



24th Annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Prayer Breakfast

Hotel Kabuki

Tuesday, November 26, 2024

Remarks by Michael G. Pappas, Executive Director

As the Psalmist proclaimed, "How good and pleasant it is for sisters and brothers to dwell together in unity!" Good morning! I'm Michael Pappas and for the past 17 years I've been blessed to direct the San Francisco Interfaith Council, which today celebrates its 35th anniversary of bringing people together to celebrate religious diversity, build understanding and serve our community.

A question...What is it about anniversaries like this that tug at our heart strings? Is it just nostalgia, the occasion to think back about all those who contributed to the present successes and the triumphs along the way? Or, is it the celebration of endurance over time? God knows that keeping a nonprofit alive for this long could give any director a heart attack!

Rome could be burning -- and it is -- and here we are celebrating the achievements of an organization whose business plan defies human logic, yet is proof positive that miracles are possible!

Or could there be something more? Something instructive about anniversaries to help us map a course for the future? I would submit, yes! In his legendary work *The Tempest*, Shakespeare both counseled and warned, "What is past, is prologue." To that point, my father, of blessed memory, used to say, "If you want to see where a person stands, consider where they sit...that is, where they come from and the journey they've taken to get here" Our past, which we celebrate today, is good indicator of why we do, say and believe things we do!"

The San Francisco Interfaith Council was born in response to two crises, an emerging homeless crisis and earthquake. It was arguably called into existence by a mayor of the City,

who understood the profound expectation of religious communities to rise to the occasion and respond in times of crisis... and he tapped into that expectation. For this very reason, Rita Semel is famous for saying that if the San Francisco Interfaith Council ceased to exist today, it would have to be created again tomorrow!

The SFIC's origins reveal its *raison d'etre*, as well as the secret sauce of how it effectively gets things done! Because it was arguably called into existence by Mayor Art Agnos, it is not an official entity funded by tax dollars or accountable to city government. That said, its success is wholly dependent upon its relationships with civic partners in order to advance the common good; Thus, the presence of so many elected officials and City Department Heads celebrating with us here this morning. But there's another more practical element to the equation of the SFIC's success, and that has to do with how we view those we seek to serve. When I came to San Francisco over 20 years ago, the Chair of the SFIC came to the church I was serving on Brotherhood Way to recruit me for the Board. Not knowing much about the organization I naively asked, "how do you become a member of the SFIC? His response was both telling and instructive, "you are by virtue of being!" Membership organizations are small and fleeting. Instead, the SFIC exists to serve our City's broader 800 communities of faith and religious institutions; Constituencies embedded in every neighborhood and street corner of San Francisco, many for over a century... and those who attend and support them extend far beyond our borders. The SFIC exists to be their advocate, guide, and portal to our civic partners. Likewise, we work closely with our civic partners to discern the needs of the City and how those needs best match up with the core missions, assets and capacities of our churches, mosques, synagogues, ashrams and temples, judicatories, religiously affiliated academic institutions and healthcare facilities and the faith based social service agencies that provide the safety net for San Francisco's most vulnerable residents.

In the faith tradition in which I was raised, we hear in the sacred text, "Show me your works and I will show you your faith! The SFIC is here, celebrating 35 years as an organization, not because it can boast lofty platitudes, but because it has rolled up its sleeves, and done the hard work required to help San Francisco meet its core challenges.

In the presence of Shireen McSpadden, our City's Director of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, I'm pleased to announce that just yesterday, the SFIC's Interfaith Winter Shelter opened for the 36th season. We thank Episcopal Community Services, which oversees it, St. Mary's Cathedral, St. Mark's Lutheran Church, First Unitarian Universalist Society of SF and Canon Kip Senior Center for opening their hearts and doors, and the over 50 religiously affiliated communities of faith and organizations that provide meals for the up to 80 homeless residents served nightly through the end of March. And here I want to especially thank the newest addition to our SFIC family Sharon Demko who is coordinating the shelter on our behalf.

To this end, we look forward to heightening awareness of homelessness among the young people in our communities of faith, in particular the students attending our religiously affiliated academic institutions, by engaging them to participate in the upcoming annual Spring Winterfaith Shelter Walk, which raises critical funds for the Interfaith Winter Shelter. Stay tuned for details from the Walk's Chair, John Ahlback!

Next to addressing homelessness, the state's mandate to create 82,000 new units of housing by 2031 is going to require all hands on deck to meet the challenge. San Francisco houses of worship are sitting on some of the most valuable and underutilized parcels in the City. A movement begun in 2016 with the creation of the Interfaith Essential Housing Task Force, coupled by the successful passage of Senator Wiener's SB4 (YES IN GOD'S BACKYARD) which will help streamline and fast track development of affordable housing on religious owned lands, has our sector uniquely positioned to move the needle and help the City achieve its ambitious commitment. Thanks to generous capacity building grants from the San Francisco Foundation and just this week the Crankstart Foundation, the SFIC and its collaborating partner Landis Graden and DCG Strategies are excited to announce its commitment to identify, support, provide predevelopment dollars for and navigate 400 new units of housing into the City's pipeline over the next two years. To this end, we are grateful to be supporting St. Mark's Square and its vision to transform its existing buildings and property into an interfaith and intergenerational oasis on Cathedral Hill.

Since the beginning of the Great Recession, the SFIC has served as Convener of the CEOs of our City's 15 most prominent faith-based social service agencies, many of which were established over a century ago and collectively provide the safety net for San Francisco's most vulnerable residents. In this role, we've provided them with the needed professional space to exchange notes, access to key City policy makers, developed the narrative of their collective impact, and cultivated relationships among them that have resulted in important collaborations. We've navigated them through seasons of dramatic budget cuts, skyrocketing rents when many of them lost their leases and their staffs could no longer afford to live in our City; when they've been forced to independently fundraise because their contracts with the City never quite cover expected services, and remittance of those contracts were delayed by bureaucratic red tape. Over the past year, in particular, realizing the looming budget challenges on the horizon, this Faith Based Social Service Agencies CEO Round Table, has partnered with Kunal Modi of McKinsey Consultants to proactively develop a model for the City to re-envision the way it issues contracts, a model with a central clearing house, that is less redundant and more efficient, one that encourages collaboration among larger and smaller nonprofits, with the larger absorbing back office compliance requirements, allowing the smaller to do what they do best, provide basic services. These findings have been shared with key budget and policy makers

in both the current as well as incoming administration, along with our invitation to serve as a resource as long as the proposal is under consideration.

Now, let's address the elephant in the room! Elections have consequences. If the most recent presidential election has consequences for the nation, how much more so will it for California and San Francisco? Over the next four years our values and basic civil and human rights will be under attack. On multiple levels we will be threatened because of who we are, what we espouse and particularly because we self identify as a Sanctuary City. On this last count, I would unashamedly remind us all that before there was a Sanctuary Ordinance, there was a Sanctuary Movement and that movement was started by people of faith. Just days after the 2016 election, I remember, like it was yesterday, escorting Mayor Lee to the largest Mosque in San Francisco for Friday Afternoon Prayers, where he reassured worshippers, shaken by threats of a Muslim Ban and deportations, that as a Sanctuary City we would protect all of our residents from discrimination. And when the Trump administration threatened to withhold critical funds from San Francisco because we are Sanctuary city, funds depended upon by our faith based social service agencies to serve their most vulnerable clients, on their behalf, at the request of City Attorney Dennis Herrera, my name appears on two amicus briefs suing President Donald Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions. The City won both of those cases because we were on the side of right. This time around we are working in advance to prepare. Here I want to commend Jorge Rivas, Director of the San Francisco Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs for his leadership in bringing together stakeholders from all impacted sectors to partner with the City in preparing for the worst... and in that spirit, allow me to thank longtime immigrant rights activist and newest SFIC Board Member Tessa Rouverol Callejo for being our ambassador on this critical issue at this critical time... and to reassure our City Attorney David Chiu, that this Council and its diverse communities of faith will be standing in solidarity to protect the powerless and those who have no voice.

Call it providence or call it fate, this year's observance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday coincides with the inauguration of the 47th President of the United States. It's only the third time in history when such a confluence has occurred. Since 2011, the San Francisco Interfaith Council has hosted the annual MLK Day March down 3rd Street and Interfaith Celebration at the King Memorial at Yerba Buena Gardens. Under the circumstances, this year's observance presents the unique opportunity to recommit to Dr. King's struggle, embodied in his call for civil rights and equality for all, a message that transcends confessional boundaries and could not be more timely.

These are but some of the ways that the SFIC is partnering with our civic and cross sector partners to do good in our City and honor its 35 year legacy of celebrating diversity, building understanding and serving our community.

In the coming weeks, months, and I dare say over the next four years, we will need to brace ourselves for dramatic change in our country. At the outset of these remarks I noted that the San Francisco Interfaith Council, whose 35th anniversary we've come together to celebrate today, was born out of crises ... and that in the midst of crisis is opportunity. Now is no time for hand wringing. For those who perceive that there has never been a time when our nation has been more divided, I would invite you to look back at history. From the time of our founding we were a divided nation. In fact, when we sit down at our tables for Thanksgiving on Thursday, let's remember that President Lincoln established this national holiday amidst the bloodiest war in our history, the civil war. Yet, in spite of our division, we continue to aspire to be a united nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. As people of faith, we are being called upon, once again, to exercise our prophetic voice, and remind our nation that the greatness of America is rooted in its diversity.

Allow me to close with words that are not my own, but yours. Words from a common statement issued by faith and community leaders of our City just a day in advance of the 2024 election: "In a world often marked by division and discord, we, representing diverse faith and community organizations, come together in a spirit of peace, solidarity, and shared commitment to uphold democratic values. Our unity is rooted in the belief that our differences enrich our collective strength, and that through collaboration and mutual respect, we can address the pressing challenges facing our divided society. Together, we affirm our dedication to fostering understanding, promoting justice, and nurturing an inclusive future where every voice is heard and valued. As we unite in our shared commitment to uphold the values of democracy, we pledge to promote accurate information and actively counter disinformation that undermines trust within our communities. We recognize the importance of building bridges with those who share our dedication to free and fair elections, fostering social cohesion and unity both within and beyond our diverse groups. Together, we condemn actions that seek to divide, intimidate, or harm our vulnerable neighbors, and we stand resolute in our support for the democratic processes and institutions that safeguard our rights and freedoms. In solidarity, we will work tirelessly to create a future where every faith, community and individual thrives - empowered to share their unique contributions and participate fully in a pluralistic and democratic society."

With this parting message I wish the San Francisco Interfaith Council a happy 35th anniversary and all of you a blessed Thanksgiving. Thank you!