



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. What 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.

Q You are all such remarkable and accomplished women and surely would have risen to the top of any profession you chose. What drew you to this work?

Rabbi Beth Singer: At my Bat Mitzvah, when I was 13 years old, as the service was ending I whispered to my dad—because back then, only your dad was allowed to sit up on the bema, the stage with you—and I said, “Oh, I can’t believe my Bat Mitzvah’s over,” and he said, “Oh, maybe someday you’ll become a rabbi, and then you can do this all the time.”

And right at that moment, I was like, “I could become a rabbi.” And the funny thing is that the first woman [in my grandparents’ congregation] had just been ordained the year before. And I wrote her this exuberant letter after my Bat Mitzvah. “I decided I want to be a rabbi. You’re my role model.” And she wrote back, “Well give yourself a little time. You may rethink that.” She must have been having a bad day. I became a rabbi anyway. I’m just so happy for this privilege.

Maha Elgenaidi: I’m here because I was inspired and spiritually called to do this work. I had a religious experience about 25 years ago where I read the Koran for the first time in my life at the age of 30. I grew up in a secular home. My dad was a psychiatrist and my family didn’t really practice religion. While we had a strong Arab-Egyptian identity, we did not at all have a religious one. ... Growing up on the East Coast, I had Jewish and Catholic friends ... and held many of the same stereotypes that most Americans have about Muslims and Islam today around misogyny and intolerance toward other religions.

I read the Koran for the first time, mainly out of interest because I had read parts of the Torah and the Gospels at the time. This was all happening around the first Persian Gulf War, when Islam was in the news a lot. At the time I was living here in San Francisco in the Marina district. And I just remember telling my friends, “I’m starting to read this book, and it’s having a tremendous impact

on me that is both difficult to explain but also important for me to further explore.” This prompted my move to the South Bay, which is where I started ING a year later.

Reverend Elizabeth Ekdale: I can relate to what you said, because I, too, feel called in our Christian understanding. My family was a Christian family. My parents were in the medical field. I grew up in Menlo Park, and my dad was a pediatrician. And I saw someone who faithfully—day in, day out—loved God by the way he served the children he cared for, some of them very, very poor. And that just profoundly shaped me. I saw my parents just serving our neighbors, living it out in their work. My mom was a hospice nurse. So I really did think intentionally, How does God want to use my gifts? Now, I never thought I’d be a pastor, ever. I wanted to go to medical school.

But at my home congregation in Palo Alto, they called one of the first women clergy, and for the very first time, I saw a woman in the pulpit. It was never an option. None of the male pastors said, “Well that could be you. You could do this.” But when I saw her, I thought, Well, maybe that’s how God wants me to use my gifts, and then she mentored me.

Reverend Dr. Ellen Clark-King: I guess faith and church is pretty much the air I breathed from childhood on. My grandfather and great grandfather were both vicars in the Church of England. As I began questioning and claiming my own faith and life, I just fell in love with this God who loves the world so much and wants to heal the world, and work through us to make this happen. ... It can be so frustrating, but it’s just the most wonderful, wonderful thing to have that sense of call, and the people it brings you into contact with.

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.

Maha, 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 it 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 in us, so if 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.

It’s unique and wonderful, I’m sitting here with four religious leaders who are women. Surely, you have faced challenges along

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—Rabbi Beth Singer

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Clockwise from top left: Rabbi Beth Singer of Congregation Emanu-El, Reverend Elizabeth Ekdale of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, Reverend Dr. Ellen Clark-King of Grace Cathedral, and Maha Elgenaidi, executive director of Islamic Networks Group.

SPENCER BROWN

the way, but are there advantages to being women in your respective positions?

Singer: Yes, in some ways. It's 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." People really are delighted 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 situations, too. But I think we have perspective on the world that men don't.

Elgenaidi: Women are also great administrators and managers, skills that helped 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.

Singer: 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 empathic 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. A lot of congregants want to do 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 always sit around the table talking 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, trying where we can to feed the hungry, and also to change the world. Our preschool that brings in kids from families without resources.

Elizabeth, 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 is the importance of our relationships with each other. We can't operate by ourselves.

Maha, what is it like to be a Muslim in America today?

Elgenaidi: I don't worry about myself; I worry about my community. My biggest struggle really is growing what I've started in my work countering 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.

What worries you the most, whether it's your own worry or worries you are hearing from your congregants or constituents?

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

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—*Reverend Elizabeth Ekdale of St. Mark's Lutheran Church*

“Houses of worship have to become beacons of light.”

—*Maha Elgenaidi, founder of Islamic Networks Group*

“No life is dispensable or worthless”

—*Reverend Dr. Ellen Clark-King of Grace Cathedral*

THE LIGHTNING ROUND

If I had a magic wand, I would ...

Reverend Dr. Ellen Clark-King: Cure climate change.

Rabbi Beth Singer: Remove assault and automatic weapons from the hands of our citizens.

Reverend Elizabeth Ekdale: Eliminate hunger.

Maha Elgenaidi: Ensure that the Islamic Networks Groups survives me, the founder, because I want to support our affiliates, which are run by women.

between climate change and these dramatic events that are happening, and even understanding the role of climate 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 to do all the things that we'll need to do when some disaster inevitably strikes right here.

Elgenaidi: 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 arks 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 get anything done and are demonstrating to the public only chaos and lack of leadership. We no longer have a sense of direction for where 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 maligned, 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 my hope as well.

Elgenaidi: I derive 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 all across the country, not just in places where Muslims were engaged and had 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. **NHG**