

“THE PULSE OF RELIGION IN SAN FRANCISCO”

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San Francisco Interfaith Council

An address to the Mayor’s Interfaith Thanksgiving Prayer Breakfast

November 25, 2008

We live in a time when everyone wants to be spiritual but few want to institutionalize the impulse. But there are many who do. Those who do make the move to institutionalized religion discover a community that embraces them as they are, not for what they want them to be; a tradition of ritual and music that touches their heart; ideas that challenge their mind; and the opportunity to join hands with others who want to make the world a better place - a world that is just and is at peace.

There are those professing faith in no religion who stand as strong advocates for justice and peace. And there are those professing religious faith who trample on justice for all and peace among all. Religion’s greatest threat is not from non-believers. Religion’s greatest threat comes from its practitioners. This month marks the 30th anniversary of the mass suicide in Jonestown. Led by San Francisco pastor Jim Jones, nearly 1,000 members of Jones’ church moved to Guyana only to be led by him into delusion and death. It was left to one of our predecessor organizations, The San Francisco Council of Churches and other religious leaders to arrange for the burials of the victims of the Jonestown massacre and provide solace and counsel to their families. In a free society, one of religion’s most unpleasant tasks is to correct those in our company who would trample on justice for all. An unpleasant task, but it must be done.

The description of organized religion in San Francisco today is largely left to cynical caricatures by its pop culture chroniclers. Those who protest against religion need to know that organized religion, its leaders and its members are deeply divided on many issues. Just like non-believers are. In this contentious time, my hope is that organizations like the San Francisco Interfaith Council can provide a neutral space for a divided citizenry to come together and learn to respect each other and, where possible, agree to work on common problems. As Jim Donahue, president of the Graduate Theological Union said recently, “One role of religion is to cultivate civic character and virtue so differences in the public square can be peacefully navigated and negotiated.”

But we in the organized religious community in San Francisco also know another story that is being told every day, 365 days a year - year in year out, ever since this city was founded in the heady days of 1849. A majority of the 800 congregations in San Francisco are small. In the Christian tradition we like to recall that Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of you.” In San Francisco, as elsewhere in this nation, that has been updated to, “where two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name, there is another 501(c)3.” Thus, religiously based social service organizations are born.

Those of us in organized religion have much in common with organized government. Our enterprise is often disorganized. As a consequence, the failure of government

structures to provide help for all of its citizens in need puts an undue burden on organized religion that does not have the resources to meet the need. But when government and religious institutions work together, the record shows that taxpayers' money is well spent and the people to people connections are of longer duration. And, therefore, positive results more lasting.

Today we will recognize the major religiously based social service organizations in the City and County of San Francisco. While these organizations receive funds by way of contracts with the City and the State, a significant portion of their financial and people support comes from congregations, individuals and charitable foundations. Their existence and their mission provide religious people the opportunity to put their faith into action. Honoring them on this week of national thanksgiving is most appropriate.