



St. Mary's Cathedral Patron's Hall is one of four host sites for the annual Interfaith Winter Shelter.

Photo courtesy of Episcopal Community Services

# FAITHFUL WINTER RESPITE

For 35 years, San Francisco's faith community has worked in unison to bring the homeless in out of the cold



**BY CHRISTINA GRAY**

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San Francisco's homeless crisis has not changed substantially since December of 1988, when then-Mayor Art Agnos beseeched the faith communities of San Francisco for help with what he called "a very serious, dire and complicated situation."

Cuts to federal and state mental health services and public housing, a wave of Vietnam vets in need of help, skyrocketing housing costs and a spike in unemployment caused by a national recession were said to have converged to hit the city hard, leaving thousands of vulnerable San Franciscans out in the cold. The need for shelter beds, especially during the cold and rainy winter months, far exceeded those available in city shelters.

"They responded immediately and magnificently," Agnos said in a video at the time sitting next to Rita Semel, longtime member of Congregation Emanu-El and inarguably the face of the city's interfaith community.

"We were called in to do this, and it was an emergency," Semel, now 102, said at the time. "So we sent out the word and the congregations responded."

The response, which included Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Buddhists, Mormons, Hindus, Muslims and nondenominational Christians and spiritualists, gave birth to the San Francisco Interfaith Council and the Interfaith Winter Shelter the same year.

## "IT'S A LABOR OF LOVE"

"What started out to be a one-year emergency shelter is entering its 35th year," said Michael Pappas, who succeeded Semel as executive director of the San Francisco Interfaith Council 18 years ago. Pappas said the city depends upon the Winter Shelter to augment its facilities during the colder seasons.

"It's a labor of love, there really is no other way to explain it," he said. It's a place, he said, where guests get what other shelters, and certainly the





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**RITA SEMEL**, longtime member of Congregation Emanu-El and former executive director of the San Francisco Interfaith Council

streets, don't offer: a warm, dry place to sleep in safety, with good meals and the kindness and fellowship of the local faith community.

“The late Mayor Ed Lee used to call it the Four Seasons of shelters for these very reasons,” Pappas said.

The Winter Shelter is a highly coordinated partnership between the city's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, Episcopal Community Services, the interfaith council and more than 40 participating local congregations.

It is not one site, but four host sites that from November through March alternate as a sort of “pop-up” overnight shelter for from 70-100 unhoused guests of all ages and both sexes. Unhoused individuals are able to take respite from the streets on a clean cot after a warm meal and get breakfast before they leave the next morning.

The city and the Episcopal agency are responsible for the administrative and logistical needs of the shelter, such as supplying cots, blankets, security and sanitation. The interfaith council is tasked with finding and securing the host sites each year.

St. Mark's Lutheran Church, First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, Canon Kip Senior Center and St. Mary's Cathedral are the sites for the 2023/24 winter season.

“Many members look forward to this ministry year after year,” said Hanna Hart of the Universalist Society host site. >



## ST. DOMINIC'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

**MONDAY, DECEMBER 18: CHRISTMAS CONCERT** with a musical version of Charles Dicken's "A Christmas Carol"

7:30\* pm

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19: RECONCILIATION SERVICE**

12:00 Noon – 1:00 pm

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19: MERCY NIGHT WITH RECONCILIATION SERVICE**

7:30 pm

**WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20: CANDLELIT COMPLINE** with

meditations on the great "O" Advent Antiphons

7:30\* pm

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24: ADVENT IV**

7:30, 9:30\* & 11:30 am Masses; 1:30 pm (in Spanish)

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24: CHRISTMAS EVE**

4:00\* & 6:00 pm Masses

11:15\* pm Carol Service followed by Mass at Midnight

**MONDAY, DECEMBER 25: CHRISTMAS DAY**

12:00\* am Solemn Christmas Midnight Mass

8:30 & 11:00\* am Masses, (No 5:30 pm Masses)

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31: HOLY FAMILY/NEW YEAR'S EVE**

7:30, 9:30\* & 11:30 am; 1:30 & 5:30 pm

**MONDAY, JANUARY 1, 2024: MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD**

8:30\* am Morning Prayer, 9:30\* am Parish Mass

5:15\* pm Evening Prayer, (no evening Mass)

Visit our website [www.stdominics.org](http://www.stdominics.org) for any and all updates. All liturgies and events subject to change. \*livestream

2390 BUSH STREET AT STEINER, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94115, 415.567.7824



### St. Brendan Catholic Church

**2023-24 Christmas Mass Schedule**

**Christmas Eve • Sunday, December 24, 2023**

4:00, 6:00 & 9:00 pm (our midnight Mass)

**Nativity of the Lord**

**Monday, December 25, 2023 • 7:30, 9:30 & 11:30 am**

**Holy Family of Jesus, Mary & Joseph**

**Saturday, December 30, 2023 • 5:00 pm**

**Sunday, December 31, 2023 • 7:30, 9:30, 11:30 am**

**Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God**

**Sunday, December 31, 2023 • 6:00 pm**

**Monday, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024 • 9:00 am**

**The Epiphany of the Lord**

**Saturday, January 6, 2024 • 5:00 pm**

**Sunday, January 7, 2024 • 7:30, 9:30 & 11:30 am**

29 Rockaway Avenue, SF, CA 94127 • 515.681.4225

[www.stbrendanparish.org](http://www.stbrendanparish.org)



Photo courtesy SFIC

The SFIC encourages local congregations to take on responsibility for buying, making and serving dinner and breakfast to homeless guests on a given date.

Paige Hosking with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is tasked with this organizational feat. “It’s a lot of work with a lot of moving pieces,” she said, but getting volunteers from local faith communities to participate is the easiest part.

“This is one of the most popular service opportunities in our church,” said Betsy Dodd of Calvary Presbyterian Church. The youth group takes responsibility for one night themselves. “The guests are always so appreciative of our meals and our attentions,” she said.

Ariana Estoque said Congregation Emanu-El takes eight nights each January to make and serve food, an “immersive teaching opportunity that breaks down barriers and stereotypes” about the homeless.

“Our teens have face-to-face interaction with people they would normally walk by on the street,” she said. “Their eyes are opened.”

Whole families come to cook and serve together, she said. Tables are set with placemats decorated by younger students, fresh flowers put on each table.

“We want our unhoused guests to feel welcome, and seen,” she said.

### CONTINUOUS CATHOLIC COMMITMENT

St. Mary’s Cathedral, with its large Event

In an undated photo, SFIC executive director Michael Pappas, back left, and his twins, Julia and Paul, foreground, help prepare a warm meal in the kitchen of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church for guests of the Interfaith Winter Shelter.

Center and Patron’s Hall, has been a host site from the very beginning of the Winter Shelter, Pappas said. During the fraught days of the pandemic, it served as the only host site for a period of three months. It also is the largest host site venue.

“We are indebted to the Archdiocese of San Francisco, and to St. Mary’s for its commitment as a continuing host site,” he said.

He credited the parish and Event Center director Diane Luporini for making the Winter Shelter at St. Mary’s “a well-oiled machine.”

St. Ignatius, St. Stephen, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Vincent de Paul, Holy Name, Old St. Mary’s, Sts. Peter and Paul, Mission Dolores Basilica and the Knights of St. Francis are among the Catholic parishes and organizations that provide meals and more to the Winter Shelter.

Pappas said that while different faith communities don’t interact much with each other during the Winter Shelter, their common goal of service to the homeless often manifests itself into generosity and goodwill toward each other.

“Our synagogue always tries to provide food on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day so that host church members can focus on their Christmas observance,” said Nancy Sheftel-Gomes of Congregation Sherith Israel. ■



**SCAN HERE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE WINTER SHELTER,** or visit [sfinterfaithcouncil.org/interfaith-winter-shelter](https://sfinterfaithcouncil.org/interfaith-winter-shelter)