traffic[s] in anti-Semitism"

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice (ICPJ) has issued a statement calling on a group calling itself "Jewish Witnesses for Peace" to end their weekly protests against Beth Israel Congregation, a local Jewish synagogue.

ICPJ Director Chuck Warpehoski, explains, "We have long opposed the pickets and recognized that they are hurtful and unproductive, but we did so quietly to avoid feeding the attention-seeking behavior of the protestors. But that low-key approach left the members of the synagogue and the broader Jewish community feeling isolated in the face of ongoing harassment. That's why ICPJ decided to amplify our call to end the harassment of the worshippers."

Warpehoski continues, "While we hope that our plea for civility and respect will lead the picketers to rethink their actions, we re-

alize that we cannot force them to stop. We certainly don't want to infringe on constitutionally-protected free speech, so our response is to also speak out against behavior that we consider unacceptable."

According to Warpehoski, "While the weekly targeting of worshippers on their way to religious services is troublesome enough, ICPJ also takes issue with the group's broader attacks on Judaism. For example, they have circulated writings claiming that Jewish religious observances turn Jewish boys and girls into monsters. It is abhorrent that someone would disseminate such blatantly anti-Semitic propaganda. The time has long come for the group to stop."

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice is a 47-year-old nonprofit that empowers people of faith and people of conscience in the Washtenaw County/Ann Arbor, Michigan area to act on their moral and religious values to build a better world.

ICPJ STATEMENT

(unanimously approved by the ICPJ Steering Committee on October 9, 2012)

In 2005 Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice (ICPJ) called on Henry Herskovitz to end his weekly protest outside Beth Israel Congregation as they were "hurtful" and "counterproductive."

Over the past seven years our response to the protests has been to avoid feeding the attention-seeking behavior of the protestors. So our response has been confined to such activities as the 2005 statement, expressing support to the synagogue's leadership, inviting Rabbi Rob Dobrusin of Beth Israel Congregation to speak on a panel about religious freedom and declining protestors' requests to participate in ICPJ public statements.

We at ICPJ realize that we are called to speak out more strongly and clearly. As an interfaith organization committed to social justice and civil discourse, we are called to be an ally to those facing religious harassment, not just a passive bystander. Having had this realization, we now publicly restate our opposition to the synagogue protests and call on the participants to stop their campaign of harassing Jewish religious institutions.

For the past nine years, members of Beth Israel Congregation have had to face weekly protests outside their house of worship as they enter to attend Shabbat

services. This harassment of worshippers is uncalled for and remains hurtful and counterproductive.

Furthermore, the group has a disturbing history of condemning not just Israel or Israeli policies but Judaism itself. For example, in 2007 Mr. Herskovitz circulated writings alleging that "Nice little Jewish girls and boys aren't born as monsters, they are turned into monsters by their parents and rabbis" through "Jewish holidays such as Passover" which "help make the deaths of others holy, justified, and, in the case of Purim, fun." To circulate writings that demonize Jewish religious observance and claim that Judaism turns children into monsters is to traffic in anti-Semitism.

We value the U.S. right of free speech. The protestors have first amendment protection for their activities, and we in no way desire to interfere with their rights. Instead, we too use our right to free speech to call for a community of respect and civility.

Harassment does not lay a path to peace. We again call on Mr. Herskovitz to end the protests outside Beth Israel Congregation and the targeting of Jewish religious institutions. ■

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