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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December Dilemma Survey Dispels Myths about Interfaith Families and Holiday Celebrations

Boston – November 15, 2004 – The common perception about interfaith families is that the December holidays can be challenging and unpleasant as family members struggle with identity crises, conflicting emotions and family guilt. But a just-completed survey shines new light on how interfaith families experience Hanukkah and Christmas. According to the December Dilemma Survey, released today by InterfaithFamily.com (www.interfaithfamily.com), an independent non-profit publisher and advocacy membership association, a majority actually eagerly looks forward to and enjoys the December holidays.

The December Dilemma Survey, which fielded responses from 199 people nationwide in October, was designed to understand how people in interfaith families celebrate their own and their partners' holidays and to gain insight into those celebrations. The survey respondents were self-selected, and 80 percent of the respondents who said they had children raised them as Jews, in comparison to the 33 percent reported in the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001. While the survey is not representative of all interfaith families, it provides important new information about interfaith families who are raising their children as Jews – a very important demographic for Jewish continuity.

“The December Dilemma Survey is the first finding that interfaith families are dealing well with Hanukkah and Christmas,” said Edmund Case, publisher, InterfaithFamily.com. “While it is gratifying to see that the vast majority of people responding to the survey indicated that they are thriving, not merely surviving, during the holidays, the insight we’re gaining will help others in the community. For example, we found that many Jews who participated in Christmas celebrations actually felt their own and their children’s Jewish identities strengthened by the experience, not weakened. We found that many parents used the line of reasoning that for Jews, attending a Christmas party is similar to having a good time at someone else’s birthday party, it doesn’t mean it’s your birthday – or your holiday.”

The survey found that Hanukkah is an important holiday for the respondents: 92 percent participated in Hanukkah celebrations last year, while 87 percent of respondents participated in Christmas celebrations. Contrary to popular impressions, Hanukkah is perceived as more fun than Christmas – 82 percent said they enjoyed Hanukkah very much, while only 53 percent said they enjoyed Christmas very much. Perhaps more surprisingly, respondents reported that more children enjoyed Hanukkah very much than did Christmas (79 percent to 69 percent, respectively).

For interfaith families raising Jewish children, a primary way to resolve potential conflicts over the December holidays is to treat Hanukkah, but not Christmas, as a religious holiday. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported that their Hanukkah celebrations were more religious than secular. In contrast, 75 percent said their Christmas celebrations were more secular than religious. As one respondent said, “We celebrate both holidays, Christmas as a secular holiday with Santa, lacking the religious aspect. We celebrate Hanukkah as

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the religious holiday.” Another said, “Christmas is not the religious celebration people make it out to be. It has become, for our family, a chance to get together and celebrate.”

“Telling the holiday story” clearly has religious implications to these respondents; while 55 percent told the Hanukkah story, only 10 percent told the Christmas story. As one respondent said, “There is a clear distinction between ‘this is a holiday I celebrate because I believe in the story’ and ‘this is a holiday that I celebrate with Dad’.”

Some in the Jewish community are concerned with religious “syncretism,” or blending of religious traditions. An important survey finding is that despite the holidays’ close proximity in 2003 (with the eight-day holiday of Hanukkah starting December 20, 2003), more than two-thirds of the respondents said they kept their celebrations separate, as opposed to blending them.

Although 81 percent of interfaith families stated they participated in celebrations of both holidays, some of the Jews in interfaith families reported residual discomfort. While 53 percent had Christmas trees in their homes, 26 percent of them felt more uncomfortable than comfortable with the tree.

Despite such lingering discomfort, the survey respondents readily explained that they participate in both holiday celebrations as a way of sharing in, honoring and respecting the traditions of the both sides of their family. (See verbatim comments in Survey Fact Sheet.)

A major concern in the Jewish community over intermarriage is whether the children of interfaith parents develop Jewish identities. Interestingly, many of the survey respondents wrote that celebrating Christmas actually strengthened their own and their children’s Jewish identity rather than weakened it. (See verbatim comments in Survey Fact Sheet.)

About InterfaithFamily.com

InterfaithFamily.com (www.interfaithfamily.com) is an independent non-profit publisher and advocacy membership association that works to encourage Jewish choices by interfaith families and increase acceptance of interfaith families by the Jewish community. InterfaithFamily.com publishes a bi-weekly online magazine that reaches out directly to interfaith families, delivering helpful, non-judgmental information about handling situations that arise in interfaith families. InterfaithFamily.com also produced the first-of-its-kind anthology, *The Guide to Jewish Interfaith Family Life: An InterfaithFamily.com Handbook* (Jewish Lights Publishing), to offer much-needed support for interfaith families seeking to explore Jewish life. InterfaithFamily.com is the only national organization that focuses exclusively on reaching out to and helping interfaith families themselves, and advocating on a grass-roots level as their “voice.”

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EDITOR’S NOTE: InterfaithFamily.com has developed “Handling the December Holidays: Eight Tips from InterfaithFamily.com” that is designed to help interfaith families have a more enjoyable and meaningful holiday season. If you are interested in receiving a copy of “Handling the December Holidays,” please send an email to 8tips@birnbachcom.com.



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December Dilemma Survey Fact Sheet

Hanukkah Observance

Respondents observed Hanukkah in their own homes by:

- Lighting a menorah: 99 percent
- Giving gifts: 90 percent
- Eating Hanukkah foods: 78 percent
- Putting up Hanukkah decorations: 64 percent
- Singing Hanukkah songs: 51 percent

Christmas Observance

Respondents observed Christmas in their own homes by:

- Giving gifts: 67 percent
- Tree decorating: 53 percent
- Hanging stockings: 37 percent
- Decorating with other Christmas items: 40 percent
- Singing Christmas songs: 41
- Eating Christmas foods: 33 percent. (64 percent indicated they had Christmas dinner at the home of relatives or friends).

Attending Christmas services: 25 percent

Holiday Storytelling

“Telling the holiday story” clearly has religious implications to these respondents.

- 55 percent told the Hanukkah story
- 10 percent told the Christmas story

Jews and Christmas Trees

Of the 53 percent of Jews in interfaith families who had Christmas trees in their homes:

- 41 percent reported feeling more comfortable than uncomfortable with a tree in their home
- 26 percent felt more uncomfortable than comfortable

Attitudes towards Celebrations

The survey asked about the attitudes of those participating in their relatives’ holiday celebrations.

- For Jewish relatives who participated in Christmas celebrations:
 - 19 percent felt more uncomfortable than comfortable
 - 32 percent felt more comfortable than uncomfortable

- For non-Jewish relatives who participated in Hanukkah celebrations
 - None reported feeling more uncomfortable than comfortable
 - 85 percent felt more comfortable than uncomfortable

Verbatim Comments: Why Interfaith Families Participate in Both Holidays

Survey respondents readily explained that they participate in both Hanukkah and Christmas as a way of sharing in, honoring and respecting the traditions of the both sides of their family.

- “I really enjoy the holidays, because it allows us as a family to share our celebration with others of all faiths and races. I am glad my husband is Jewish because it’s allowed me to learn so much of his background.”
- “It’s a season of giving and to be thankful for what we have. To keep an open mind and understand that it’s a new holiday to celebrate just like ours is new to someone else.”
- “It’s a Christian party which we celebrate in a secular way. What we celebrate ...is the reunion of the family and how we can learn to value each other’s traditions, even if they are not our own.”
- “My children's grandparents are Christian and these are the only grandchildren they have with whom to celebrate Christmas. We celebrate Hanukkah at our house, and we celebrate Christmas at their grandparents’ house. We are sharing their holiday with them, just as they share our holidays with us.”
- “I hope to tell my young children that this is something very important to their mother's family, and that despite the fact that we are Jewish, it is important to respect other people's faith; faith in a moral and compassionate religion is admirable.”
- “Participating in some Christmas celebrations was a way to connect with my family. I miss Christmas in the sense that I miss my mom.”

Verbatim Comments: Christmas and the Jewish Identity

Many of the survey respondents wrote that celebrating Christmas actually strengthened their own and their children’s Jewish identity rather than weakened it.

- “Celebrating Christmas as a secular holiday has not caused our children to have any identity problems because we celebrate Hanukkah as the religious holiday.”
- “Christmas celebrations do not alter their Jewish identity as long as parents and family explain what is happening.”
- “I don’t feel that sharing in the celebrations of others negatively affects one’s own religious identity. I think it strengthens the awareness that there are many different cultures and religions and teaches acceptance and even curiosity about the unfamiliar.”
- “Being secure in your own Jewish faith makes it pleasurable to share another’s celebration without considering it a threat.”
- “We think Christmas is a great celebration of peace and goodwill. We don’t happen to believe in the divinity of Christ, but we celebrate the spirit of peace that should surround Christmas.”
- “Our children’s Jewish identity will be strong enough to support them and they’ll know that it’s important to support others in their religious convictions.”
- “While our children are Jewish their father is Catholic so that is part of their identity. They identify themselves as Jewish with a Catholic father. They will always want to celebrate Christmas for the festive nature of the holiday and not the religious part, which they know but do not identify with.”
- “We have tried to teach our son respect for others’ holidays and traditions, while maintaining our own Jewish traditions, not as superior to anyone else’s, but rather our own, and therefore special to us.”
- “We give our non-Jewish relatives presents at Christmas because it’s when the gesture is most meaningful to them. It’s one of the ways in which we teach our children to acknowledge and appreciate other traditions while learning to be responsible, educated and committed Jews.”

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