The Interview
With Janet Reilly

Keeping the Faith

The season of hope, charity, goodwill and blessings is upon us—and in that spirit, I invited four remarkable women leaders in San Francisco’s religious community over to my home for coffee and cookies.

And when I say remarkable, I mean remarkable.

Reverend Dr. Ellen Clark-King of Grace Cathedral, Reverend Elizabeth Ekdale of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, Rabbi Beth Singer of Congregation Emanu-El and Maha Elgenaidi, executive director of Islamic Networks Group, a nonprofit countering bigotry through education and interfaith engagement, not only keep hope alive in trying times, but they inspire others to do the same. For these spiritual leaders, it’s all in a day’s work. For those to whom they minister and teach, it’s, well, a godsend.

Sitting around my dining room table recently, our conversation flowed easily, touching upon faith, feminism and the never-ending work of creating a just society in the face of deep division. That transpired that afternoon, around that table, left me hopeful, encouraged and joyful for the future—for our city and our world.

Meet these women of wisdom and light.

How does your religion energize your work in social justice?

Ekdale: It feeds it. Even on the most discouraging of days, you have to take the long view because of all the setbacks and disappointments along the way.

Elgenaidi: My religion is foundational to what I do, which is about countering all forms of bigotry including Islamophobia, which Muslims are having to deal with today. What’s interesting about my experience in reading the Koran and all of the secondary sources [on Islam] was that it inspired two actions which embody my work: one was to go out and teach about Islam and Muslims because Americans have a right to know the truth about this religion. We’re making decisions in both domestic and foreign policies based on stereotypes that are simply not true. And the second inspiration was to do this work by giving voice to American Muslims themselves who should be doing the teaching, alongside Americans of other faiths. And that’s what we do at ING.

Mahg, arguably, your organization is more relevant now than it was 25 years ago when it was founded.

Elgenaidi: Isn’t that something? I thought after 9/11 it couldn’t get worse, and if I did, it had to outdo 9/11 in terror. This administration [in Washington] is problematic for a lot of reasons, but especially for Muslims. There have been calls for surveillance of our mosques, profiling, Muslim bans and Muslim registry. We need to push back against these ideas with lots more education and engagement and all the love we have to counter this misguided and extreme hate. And we need to do it at the grassroots level.

Ekdale: Well, then, it’s our call to stand up with our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Elgenaidi: Christians and Jews are already. Jews in particular have been on the forefront because they get it.

Singer: We know that hatred against your own people and hatred against another people are not different. The Torah’s primary teaching is that each one of us is created in the divine image, and we carry a spark of the divine in us. So if I’m out there calling someone names, I’m out there calling names to God or to a creation of God.

Clark-King: One of the things I love is the fact that [Grace] Cathedral is working with Jewish Family and Community Services to bring in Islamic refugees, and that’s all three religions working together. I agree with Rabbi Beth. It’s this sense for me of each individual holding something of the image of God. So no life is dispensable or worthless, and we need to work for the good of all those lives.

Its unique and wonderful, I’m sitting here with four religious leaders who are women. Surely, you have faced challenges along...
the way, but are there advantages to being women in your respective positions?

Singer: I think in some ways it is really funny. In a New York Times op-ed, a female stand-up comedian talked about how rare that is, and what a man’s world it is. And she said when she goes to clubs to perform, she feels all the women in the room go, “Ahh. It was tiring to have all those men in the room.” I really think we needed to have women clergy, women’s leadership, and it is a little bit of a breath of fresh air after so much male leadership.

Clark-King: I like the breath of fresh air. I think when you’re the first woman minister they’ve experienced, they’re open to looking at ministry in a slightly different way, because they’re seeing it in a slightly different package.

Ekdale: They look to us for different perspective, different insights. I think our perspective can be valued. It’s certainly been devalued in some ways, but I think we have perspective on the world that men don’t.

Eldenai: Women in religion also are good administrators and managers, skills that aided me tremendously to start and operate a nonprofit organization. Women also recognize different needs in the community that men may not—such as the needs for family support services, youth development, elder care and so forth. For any community’s growth, it’s essential that women are in positions of authority and power equal to that of men.

Eiddle: Women in religious leadership have had a profound impact on men and how men lead, and I’m starting to see that amongst our younger colleagues in a lot of different ways: that they’re more likely to talk about personal experience; to really let their empathetic side be seen; to want to have a work-life balance, something that I think a whole generation of leadership before us didn’t do because they had a wife at home taking care of everything.

Rabbi Beth, since coming to Congregation Emanu-El, you’ve put a special emphasis on getting your congregants more involved in the work of social justice, which of course is a tenet of Judaism—but really focusing on the homelessness, poverty and injustice as we see it in our world. Can you talk about that?

Singer: I want us to be out there making a difference in the world. At this particular moment we are seeking that, but they don’t know how. They’re very busy in their own life. They think getting their child into the best college is the thing that has to be done. And we don’t want to get in the way of that, but I think everyone in our congregation has the capacity to do more. So we find lots of different ways that we work on refugees and homelessness. We started a black/Jewish unity group, because African Americans in our city hardly exist. And in our day-to-day life, we don’t see anyone who is related to African Americans. So we have this monthly gathering of our congregants and local African American leaders, church leaders, just common people. And it’s been very powerful.

Ellen, talk about your role as Grace Cathedral’s executive pastor and canon for social justice.

Clark-King: The executive pastor bit tells you that I look after the Cathedral congregation, so I’m the one to make sure that we are a loving, open, welcoming community on Nob Hill in Grace Cathedral. And the social justice means that we aren’t a community who are concerned primarily or just with what goes on inside those walls, but are looking out to the world and seeing where we can make real significant change that needs to happen. So both, where you can to feed the hungry, and also when the worst our preschool that brings in kids from families without resources.

Eiddle: You’ve been with St. Mark’s for nearly two decades. How has your work changed over that period?

Ekdale: We can tackle challenges in our community, or in our lives, that I probably couldn’t in my first few years there. I think the gift of serving in San Francisco really is the interfaith relationships that we have. This is what I love about our city and serving here. ... So for example, in a couple of weeks, St. Mark’s hosts the San Francisco Interfaith Council homeless shelter. We’ll have 70 men staying overnight at St. Mark’s, and they’re served breakfast and dinner—well, for a week, the dinners will be provided by the congregants at Temple Emanu-El. I love those kinds of opportunities and being able to collaborate. And the longer you’re here, the more I see the importance of our relationships with each other. We can’t operate by ourselves.

Eille: What, what is it like to be a Muslim in America today?

Eldenai: I don’t worry about myself, I worry about my community. My biggest struggle really is growing what I’ve started in my workcountering bigotry, expanding it all across the country in local neighborhoods, and making the work of education and interfaith engagement an institution. ... Muslims need to go out of their mosques and homes and talk to their neighbors. Talk to their local school districts, their local police departments, civic organizations, reach out and build relationships. Many studies have been done about the impact of education and engagement. All you need is a 10-minute encounter with someone to change their perceptions of you for the rest of their lives.

Singer: What worries you the most, whether it’s your own worry or worries you are hearing from your congregants or others involved?

Clark-King: I think for me, it’s the grinding inequality. You see it in San Francisco. You see it, on a larger scale, internationally as well. And the way so many people are just struggling to survive and not being given the opportunity to live because everything’s so unequally divided. And the hostility and the tension that brings into the world.

Ekdale: The stresses on families. It’s so high. I know for all of our institutions, we lose families all the time.

Singer: All the time. ... Or if you want to hire somebody, you can’t bring someone from outside. We want to get the best director of education for our school. We could look all across the country. They just probably couldn’t live here.

There also does seem to be this relationship between climate change and these dramatic events that are happening, and even understanding what is imaginative change in the fires in the North Bay. My worry is that there’s much more of it to come, and it’s going to come much closer to home. Our religious institutions have to be prepared to be homes, to be spiritual centers, and to respond, and to open up daycare centers, and all kinds of things that we’ll need to do when some disaster inevitably strikes right here.

Eldenai: The metaphor that I have for exactly what you’re describing is that these houses of worship have to become beacons of light. Noah’s ark so to speak. People are going to run to them when things become really difficult. My greatest fear is that things are becoming unhinged in Washington, D.C., where the White House, Departments of Justice and Education, Congress have all become dysfunctional. They can’t even get anything done and are demonstrating to the public the only chaos and lack of leadership. We no longer have a sense of direction for which we are heading as a nation. So who’s left to lead? Perhaps, it’s local government and local civic and religious institutions.

In a world that is filled with difficulty and uncertainty, from where do you derive your hope?

Ekdale: I draw on my faith, and that God is in the midst of this brokenness, and that for us as Christians, we follow the way of Jesus, of compassion and peace. That gives me hope.

Singer: Millennials are so maimed, but so many of them really are going to take on these issues, and they have these remarkable tech backgrounds and are computer-savvy. I think that they’re part of our hope as well.

Eille: What do you hope from ordinary people? It is astonishing how many people have become politically and civically active since the last presidential election. When the first Muslim ban came out, I would have never imagined the number of people going out and protesting at airports across the country, not just in places where Muslims were engaged and had good partnerships but everywhere. It was an amazing sight to see. ... I get my hope also from my faith in God. I’m an optimist like all religious people are, and I’m not worried. This is God’s world and He’ll take care of it. Let’s just hope that we’re in the right boat for the ride.

Clark-King: When you think of 50 years ago, the chances that Jews, Christians and Muslims would sit down like this at the table was so much less than it is now. And the fact that women are in leadership.

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