

# Rainbow of Religions Form Interfaith Unit

## 50 congregations have already signed up

By Don Lattin

Chronicle Religion Writer

Hoping to represent the entire religious rainbow of San Francisco, local leaders have formed a new interfaith organization that includes Buddhists, Hindus and other faiths.

"We can no longer call ourselves a 'Christian nation,'" said the Rev. Richard Schaper, pastor of St. Marks Lutheran Church and chairman of the new San Francisco Interfaith Council.

"San Francisco and California, with its multiplicity of religious communities, is on the cutting edge of religious trends in this nation," Schaper said.

About 50 congregations have already signed up as dues-paying members of the council, whose board of directors includes a Zen Buddhist priestess, a black Baptist preacher, a Roman Catholic priest, a United Methodist clergyman, a Unitarian minister, a Reform rabbi, a gay Christian pastor and a Hindu nun.

Rita Semel, a longtime leader in San Francisco's Jewish community, was instrumental in putting together the new council, which grows out of temporary coalitions formed to provide earthquake relief and help for the homeless.

"We were tired of having to reinvent ourselves every time there was a crisis," said Semel, executive vice chairwoman of the new group.

Charitable work will be organized through the council's "Human Needs Commission," while interfaith dialogue and conferences on such social problems as racism will be addressed by its "Human Values Commission."

The Rev. Laverne Sasaki, pastor of the 500-member Buddhist Church of San Francisco and a board member of the new council, hopes for a lively theological dialogue.

"We really need to get to know each other, so we are able to respect each other," he said. "There

are a lot of misconceptions about Buddhists — that we are idol worshippers, completely mystical, completely out of this world."

Efforts are continuing to get Muslims, Orthodox Christians and fundamentalist Christians to join the new group.

"Conservative evangelicals dropped out at an early stage," said Schaper. "They wanted to lim-

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JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADER

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it the group to Christians who believe in the Holy Trinity."

Creation of the interfaith council comes less than a year after the announced formation of Ecumenical Ministries of Northern California, an inter-church agency that includes Catholics, fundamentalists and mainline Protestants.

That agency was formed, in part, as a protest to the liberal social agenda of the Northern California Ecumenical Council, which continues to operate.