



Ministering Together

News, comments and events of concern to the religious community.
The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County
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Director's Letter

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figures

somewhat in the new Da Vinci Code movie. If you haven't seen it yet (or read the book), I won't spoil anything for you. I bring him up because, somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I remember a classroom movie (yes, with the old projectors operated by us nerds) that featured Sir Isaac and the fundamentals of physics. I can picture the apple falling on his head and his contemplation of the reality of gravity. Gravity, we learned, is a force that is invisible but always present, always figuring into our daily lives.

We don't discuss gravity much, probably since it doesn't fluctuate like the weather, nor does it bend to our whims or desires (unless we escape Earth's gravitational pull like the astronauts). And we ignore the effects of gravity to our own peril, such as when we climb too high with insecure footing or wear uncomfortable shoes.

That same physics movie, as near as my 50-year-old memory serves me, also had another illustration. They used a slow-motion picture of a gun being fired (!) to teach the rule, "For every action, there is a reaction." Gun enthusiasts and instructors will be sure to warn you, that the bigger the gun, the bigger the kick. Bruised shoulders and hands are not uncommon on firing ranges.

My point here is that the law about actions and reactions extends to the realm of human interactions. We don't discuss this law much either, but it affects us greatly on a day-to-day basis. If we're kind to someone, they're likely to be kind back. If we give them the finger, watch out for the one-fingered salute returned to us. If we listen, we may just be listened to in response. If we strike out in anger, we better have some kind of defense or armor at hand.

I believe the same law applies in international relations. It never hurts to be the more powerful nation in the equation, but it holds that if we want

respect, we must give respect. If we seek to dominate, and those we seek to dominate are not as strong as us, then they will strike back as best they can. It is an immutable law and should not take us by surprise. To dominate another nation in today's world, we will need to seek to destroy them, because the rivalry that ensues will only fester. Let me know if you think I am wrong. A vernacular version of the law is "What goes around, comes around." A sacred version is, "As you sow, so shall you reap." Another, "The measure you give will be the measure that you receive."

I don't channel surf very often, and almost never watch Dr. Phil. (Doesn't mean I don't like him.) The other day, he was mediating a dispute between two young women. I didn't hear the specifics, but understood that, having started as friends, they had become nasty to each other. What Dr. Phil said was something like this: "Your relationship needs a hero, someone who is willing to start over unilaterally. If you say you'll only work on it if the other person does first, it will never get better." He then appealed to the one whom he deemed had been hurt the least to be that hero.

That is an insight that wasn't illustrated in the classroom movie. We are not in total control of our lives, but we can help what we dish out. We can monitor what we are sowing, what measure we are giving, what our own actions are. The world would greatly benefit from a wide application of the Golden Rule.

But, you say, there are enemies out there of whom we must be very afraid, and as result of our fear, be hostile toward. So I ask, how does someone become our enemy? Not in small part, by our showing them disrespect. Our own mixed motives, our own disordered desires, create our enemies. When someone tells us, "There are those who hate us and would do us harm," we might ask

how they got that way and what might be done to reduce tensions rather than enhance them. What was that about loving your enemies? You destroy an enemy by making them your friend. Trite, I know, but still true.

Chaplain's Corner

Soft music played in the background; a slight breeze gently parted the drapes covering the partially opened window of the small room. Sounds of the city, an occasional horn, shouts of passersby in the street scarcely interrupted the relative calm of the moment. The tranquil mood was particularly conducive for reminiscence.

I remembered a grandmother who helped to raise her grandchildren. One grandson some years ago was punished for returning late to the Summit Center for Boys from a weekend home pass, through no fault of his own. En route to Martinez from home, a tire on the grandmother's older model car literally disintegrated. The kid was unable to return until the following morning. The grandmother had no resources to replace that and the other tires on her car, her only means of transportation. Consequently, the grandson's future earned and coveted home passes were placed on indefinite hold.

The memories included my delivery of a set of more-than-slightly-used tires to the family. The tires had sat in my garage until I learned that they would fit the grandmother's car. The kid's home passes resumed...

I remembered working for weeks with probation and the group home where this kid's older brother resided to forge an agreement to allow the young man to attend Knoxville College in Tennessee. I chuckled to myself as I thought about how often I had driven from Nashville to Knoxville because flights into Nashville were considerably cheaper than into Knoxville. The one-hundred-seventy-mile trips from Nashville to Knoxville and back were beginning to take their toll. "Just *one more* trip back to Knoxville," I recall thinking, as I arrived at the airport.

I was at the gate when the passengers began to disembark. In due time, all of the passengers exited the airplane, but the kid I had come to meet was not among them. The TWA agent was not concerned about the absence of the seventeen-year-old. "Oh, he either missed the plane in Ontario *or* St. Louis *or* he got on the wrong flight... any number of

possibilities," he replied almost gleefully.

"I need to know *exactly* what happened to the kid. You have a computer terminal there, you can track everything else; so where is my kid, who has flown only once before? He is not a sophisticated traveler!" After coaxing and praying, I finally learned from the customer service agent (who was probably as fatigued and frustrated as I was) that the kid had arrived in St. Louis and was put onto a flight directly to Knoxville. *My trip to Nashville had been in vain.*

I was well acquainted with the two brothers, their parents, maternal and paternal grandmothers and assorted other family members when a younger brother also found his way into trouble. The youngest had his share of difficulties over the past several years. I watched him grow mightily, but in stature only.

As I pondered the positive and sometimes amusing memories of these three brothers and their family, I was thrust back to present realities. The oldest kid failed to adjust to college life and reverted to the ways of the street. He got into serious trouble and will reside in a California state prison for a long time. The youngest of the brothers sits in juvenile hall waiting to be "delivered" to yet another in a long line of group homes. The middle child was the one with whom I spent the most time. He accompanied me to church and to the "all-you-can-eat" buffets, and I served on his "wrap-around" team. When he graduated from the Summit Center program, his therapist and I, among others, had high hopes for him. Unfortunately, the kid once more had a run in with the law. He was committed to the California Youth Authority, paroled, violated parole, and returned to custody. He was paroled again.

My melancholy walk down memory lane came to a close, as it was time to get down to the dreadful business at hand. I slowly walked over to say good-bye to the middle child. He had been out of custody not three weeks before he was shot. Standing before his open casket, I thought about what might have been...

Rev. Dr. Charles Tinsley

Juvenile Detention Chaplain

Health and Faith-in-Action

Healing Story

The Rev. Patricia Stout Plymale, Clayton Valley Presbyterian Church

A tiny, Irish woman went about her days in her small village saying quietly to herself, "Father, I thank you. I know you hear me always." If her crops were good or yield was low, her response in every moment was, "Father, I thank you. I know you hear me always." It was more than a mantra; she lived her life ceaselessly thanking God for every moment. If a family in the village needed food, she would pray, "Father, I thank you. I know you hear me always. This family needs food! Please provide for them." The family would receive food. If a child was sick, she began with the same prayer and added, "This child needs to be healed." The next day, the child would be healthy. When the village well went dry, a group of boys teased the woman, "Now what will you say? 'Father, I thank you'?" Everyone had heard her mumbling to herself over the years.

When she returned to her home that evening, she offered a prayer in earnest, "Father, I thank you. I know you hear me always. They are not going to believe you have done all of these wonderful things if you do not fill the well." The next morning she took two large buckets from her house and walked toward the well among the taunts of the youth. When they all arrived at the well, it was full. The teenagers said, "Why wasn't it filled sooner?"

This story reminds me of Nancy, who fell on an icy patch of sidewalk while walking her dog late one night. She broke her wrist and her doctor installed one of those pins and bracket set-ups externally, with an ace bandage to keep it all in place. When I saw her arm for the first time, she assured me she was grateful. "God is telling me to slow down," she said, "and watch where I am placing my feet. I thank God every day for this experience." The healing went remarkably well, she completed her physical therapy and was back to business as usual.

Months later, I was surprised to see her at a Taize Healing Service I

was leading. She was active in another congregation. She came to my healing station during the service and told me she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. "I am not afraid," she said. "I know God has a plan for me and this experience will grow my faith." We sent cards to each other. She wrote me explaining she was not answering her phone, just focusing on her recovery.

A year later, she called me and scheduled a lunch. "Patricia, I wanted to tell you in person – I am cancer-free. I thank God every day for giving me this opportunity to deepen my faith and know God is always with me." Both of our eyes filled with tears as she added, "I have learned so much through this experience. I have met so many wonderful people."

Both of these stories express absolute trust. These women demonstrate a commitment to oneness with their creator, just as a little child will place a hand in the hand of a loving parent.

Healing Touch

A very helpful ministry has been going on for many years under the radar in Contra Costa County. It is called Healing Touch, and it is run, among other places, out of Walnut Creek United Methodist Church (1543 Sunnyvale Ave., where the Interfaith Council office is) for anyone who wishes to come.

Healing Touch, according to their international website, "is a holistic energy therapy that emphasizes compassionate, heart-centered care in which the Healing Touch provider and client are equal partners in facilitating health and healing. Healing Touch providers use gentle, non-invasive touch to influence and support the human energy system within and surrounding the body. The goal of Healing Touch is to restore harmony, energy and balance within the human energy system. This goal supports the client's self-healing process of becoming whole in body, mind, emotion and spirit. Healing Touch complements conventional health care and is also used in collaboration with other approaches to health and healing."

The amazing news is that there is absolutely no charge for this service at this site. The ministry is headed by Jan Simons, a member of Walnut Creek UMC. You may contact her for an appointment, at 925-685-9578.

The Healing Power of Supplication to God

Dr. Amer Araim Healing is part of faith traditions because the role of religion is to guide humanity into a better way of life both spiritually and bodily. Allah says "And We reveal of the Quran that which is a healing and mercy for the believers." In the Quran as well as in the Tradition of Prophet Muhammad there is emphasis on maintaining a healthy life, good hygiene and the role of supplication to Allah in healing the sick person. While supplication is important, the Prophet commanded Muslims to understand and deal with the causes, i.e., to seek medical advice.

More than a year ago I received a

call from the chaplain in a hospital in our county stating that a young Muslim pregnant woman was in a coma and her condition was very serious. The doctors were discussing whether to remove the baby, to stop feeding her through a tube and when to stop the breathing support system. The family requested the opinion of an imam. As for the removal of the baby, the opinion was not in favor of such procedure unless the doctors certified that continuing the pregnancy was an imminent threat to the mother's life. The feeding should be maintained while she continued to breathe and her heart was beating.

After consultations, the doctors decided to keep the baby, to continue

to feed the mother through a tube and to maintain the breathing support system. In the meantime, my wife and I continued to visit her to recite the Quran and to supplicate to Allah to cure her. After a few weeks her situation progressively improved. One day she began to speak. I was so thrilled when she told me that she heard me reciting the Quran, remembering Allah and supplicating to him to grant her mercy and heal her while she was in coma. Later on she delivered a healthy baby. I thank Allah for enabling me to understand his commands and be helpful to others.

I wish also to express my deep appreciation for chaplains in the

hospitals in our county for the care they provide to all patients, including Muslims, and the cooperation they extend to me. It is real interfaith spirit.

Point of View - Risking Conversation

Eyewitness Guide to the Presbyterian Church/USA: What Can the Local Church Do?

The Rev. Mary Naegeli, First Presbyterian Church, Concord

The most frequent comment or question I get in follow-up to our "lunches with the pastor" has been, "What can FPCC do to affect the outcome [of national church deliberations]?" I believe that one person and most especially one church really can make a difference in the Big Picture. Here are some of the possible actions we can take, given here in order of intensity:

Fairly "easy" steps:

1. Write an overture, seek its endorsement at San Francisco Presbytery, for inclusion in General Assembly 2008 business (Session action).
2. Commission some of our elders to participate in Presbytery committees where decisions related to the application of G-6.0106b [Standards for Ordination] are made (i.e., Committee on Ministry, Committee on Preparation for Ministry, Permanent Judicial Commission) (Session would nominate potential candidates).
3. Nominate elders to General Assembly level committees (e.g., PJC, Nomination Committee).
4. Write a letter to General Assembly sharing our feelings about the report of The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church (probably Session).
5. Send observers to General Assembly to watch, pray and testify in committees.
6. Establish a "denominational relations" committee at FPCC to track progress and research the issues.
7. Coordinate strategic efforts in the San Francisco Presbytery to uphold standards.

Steps that are more public and provocative:

8. Withhold payment of our Per Capita Assessment, with specific requirements for its reinstatement (Session action).
9. [Our of consideration for the effectiveness of our mission] Change the name of our church to remove "Presbyterian" from our title (Session

can do this by filing a "doing business as" application, without approval of the presbytery or changing any foundational documents).

10. Join New Wineskins (as an example, though this is not the only option), which is the "fellowship" option on last meeting's handout, and disassociate on an everyday basis with the workings of the San Francisco Presbytery (withhold Per Capita, resign from committees, cease voting at Presbytery meetings).

11. Initiate judicial proceedings against SF Presbytery churches defying G-6.0106b.

Defining actions:

12. Declare, by changing the wording in our foundation documents, that our property is not held in trust for the presbytery or denomination (Congregational action).

13. Request release from San Francisco Presbytery to another Reformed denomination (e.g., Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Christian Reformed Church, Reformed Church of America, etc.) (Congregational action).

Or, if 13 fails (i.e., Presbytery refuses),

14. Walk away from our 1965 Colfax campus and “start a new church” without props, property, or denominational support.

Dr. Amer Araim’s Analysis of the Iraqi Jewish Community: A Response

I was both shocked and dismayed to read Dr. Amer Araim’s characterization of the events that led to the removal of the Jewish community of Iraq, a community that had lived there for 26 centuries and long preceded Islam’s presence in the region.

In Dr. Araim’s rendition of the history of Iraq, Jews lived there without experiencing anti-Semitism; became victims after the massacre at the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin (a controversial episode) in 1948; and the actions of Zionists thugs who bombed a synagogue in Iraq, on the Sabbath no less, and thus caused an ancient community to pull up its roots and flee.

The characterizations would be laughable did they not come from a respected member of the interfaith community, a person who holds a doctorate in political science, and himself an Iraqi.

The assault on Iraq’s Jews came a full seven years before Deir Yassin. at exactly 3:00 p.m. on June 1, 1941, on the Jewish holy day of Shavuot. It is seared in the consciousness of Mizrachhi Jews, and is known as the infamous “Farhud.” It began when a mob attacked representatives of the Jewish community as they crossed the Al Khurr Bridge to greet the returning Iraqi Regent Abdul-al Ilah. The mob murdered, burned and raped its way through the Jewish community. Jewish infants were special targets, killed as their helpless parents looked on. The superintendent of police refused to stop the riots.

The Farhud is the beginning of the

dismantling of Iraq’s Jewish community. The Farhud resulted from the work of the Grand Mufti (Imam) of Jerusalem who came to Iraq in October of 1939 to precipitate a coup led by Iraqi Nazis known as the Golden Square.

The Mufti entered into an agreement with Hitler, where the Mufti would provide Iraqi oil for the Nazi war machine if Hitler would destroy the Jewish community of Palestine. After the failed coup, the Mufti went to Berlin where he spent the war as the personal guest of SS Chief Heinrich Himmler and Adolph Hitler himself. There the Mufti planned executing a Nazi-type “final solution” against Palestine’s Jews, and he attempted to implement this after World War II. Although the Mufti spent only several years in Iraq, his propaganda resulted in Iraqis labeling all Jews as enemies of the state.

As the UN took up the Palestinian question in 1947, Iraqis carried out new pogroms and used Nazi confiscation techniques to seize Jewish property. On September 23, 1948, Shafiq Ades, Iraq’s wealthiest Jew was publicly hanged on phony charges and his property seized. His body swung in the public square in Basra where celebrant Iraqis mutilated it.

A month later, all of Iraq’s Jews who worked in the civil service were summarily fired. Iraqi then set about systematically seizing Jewish assets and impoverishing its Jews, anticipating that the imposition of 15,000 penniless Jews on Israel each month would break the Jewish state

Abraham H. Miller, Emeritus Professor
economically. Were these episodes so inconsequential that they merit not a line of prose in Dr. Araim’s characterization of the causes for the departure of Iraqi’s Jews?

Then there is the alleged Zionist attack on a synagogue, which according to Araim caused the flight of the Jews of Iraq. The incident comes from Naeim Giladi’s work. Dandelion Press, which published the book, alleges that Giladi’s work was banned in the United States. Really! The hype tells you something about Dandelion Press, which also publishes a book that alleges “the only logical conclusion that the 09-11 attacks and numerous other foiled terror plots were planned, orchestrated, financed, carried out and covered up by the forces of International Zionism.” (Albert D. Pastore, *Stranger than Fiction*, from the jacket)

Dandelion’s authors are linked to writings about Jewish conspiracies and Holocaust denial. This is the kind of imprimatur that no real scholar would cite. Yet Dr. Araim had no hesitation doing this. But then he also had no hesitation in writing about the dislocation of Iraqi Jews that makes absolutely no mention of their persecution or the infamous Farhud.

Reply to Professor Miller *Dr. Amer Araim, Dar-ul-Islam Mosque, Concord*

With a view to deflecting from the real requirements for peace and justice in the Holy Land, unfortunately whenever the question of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and particularly the sufferings of the Palestinians have been discussed, the issues of anti-Semitism and the migration of Jews from the Arab world are brought up. As for the issue of anti-Semitism, it is repeatedly stated that the Arab are Semite. Even if anti-Semitism is taken in its narrow interpretation, i.e. anti-Jewish, I have repeatedly stated that I cherish my good and friendly relations with the members of the Jewish community.

Professor Miller referred to the Iraqi Regent Abdul-al-Ilah who was considered by the Iraqi people as a stooge of the British Colonial Power. The Iraqis were struggling to end the British influence. There was an attempted coup and the British brought back the Regent who was welcomed, as stated by Professor Miller, by the leaders of the Jewish community. Therefore in such chaos no one could consider the mobs' behavior as the norm. Even then and later by the end of the 1940s, when the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was exacerbated by the Zionist attacks against the Palestinians to uproot them from their homes, many Muslim and Christian Iraqi families defended and protected their Jewish neighbors and friends. The Iraqi Jewish community was living a prosperous life and contributed to the Iraqi society. That is why, until now, Jews of Iraqi origin, whether in Israel or in the United States, still remember with nostalgia the good old days in Iraq.

The plight of the Jews in the Arab world was caused by both the Arabs and the Zionist movement, which claimed that Palestine is a land without a people and it should be allocated for a people without a land. It forced Jews from the Arab world to migrate to Israel by using terror and other illegal means. In the meantime, Arab masses were angry at the plight of the Palestinians and reacted against the members of the Jewish communities in their own countries. As stated by Professor

Miller, the leadership of the Jewish community was supportive of the monarchy, which was overthrown in the late 1950s. The government of Iraq was caught between the British schemes against the Palestinians and the anger of its masses. As a matter of fact, many of the coups that occurred in the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s were related to the failure of the Arab governments to support the Palestinians.

Today the new thinking in the Arab and Muslim worlds is aimed at building bridges with Jews who left the Arab world and by adopting measures to encourage members of the Jewish communities to visit. However, the Israeli government continues its policies aimed at usurping the Palestinian land and preventing them from establishing their own viable state. This is the crux of the Arab-Israeli conflict and should be dealt with directly and not by accusing those who are working for peace and justice in the Holy Land as anti-Semite or bringing always the issue of Jews from the Arab countries. All of us recall that the Israeli government and its supporters abroad exerted pressure to force Jews from the former Soviet Union to migrate to Israel instead of allowing them to choose their country of residence. The Zionist movement acted in a similar manner to bring Jews from the Arab countries to Israel. Israel is now importing foreign workers, while denying the Palestinian refugees their right to return to their homes.

I hope that the supporters of Israel will engage in fruitful and serious dialogue about how to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. My vision of peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis is that after the establishment of Palestinian state on the land occupied by Israel in 1967, with Arab East Jerusalem as its capital, and resolving the issue of the Palestinian refugees on the basis of United Nations resolutions, all the peoples of the region--including the Israelis--shall live in peace and good neighborliness.

Confirmation – The Sacrament

The Rev. Brian Joyce, Christ the King Catholic Church, Pleasant Hill

Confirmation is an important sacrament of the Church; but one that tends to get lost! The pastoral practice across the country and even world wide is so varied as to when Confirmation should be celebrated that any families changing location can easily miss the opportunity for Confirmation. The fact that most U.S. parishes celebrate the sacrament in the teen years means that it happens precisely when some teens are deciding to avoid the Church at all costs; and finally the meaning and purpose of Confirmation gets fuzzy when the time for its reception keeps shifting around.

First of all, Confirmation is part of the process of initiation or welcome into the Christian community and in its most ancient form (and today with the RCIA for Adults at the Easter Vigil) always followed a three-step entry into the Church: first, Baptism, then Confirmation and finally Eucharist. You can even locate some parishes today that have returned to the old sequence and now put Confirmation before first communion—that is, for infants and pre-second graders.

The practice in our Diocese and most of the U.S. is to invite teens to prepare for Confirmation when they are ready to stand on their own and make faith decisions for themselves. Our own Diocesan original guidelines are “you have to be old enough to be able to have a driver’s license and get yourself to Church!” Granted there are some disadvantages to this time frame; it tends to coincide with exactly when young adults are questioning whether they want to continue to be active churchgoers at all. But it is also a great time for some serious experience of Church, a time to ask maturing questions, a time to meet adults modeling their Christian faith and a time to participate in challenging discussions and moving retreats.

What I hope, for all Confirmed Catholics young and old, is that it represents a personal decision and commitment to take responsibility for following Jesus and with his values to make a difference in our world. That’s

what Confirmation is about: belonging to a faith community and taking responsibility for its mission and ministry.

The Blessing of Rain

Cantor Jennie Chabon, Congregation B'nai Tikvah, Walnut Creek

I feel compelled this month to write about the rain. Although my hope is that you are reading this article on a clear blue day in May [or later], as I sit in my office writing on April 7, the rain is steadily coming down outside my window. I am someone whose mood is greatly affected by the lack or presence of sunshine. I do enjoy sitting by the fire while the rain makes music on my roof, but I always prefer a sunny day to a rainy one. I feel lighter and happier and more optimistic about everything. For me, the last five weeks of rain have been a challenge to my spirit! I imagine that many people share this feeling with me.

With a nine-month-old at home who loves being outside, the days have been long and often trying. I have spent some of those long afternoons thinking about what we can learn from all this rain, and how we can look at it as a blessing. In our tradition there are blessings for almost everything: waking up in the morning, eating fruit, drinking water, smelling fragrant oils, hearing bad news, meeting someone distinguished in learning, seeing a rainbow...the list is very long! Not surprisingly, there are blessings for good and bad, happy and sad things. We don't shy away from pain or struggle and we often look for the way to praise God at even the hardest times. With this in mind, I went searching for a blessing for days and days of rain.

I did not find exactly what I was looking for, but I did find a blessing to recite upon seeing wonders of nature. "Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Source of Creation" and a blessing to recite upon hearing thunder or seeing a storm. "Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, whose power and might fill the world." Whether you are seeing a sunrise or witnessing a storm, our tradition encourages us to step back from it and acknowledge that everything, especially everything in nature, comes from God. Even though the earth is saturated and overflowing with so much rain, and even though we are all so anxious for the sun to grace the sky once again, Judaism's response to the unfamiliar weather is to look at it as a mystery that deserves

a blessing. Next time you get stuck in a rain storm, try offering a blessing for the unexpected weather. Maybe it would look something like this: Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, whose wisdom and power go beyond our understanding.

History Behind the Cantor's New Look

Cantor Leigh Korn, Temple Isaiah, Lafayette

I never really imagined it would cause such a stir. It was the afternoon before Purim and I was getting my costume together. My sister had given me explicit instructions about what I should wear so that I would look like an authentic 1950's greaser. I put on my Converse high tops, dark blue jeans, and white t-shirt. I slicked back my hair with the requisite amount of hair gunk, but as I looked in the mirror I realized that something was in the way of having that authentic 1952 look. And that's when I did it. I shaved. I never expected quite the reaction I received. *Everyone* had to share their opinion on it. If I were to tally the "votes," it was a landslide – clean-shaven won. It really struck me that the Jewish community had such a preference for my goatee-free look. Where had the love gone for the facially hirsute Jewish man? I thought that facial hair was practically a fixture of the prototypical male Jew. I decided to do some research into the history of the Jew and the beard.

In biblical times, the beard was regarded as a symbol of male attractiveness and virility while a shaved face was a sign of humiliation. When King Hanun accused King David's courtiers of being spies plotting to overthrow the government, he "clipped off one side of their beards ... and sent them off." Understanding their deep humiliation, David ordered the men to hide in Jericho until their beards had grown again. Further, shaving was an indication of intense grief and bereavement. Ironically, since many Jewish men are now clean-shaven, growing a beard – as opposed to shaving it – has become a sign of mourning.

The Torah expressly prohibits shaving "the side-growth of our beard." The reason for the ban on shaving this area of the beard was to distinguish the Israelites from the priests of pagan cults, who ritually shaved certain areas of their faces to designate their sacred status. The Mishnah codified the biblical law not to "mar" the corners of the beard,

while the Talmud termed the beard "the glory of the face," a sign of maturity and piety.

For the kabbalists, hair possessed great mystical significance. A man's beard represents the beard of the Holy Ancient One, the point of Creation when divinity flows to the world. The beard is also mystically associated with God's mercy. Thus the kabbalists prohibited even the shortening of one's beard. The Chasidim of Eastern Europe adopted this practice.

Today, some strictly observant Jews do not shave or even trim their beards, as a sign of their devotion to tradition. Some Jews do not cut their beards or shave during the period of the Omer and for the three weeks preceding Tisha B'av, due to the mournful tone of these periods. The Shulchan Aruch ruled that as long as a single razor is not used, it is acceptable to remove all facial hair, which explains my modern Orthodox friends' clean-shaven faces.

Well, I'm sure it comes as no surprise that Judaism has had a lot of differing opinions on the topic throughout our history. Where does that leave this goatee-less cantor? Do I go with the Torah, Talmud, and Kabbalists and let it grow back? Do I listen to the words of the Shulchan Aruch and continue to shave with my electric razor? I think, for now, I will listen to the other tried and true Jewish source of knowledge and wisdom – my mother, who will gleefully declare that she likes what Purim has done to my face.

Why Should He Go To Church Every Sunday?

Intern Lisa Sargent, Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church, Walnut Creek

Recently, I read a story about a man who wrote a letter to the editor of his local newspaper. In his letter, he said that he was never going to church again. His rationale for this decision was that he realized that he'd probably heard a thousand sermons in his life and he couldn't remember any of them. So, he figured, there was no reason to go to church.

As you might imagine, this letter inspired a hearty number of replies (much to the delight of the editor). The reply that caught everyone's attention came from an older man who wrote that he'd been eating meals for his entire life— three a day for 70 years, which amounted to over 75,000 meals. He said he couldn't remember any one of the meals in particular or exactly what he had eaten when. However, he knew that these meals had nourished his body throughout the years, sustaining him on his journey. He'd also been attending church for those 70 years, and he knew the sermons he'd heard had nourished his soul throughout that time, sustaining his spirit through life's joys and challenges.

Answers on Buddhist Life for Children

Ven. Jian Hu, Sunnyvale Chung Tai Center visited the Walnut Creek Intermediate School in March to give an introduction to Buddhism to the sixth graders. They responded with many letters and questions. Here are some replies to these questions.

Q: What kind of chores do you do and how do you meditate? My mom says that you count your breaths until you get to five, and then you start over again. How do you do it?

A: In a monastery, there are many duties and the monks take on different tasks. For example, holding Buddhist services, teaching Buddhism and meditation, daily administration, paying the bills (we have to pay the bills too!), keeping the monastery very clean, etc.

There are many meditation methods. The most basic one is called "breath-counting." A person sits on a firm meditation mat, with the body

upright, usually with crossed legs, and focuses on the breathing. With each exhalation (breathing out), you count from one to five in order to concentrate.

Q: Why can't you celebrate your own birthday?

A: It's not that we never celebrate birthdays. In some monasteries, on the master's birthday, they hold a service in his honor. (We don't in our monastery.) It's just that we don't have a pig-out party with loud music and junk food. That would not fit well in a monk's life. On the other hand, your birthday is the day your mother suffered the greatest, so to chant a sutra (Buddhist scripture), or to do a good deed to honor your mother would be a Buddhist way to celebrate a birthday.

Q: Why do you only have three robes and not more? Do you wash them frequently? Did you have a chance to

get more or is that all they give you?

A: Originally in India, the monks wore only three robes. In China, many places are colder than India, and we've had to wear some extra clothing; for example, thinner robes for summer and thicker robes for winter. Still, we are limited in having a few plain-colored robes. I do wash them when they get dirty! I think it's nice not to have too much clothing. I never have to worry about what to wear, matching clothes, etc. When you just wear a robe on the outside, everything automatically matches!

Q: Did you desire a lot before you became a Buddhist monk? Do you ever desire, even a little, currently? If you start to desire a lot when you are in heaven, and use up all your good karma, will you be reincarnated as something lower, such as a beetle or an ant?

A: Yes, I spent a lot of money on books and music before I became a monk. Also, my temper wasn't very good when I was younger. Even as a monk, I still have some desires that I need to work off. That is why I'm not in nirvana yet.

In heaven, if you desire a lot, you will be reborn as a lower animal like a beetle. So a Buddhist wishes not to go to heaven but to nirvana, which is a state of ultimate peace that is beyond earth, heaven, hell, and rebirths.

Q: How are you sure there is no heaven but there is reincarnation? Are you sure there is no God? If there is no God, how would you know?

A: In Buddhism, life has always existed; it is not given nor taken. So there is no creator of life. The main issue in Buddhism is not who created us, but how we can live in peace, harmony, and happiness without suffering.

There is heaven in Buddhism: in fact, there are many levels of heaven, depending on how much good karma one has created in previous lifetimes. However, to live in one of the heavens is not eternal, and you can cycle within heavens, earth, animals, and hell, all depending on whether your good karma or bad karma is greater.

Is it possible to be sure of all this? When you practice meditation and study Buddhism more, your mind becomes clearer and you can see the world and our lives more clearly.

On Electing a Bishop *Rev. Steven Strane, St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, Danville*

I believe the media were terribly disappointed in the results of our Episcopal election [The Rt. Rev. Marc Andrus]. They had been counting on the election of a partnered gay nominee to generate a firestorm of reaction that would have served up myriad possibilities for stories for months to come. Oh, well. Those of us in the Diocese of California could have told them that our prayerful intent was to elect the person we believed to be the best qualified candidate to serve as our next bishop without consideration of gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

However, members of the media needn't worry. This summer is shaping up to produce just the kind of news they love. There have been threats and early signs of a further

splintering of the Episcopal Church for several years, and those who have been fomenting unrest appear ready to act. California may not have provided the straw to break the camel's back, but those who are militantly dis-eased have already declared that all of the candidates for our next Presiding Bishop are unacceptable. The bishop of San Joaquin has given notice that he plans to remove his entire diocese from the Church, and the bishop of Fort Worth has made inquiries about establishing a new pension fund for breakaway clergy.

Perhaps the time has come to say our goodbyes, bind up our wounds and get back to the business of ministry. Far too much time, energy and money have been poured into at-

tempts to achieve reconciliation with a constituency that has no desire to be reconciled. One of the great beauties of the Episcopal Church is its ability to offer a spiritual home to people of diverse theologies, backgrounds and political persuasions. As different as we may be from one another, if we are focused on the same Lord and if we find our motivation in the same Gospel mandate, the center can hold firm in spite of the tension. But if a shared sense of identity and vision has been obscured by something that is judged to be fundamental, then it seems to me that the honest thing to do is to make the course corrections that will allow all of us to liberate and redirect our resources in ways that can help feed the hungry, heal the sick, end oppression and renew the

gift of hope for all of God's children in need.

It will be a sad thing when the Episcopal Church is once again broken by strife. It is always a sad thing when the Body of Christ, in any of its manifestations, is wounded or torn. But the sadder thing would be if we allowed the events on the horizon to cause us to turn aside or be distracted from the ministry that is ours. There is a hungry, hurting world that needs to hear from us and to see us at work.

Redemption?

The Rev. John Bennison, St. John's Episcopal Church, Clayton

In the past few weeks, this little parish has been surrounded by controversy from the outside. Old offenses and allegations about a time in my life over thirty years ago have been exhumed once again; even from before the time I entered the priesthood. While we may have thought the matter had been dealt with twice before, and that it was a thing in our collective past, apparently that was not the case for others. The amendment of a redeemed life well lived as a pastor to God's people for thirty years has proven insufficient.

I have been first Vicar, then Rector of this congregation for nearly twenty-four years. That's a lot of baptisms, weddings and memorial services. That's literally thousands of worship services, well over a thousand sermons, lots of "annual" events, dozens of outreach efforts, a fair amount of pastoral care and some life-changing counseling; while hundreds of people and families have come and gone. I've been able to remember each of you by name because of who you are, and what you've meant to me. In the balance, there's been a whole lot more building up than tearing down...

It is with a deep sense of regret that I will bring to a close my ministry with this wonderful congregation I love, and leave the Episcopal priesthood. At the same time, I am deeply grateful for the privilege of having faithfully served God's people here.

In the course of the last three decades (as I have lived out the vocation to which I was called by God) I have come to know and believe that amendment of a redeemed life well lived in service to others far

surpasses the impoverishment found in clinging to the dust of the past. Forever on our lips are such words of a faith that casts out all fear. And for me, that is, in fact, *the Last Word*.

For I have looked and seen far more than merely "glimpses" of what we have come to know and believe to be *resurrection* in the lives of so many of the people I have been privileged to serve. And it does indeed "trump" all other shallow perceptions of this world that would presume to *pose* as reality; let alone the amazing state of grace we know to be the gospel of Christ.

Resurrection *The Rev. Greg Ledbetter, Shell Ridge Community Church, Walnut Creek*

If the purest meaning of Resurrection is that the powers of life, love, courage, hope, and liberation are daily overcoming the powers of death, hatred, fear, despair and oppression, then our post-Easter lives should be spent seeking to daily embody – incarnate – the “truthful energies” of Resurrection. This is what it means to *practice resurrection* [Wendell Berry]: it is to practice living in the face of death, to practice loving in the face of hatred, to practice courage in the face of fear, to practice hoping in the face of despair, to practice liberation in the face of oppression

Transitions

#Welcome to **Heather Leslie Hammer**, who will join San Ramon Valley United Methodist Church in Alamo as Associate Pastor. Heather has lived in Livermore for 26 years where she and her husband Jim raised three children. When her oldest child died in 2002, she began to learn about grief counseling and decided to become a minister. She is drawn to pastoral care, enjoys planning worship and loves preaching. She will work toward ordination while at San Ramon Valley UMC.

#Welcome also to **Father Peter Son Vo**, who has been assigned as parochial vicar at Saint Bonaventure Catholic Church in Concord. Father Peter comes from Danang in central Vietnam, an area called the Country of Martyrs. He studied in a classroom at the Cathedral because all seminaries there were closed. Says Pastor Richard Mangini, “I think that you will find his love for Jesus refreshing, his enthusiasm for ministry embarrassing and his love for people gratifying.”

#Farewell to **the Rev. Leslie Nipps**, who has left St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Concord. She writes: “As I write this last article, I wanted to refer to how Jesus said good-bye to his friends. The problem with those passages, though, is that 1) he talks about how he is going to die and go to his Father, and 2) he talks about how he is coming back. I am neither going to die nor am I coming back... You deserve a new relationship with a new interim and/ or rector, and you are called to support that new person and commit yourselves to doing everything necessary for that relationship to thrive. But I will be praying for you, and looking forward to hearing good news about your growing ministry in the diocese.”

#Farewell to **the Rev. Don Stahlhut**, who is retiring from the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community

Organization (CCISCO) after having founded and served it for many years. And welcome to his successor, **Adam Kruggell**, who has been the Lead Organizer for the PICO affiliate in San Francisco.

Congratulations #Congrats to El Cerrito United Methodist Church (Rev. Hubert Ivery, pastor) as they celebrated their centennial anniversary a few months ago!

#Congratulations also to the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church. On June 4 LOPC dedicated the Dornisfe/Little Christian Life Center. The Dornisfe family exercised outstanding leadership and financial management roles in the development of virtually every building on the campus. Jim Little was pastor of the congregation from 1964 to 1986, during which time the congregation doubled its membership, increased its giving tenfold and became a powerful force in the Presbytery, as well as nationally.

Social Justice Alliance

#Motivational Toys?: Check this out! Representatives of a toy manufacturing company shared their great ideas for the coming holiday season on a TV news channel recently.

They are coming out with an action figure (NOT a doll) that is a handsome and strong and happy-looking soldier. He can stand at attention proudly in full uniform, salute and turn his head from side to side. He has "everyday" clothing and camouflage fatigues.

He comes well-equipped with grenades, a variety of weapons and medals, multi-colored battle ribbons to be displayed to recognize various forms of valor and a packet of cadences. This action figure can bend, twist and crawl in many positions of attack.

Accessories for this soldier, purchased separately, can be Hummers, helicopters, tanks and aircraft with strategic plans for attack included. These actions figures are being designed specifically (according to the presentation on TV by the proud manufacturer) as motivational toys for children.

Oh, the glory of it all! Exposure to this "child's play" should make military recruitment much easier in times to come. Allah, Adonai, God help us all!

#The Peace Pole: How about planting a peace pole at your place of worship? ...or your garden or school? The company in the US that makes peace poles offers them in four-, six- or eight-sided red cedar and to stand four to six feet above ground. On each side of the pole is written the phrase "May Peace Prevail on Earth" (which has become an international slogan) in four, six or eight different languages. Environmental messages are also available, with paw prints, leaves or stars.

Peace poles are seen at churches,

parks, schools, civic centers, gardens or wherever one might desire to remind people that peace is possible. Want to learn more? Call Natalie at 925-934-0759.

#Mountain View Shelter Update:

Since the First Five Foundation was able to provide funding for much of the family shelter program for the next year, it is still in business!

Therefore, volunteers are still needed to cook and serve dinners on a weekly basis. If you, your congregation, your family, or a group you belong to is willing to take on this responsibility (a FUN responsibility), please call Gloria at (925) 228-6920 right away. Dates are still available for this summer and into the fall.

#Contra Costa Crop Walk 2006:

"Hike for the Hungry" will be Sunday, October 1, 2006, at 1:00 P.M. at Walnut Creek Civic Park. The Crop Walk is co-sponsored by caring people in Contra Costa County, the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County, and Church World Service.

A total of 82% of funds collected at the walk is distributed by Church World Service on an as-needed basis. Sponsors may designate donations to 19 listed organizations, such as: the Heifer International, American Jewish, Lutheran World Relief, Unitarian Universalist, Baptist World Aid, Project Care, and others.

Twenty-five (25) percent goes to local programs, and this year's recipient is the Winter Nights Shelter. CWS Administration and Fundraising expenses are less than 19%.

We'll walk rain or shine!! Please plan to join us. Call Polly Smith-Telfer for information 925-256-9992.

#Homeless Families Benefit from Winter Nights

The goals of the Winter Nights Program this past year were to

provide a warm, safe place to sleep, meals, and transportation for homeless families with children and the elderly from mid-October, 2005, until the end of April, 2006.

Thanks to contributions from individuals, businesses, foundations, and the generosity of 26 host congregations, a total of 111 family members were admitted to the shelter, transported by van to schools, service centers, and jobs, and served three meals a day.

We are happy to report that we were able to provide stable housing to 80 percent of these families that spent at least two weeks in our program. We are proud of our good record this past session and are grateful to all who helped.

As the Homeless Summit and the Winter Nights Steering Committee meet during the summer, the focus will be on plans for the 2006-07 Winter Nights Shelter, which opens October 16, 2006. **If you are interested in participating in the Homeless Summit, please contact Gwen Watson at 925-930-9965**

#SoJA Adopts Endorsement Policy: At its June 14 meeting, the Social Justice Alliance of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County adopted an endorsement process for sponsored events or issue endorsements:

- 1) Decisions will be made by consensus,
- 2) Anyone from the SOJA email list who is present or sends a proxy may participate in the consensus process.
- 3) The SoJA Chair will report on decisions to the Interfaith Council's Executive Committee.

#CNWS Interfaith Task Force: Since the inland area of the Concord Naval

Weapons Station was closed by the Department of Defense in 2005, the Concord Naval Weapons Station Interfaith Task Force has been actively involved in the planning process for its Reuse Project.

Task Force members **Larry Risman, Dolores Loague, Dan Hardie, Mary Agnes Hardie, Pat Conroy, Ed Seghers, and Gwen Watson**, as advocates for the homeless, attended the Ideas Fair in early May. Affordable Housing Week featured a Meeting of the Task Force at Concord United Methodist Church, hosted by **Pastor Robert Kirk** and **CNWSITF Co-Chair Dolores Loague**.

Ed Seghers and **Lynda Conlow** represented the Task Force at the June 10 City of Concord Working Session, which began the development of goals and principles for the planning process. On June 26 Task Force members met for a de-briefing of the three City Working Sessions and a talk by **Dan Sawislak**, Executive Director of RCD Nonprofit Housing.

July 11 and August 1 will be the two concluding Working Sessions. The Task Force aims to be a presence at both sessions. Several members have applied for Advisory Board positions. The CNWSITF, convened by SoJA, is co-chaired by **Dolores Loague** and **Susan Jaffe**.

Immigration is the topic. Carolyn Krantz, Pastoral Associate at St. Peter Martyr, Pittsburg, will be the speaker. *All are invited.*

Next SoJA Meeting: The Social Justice Alliance will meet **August 9** at 7:00 P.M. until 8:30 P.M. at the Interfaith Office, Room 205, 1543 Sunnyvale Avenue, Walnut Creek. Agenda items will include #Kuehl Single Payer Health Care Bill, #Concord Naval Weapons Station Interfaith Task Force, # CROP Walk, #Inclusionary Housing, and more. *All are welcome.* Please send your email address to Dorothy Vance (dorvancew@yahoo.com) if you'd like to receive minutes/notes of SoJA meetings.

September SoJA Meeting:

We Could Use Your Help

By our nature, we operate primarily with volunteer energy. In fact, we would nearly be nothing without the scores of persons who work together in interfaith cooperation. We are very grateful for you, who do work in your own congregations as well as in joint ventures.

New areas are developing, so we are seeing if there are persons connected with the Interfaith Council to

#encourage congregations to “adopt” support of **emancipated foster care youth.**

#network around addressing **global warming.**

#work on behalf of **universal, or single-payer, health care.**

#widen the circle of support for the **Mountain View family shelter.**

#encourage congregations to participate in the upcoming **CROP walk** sponsored by Church World Services.

If you are inspired to work on any of these issues on a county basis,

please contact the office at 925-933-

6033 or Lenita@ash.com

Thank You Corner
This newsletter is brought to you through the efforts of our wonderful volunteers who generously donate their time to collate, fold and label.

Thanks to **Betty Alton, Chris Coons, Madeline Gomes, Darby Lockett, Edith Reed, Anne Roth** and **Dick Shumaker** who worked on our previous edition.

YOU too can be part of this group who always have a good time when they get together. Just call Lenita at (925) 672-1053 to volunteer. We can use more help.

☺ Firefighters everywhere
☺ Public Schools in California
☺ Economic conditions in
Mexico
☺ Victims of landslides & floods
in
Indonesia

Please Pray For
☺ St. John's Episcopal, Clayton
☺ Faith Lutheran, Pleasant Hill
☺ Grace Presbyterian, Walnut
Creek
☺ Walnut Creek United Meth-
odist

Next Newsletter Deadline: August 16, 2006

Please send copy marked to the attention to:

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