



M inistering Together

“News, comments and events of concern to the religious community”

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County

May-June 2008

COMING EVENTS

❖Spiritual Spa Day for Women

Awaken to the Sacred

Friday, May 2, 2008 9:30 A.M. – 4:00 P.M.

San Damiano Retreat, Danville

Treat yourself to a day of peaceful relaxation at San Damiano Retreat. Renew your mind, body and spirit in tranquil garden settings. The day will include quiet time, talking meditation, gentle stretching, praying in color, and spiritual direction. Facilitated by Rena Grant, Nancy Burchett, Kathy Miranda, Bidi Millet, and Janet McQuiston. The cost is \$75 and lunch is included

❖Mother's Day Retreat

Friday through Sunday, May 9 to 11

San Damiano Retreat, Danville

On this weekend, mothers will “open the narrow door of willing-ness and experience a flood of grace-full-ness.” Family members are invited to come on May 11 to attend a special Eucharist and brunch, for an additional fee. Cost for the weekend is \$165-195, with six meals included. Presenters are Mary Ann Lemire Mattos and Fr. Rusty Shaughnessy. To register, call 925-837-9141.

❖Who is our Neighbor?: Immigration

Sunday, May 18, 7:15 p.m.

Shell Ridge Community Church

200 La Casa Via, Walnut Creek

Reaching Out Ministries presents the story and experience of Edgar Sotelo, radio host, psychologist and leader. There will be music, refreshments and discussion. For more info, contact Ron Elsdon at newbeginnings@elsdon.com.

❖Healthcare with Faith Communities: Basic Preparatory Course for Faith Community Nurses

Friday to Monday, July 11 to 14

Holy Names University

3500 Mountain Blvd., Oakland

This course prepares faith community nurses with the curriculum approved by the International Parish Nurse Resource Center and the American Nurses Association. For more information, contact Marion.depuist@JohnMuirHealth.com or Jbard@samuelmerritt.edu.

❖Embracing an Interfaith Future

July 24 to 28

San Francisco

The North American Interfaith Network (NAIN) is holding its 20th anniversary national convention in our area this year. The several-day event will include assemblies, workshops, shared meals, and round-table discussions. Registration is \$275 before May 15, and \$350 after. For more info or to register, contact www.nain.org/2008. For questions con-

Director's Letter

Dear friends,

Those of you who are regular readers of this newsletter know that we have sought to encourage respectful dialogue and conversation, even regarding sensitive topics.

Some time ago, we divided contributions between the “Your Words” and “Point of View” sections. The first category included gleanings from your newsletters and submissions that were more informative than controversial. The second section was to allow for point/counterpoint discussions.



We also made the determination over a year ago that we would solicit directed articles in the Point of View section, concentrating on one topic at a time. We did not accomplish that goal...until now. This month's issue is on mental health issues, and we welcome the submissions

by Raphael Asher and Brent Adams.

The subject for the next issue, July/August, will be “the funding of education.” We will include as many articles as we can fit that are well-written and cogently argued. The deadline for those articles is June 15.

Our sincere apologies to those who have wished to continue ongoing “risky conversations” about topics that have been recently presented on these pages. This is not an attempt at censorship. There are natural limitations on this publication, including its infrequency and space. There are also sensitivities within our interfaith community that we are learning to respect. It is the express wish of the members of the Executive Committee, who have made these recent editorial policy decisions, not to abandon controversial issues, such as the state of Israel-Palestine relationships, but rather to move the action and concern to another venue, such as dialogical or ritual events. I pray that you are able to understand.

As to non-controversial matters in which the Interfaith Council is engaged, I point your attention to a new cookbook under construction, which promises to be both unique and fascinating. It is entitled “Room at the Table: An Interfaith Cookbook.” We are currently soliciting recipes for the book, which can be submitted entirely online. Below you will find directions for doing so.

Go to www.fundcraft.com.

Look for the green writing on the right side of screen and scroll down to the blank box marked “Web ID”, (members).

Click on it and enter: 36834-07QV. Click “Log in” Click on the pink, “post recipes.” Enter the recipe.

We are seeking recipes from as wide a religious and ethnic and national spectrum as we can get. We want you to submit your favorite dishes that have been handed down in your family, the kinds of food that you prepare for your religious celebrations, the delicious (and hopefully not secret) recipe that your great-aunt prepared for special occasions.

We are grateful for the committee that is putting this cookbook together. In a few months, the cookbook will be available for purchase, at a very reasonable price. We hope that it will find a place not only on your bookshelf and counter, but also in your heart and stomach!

Blessings and love,



Chaplain's Corner

On March 24th the several editions of the *Contra Costa Times* newspaper carried a remarkably informative story about this ministry and some members of the population we serve. The extremely complimentary article, superbly and accurately written by a *Times* religion reporter Rebecca Rosen Lum was, it is apparent, widely read. Particularly kind and positive responses have come from all over this and adjoining counties. People have called to offer scholarships for those young people preparing to go away to college. Others have inquired about volunteer opportunities to assist with, and reach out to, troubled youth and young adults, inside and outside of the facilities.



Of the more tender and moving responses to the article was a letter to me from a set of parents who were convinced that an accompanying copy of a letter sent to them by their son could be helpful to young people. I agree with their assessment. The letters are reproduced below in hope and anticipation that, so

shared with an immense audience, lives might be touched in positive and constructive ways. The very reading of, hearing and even feeling the immense pain of this family might well serve to encourage young people in your midst to not only embrace what is good and decent, but to count their plentiful and abundant blessings. Please share the following, just as I have with young people in the detention facilities.

On a page of stationery, under the imprinted words of Psalm 91:11, “The Lord will put his angels in charge over you to protect you wherever you go,” a loving and supportive mother wrote:

Dear Reverend,

I read the Valley Times article on the good work you are doing. My son had just recently sent me the enclosed letter. We visit him every week at Folsom [State Prison] and have been doing this for twenty years. My son made one mistake. I hope that this let-

ter may help others to find peace and direction in their lives. Our son just received his AA from Ohio University. He is the first inmate to receive an AA-- on his own. Anyway, our family hopes that this letter may help others.

Thank you for your work with young people.

The letter from their son:

Dear Parents,

I want to tell you that I realize what a complete fool I was to throw away all of what you gave to me! The upbringing you provided for me was nothing short of perfect, with such a loving atmosphere & upholding attitude. You supplied me with all of the tools needed to grow into a respectable adult! I was nurtured through you & the family & I am truly grateful for it! What I did was throw all of that to the

side, taking it for granted, & made myself into a complete idiot! I put myself in a world of unimaginable ignorance, stupidity, hatred & fear. I put myself into a place that was the total opposite of the place I grew up in! I still can't believe after 20 years, that I decided, I made the choice, to walk out of a lovely dream & into a horrible nightmare! I did this! Now I'm stuck trying to get out of the nightmare I created, & again you are there to uphold the loving atmosphere of home & family. I have grown quite a lot & I have quite a lot of growing to do. I'm no longer that fool idiot who threw away the dream yet I have a lot of learning to do before the nightmare is over.

PEACE!

Rev. Dr. Charles Tinsley
Juvenile Detention Chaplain

Your Words – *Windows on each other's lives of faith*

◆ **Rabbi Michelle Fisher, Congregation B'nai Shalom, Walnut Creek**

I have not yet bought a GPS; I admit that I still rely upon Mapquest to get around. Yet, I love the concept of having a GPS tell me where to go, being able to announce to me in advance: "In 200 yards, turn right on Main Street." I have also, at times, wondered what life would have been like for the Israelites had Moses been able to invest in such a device. "In 4 days, turn left at Mt. Sinai." And then when Moses failed to do so, hearing it say, over and over again, "Re-calculating..." At the very least, it would make a good Purim comedy skit.

Parashat Pekudei hints that the Israelites had the 2nd-or-3rd-millennium-before-the-common-era equivalent to a GPS. The work of the Tabernacle is finally completed, and God's Presence has descended to fill the Tabernacle. "When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on their various journeys... for over the Tabernacle a cloud of Adonai rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys." (Ex. 40:36,38) They seem to have traveled by GPS – a God Positioning System.

Joking aside, I am sure that this cloud/fire was amazing. Here were a people just out of slavery, on their own in an unfamiliar and unknown territory. They had already been pursued by their former oppressors, and been attacked once by another tribe. The future was equally uncertain. They knew they were heading to Canaan; I can

imagine, though, they questioned what that meant and would mean for their lives. And yet, all they had to do was look up to see God was with them and in their midst.

We do not have such obvious signs of God's Presence with us today. God's Presence is more hidden, and has to be looked for more carefully in other places and ways. In the love of a community. The smile of a child. The support of a colleague. The friendly gesture of a passerby. The coming together in compassion and comfort during a crisis. God does still attend to us, is still magnificently in our midst, if we only adjust and attune our consciousness. May we all have our eyes opened to seeing this, and our hands and hearts opened to being such conduits for God's holiness.

◆ **The Rev. Greg Ledbetter Shell Ridge Community Church**

We're in Eastertide now which is something of a fifty-day suspension bridge between the Resurrection of Jesus and the Birth of the Community that lives on in his name. I like to think of the buildup toward Pentecost as a time of gathering energy much as a bud on the tip of a springtime branch puffs and swells with the latency of new life. Pentecost is the Spirit-induced explosion of the life of Jesus through the community of his followers into the world. But before we can assemble expectantly with the disciples, awaiting the winds of the spirit, we must allow the fear that lingers past Easter to be transformed into the hopeful expectation that

welcomes the Spirit that will lead, guide, empower, teach and sustain the Jesus community.

Fear is the emotion that we most typically underplay when recounting the Easter story on Resurrection Sunday. The bulk of the disciples spent their day of Resurrection still huddled away, their guts and their lives still clenched in fear. My reading of the post-resurrection texts suggests that the fear of Jesus' followers only slowly gave way to recognition and hope. Any reading of history, up to and including the present, suggests that fear is not so easily cast out; fear still dominates our life together on this planet, including these very long last two years of campaigning for the American presidency.

Glimmers of light out of the typically gloomy pit of American presidential politics come in the form of the first two serious contenders in history who are non-white and non-male. And unless one of these is elected, it will remain hard to speak seriously about equal opportunity in the U. S. if women and non-whites are effectively barred from our land's highest office. But this challenge to the all-white, all-male grasp of power, control and privilege has resulted in a highly foreseeable response: fear cloaked in grave concerns about inexperience, dubious religious affiliation and questionable patriotism. Of late, Barack Obama has been most harshly attacked, presumably in part because he appears increasingly to be the Democratic frontrunner. One of the most curious attacks has come in the form of ferreting our tiny, seemingly inflammatory snippets of Obama's home pastor's sermons and splashing them all over the internet and airwaves in the hope of tainting Obama (lest you think I've got a dog in this fight, this time around I just might vote "Green"). Obama's soon-to-be-former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, has on occasion lashed out at white blindness and indifference to black injustice and pain and has suggested that the 9/11 attacks were inevitable, sooner or later, given our nation's way in the world. These are not outrageous statements and similar words have been spoken from pulpits of a variety of faiths by pastorly lips of a variety of ethnic shades all over the land-including mine.

To the extent that white America is afraid of having a black president, it may be in large part of owing to the fact that it'll be much harder to ignore the unhealed wounds of the past and their continuing legacy of pain and injustice. Political expediency clearly forced Obama to repudiate his pastor's more vitriolic remarks, but I certainly hope that he doesn't disagree with the essence of Wright's concerns and prophetic, some would claim, pronouncements.

If the resurrection of Jesus symbolizes the end of death's sway over life, perhaps we could add "fear" as another

casualty of this season. In the days ahead, as we parse the political landscape and as we enter into conversation around human sexuality, let us refuse to be captured and

◆The Rev. Frank Baldwin Orinda Community Church

This is an increasingly interesting and significant time to be part of the United Church of Christ. Last month we learned that our denomination is being investigated by the IRS because one of our members - presidential candidate Barack Obama - spoke at the UCC's biennial General Synod last summer. Currently Mr. Obama's pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, along with his congregation, Trinity United Church of Christ, is being caricatured and condemned in the media for being too outspoken, too critical, and too Black.

In Trinity UCC, we're talking about one of the authentic jewels of American Protestantism. Trinity is a powerhouse of Christian faith and mission set in the impoverished South Side of Chicago. The church is known and admired around the world for its inspiring Afro-centric worship, extravagant hospitality, extensive community involvement and profound commitment to social justice. Among its local ministries, Trinity offers career development and college placement, tutorial and computer services, health care and support groups, domestic violence programs, pastoral care and counseling, bereavement services, drug and alcohol recovery, prison outreach, financial counseling and a credit union, housing and economic development, dozens of choral, instrumental and dance groups, and diverse program opportunities for all ages, including youth and senior citizens. Trinity has been involved in planting more than 15 new congregations throughout the upper Midwest, and is a notably generous supporter of our denomination.

The Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who retired earlier this year, is a renowned preacher in the tradition and experience of the Black church. During the 36 years of Dr. Wright's pastorate Trinity grew from 87 to 8,000 members, and it is currently the largest congregation in the United Church of Christ. Like those of other great African-American preachers (the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. comes to mind) his sermons are prophetic, biblical, truth telling, fearless and controversial. During his lengthy ministry Pastor Wright has probably spent close to 5,000 hours in the pulpit, and the 15-second sound-bite that has lately gotten him (and his parishioner, Mr. Obama) in such hot water needs to be kept in perspective. In that now-notorious quote, the preacher raises a discomfiting question that many thoughtful people were asking in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, namely, *What is it about U. S. foreign*

policy that has caused some people to so hate and fear us?
 Dr. Wright reads his Bible, especially the Hebrew prophets and the Christian gospels, and faithful to his preaching heritage he has a responsibility to raise such a question, even if it makes his congregation (and perhaps the entire country) squirm.

While I'm nowhere near Jeremiah Wright's ballpark as a preacher, in my years in the pulpit I have also undoubtedly said things that offended or embarrassed a number of my hearers. That being so, I hope and pray that each of you know how strongly I uphold your freedom to disagree with me, or even to disavow what you have heard. You may do so and still be assured of my continuing respect, support and friendship. With similar confidence in his spiritual, intellectual and political liberty as a member of Trinity United Church of Christ, Mr. Obama has now chosen to firmly distance himself from his pastor's post-9/11 remarks. In these dark days of assault politics, all of the presidential candidates can expect to have their political record, religion, character, family and friends microscopically scrutinized and mercilessly attacked. As long as Mr. Obama is in the race, the United Church of Christ will also be targeted. Let us be willing to respond with clarity, confidence and conviction.

◆ **The Rev. Joanne Peterson**
Tice Valley United Methodist Church, Rossmoor

My husband, Dan, and I take our two dogs out for a walk every morning and every evening. Even if it is pouring down rain, they insist on going out. Since we take essentially the same route each time, I've gotten adept at noticing small changes. In the last several days, I've been watching two birds build a nest under the eave of a nearby house. The nest is finished and I think the eggs are laid because the female is always sitting in the nest as we go by. As I've thought about those birds, I realize they have something to teach us—lessons to remind us to simplify our lives and be open to moments of awe and wonder.

Here's what they've taught me:

- ❖ Travel light
- ❖ Eat small portions at a time
- ❖ Look where you are going
- ❖ Make your nest seasonally
- ❖ Sing through-out the day
- ❖ Form community
- ❖ Clothe yourself in simple beauty
- ❖ Feed the hungry
- ❖ Join the choir
- ❖ Keep your sermons short
- ❖ Nurture the young
- ❖ Call your friends
- ❖ Risk the flight

These two birds are nesting and giving birth to the new. The Easter season is also the season of new birth, a time to celebrate a Creator who turns dark into light, sadness into joy and creates yet another new day. In these next few weeks, take time to notice beauty, mystery, wonder and awe. Slow down the pace of your life so mystery and awe can have a fighting chance of presenting themselves. While we cannot do anything to make wonder happen, we can live in anticipation. So I invite you to pause for a while to reflect on the moments of awe and wonder in your own life and to note the ways those moments have changed you forever. May God bless you abundantly!

◆ **Mary Alice O'Connor**
Mt. Diablo Peace & Justice Center

As peacemakers it is vital to pay attention to what is being born, not to the beast that is dying. Two things come to mind as disturbers of the peace. One is in our larger world and one is personal. In a world full of suffering, violence, and injustice how easy it is to get caught in a gloomy view of our world. We can get caught up in conversations with friends that start with "Did you hear..." or "Isn't it awful?" and then recount some bad news that leads our friends to tell more tales – and the discussion goes from bad to worse to worst. Soon we are in a downward spiral of paralyzing negativity where no action we take can make a difference large enough to overcome the ultimate worst-case scenarios we have created. By focusing our thoughts and words destructively and letting them reproduce we have what looks to be insurmountable difficulty.

On a personal level the same thing can happen when we make mistakes. Although we may have learned the simple way through mistakes asking forgiveness once we figure out we have harmed another our own self-judgment mechanism may continue to aggravate us because we have not used self-approval and kindness to ourselves. So our minds run the videos of us making the mistake, and that re-run may have a voice-over of self-judgment or criticism. We can descend into a very similar negative spiral that is personalized from "Isn't it awful" to "Aren't I awful?" or "I'm not good enough."

Wait! In either case take a breath. Wake up. Come back to your body. In this moment are you all right? What new thought can you think about the situation that sheds light or lends aid? What can you do to alleviate your suffering or that in the world? That is what is being born. We can birth a thought that takes us to a new place or write a letter to the editor that describes our

frustration and points to what needs to happen. That is where we can be awake and creative rather than re-running garbage. In information technology we used to say, “garbage in, garbage out” as far as data went. So what data are you giving yourself to stew on? Are you making something savory or something that gets a “Yuck!” rating? Focusing on what takes our energy into a past that no longer exists, i.e., the dying beast. Read some inspiration. Feel the new wind that is softly blowing on your cheek. Sense the changes for goodness, kindness and unity that are in today’s air. As peacemakers it is vital to pay attention to what is being born, not to the beast that is dying.

◆Baika Ensho

Mt. Diablo Zen Group, Pleasant Hill

Sometimes we have a big problem and we try to get rid of it, but our problems are good to have. They are our teachers. I was talking about my big problem one time at a Monday morning talk and some of you came up to me afterwards to say, “I’m so sorry for your big problem.” That was very kind, but actually I don’t mind my problem. Sometimes it feels uncomfortable, but I try to make it my friend. When we pretend to ourselves we have no problem, this is putting a problem on top of our problem. When we try to escape our problem in this way, we will never understand it. If we become curious about it, then we begin to understand.

You might forget you have this problem for awhile and then someday, you remember it and realize you no longer cling to it like you used to, but actually, some form of your particular problem will most likely always be with you. When we try to take our problem out to the garbage bin and throw it away, it doesn’t go away. It shows up somewhere else and creates more problems and sometimes problems for other people. It is like trying to get rid of our nuclear waste, by drilling a hole through a beautiful mountain and storing it there. We might even consider sending it to outer space on a rocket ship. This is not taking care of the problem. This is why it is necessary to completely dissolve our problem, examining it, again and again, pulling it up with the root.

Sometimes Zen practice will not help you. Maybe you will try talk therapy, maybe a vision quest, more exercise, rest or a better diet. This may work for a while, but ultimately, this is blowing up a balloon of hope in your mind. You may skip from one cure to another and eventually POW! You run out of ideas and have to face yourself. This is when truly practicing with your problem begins.

You may think you see someone else who has a problem and you may want to tell them about it. That’s okay, we

don’t have to tell people about their problem because it is theirs. Their problem will teach them. We can’t decide for another when to wake up to their problem or where they should be in their life process and chances are what you see in another person is more likely about you than about them. So it’s best to leave other people’s problems to them and let their problem help them. This may take a very long time, so we are patient with ourselves and our friends and help them. Not with their problem, but because they have a problem, just like we do.

Some people come to practice in order to be a good person and to live a good life. This is what I was wanting when I came to practice. In working with our problem, we can fall into thinking this is good, that is bad. When we fall into thinking good and bad we can become rigid and anticipatory, attaching to some result. Actually, it’s never that somebody is just good or somebody is just bad. These opposites are always together. It’s the fluidity of good and bad that makes us human. Sometimes we are having such difficulty, such a painful time. We think and feel we’re not connected, not practicing, but actually we’re always connected, practicing, a part of, reflected in the great wisdom mirror, whether we feel, or think we are or not. There’s joy and there’s suffering, there’s easy times and difficult times. This lasts forever.

◆The Rev. Jan Rudzewicz

St. Agnes Catholic Church, Concord

Sometimes we look at the nature around us and try to find logical arguments and hints of resurrection. We point to caterpillars that have become butterflies with the gift of beauty and flight. We look at the dry branches of the old oak tree and see the green new leaves coming out of them. Or we see dark, bleak and brown soil and then we notice green shoots that soon become daffodils. And somehow we think these are arguments for the resurrection, signs that life comes from unexpected, even dead looking places.

But with so much evidence of death these days; with so many killed from car bombs in Iraq or Afghanistan; with unending murder on the streets; with more frequent funerals of our loved ones and friends - caterpillars becoming butterflies do not offer enough comfort and assurance in our grief.

One of our parishioners told me recently at the funeral of his wife, “Father, she was my entire life and she is not here anymore. What shall I do without her?” In a situation like this more is needed to get through that kind of grief. We need more to keep us from faltering, and, thankfully, we have more.

When we continue to read today’s gospel a little bit further, we learn that Mary met the risen Lord and came to believe

what we believe – that the dark shadow of death has been driven out by the light of the risen Lord. Once given the gift of light, she will proclaim the good news to the frightened apostles waiting in the upper room, “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:11-18)

So Peter and the other disciples went out and came to the tomb. Who was the other disciple? The evangelist says “the one whom Jesus loved.” Some think it was John himself. The beloved disciple looked into the tomb and “saw and believed”. The love this disciple had known had opened his eyes, had given him sight.

Our faith tells us that we can call ourselves “the disciple Jesus loved.” The experience of that love may open our eyes, too. This love is not based on merit or achievements or our brilliant insights. Rather, as it is with love, it is given as a gift. We, as beloved, now can confront death in its many guises.

Love invites us to take a close look at what is before us. We don’t look back over our shoulder at who we were and what we did in the past. The love we have received is a basis for a new way to live. We can begin – or start again – to act like loved ones. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we trust we will not fall out of the embrace of God’s love and so we can take chances on loving others we might not ordinarily take.

We return from the empty tomb asking ourselves, how can we live the life of a beloved disciple? How can we love better? Especially, how can we show love to those who don’t have the signs our culture loves – such as youth, looks, wealth and power?

Each of us makes the trip to the empty tomb, peers into the tomb and into our lives. Is there someone we have not forgiven? Have we hesitated to get involved in serving others? What signs of death do we see that we must turn away from or confront? In the light of what we “see,” what new life do we experience, and with whom should we share in word and act?

◆ Jaleh Kilpatrick Walnut Creek Baha’is

I just received a letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States regarding the situation of the students in Iran.

They say in a 1980 message to the Iranian Bahá’ís throughout the world, describing the plight of the Iranian

Bahá’í community, the Universal House of Justice wrote of the beleaguered friends of that country, “Behold the courage, firmness, detachment, unity, co-operation, zeal and enthusiasm with which these loyal believers daily face their tests and prove and demonstrate to the world, with radiant and shining faces, their purity, their heritage, their quality, and their virtue. With the utmost meekness, truthfulness, wisdom, and courage they meet the challenges presented to them...” The situation in Iran today is no less critical for the Bahá’ís there than it was twenty-eight years ago, nor is the courage and steadfastness of our dear brothers and sisters in the Cradle of Faith any less valiant.

The Universal House of Justice noted more recently that “the peril surrounding the believers [in Iran] has mounted to a scale not witnessed since the early 1980s. Recent reports indicate that Bahá’í children in primary and secondary grades in Iran are being subjected to cruel and harsh treatment as part of a government-sponsored campaign against the Bahá’í community. Bahá’í pupils are secretly monitored and reported upon by school officials, are being vilified by their teachers and school administrators, and are forced to listen to vile and immoral behavior of their co-religionists. Students are often expelled when they identify themselves as Bahá’ís, when they try to defend the Faith against utterly unfounded accusations, or when they respectfully attempt to correct gross misrepresentations of the Faith’s history in the textbooks they must study. You can check out this website to get more information on the issue. <http://iran.bahai.us/iranian-bahai-school-children>.

Baha’is outside Iran have been asked to raise awareness of the maltreatment of Baha’i students in Iran. There is a congressional resolution in the House of Representatives (H. Res. 1008), condemning the persecution of Baha’is in Iran. It condemns the Iranian government for its state-sponsored persecution of the Baha’is in its country.

I would like to ask you and the other Council members to please contact California Senators and Congresspersons, and encourage them to support this resolution.

CORRECTION

We apologize for having incorrectly identified David Zarri as a clergyperson at St. Agnes Catholic Church in Concord in the last issue of *Ministering Together*. He is a layperson of that congregation.

■ Faith and Mental Illness

Rabbi Raphael W. Asher, Congregation B'nai Tikvah

Congregations and community play a critical role in bolstering the mental health of its members. All of us need a place where we can relax and let down our guard, and particularly those with clinical needs and chemical vulnerabilities need a 'sanctuary' for unconditional acceptance.

Historically, however, faith communities have been less than accepting, even suspicious of mental illness as a spiritual defect. Medieval fears branded the mentally ill as possessed, and some of those fears still seep into the modern consciousness, perpetuating the isolation of patients and their families. Before congregations can be part of the solution, we must de-stigmatize mental illness so we are not part of a centuries-old problem.

Science and medicine have served us well to no longer fear physical illness as a scourge from God. We have progressed beyond the Deuteronomist's image of God casting physical afflictions as punishment; and although many faiths imagine God as a Healer, we no longer equate our physical health with God's favor. In a world where we acknowledge bacteria, germs, and cancers as random and genetic we can no longer presume illness as some moral or spiritual deficiency. And now that we are learning more and more about mental illness as chemically and genetically based, we must re-structure our judgment-responses to those as well.

Faith is not the cure-all that shamans once promised. However, faith is a valuable tool in coping with all afflictions – physical, mental, and spiritual. The faith community also has a valuable role to play. Whereas isolation can be important in containing plagues, isolation has the opposite impact on the recovery and management of mental illness, forcing it to harmful extremes.

Let our congregations today free themselves from judgment and be the safety net that is so sorely lacking in the secular and fraying social fabric. To that end let me suggest the following actions to the members and friends of the Interfaith Council:

- To support NAMI (the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill) in their efforts to support the caregivers of those who suffer from mental illness.
- To advocate for Veterans' Affairs and VA Hospitals to address the traumas of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
- To support Pleasant Hill's Crestwood Healing Center as a model of a residential treatment facility that doesn't isolate but builds bridges to the community.
- To ensure that our Regional Medical Center has qualified chaplains to provide counsel in its psychiatric unit.

And let me just acknowledge the lifelong work of our good friend, Rev. Chet Watson, retired minister at St. Michael's Episcopal in Concord. Chet has served as Regional President of NAMI, volunteered countless hours at the county's medical center, and been a tireless model for me and so many other clergy and laity to pull our heads out of the sand and acknowledge the needs of the mentally ill and the deficiencies in the mental health system.

■ The Rev. Brent Adams, Chaplain

Practice Hospitality—A Call to Faith Communities on Behalf those who experience Mental Illness

A man diagnosed with a serious mental illness, claimed his recovery is best supported when he takes the "I" out of illness and adds "We" for wellness. This statement is most relevant; as this man is your neighbor, he is my neighbor; this man is our neighbor. On behalf of our neighbors, I commend our faith communities practice hospitality, anew.

"Welcome!" is the age-old, spirited response when meeting 'the Other.' Mental illnesses are often the 'unwelcomed' companion in many a life's journey. "Strangers" come to us from within as well as from without (for example, we can be taken aback when we meet up with our fears, our longings, our questions, etc.) Our faith communities' welcoming the stranger makes room by lessening shame, ignorance and stigma. How might your congregational life provide opportunity and permission to name this reality—one in four adults experience a mental health disorder in a given year?

At best, hospitality also recognizes the fluid role between guest and host. Persons who experience mental illness bring with them teachings, from which anyone with ears and hearts open might benefit. So at once, we may find ourselves offering hospitality and discover, too, we are guest to the sacred stories of this person—your neighbor, co-worker, parishioner, friend, sibling, parent or partner—in their experience of a mental health disorder. What opportunities can faith communities provide, which demonstrate sensitivity in services provided and communicate an openness to learn from each other.

To practice hospitality is to participate in story-telling. By this I mean to say, when we are invited to tell our life stories within hospitable spaces, we enjoy a recreational process of shaping meaningful and life-giving stories. Persons and families who experience mental illness desperately need hospitable spaces (refuge) where all are welcomed with dignity and respect for how their knowing makes us all a more 'wholly' people.

Social Justice Alliance Of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County

SOJA meets Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 7:00 pm in the Interfaith Council Office.
All Are Welcome

CNWS Interfaith Task Force. Delores Loague, **Concord United Methodist Church**, set up a meeting with **Concord Mayor Bill Shinn** in early April to advocate for housing for the homeless as part of the Concord Naval Weapons Station Re-Use Plan. Mayor Shinn invited Re-Use Director, **Michael Wright**, to field questions and opinions voiced by five Task Force members—**Ed Shockley** and **Dan Hardie**, **St. Bonaventure Catholic Church**; **Susan Jaffee**, **Jewish Federation**; **Kathie Pomgrace**, **Cal State East Bay**; and **Delores Loague**.

A petition, which was circulated in congregations of the region near the closed base, will be presented to the Concord City Council at a meeting in May.

Winter Nights Shelter. April 28 was Closing Day for this fourth session of our Shelter. For six and a half months a total of 71 homeless individuals were hosted by 33 host congregations as the children went to school and the adults went to work or searched for jobs and applied for benefits with public agencies. As our families depart for permanent housing and shelters leading to transitional housing, we know that for the time they spent with us they were able to concen-

trate on what was necessary to meet their needs and move forward.

Hosting congregations for March and April included **St. Perpetua Catholic**, **St. Stephen's Episcopal**, **Good Shepherd Lutheran**, **Concord United Methodist**, **Orinda Community Church**, and **First Baptist**. Winter Nights couldn't exist without them.

We are proud to have added new programs this year--the Family To Family program, enhanced healthcare and parenting training, an effective tutoring program customized for each of our school children supervised by our experienced education specialist, and career and budget counselors.

We like the way our shelter brings people together and our guests become like a family, and the partnering congregations become a big interfaith family! Thank you again to all who helped to bring hope into the lives of our guest families and to the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa for sponsoring Winter Nights.

Gwen Watson, Winter Nights Shelter Director



**BOOK REVIEW – *The Faith Club: a Muslim, Christian, Jew—
Three Women Search for Understanding***

(Free Press: 2007 paperback, 2006 hardcover)

Many of us in the interfaith community and elsewhere have a deep longing for peace and reconciliation. We are aware how difficult living in relationship with one another with our differences can be. **The Faith Club...** offers a superb entrée to interfaith engagement and understanding.

Three women -- Jewish, Muslim, and Christian -- all mothers in their 30s-40s living in New York, come together soon after the 9/11 terrorism to create a children's book drawing on shared stories of their three traditions. (Interestingly, they haven't yet published that book.) Ranya, Suzanne and Priscilla challenge one another as they examine their own faiths and gain insight into the lived faith of their sisters. They engage with honesty, respect and curiosity. Each experiences deepening of personal faith, enriched relationship with her own faith community, and expansion of compassion for others.

The Faith Club is a valuable book for those wondering how to start such conversations. Useful information on starting a faith club is included. The book demonstrates that interfaith dialogue is not only about sharing ideas; it's at least as much about building relationships. The narrative is a light-filled testimony to the trio's perseverance and humor midst "aha!" moments and revelations, disagreements and alienation. Thus, it may also be a valuable book for folks already laboring in the interfaith vineyard who could use some easy-read, satisfying, revitalizing support.

Anyone who reads **The Faith Club** will be better able to walk in the shoes of others, whether in interfaith relationships or other challenges of diversity in this 21st century. Enjoy!

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Interfaithcouncilofccc.net

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Thank You Corner

Special thanks to our great group of newsletter volunteers who collated, folded, sealed and labeled our last newsletter. They were: Sandra Ellingson, Madeline Gomes, Mary Hogan, Tim Michelson, Leslie Russing, Frances Sedar, Dick Shumaker, Mayra Sanchez, Dorothy Vance and Dolores White. Seven of these folks were from Shell Ridge Community Church. Is **your** congregation represented on our newsletter team? If not, call Lenita at (925) 672-1053.

Please Pray For

Good Shepherd Lutheran, Concord
Congregation Beth Chaim, San Ramon
Walnut Creek United Methodist Church
Baha'i of Pittsburg
Executive Committee of the Interfaith Council
Families suffering from foreclosure
Military returning with post-traumatic stress disorder
Students and Teachers adversely affected by state budget cuts

Transitions

Welcome to **the Rev. Peter Champion**, who has come to St. John's Episcopal Parish in Clayton. He most recently served as interim priest at St. Alban's Parish in Brentwood.

Welcome also to **the Revs. David and Leslie Takahashi Morris**, who have been called to serve Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church in Walnut Creek. They come from Charlottesville, Virginia. They write, "As co-ministers, our relationship is a creative exchange of imagination, vision, ideas, and efforts; each of us benefits from the opportunity to engage with the other in an ongoing process of learning and growth in our shared ministry."