

RELIGION AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM:

A RESPONSE

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Colleagues and others familiar with censorship issues often assume the conservative area I work in probably experiences more than its share of intellectual freedom challenges because of its large Mennonite and Amish population. In actuality, however, members of this religious group generally allow for the differences of those they offer service to and live near. They are only part of the population that make up this particular community and it is unfair to everyone in the community to place them all in the same group. In addition to the dangers of stereotyping individuals and groups, there is also danger in doing so to whole communities. The idea that the modern small town contains the same mix of people it did 50 years ago is often hard to change, especially by the residents, who may view the area as insular, never-changing and homogenous and who may prefer it that way.

I have observed this in our area. Although the majority of residents welcome new ideas and people, there are members of two groups who struggle against changing their concept of the town. Some members of the "native" population hold the traditional fears that with new people come unwanted or undesirable changes. On the other hand, many new residents chose this area based on its religiously conservative reputation and may believe that everyone holds values that closely parallel or equal their own. This latter group follows the national trend of the new spiritualism among younger couples. While it is important to remember that challenges can come from all sources, left, right and middle, it has been our experience locally that the relatively few challenges or complaints that we receive really do come from this latter group. They seem to feel slightly astonished that our community is not as homogenous as they originally thought and are very vocal about what they believe should be acceptable for everyone.

Within the past year, I have personally been involved in two major challenges, as well as listening to the occasional minor complaint or concern. One of the major challenges came from a member of a reli-

giously fundamentalist church who was concerned about Internet filtering. The other was from parents using their "Christian religious freedom" to challenge a book studied in their child's class. Minor concerns have involved graphic descriptions of murder, the birth and death of animals, language, sex, nudity and a G-rated movie that "shouldn't have had a G rating." Some of these complaints have come from people that we know are very religious, while others may or may not be.

Beyond trying to determine from what direction the challenges come, our staff has made the following observations. More complaints are received about audio and visual items than books, such as magazine covers, videos and audio books. These leave less to the imagination and offensive passages cannot be skipped over as easily as a paragraph or pages in a book without going too far beyond the passage. People rely on ratings and labels for assurance that materials are appropriate, not realizing that the standards and subjectivity of the raters may not mirror their own values. Language and sex are still more often offensive than hate or violence. People may have other reasons than the obvious or stated ones for challenging something. A person may have a personal history that is more responsible for his or her feelings than religious affiliation.

At our library, we have adopted the policy of always trying to listen to the challenger and making a conscious effort to see the issue from their viewpoint, which at times is difficult if it varies from our own. However the issue is resolved, remaining open-minded and keeping the channels of communication open can lead to fewer confrontations and better relationships in the future with both individuals and the community. It may also make it easier to explain the concept of a library's responsibility to all of its patrons' diverse viewpoints and needs. We need to constantly remind ourselves to respect their positions, because they feel as strongly about their commitment to their causes or beliefs as we do to ours.

We have a brochure available on the role of the public library and the rights and responsibilities of patrons to choose wisely from the variety of materials offered in our collection. Its title is "Give Us Ideas, Give Us Wings." Although it is a wonderful statement and represents a vital goal, the reality is that we face challenges to it every day. How we view those challenges, and the people that raise them, may determine how successful we are in keeping those ideas free.

