



[PHOTO BY VALERIE SCHMALZ]

Acting police chief Toney Chaplin and Rita Semel, former chair of the San Francisco Interfaith Council, at a council meeting Aug. 11.

Acting SFPD chief stresses importance of faith leaders in crisis response

VALERIE SCHMALZ
CATHOLIC SAN FRANCISCO

Acting San Francisco police chief Toney Chaplin endorsed the idea of supplying lists of neighborhood faith leaders for each police station at the San Francisco Interfaith Council on Aug. 11.

"I think it's a fantastic idea," Chaplin said in response to a suggestion that police stations be supplied with lists of neighborhood churches and congregations. Every captain has a book he gives to the watch commanders, "a ready reference guide," Chaplin said. "It is who you can go to immediately as soon as there is a crisis. I think it is fantastic idea and quite frankly I don't think it has ever been done."

"You have always been the rock in these communities," Chaplin said in his presentation to the crowded room at Calvary Presbyterian Church. He said all groups and coalitions need to work together. "We have all been working but in different spaces and silos. Imagine what we can do if we all linked arms and joined forces and pulled in the same direction."

Chaplin, a 26-year police veteran, was deputy chief of the Professional Standards and Principled Policing Bureau when Mayor Ed Lee appointed him interim chief in May after three fatal police shootings in six months led former police chief, Greg Suhr, to tender his resignation.

"There's a lot of people who stand behind us and support us, contrary to popular belief. But we don't just work for 96 percent of the city," he said at the briefing for faith leaders.

Changes in police policies and training on use of force, including implementing the "time and distance" approach and the roll out of body cameras, have made a difference already, he said.

He also said the department has stepped up recruitment among young African Americans, including placing a full-page ad in Black College Monthly, which is distributed to historically black colleges in the country. He encouraged those present to recruit the kind of people they would like to see as police officers.

Under prodding from G.L. Hodges, chair of the interfaith council and a member of Providence Baptist Church, Chaplin described how police used the "time and distance" approach to recently successfully defuse a standoff with a man who was waving a loaded gun in the middle of the day at Market and Jones streets, surrounded by a crowd that was egging him on.

"They would have been perfectly justified in shooting this individual but they didn't," Chaplin said of the officers. "They saved that gentleman's life." The officers separated the man from the crowd, creating a barrier, eventually shooting him with bean bags and coming in to surround him with shields, tackling him. His family was very grateful, Chaplin said, saying the situation was unbearably hostile with a crowd that used so much profanity that news cameras were turned off. The man had suffered a brain injury as a child and each year near the anniversary of his brother's death displayed mental distress, Chaplin said, but police knew none of that at the time.