

5-30-99

Mark A. Whittaker, Opinion editor,
1-800-874-9994 or (724) 779-7129

Our View

Ironic chord sounds in veto of 'Godspell'

Although the discussion was thick with irony, the North Allegheny School Board correctly rejected "Godspell" as the high school musical for next year.

The school board concluded the musical, which is loosely based on the Christian Gospel of Matthew, would offend non-Christian members of the school community. Two women at last week's school board meeting objected to the musical because of its content.

The opponents said it would be inappropriate for a public school to sponsor performances of a musical that espoused a particular religion. One Jewish parent expressed concern that if her children had parts in "Godspell" they would be forced to sing songs that put forth ideas they don't believe in.

"Godspell" was first performed in 1971 off-Broadway. It has remained popular and has been performed in public high schools throughout the country with few complaints. The most well-known song from the show is "Day by Day," and much of the play relates the parables Jesus of Nazareth used to teach tolerance, understanding and forgiveness.

Ironically, the school board based its rejection of "Godspell" on the district's new diversity policy, which says, in part, "The district shall foster mutual respect and affirmation for diversity as it prepares all students to enter and participate in an increasingly global society."

The juxtaposition of the story of "Godspell" and the district's diversity policy raises a number of questions about whether "Godspell" is appropriate as a public school's musical.

Is the school board showing the same mutual respect for Christians as it is for non-Christians in rejecting the play? Who is being intolerant — those who suggested that

North Allegheny School District

Is the school board showing the same mutual respect for Christians as it is for non-Christians in rejecting the play? Who is being intolerant — those who suggested that "Godspell" be performed or those who object?

Is "Godspell" art, culture, religion or some combination, and where does one draw the line? The lyrics and dialogue don't attack any particular race or religion — although they do criticize Pharisees, lawyers and hypocrites — so what, if anything, is offensive about the musical?

If the school board had allowed the performance of "Godspell," would it have been unfairly imposing the majority's will on a minority who don't share the beliefs expressed in the play, or would individuals simply choose not to participate because of their beliefs?

In most drama there is a villain. If an actor portrays a villain, does it mean the actor shares the bad guy's values? Can a non-Christian actor portray a Christian without sharing Christian beliefs?

The courts have drawn bold lines to separate church and state, but at what point does that separation become an educational denial of religion and religion's role in American and world history?

In deciding to reject "Godspell," the school board made the safest choice. The district almost surely would lose a lawsuit over the matter. And there are legitimate reasons to be concerned about spending public money on anything that could be perceived as an endorsement of a particular religion. Unfortunately, some would perceive an NA performance of "Godspell" that way — even though it was intended as nothing more than a challenging and popular musical.