

“OUR BUILDINGS SERVE PEOPLE”

Today’s program is about our religious buildings. While congregations or judicatories own these buildings, often we feel like they own us. This can be illustrated by the oft-told experience of the clergyperson who, just as the worship service is about to begin, is confronted by an earnest congregant: “Pastor! A toilet is overflowing in the bathroom!”

As everyone who owns property can tell you, it is always something. And usually “something” means it costs money. Often a LOT of money as the stories of retrofitting in your booklet testify. Church leaders: bishops, clergy and laity, are often caught between a rock and a hard place when trying to decide how much money should be used for ministry and how much for buildings. It is doubly hard when the building is a significant architectural work. But all of us recognize that buildings are an important part of our mission. They not only provide a place for people to gather for worship; they are public places where thousands of people gather each week for Alcoholic Anonymous and other 12 step meetings; for senior programs; for medical clinics; as shelters for the homeless; for meal and food distribution; for job training; for pre-school and after-school tutoring programs; for concerts and dozens of other public uses. Many of our buildings are occupied from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week, some 24/7. Most of our congregations, of all persuasions, consider it a core part of their mission to open their religious buildings for programs that both save lives and enhance the lives of all who come through their doors.

That is why, when 21 years ago Mayor Art Agnos called faith leaders to city hall and asked them to open their doors so homeless people could have a place to sleep, it was a no brainer.

We also recognize that disaster preparedness is an important part of this. Our religious buildings and the people who work in them must be ready to serve the public when the next earthquake or other disaster comes upon us.

So today we are recognizing the congregations in our city that have taken disaster preparedness training through SF CARD and the Red Cross. And we are giving special recognition to those congregations that have, at great cost, retrofitted their buildings, not only to preserve San Francisco's architectural heritage, but especially to make them safe for all who enter.

Finally, I would like to say something about Interfaith work in general.

A few weeks ago, we had religious visitors here from a country in the Middle East who met with us to learn how we did interfaith work. In the course of the conversation, Rita casually mentioned the first amendment of the United States constitution, that says Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion. They were astounded. They couldn't believe it. But it is true.

Throughout our nation's history, anyone, anywhere can expound a religious idea, gather followers and no one can stop them. The interfaith movement in our country takes that for granted and that is why it is able to flourish. Not so in many places in the world. So pay special attention to this trailer of a new film, "Congress Shall Make No Law."

Rev. James DeLange, Chair
San Francisco Interfaith Council
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