

Interfaith activism is key to solving many city problems

Interfaithmanship is alive and well in San Francisco, and this past month was further proof of that.

On May 16, more than 100 clergy and congregants gathered to learn from Bevan Dufty, Director of HOPE, the City's homeless program, what they can do to help those who find themselves living on the streets.

On May 18, Rabbi Stephen Pearce of Congregation Emanu-El received an honorary doctorate from the University of San Francisco and gave the commencement address at this Jesuit university — an unusual honor for a rabbi.



To cap it all, on May 19 a large crowd turned out at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco to hear about "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene," a new opera premiering at the San Francisco Opera House in June.

I cite these examples because they happened recently, but I have

to point out that interfaith cooperation in our community goes back to pre-civil rights days when Rabbi Alvin Fine, then senior rabbi of Congregation Emanu-El, joined a Catholic priest and an Episcopal priest to host a television program called "Problems Please." The three clergymen discussed issues on which they agreed and issues on which they disagreed, all in a civilized and thoughtful way.

That pioneering interfaith effort was followed by

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much more within the civil rights movement. In the early 1960s, rabbis, ministers and priests from the Bay Area flew to Selma to march with Rev. Martin Luther King. They came home to help found San Francisco's Human Rights Commission. Others devoted time to the San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns, the precursor to today's San Francisco Interfaith Council.

Did they agree on everything? Not at all. But their differences did not stop them from working on issues on which they could agree. Underlying all this activity was the concept of tikkun olam, the commandment to repair the world. This is expressed in different ways by different faiths, but the basic concept is there in all of them.

Working side by side with the clergy is an army of lay people, congregants of the various religious institutions in our region. Take the winter shelter program of the San Francisco Interfaith Council, for example. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the initiative, which runs from the Sunday before Thanksgiving through the last week of February. Four congregations provide the shelter sites and more than 35 congregations — of many faiths — provide the meals. Hundreds of local homeless are helped by hundreds of local volunteers.

Then there is the issue of disaster preparedness. Congregations have been gathering together for the last eight years to meet each other, learn about each other's strengths and plan together to respond effectively when the next earthquake or other disaster strikes.

And that cooperation has already borne fruit. For

example, when Congregation Sherith Israel was undergoing retrofitting of its building nearly a decade ago and needed a place for High Holy Day services, Calvary Presbyterian Church two blocks away offered its sanctuary for several years in a row. This led to other joint activities and a friendship between the clergy of both congregations and study sessions among congregants.

This past April, the S.F.-based Jewish Community Relations Council took the lead in organizing an all-day workshop exploring ways to alleviate local poverty. Co-sponsors were the San Francisco Interfaith Council and the United Way of the Bay Area. More than 70 organizations and congregations participated.

There is much work to be done to heal this broken world of ours. And the faith community must play its role. The Jewish community with its long history of persecution and triumph over persecution must continue to be involved. The examples set by rabbis such as Stephen Pearce and organizations such as the JCRC and the Jewish Community Center can and must be replicated by the rest of us. ■

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