

Homelessness, bigotry targeted by interfaith council

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Smoke signals from the Los Angeles riots are being read in San Francisco, where Jews, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists have joined together to tackle homelessness, bigotry and other social ills.

A year in the making, the S.F. Interfaith Council already has 50 dues-paying member groups, and now that it's an official non-profit, organizers are turning their attention to the task at hand.

Several local crises spurred the Interfaith Council into being, according to executive vice chair Rita Semel.

The first, the growing number of homeless in San Francisco, inspired more than 70 congregations and organizations to create an emergency shelter program now entering its fifth year.

The second, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, again brought religious leaders together in an ad hoc relief committee; a third crisis — the execution of convicted murderer Robert Alton Harris — came up in April when many of the same religious leaders joined together to protest the death penalty.

But "we were tired of having to reinvent ourselves every time there was a crisis," says Semel, executive director emeritus of the S.F.-based Jewish Community Relations Council.

"There's also concern about the David Dukes of the world and, reinforced by the Los Angeles riots, we realized in a city like San Francisco people need to get to know



Photo by Mike Richman

Charting the future of the S.F. Interfaith Council are (from left) Buddhist priest Laverne Sasaki, Rabbi Martin Weiner, Lutheran Rev. Richard Schaper and Rita Semel, executive vice chair.

each other on a human and personal basis," she says. "Where better than through churches and synagogues? I think it's true they can set the moral tone for a community and that's what we're talking about — values and ethics and ways of behaving."

She'll get no argument from the Rev. Richard Schaper. The pastor of St. Marks Lutheran Church and chair of the new Interfaith Council,

he emphasizes the need "to grow in mutual knowledge and respect" and notes that combating bigotry tops the agenda.

That will be done by examining "how the racism in our society is reflected in our respective faith communities," he says

Another issue for Schaper is "Christians on the right" who claim America is a Christian nation. Such rhetoric "has even come

from the White House," he says. "But when one lives in a place like San Francisco, the obvious is even more bluntly obvious — that we're in a pluralistic society with a

multiplicity of religious traditions."

Contrasting the broadly based Interfaith Council with the councils of churches common in other cities, Schaper says, "It's clear we're in this together as equal partners together with people of other faiths. Given the historical anti-Semitism in many Christian churches, this is a significant development."

Rabbis Mark Schifftan of Temple Emanu-El and Martin Weiner of Congregation Sherith Israel echo that pride in the organization.

"I think we have a very effective organizational structure which can address community social service needs and build bridges of understanding among the various faiths," Weiner says, welcoming in particular the opportunity for Jews to work with Buddhists and Hindus.

Schifftan cites the emergency shelter program as one area where interfaith cooperation has paid off.

"It's only the beginning of what's possible," he says. "No matter what one's politics, we have to deal with the results, and the reality is that for the past 12 years the American people have wanted a government that has had a hands-off policy toward these issues. In light of that, the Interfaith Council has to step in."