



Leadership San Francisco Remarks

June 18, 2009

Moscone Convention Center, San Francisco

By Michael G. Pappas, Executive Director

Good afternoon! I'm Michael Pappas, Executive Director of the San Francisco Interfaith Council (SFIC). I'd like to thank the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, and in particular, Leadership San Francisco, for this invitation to speak about the role of the SFIC as a stakeholder and partner in our City's disaster preparedness equation.

In times of crisis, our natural inclinations are to turn to God and gather as community. No clearer example can be given than our nation's instinctive response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th. In that moment of seeming vulnerability and powerlessness, as individuals we fell to our knees and as community gathered together in our respective houses of worship, and as an interfaith community, to seek comfort, strength and guidance. In fact, in times of crisis, it is to the religious community that our civic leaders naturally turn to enlist not only the guidance of the Almighty, but also the assistance of the countless faithful committed to doing the will of their God. Proof positive of this assertion is the very birth of the San Francisco Interfaith Council.

Twenty years ago our City was plagued by two major crises in very short order; a homeless crisis spun out of control, quickly followed by the devastating Loma Prieta earthquake. In their wisdom, and realizing that the tasks at hand required greater resources than even the City possessed, the civic leadership at that time called upon religious and lay leaders of many faiths to engage the greater faith community in addressing the immediate needs of these particular crises. The formation of two ad hoc committees in cooperation with the Mayor's Office, followed by an inspired grant for interfaith work from Church World Service, and a cadre of dedicated and visionary clergy and lay volunteers, led to the formation of the SFIC we know today.

With very limited resources, compensated by incredible resolve of purpose, the SFIC, over the last two decades, has evolved into a significant component and stakeholder in the arenas of homelessness and disaster preparedness.

Through the SFIC's leadership, an Interfaith Emergency Winter Shelter Program was coordinated which annually commences the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving and runs through late February. Just having completed its 20th year, thanks to the efforts of Executive Vice Chair, Rita Semel, Episcopal Community Services, four host and over 30 meal providing congregations, the Interfaith Winter Shelter Program has emerged as one of the premier programs in the City and last year provided over 8,900 meals and shelter beds for homeless men in the City. In addition to this ongoing effort, the SFIC joined forces with congregations in the Bayview as well as the United Council of Human Services in sponsoring Project Homeless Connect this past September. Helping to gather over 400 volunteers, the SFIC and greater interfaith community played an integral role in providing essential services to the over 775 clients served that day. We pray for the day when such shelters and programs will no longer be needed, but as long as they are, the interfaith community will do its part to help alleviate this ongoing crisis.

If the Loma Prieta earthquake was a wake up call to the importance of preparedness, the SFIC has assumed the role of both town crier and facilitator in summoning the interfaith community to rise to the call. The SFIC was instrumental in the formation of San Francisco Community Agencies Responding to Disaster (SF CARD), and served as its initial fiscal agent. SFIC input continues to be engaged by key City Departments and NGOs in San Francisco's response to disaster. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, thanks to funding by the Walter and Elise Haas Fund and the hospitality of St. Mary's Cathedral, the SFIC convened a highly successful Congregations Disaster Preparedness Workshop. Realizing important developments made in this arena over the last two years, a follow-up workshop, supported by the SF Foundation and the Dept. of Emergency Management (DEM), was held last May at the same venue, with an emphasis on the theme of "Creating a Culture of Preparedness." The reality is, when disaster hits, the locus of response will be centered around neighborhoods. By offering an interfaith perspective and assisting SF CARD in its work to cultivate neighborhood clusters, the SFIC continues to substantively contribute in the City's equation to respond to disaster, a tenet foundational to our mission.

Most recently, the SFIC's wide-spread network of clergy and lay leadership has been recognized and utilized by civic and non-governmental agencies as an untapped, cutting edge communications resource. In times of crisis City leaders have engaged the SFIC to collaborate in getting the word out to congregation pulpits, websites, weekly bulletins and monthly newsletters. In the aftermath of Prop 8 and the Gaza issue, when there was growing concern of hate crimes and potential violence to houses of worship, through the SFIC, the Chief of Police Heather Fong issued a message to the interfaith community urging vigilance and tolerance. In the midst of the current economic crisis, City Treasurer Jose Cisneros informed the interfaith community of opportunities available to low income residents for tax services and introduced the important Bank on San Francisco Program for those citizens in need of bank accounts. During the recent H1N1 scare, through the SFIC, Red Cross CEO Harold Brooks issued an important

message to the interfaith community regarding precautions to take at that critical time and of services available by his agency. And in these past few weeks, the SFIC has worked closely with San Francisco Food Bank CEO Paul Ash in assisting that agency in setting up Recession Relief Pantry sites along City transit corridors and urging the interfaith community to encourage congregants in need to take advantage of this critical program. Although none of these cases can be characterized as natural disasters, they do offer a strong case for how the interfaith community can partner and collaborate with civic and NGO entities in responding to crises.

In the complexities of these ever-changing times, the SFIC has sought to proactively unify and respond to the challenges of the day. Be it working with Swords to Plowshares to facilitate the training of our City's clergy to meet the ministerial needs of veterans returning from military service in Iraq and Afghanistan; to promoting the sale of Thanksgiving Fair Trade Coffee, grown by a cooperative of over a thousand Muslim, Christian and Jewish farmers in Uganda; to co-convening a quarterly conversation and meal which has come to be familiarly known as the "Concepts of the Abrahamic Traditions;" to hosting a monthly breakfast at St. Mark's Urban Life Center, at which San Francisco's interfaith community can gather, pray, converse, and learn about civic and philanthropic programs, through which congregations can play a role; to convening the interfaith community in times of significant observances and need: examples being the Mayor's Interfaith Prayer Breakfast, San Francisco's Interfaith September 11th prayer services, the 100th anniversary observance of the 1906 Great Earthquake and Fire, the City's only annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Day Services (this year to be hosted by Calvary Presbyterian Church), and this past January, a moving Interfaith Prayer Service held on the eve of the President's inauguration at Grace Cathedral. In each of these efforts the SFIC has assumed the important leadership role of bringing together the City's rich and diverse interfaith mosaic.

Ever so conscious of its fragile coalition of over 800 congregations, the SFIC speaks on behalf of no particular tradition or cause, while at the same time gives a voice to and promotes the activities of its constituent congregations. Employing state of the art technology, the SFIC website, newsletter and list servce have become integral vehicles to keep the interfaith community informed, engaged and connected.

It has been said that if the SFIC ceased to exist, the religious leaders of our City would find it necessary to create one. In these times of uncertainty, if not crisis, the need for interfaith cooperation and understanding has never been greater. The SFIC accepts its mission as a sacred trust and will continue to engage the interfaith community to do its part in contributing to the betterment of our City and the greater society.