

# *San Francisco Faith to Faith*

The Founding of the San Francisco Interfaith Council – 1990 - 2000

*Celebrating our diverse faiths and spiritual traditions, the San Francisco Interfaith Council brings people together to build understanding and serve our community.*

Mission Statement

The San Francisco Interfaith Council emerged following a cry for help from Mayor Art Agnos after the devastating 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. The Council was founded by a lay leader from the Jewish community, Rita Semel, supported by Mary Culp, a Presbyterian lay leader, and a circle of Buddhist, Christian, and Jewish congregations and their clergy.

Earlier in the eighties the San Francisco Council of Churches, nearly 100 years old, had come to the end. For a few years the City by the Bay had little ecumenical or interfaith activity.

The leaders from various faiths who said yes to Art Agnos a decade ago live in a new kind of San Francisco. Historically it was largely Roman Catholic. Protestant inroads were made during the twentieth century. But San Franciscans today come from all over the world. Less than half the population is Caucasian. Practicing Christians all combined remain a minority. And hundreds of different religious traditions representing dozens of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds have found a home here or nearby. With these new interfaith demographics, it is no surprise that religious, racial, and cultural diversity is grounding for the San Francisco Interfaith Council and regularly celebrated.



*Founding Director Rita Semel relaxes after a celebration at the Brahma Kumaris Meditation Center.*

## *An Emergency Homeless Shelter Program*

Earthquake disaster response ten years ago was but one of several red-flags soliciting more religious involvement in city issues. As early as 1987 Mayor Agnos had called on religious congregations to serve the city's homeless during the winter months. Rita Semel, retired from a distinguished career directing San Francisco's Jewish Community Relations Council, found herself organizing an interfaith emergency shelter program. Congregations involved in the early shelter efforts went on to become founding members of the new Interfaith Council, and offering food and shelter each winter became the Council's hallmark.

In 1992-93, for instance, First Congregational, St. Mark's Lutheran, Trinity Episcopal, St. Paulus Lutheran, St. Mary's Cathedral (Roman Catholic), and First Unitarian hosted a hundred homeless men each night on a rotating basis. Thirty



other congregations and organizations helped, including cooking and serving hot meals. Financial support was and is received from other congregations, San Francisco's Department of Human Services, and a number of foundations.

The "emergency" shelter program endures – *We hope your congregation will become involved if it hasn't yet!* But the SFIC, whose board meets monthly, has also addressed dozens of other issues over the years, created and co-sponsored numerous projects and programs, and called the interfaith community together in times of crisis and celebration. The Reverend Richard Schaper, the Council's first chair, catalogued the agency's early work in his April 1994 report. Besides the shelter program, he notes...

- sponsoring a Bay Area Parliament of the World's Religions,
- initiating an effort to establish a permanent interfaith presence at the Presidio (soon to change from the home of the U.S. Sixth Army to a national park),
- facilitating a coalition of congregations facing the challenges of seismic retrofitting (still active as Collaborating Agencies Responding to Disaster), and
- responding to city events ranging from a gun-induced tragedy in a downtown high-rise to plans to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the San Francisco signing of the United Nations Charter.



*The Council's Childcare Taskforce supports a network of daycare programs around the city, including this one directed by Margie Stokes.*

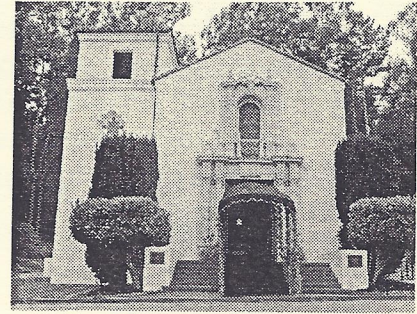
The month rarely goes by when the SFIC board doesn't welcome and give time to a new cause or project seeking a stronger relationship with San Francisco congregations. Healthcare, immigration and citizenship, early childhood development, economic development for the poor, and disaster response have all surfaced in a variety of forms.

While never becoming an activist organization, these issues and more have caught the board's attention. SFIC leaders initiate conversations with the city's newspaper editors, petition politicians on behalf of justice issues, lend their name and resources to conferences and workshops, and systematically identify and inquire into priority issues in this city, particularly for the disadvantaged. Frequently the Council lends its weight and influence and then moves to another issue, or develops a program and then lets it spin off on its own.



## *The Interfaith Center at the Presidio*

In 1992 the San Francisco Chronicle reported “swords into plowshares” as one of several themes to be explored in creating an urban national park of the Presidio with its 800 buildings on 1500 acres on the northwestern tip of the city. This inspired the SFIC to organize a coalition of interfaith agencies from across the Bay Area to start planning an interfaith presence in the new park. In early 1993 a case statement was delivered to the National Park Service proposing such an organization.



*Main Post Chapel*

There followed three years of fundraising, organizing, and lobbying, with SFIC taking a lead role and providing fiscal agency to the venture. In September 1995 the Interfaith Center at the Presidio was incorporated, and in March 1996 the Center was invited to occupy the Main Post Chapel.



*A United Religions Initiative charter signing ceremony was held this year in October at the Interfaith Center's annual Gathering of Blessings.*

In March 1999 the Interfaith Center at the Presidio was awarded long-term tenancy of the Chapel. The Chapel regularly serves as a venue for SFIC and other interfaith activities, as well as concerts, weddings and memorials, workshops and retreats.

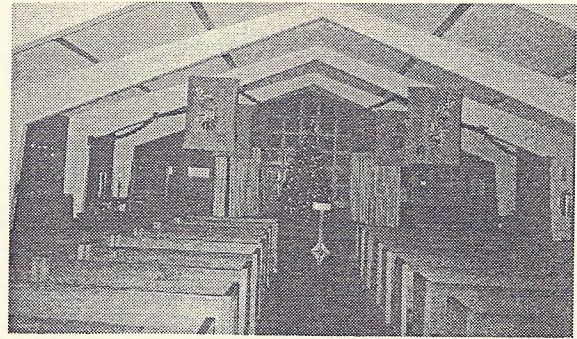
## *Creating a Juvenile Hall Interfaith Chaplaincy*

Other programs have settled in and become part of the Council's tradition. SFIC initiated and sponsors an annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast – tickets regularly sell out to the large 6:30 a.m. event. A Child Care Task Force points to another enduring concern at the Council – to be involved in hands-on activity supporting children in this city.

In 1997, attorney Charles Breyer, chair of the city's Juvenile Probation Commission (and now U.S. District Judge), appealed to the Council as the last best place in the city to address youth in trouble with the law. He confessed that repeated efforts to transform local juvenile justice had made little difference. The Council went to work, a proposal was written, a national search conducted, and a new interfaith chaplaincy inaugurated at San Francisco Juvenile Hall.



With support from the Ford Foundation and the vital leadership of the Reverend Toni Dunbar, the program met early success, interns were secured, and conditions at the facility improved. An after-care unit is now being initiated to provide a network of opportunity and caring for young people following incarceration.



*Juvenile Hall Chapel*

## *The San Francisco Interfaith Council's Future*

With the help of the San Francisco Foundation, the SFIC enters the new millennium planning a new development phase that projects a larger staff and more program capacity. This growth reflects a new openness in the public at large and the philanthropic community in particular. Both civic and business leaders are expressing a growing awareness that congregations and faith communities are one of the few assets left in any city for championing the neediest among us and providing some of the most difficult-to-provide human services. The Council will continue on the forefront of those discussions and set of activities in San Francisco in the coming years.



*SFIC joined three other interfaith organizations to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ordination of Father Gerry O'Rourke, a founding member of the Council.*

We can also report with certainty that the future SFIC will continue to celebrate and honor the many, many ways humankind gives expression to the spiritual impulse and gathers us in religious families. To this end we are committed to becoming better listeners. SFIC members believe it is critical to know each other, to share the values which mean the most to us, to tell our stories, and to

socialize and worship together, each using the language of our own traditions to create a holy harmony. And, we hope and pray, a better world.

The Council welcomes all San Francisco congregations into membership with the hope that we can become well acquainted, can be a growing influence for matters that matter to us all, and can inspire each other to live deeper into our own faith and practice in this troubled yet glorious city by the Bay.

*- Paul Chaffee, October 17, 2000*

## *San Francisco Interfaith Council*

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