

Forum provides taste of Mideast emotions

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Organizers of a Feb. 23 community-education forum on Israeli-Palestinian issues had hoped their event would "enhance the light and lessen the heat."

But the forum did raise the temperature somewhat in the auditorium of the University of Rochester's School of Medicine and Dentistry, where about 125 people gathered for the four-hour session.

Panelists — two featured speakers from Israel and eight local representatives of Palestinian, Jewish, Arab and Christian communities — engaged in several lively exchanges.

Those exchanges included variant histories of the region, accusations and counter accusations, and even finger pointing.

"The gut issue," according to speaker Isaiah M. Gafni, a professor of Jewish history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is the "perception in both camps of the nature and intention of the other side."

And that perception, a number of the panelists asserted, is one of mutual distrust stemming from a long history of battles over Palestine.

"This is the main obstacle to building peace," observed panelist Eitan Bogin, an Israeli chemist currently working for one year at Eastman Kodak Company. "There is a lot of history, a lot of mistrust."

"I think we had hoped for something a little more calm, a little more conciliatory than it turned out to be," acknowledged Father Joseph Brennan, chairman of the committee that organized the forum. "But I'm not disappointed with the way things turned out."

"I think a lot of the people there were talking out of a lot of emotions, out of a lot of hurt and a lot of anger,"

added Father Brennan, the U of R's director of religious affairs. "They're just not used to talking to each other. I think the forum achieved that."

The forum also led approximately 30 people to sign a list indicating interest in participating in further Palestinian-Israeli discussions.

Jointly sponsored by the Commission for Jewish-Christian Relations of the Jewish Community Federation and the Genesee Valley Christians for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, the forum began with presentations by Gafni and the Rev. Shehadeh N. Shehadeh, a Palestinian who is an Episcopal priest of the Diocese of Jerusalem.

During the program's second half, principal speakers and panel members discussed Israeli-Palestinian issues.

The audience responded most warmly to the comments of Ayala Gabriel, a professor of anthropology at the University of Rochester, and David Shomar, a Palestinian businessman now living in Syracuse.

Gabriel, who is studying the women's peace movement in Israel, noted that even efforts like the forum that attempt to move beyond the past "are drawn back to the past." She said this results in "an inability to talk about the present."

Shomar went further, declaring, "Keep the focus on the people; forget the past."

Yet history surfaced again and again in the discussion, as participants recounted past transgressions, and even personal suffering.

The Rev. Shehadeh noted, for example, that after he completes doctoral studies at McCormick Seminary in Chicago this June, he must return to Israel to face charges of "instigating against the security of Israel." He faces the charges for appearing briefly — but not speaking — at a May, 1990, peace gathering during which he was photographed standing in front of a

Father Dennis Noelke to become new principal at Aquinas Institute

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Stating that "there may be no other time Catholic schools are needed more than right now," Father Dennis P. Noelke, CSB, said he's looking forward to taking over as principal of Aquinas Institute on July 1, 1992.

Father Noelke, 38, succeeds Father Harold B. Gardner, CSB, whose five-year term expires June 30. The Aquinas Board of Trustees made the appointment at its Feb. 11 meeting.

Father Noelke becomes the 14th principal to lead Aquinas since the school opened in 1902.

"I feel honored and awe-struck all at the same time. I know the tradition at Aquinas, and to be asked to carry it toward the 21st century is an overwhelming honor and challenge," he remarked.

Since 1987, Father Noelke has held several roles at Aquinas, 1127 Dewey Ave. In addition to serving as superior of the Basilian Fathers, he has been director of campus ministry, freshman guidance counselor and theology teacher.

Father Noelke believes that the extensive contact he's had with Aquinas students will prepare him well for his

new role.

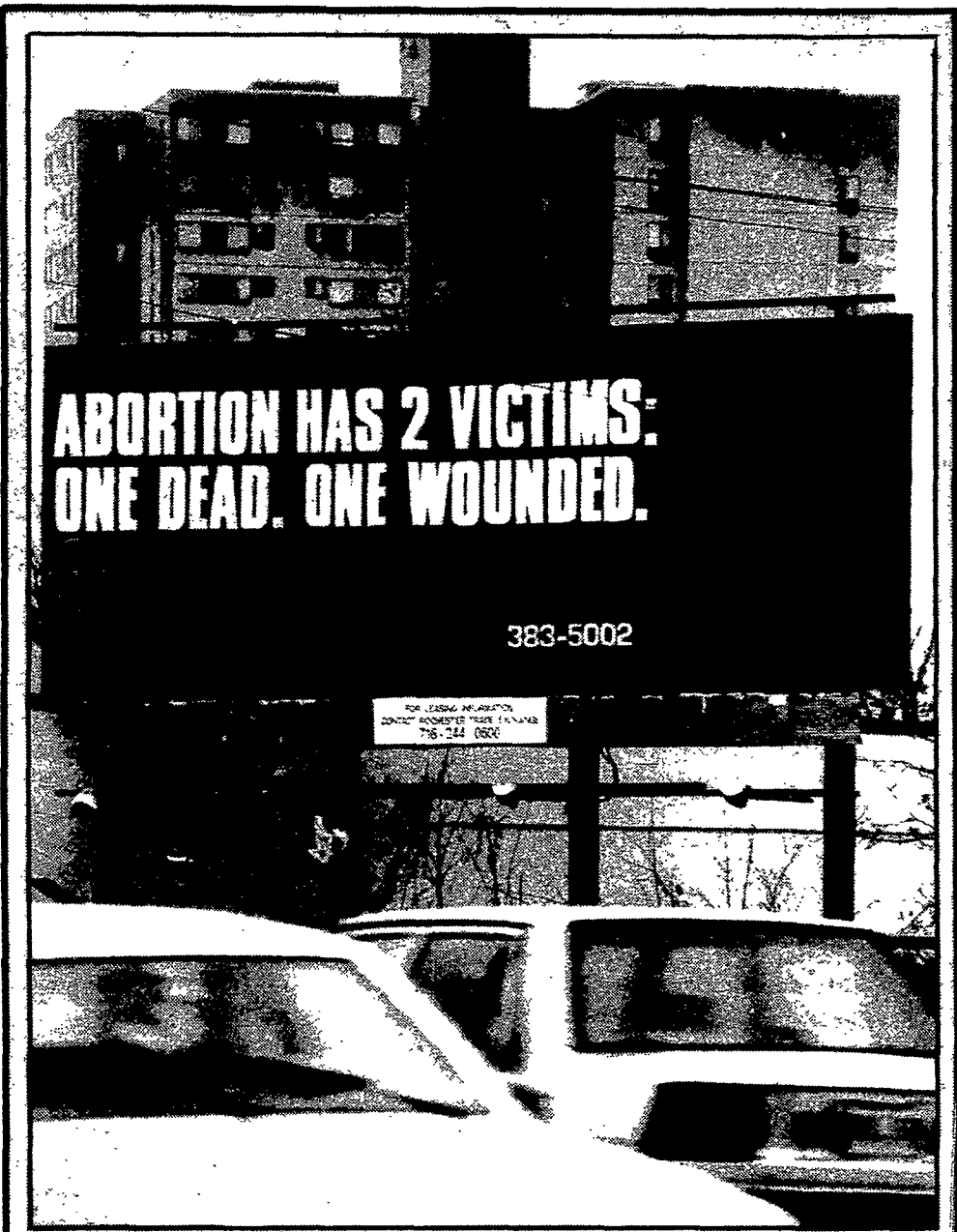
"It's given me a much clearer understanding of the needs of young people today," he said.

He added, with a chuckle, "So many students are saying to me, 'Oh, you're going to have to be mean now.'"

Regarding the importance of Catholic schools in the 1990s, he said, "I've been in Catholic schools my whole life, for all my education, and I think I'm the person I am today because of it ... with the kind of values that today's society presents, Catholic schools, you might say, present alternative values that are needed."

A native of Detroit, Mich., Father Noelke first came to Aquinas as a seminarian in 1976-1977, when he taught mathematics and theology. After he was ordained in 1981, he served from 1983-87 as director of Vocations and Associates for the Basilian Fathers.

He began his current duties at Aquinas after earning his master's degree in pastoral studies from Loyola University of Chicago in 1987. Father Noelke also holds a master's of divinity degree from the University of St. Michael's/Toronto School of Theology, and a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Mercy College of Detroit (formerly known as University of Detroit Mercy).



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor
BILLBOARD CONTROVERSY — A billboard leased by Feminists for Life of Western New York in downtown Rochester advertises a phone number that offers a recorded message listing support services for pregnant women. Since the sign went up Feb. 16, members of the group have been receiving what they described as 'hate calls' at their homes.

Palestinian flag.

Forum exchanges also included observations that angered not only participants, but audience members as well.

In one case, Bogin questioned the amount of influence U.S. citizens should have in the Middle East, since they do not live in the situation. He compared such influence to Americans more than two decades ago commenting on the progress of the Vietnam War, as they sat in front of their televisions eating popcorn.

And the Rev. Shehadeh declared that the Palestinians had been at a disadvantage when Israel was created because they did not have the influence, power and money that the Jewish people did — a comment that produced immediate vocal reactions from the audience.

Father Brennan observed that although the forum did not go quite as planned, it possibly allowed some

people to release some of their anger and other emotions so that they can now move on to talk about the future. He added that the forum enabled participants to hear the other side's point of view — perhaps for the first time.

As for the future, Father Brennan said the committee that organized the event will be meeting to discuss further activities. Other forums might be held, he said, with one possible topic for discussion being the women's peace movement in Israel.

The Rev. Shehadeh said such dialogue in the United States will ultimately help the situation in Israel.

"You set an example for everyone in the world, especially Palestinians and Israelis," the Rev. Shehadeh said in an interview following the forum. "We are here, Palestinians, Christians, Jews, and we are talking together, and we are listening to each other."

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