



## COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

### **Interfaith Center at the Presidio (ICP)**

**FAITHS AND TRADITIONS REPRESENTED IN CC:** Christian, Hindu, Brahma Kumari, Pagan, Wiccan, Indigenous, Unitarian Universalist, Sikh, Baha’I, Jewish, Muslim

**LOCATION OF CC:** San Francisco, California, USA

**KEY AREAS OF FOCUS:** Interfaith Dialogue, Networking, War Veterans

The Interfaith Center at the Presidio (ICP), located in the San Francisco Bay Area, is located in a chapel that was originally built by the U.S. military as an interfaith space -- one of very few in the world, other than U.S. military chapels. This is a sacred space in this incredibly geographically, culturally and religiously diverse community. ICP also provides programming and communications support to interfaith groups throughout the region.

#### **QUESTIONS:**

**1. What is the current religious/cultural/social context in the area where your CC is working?**

The San Francisco Bay Area is really a microcosm of the world. It is highly diverse culturally, geographically and religiously, encompassing several different counties and numerous communities (including a myriad of migrant communities), each of which has its own unique culture.

**2. Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed in the area where your CC works?**

Because of the geographic and cultural diversity of our region, there is a real need for a place that can bring people together from across different communities and cultures, including those in our community who are spiritual but not religious. We also work to build cooperation and collaboration between interfaith councils in the area, including Marin Interfaith Council, Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County, Silicon Valley

Interreligious Council and San Francisco Interfaith Council; all of which are also Cooperation Circles. We are also a resource for other groups who want/need interfaith guidance.



**3. Please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is carrying out this year?**

In the coming year (2015), we are planning to have the following events:

- Meet Your Presidio Neighbors -- This reception will be a place for people who live and work in the Presidio to meet each other, regardless of religious or cultural background.
- Events -- Every year we host various functions in our interfaith chapel, including interfaith services for Veterans Day and Memorial Day and the Girl Scouts Awards Ceremony.
- Veterans Workshop -- We hold a yearly training for religious leaders on how to help meet the spiritual and moral needs of veterans. These are typically conducted around the Bay Area in conjunction with the local interfaith council.
- Interfaith Council Leaders Gathering -- The Bay Area is home to many interfaith councils; we host the leaders of these councils approximately once a quarter.
- Speakers Series -- We are currently developing programming for a speakers series for 2015. The theme will likely be "Religion 101."

- Peace in the Park -- We will participate in the annual Peace in the Park festival in the Presidio, presented by the Brahma Kumaris
- Parliament of the World's Religions -- We will be attending the Parliament in Salt Lake City in October and hope to present several workshops. We have submitted four proposals.
- Collaborations -- In conjunction with the San Francisco Girls Chorus, there will be an interfaith panel focused on the devastating effects of war on children. And with the San Francisco Interfaith Council and Interfaith Power and Light, we will convene an interfaith panel to discuss the work of the Abrahamic religions in conjunction with an author presentation and book-signing of *Granada: A Pomegranate in the Hand of God*.

#### **4. Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?**

As the Bay Area really is a microcosm of the world, we are working to build bridges among nearly all religions - and none - Christians, Hindus, Brahma Kumaris, Pagans, Wiccans, Indigenous, Unitarian Universalists, Sikhs, Baha'is, Jews, and Muslims -- and cultures -- including Middle Easterners, Indians and Pakistanis. All are welcome to the table.

#### **5. Please explain the method or strategy that your CC uses to bring together people of different cultures and faiths that would otherwise not interact or cooperate with each other.**

Our middle name is "Center" and as such, we provide resources, convene meetings, and make connections. Many people bring us opportunities for peace and dialogue that the local councils may not be able to deal with.



An example is the San Francisco Girls Chorus, where we have contacted interfaith leaders to serve on a panel to discuss the effects of war on children. I would venture to guess that regular attendees of the Chorus have not heard from these leaders.

We also can provide a forum for authors of relevant books and articles. As an example, our dear friend, Charles Gibbs, has interviewed several such authors on the Chapel stage. We are very fortunate to be located in the Presidio Chapel, a historic building in the Presidio National Park and protect is as a welcoming, safe and sacred space for all.

ICP is like a “mini URI” in the Bay Area. We work alongside the area interfaith councils and other faith groups who, on their own, are each very unique. We seek to create a space for all of these groups to gather and feel comfortable. For example, on the International Day of Peace we hosted a concert that was open to all Bay Area communities. This concert welcomed people from all different communities in the area and had a very special, unifying feeling. We also regularly attend events hosted by other groups and really seek to expand relationships across our region by introducing people to each other.

We also serve our area by providing online communications support. We publish a monthly newsletter that includes a calendar for all area interfaith events; we also have resources on our website that are available to everyone.

**6. Given the current context you described, what does your CC hope to achieve (goals)?**

In the coming year(s), we want to increase our online presence. We want to build on our widely-read monthly newsletter and Bay Area calendar by adding additional resources to our website. We want to increase our physical presence in the Bay Area, and participate in global events more.

**7. How do you see your CC’s work improving cooperation among people of different traditions?**

That’s what the Center has been doing for the past 20 years and continues to do so by reaching out to individuals and creating one-on-one relationships. We will also be doing this on a larger scale with events such as the Meet Your Presidio Neighbors reception where we will encourage people from different walks of life to meet. Our goals (above) speak to improving cooperation.

We are a resource for people who are thinking of forming new interfaith groups. For example, on the Peninsula, particularly San Mateo, a nascent group has reached out

asking for help in establishing themselves as a new non-profit, and ICP is providing support and expertise.

**8. How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflict? (NOTE: This question is relevant only in areas with violence/open conflict.)**

N/A

**9. What are some observations or signs you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?**

I think a bigger phenomenon is that whenever there is a need to gather the community together, usually when something tragic or difficult happens, one of the first public responses is to have an “interfaith prayer service” -- and that’s the terminology that is used! Ten years ago, we did not have the language to gather people of different traditions together to focus prayerful energy towards something. I think this is the beginning of a much bigger mindset.

On a larger, global scale there are more people ready to defend or support people of other traditions in difficult circumstances. Whether it is defending Muslims from backlash from extremists or the community coming around the Sikh community after the temple shooting in Wisconsin, there are more people supporting each other, many more than gets covered by the media.



**10. Please share a specific short story about your CC’s work that might teach a lesson about interfaith or inspire other CCs.**

There was an ecumenical Christian group that used to meet annually at Asilomar in Big Sur, south of San Jose. When they decided to hold an interfaith weekend, they

contacted the Interfaith Center to help plan the weekend. While individuals in this group pretty much accepted Jews and to a lesser extent, Muslims, they struggled with the pagans. It was hard work, but many of them opened up.

The format was to have each group conduct its own ritual around their tradition - Friday night Islamic prayers, Saturday morning Jewish Shabbot, Sunday morning Christian worship service, with others in between. Each group was asked to conduct their rituals as they normally would.

When it came time for communion on Sunday, the Christians agreed to open it up to everyone which was a big deal since most Christian groups at the very least allow only baptized Christians to partake.

A Buddhist woman was so moved that she was finally able to take communion that she shared with the group how healing the experience was.

### **11. How is your CC's work helping to achieve the mission of URI?**

We are a "mini URI." We bring people together of different traditions in ways that they're willing to meet us. We reach out to interfaith councils and other groups -- our workshops on caring for veterans is an example of that. We are a member of Interfaith Power and Light in an attempt to heal the world. And we are embarking on a campaign, along with others, to support the Yezidis in Iraq and Syria in an attempt to end religiously-motivated violence.

### **12. Within your CC, you have members from several different faiths and cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation among your CC's members? What are the challenges?**

As we are all aware, while we celebrate the things that are the same among us, there are sensitivities that we have to work through. We have learned to think through something we might want to say or publish by checking with each other regarding possible issues. A prime example is the role of women in various religions. To truly understand and respect each other, we have to listen carefully to these issues. Anyone who gets involved wants to cooperate to make a difference, or they wouldn't be here.

I think the challenges we have in cooperating together are human issues rather than interfaith or cultural issues. It can be hard to deal with some matters that one feels strongly about, and that can be reflected in what we actually do. And quite often, it boils down to so-called liberalism from so-called conservatism; tough stuff in this bifurcated world.

**13. How is being part of URI helping your CC to achieve its goals?**

We have a very close relationship with URI due to our geographic proximity to the Global Support Office; many of the members of ICP have also served on the Global Council and various URI committees. We've collaborated with URI on events such as the International Day of Peace concert. We also shared a table at the Peace in the Park festival and host URI events at our chapel. We really support each other.

**14. Aside from funding, what are some specific ways URI can better support your CC in reaching its goals?**

You are doing it already. We really appreciate the newsletters and Facebook. It is also really wonderful to have a link internationally so that when we are approached with a more global issue we can direct that person to a URI contact in another part of the world. A "tutorial" on Appreciative Inquiry would be helpful.