



22nd Annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Prayer Breakfast

Hotel Kabuki

Tuesday, November 26, 2019

Remarks by Michael G. Pappas, Executive Director

Thank you, Rev. Victor Floyd of Calvary Presbyterian Church and thank you San Francisco Interfaith Choir! My name is Michael Pappas and for the past 12 years I've been blessed and privileged to serve as the Executive Director of the San Francisco Interfaith Council!

"For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven!" As the SFIC observes its 30th anniversary of bringing people of different faiths together to celebrate our City's rich and diverse religious and spiritual traditions, build understanding and serve our community, these words could never be more-timely, nor more profound. The lyrics of the song you just sang derive from the "Book of Ecclesiastes in the ancient Hebrew sacred text, were then put to music in the late 1950's by singer/songwriter Pete Seger, and recorded later and popularized by the Byrds. For some here today, it was not an easy song to sing, as it forces us to come to grips with polar opposite realities with which we struggle, birth and death, love and hate, war and peace, joy and sorrow.

"For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven!" Each year, in this sentimental and joyous season of Thanksgiving, the SFIC is reminded of why and how it came into existence. Like the lyrics of the song, the Council's genesis was not in a time of joy and pleasantness, we were born 30 years ago in response to an emerging homeless crisis in and a devastating earthquake. We answered the call of San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos and our City government, and for 31 years have opened the doors of our houses of worship, sheltered and fed between 60-100 of our City's homeless from the Sunday before Thanksgiving until the end of March. And since then, we've rolled up our sleeves, catalyzed and mobilized San Francisco's 800 religious institutions to labor together and express our prophetic moral voice on issues spanning the spectrum... from championing the sanctuary movement and the rights of undocumented immigrants to being faithful bearers of our rich civil

rights legacy, from preparing congregation leaders for the important role they will play in times of disaster to providing for the security of their own congregants who come to worship, from taking a leadership role in our City's decennial census effort to innovatively seeking to repurpose religiously owned properties to provide sorely needed housing for essential San Francisco workers, from addressing the critical needs of our fragile aging and disabled sisters and brothers, and yes, to reminding those who would say otherwise, that health care is a human right. In all of these undertakings and so many more, San Francisco's religious community has been at the forefront of the struggle. In short, together, for three decades, we've done our part to advocate and live the best of San Francisco Values. Working together as communities of faith in times of both crises, as well as prosperity, I believe, reveals the greatest potential of the human spirit, and I dare say, the Greater One's true will for creation.

Being a City of true compassion, San Francisco is a City comprised of a mosaic of nonprofits, that address every imaginable cause and need. Collectively, we nonprofits are the heart of our City. Sadly, in challenging economic times, we've seen many of our collaborating partners forced to merge, relocate, downsize and some, sadly close their doors. Paradoxically, in those fragile times, the need for the critical work of the SFIC is never greater or more valued. Over three decades, we have emerged as that portal through which our City's rich and diverse religious communities and institutions can more effectively and efficiently engage San Francisco's civic officials, policy makers and NGO's. In our roles as connector, convener, communicator and advocate, we have benefitted our constituent congregations, judicatories, healthcare and academic institutions and faith based social service agencies in ways that no one of our members could dream to achieve alone. As a result, collectively, our impact in enriching every aspect of San Francisco's social fabric has been profound.

In these precarious times of rising income inequality and skyrocketing real estate, the security and futures of so many nonprofits have been placed in jeopardy. To what then, can the SFIC's longevity and stability be attributed? The secret sauce has two ingredients. In addition to vigilantly adhering to a lean budget with the utmost of discipline, we are a staff of two (here, I'd be remiss if I did not pause to thank my better and other half, Cynthia Zamboukos). But there is a second and perhaps more significant factor at play. The SFIC's model of interfaith work envisions service as a means of dialogue. In the sacred text of the religion in which I was raised we hear, "Show me your works and I will show you your faith." We believe that by bringing people of different faiths together to be of service to the greater community, that in fact, we are helping to build those authentic relationships of trust foundational for true and deeper interfaith understanding. In other words, FAITH IN ACTION.

"For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven!" As we celebrate this milestone 30th anniversary, we are likewise reminded that we stand on the shoulders of visionaries who founded and navigated this Council through new and uncharted waters, many are here today and others are not. To them and to all of

those Board Chairs and members, volunteers and supporters we owe a great debt of gratitude. I came to the SFIC 15 years ago, first as a Board Member then as Executive Director. It was clear then, as it is now, that if there is one singular figure who not only helped birth, but whose ongoing commitment mothered and nurtured the San Francisco Interfaith Council, that person is our Founder, Past Chair and Matriarch of Interfaith in our City, the indefatigable Rita Semel. Rita your baby has grown up and you have much to be proud of!

“For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.” Dear interfaith partners, our work is far from over. In the surreal times in which we live, a time when honesty, integrity, respect for values, the law, and treasured institutions has never been more blurred, and when the possibility for us to realize our true potential as nation is being drowned-out in the cacophony of deafening and divisive noise, the need for people of faith to be united, show leadership and exercise that sorely needed prophetic voice, has never been greater than now. Each of us woke up in the wee hours of this morning and made a decision to be here today. That act alone, aside from being a small miracle, reveals our commitment to joining in a common cause that can make society and the world in which we live a better place. For many of us here today, civic engagement and why we do what we do is deeply personal. Growing up, my father of blessed memory, often quoted the great Athenian Statesman Pericles, who, in his farewell address to the citizens of Athens proclaimed, “A true citizen is the one who, in word and deed seeks to leave the City a better place than she or he found it.” This morning, two of my three children, Julia and Paul, are here with us to join in this historic anniversary observance . Each day I wake up and think of those words commended to me by my father, I ask myself what kind of world will I leave to my children and their generation? That singular haunting question inspires my service to the San Francisco Interfaith Council and more importantly my appreciation for all of you, who are partners in our blessed work!

Happy 30th Anniversary San Francisco Interfaith Council! Thank you!