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.

With Janet Reilly

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 bima, 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 heartwarming letter after my Bat Mitzvah: “I decided I want to be a rabbi. That’s my role model.” And she wrote back, “Well, grow yourself a little more. You may rethink that.” She must have been having a bad day. I became a rabbi anyway. I’m just so happy to have 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, and it’s having a tremendous impact on me in that it’s both difficult to explain but also important for me to further explore. “This prompted my move to the Bay Area, which is where I started my work.”

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 both in the medical field. I grew up in Menlo Park, and my dad was a pediatrician. And I saw someone who was suffering—day in, day out—lived 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, bringing it out in their work.

My mom was a hospice nurse. So I really did think intentionally, “How does God want me to use my gifts?” Now, I never thought I’d be a rabbi. She was a doctor, and I wanted to go to medical school.

But at my home congregation in Palo Alto, they called me 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.”

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 it did, it had to evolve 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 against 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.

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 the same for me of each individual holding something of the image of God. So no life is disposable or worthless, and we need to work for the good of all these lives.

It’s unique and wonderful, I’m sitting here with four religious leaders who are wom... surely, you have faced challenges along...
Ellen, talk about your role as Grace Cathedral’s executive pastor and canon for social justice.

Ellen: When you’re the first woman minister they’ve experienced, they’re open to looking at ministry in a slightly different way. In some cases they’re seeing it in a slightly different package.

Ekdale: They look to us for different perspective, different ideas. It’s that think that can be valued. It’s certainly been devolved in situations, too. But I think we have perspective on the world that men don’t.

Reverend Elizabeth Ekdale of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church: “We have a perspective on the world that men don’t.”

Women also have a perspective on the world that men don’t. 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 I inherited from my parents. And the generation of leadership before us didn’t do that because they had a wife at home taking care of everything.

Rabbi Beth Singer, 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 is of course 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 they have to do. 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...