



## **14<sup>th</sup> Annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Prayer Breakfast**

Hotel Kabuki

Tuesday, November 22, 2011

Remarks by Michael G. Pappas, Executive Director

If each of us in this room sat back, closed our eyes and thought about our favorite Rita moment or moments, I suspect we'd each break out in a big smile. As one who, arguably, has spent more concentrated time with our honoree over the past four years, I've been blessed with many such moments. My favorite Rita moment is seeing her beam when she meets an unsuspecting victim and gets to tell the story of the birth of the San Francisco Interfaith Council. Having been tasked, this morning, with giving an account of Rita's role in the development of the SFIC, allow me, for a moment, in best of Jewish tradition, oral history passed down, to lift up HER voice and tell HER story ...

The repository of institutional memory, Rita reminds us that before there was a San Francisco Interfaith Council, during the civil rights days of '63/'64, there was the San Francisco Conference on Religion and Race, which later became the San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns. This entity met continuously for 25 years, but languished because there were no particular crises to address.

In December of 1988, however, when Rita was Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, it was a particularly cold and wet December. A group of clergy was called into San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos' office. As she is quick to remind us, because she was not clergy, Rita was not invited to attend. But Rabbi Malcolm Sparer, who was then the President of the Board of Rabbis, went. With great urgency, he rushed back to the JCRC and reported to Rita that the Mayor asked for help because there were more homeless than the City could handle and he needed congregations to open their doors to provide meals and shelter. Furthermore, he went on to say that the Catholics and the Protestants said yes, so the Jews had to say yes, and of course they did. Thus was born the term, "interfaithmanship!" With that, Mayor Agnos set up a committee upon which Rita was asked to sit. During that winter various congregations provided extra shelter and others provided meals. When spring came the committee dissolved, but the shelter program, now a collaborative effort of the SFIC, Episcopal Community Services and the City's Human Services Agency continues to this day.

Come October 1989 the Loma Prieta Earthquake hit and devastated our city. Rita, along with a number of congregation leaders, tried to figure out how they could

help those impacted by the quake, when Jim Emerson, then Pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church, got a call from the Humanitarian Aid Agency, Church World Service. The person who called said, "We want to give money to San Francisco to help with this current crisis, but we don't want to give it to Christians alone. We want to give it to everybody, no matter his or her faith." So Pastor Emerson called together a committee to decide who needed the funding, who should get it and how it should be distributed. And to nobody's particular surprise, the same people who served on the committee to provide shelters ended up on this committee, as well.

When the crisis was over and those faith leaders did everything they could to distribute the money fairly, making sure that it went to the right places, somebody said, we can't keep setting up committees every time there is a crisis in the City, every time something needs to be done that the faith community ought to be involved in. Rita then suggested reviving the San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns. In response, someone immediately piped up and said "NO, the current nomenclature is interfaith council ... interfaith councils are being formed throughout the nation ... and we need one here in San Francisco." With that, in true American spirit, a committee emerged to organize the San Francisco Interfaith Council we know today. By the time the organization was ready to begin its work, Rita had retired from the Jewish Community Relations Council and was called to be the de facto executive director. Quick to remind us, she is very good at assuming unpaid jobs, she assumed the role and, along with first chair, Rev. Richard Schaper and a dedicated board, embarked on this 23-year adventure ... and the rest is history!

Thanks to Rita's inspired vision, passion, tenacity, sacrifices and tireless efforts, the San Francisco Interfaith Council has been true to its mission, "Celebrating our diverse faiths and spiritual traditions, bringing people together to build understanding and serving our community" and, as a result, we've become that portal to give voice to the rich interfaith presence here in San Francisco. Be it our core work with the homeless and disaster preparedness, to being there for our constituent faith communities and the City in good times as well as times of crisis, we owe a great debt of gratitude to this founder who has truly earned the title, Matriarch of Interfaith Work in San Francisco.

As the one who stands on her shoulders and has been called to stewardship of her rich legacy, I think the gift she would most like from each of us today is to renew our commitment to just do what comes natural ... this business that our beloved Fr. Gerry O'Rourke says, "is all about relationships."

On a personal note, I'd just like to say, Rita, you have been so much more than a colleague ... to me, you have been a mentor, a confidante, mother and friend. Like so many of us gathered here today, you have enriched my life and made me all the better for it.

For fear of getting scolded for violating Rita's commitment to economy of words, allow me to close with this thought. A little known fact about Rita is that her father was in vaudeville ... when she was young he gave her a sage piece of advice ... "Keep'm wanting more." Rita, you keep us wanting more! As you begin this new chapter in life we can't wait to see what comes next! May God grant you many, many more years of continued health and vitality ... Happy Birthday, my dear friend!