

Rekindling Hope in Dark Times: San Francisco Night Ministry

Trent J. Thornley

S*piritual care is a human right.* This assertion has been the hidden premise upon which the San Francisco Night Ministry (SFNM) has operated for over fifty-five years. Since the first late-night walk on September 1, 1964, SFNM has made spiritual care accessible to people when access is otherwise foreclosed. Every night, during the late-night hours, with open hearts and minds, night ministers stroll the streets, SROs (single room occupancies), transit stations, coffee shops, and bars offering nonjudgmental, nonproselytizing care to anyone open to receiving it. From the outset, SFNM has been a progressive force, extending a loving hand to sex workers, run-away youth, people living with mental illness or a substance use disorder, veterans, formerly incarcerated people, LGBTQA+ people, and other people inhabiting the margins of society. SFNM has heeded a particular call to care for people living on the streets. Founded by a council of local churches, SFNM thus became known as “the Church’s night shift.”

San Francisco Night Ministry is at a crossroads. Its traditional ministry partners—mostly mainline Protestant congregations—are struggling to maintain themselves. These churches no longer have the same level of resources in terms of volunteers and finances to support SFNM as they have in the past. San Francisco Night Ministry faces the prospect of contracting its ministry or finding new avenues of engagement and support.

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UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHT TO SPIRITUAL CARE

The hidden premise of SFNM's ministry is evolving into an explicit mission: to increase access to the human right of spiritual care. Articulating and realizing this mission is refreshing SFNM's work as a social-spiritual engagement that includes, yet reaches beyond, the exclusively Christian form. The ministry occupies a newly forged space at the intersection of sectarian religious ministry and secular social services. Drawing on the language and values of pluralistic society, SFNM is re-envisioning its ministry as a social justice action that is more accessible, and hopefully more inviting, to a broad array of people and partner organizations. Though still inchoate, we might call it "the social services of multifaith spiritual care."

To elaborate, I first take it as axiomatic that tending to matters of existential concern—tending to the "spirit"—is an essential dimension of holistic human flourishing. Generally speaking, spiritual care involves offering loving presence, wholesome relationality, and wise seeing as means for accompanying and helping others grapple with the suffering inherent in mortality. Spiritual care professionals, board certified by organizations like the Association of Professional Chaplains, are trained to remain grounded in their own traditions while facilitating "sacred" connections for people in their care—connections to the self, to others, and to the Ultimate, however the cared-for person understands it. Spiritual care thus honors the meaning-making of others. Spiritual care also invites them into community.

Although their work overlaps with that of therapists and social workers, the spiritual care providers utilize a specialized skill set to address a distinct set of needs. And, for many people, traditional religious expressions, such as prayer or meditation, also support mental health and well-being. When hopelessness, meaninglessness, existential terror, or other spiritual concerns mercilessly unravel a coherent life, tending to matters of the spirit is paramount. In some desperate moments, spiritual issues rapidly become *the* issues that most need addressing. Good spiritual care rekindles the hope—in the very moment it is offered—that life can be meaningful, that each person is intrinsically valuable, that people can care for one another, that peace is possible, and that an ineffable truth can be realized, even if never grasped.

Access to spiritual care services, therefore, is just as critical as access to health care, mental health services, and social work services. And providing everyone with access to spiritual care is a common good. Most people are

fortunate enough to access care by walking into just about any church, temple, meditation center, yoga studio, or the like. Most hospitals and prisons offer chaplaincy. And most agnostics or atheists can connect with the arts or other humanist means for tending to the “spirit.” Yet, what about folks who are forlorn in the late-night hours, when religious communities are closed? Or people living on the streets who feel uncomfortable—or even unwelcome—walking into walled communities, let alone worshipping there?

HOW SAN FRANCISCO NIGHT MINISTRY WORKS

San Francisco Night Ministry recruits spiritual leaders and volunteers of all faiths and spiritual traditions to care for people on the streets or on the phones in the late-night hours. Night ministers walk from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m., while trained volunteers counsel people on the crisis telephone line from 10 p.m. to 2 p.m. In a crisis situation, the phone counselor can dispatch the on-duty night minister to a caller’s location in the city.

Over the last decade, SFNM has expanded into offering street-level spiritual community programs. SFNM’s Open Cathedrals consist of two weekly outdoor Christian worship services. One is a Spanish-English bilingual service held on Thursday evenings at a major transit hub, and another happens on Sunday afternoons in the Civic Center Plaza. Everyone is welcome at the Open Cathedrals in whatever state of sobriety or cleanliness, centeredness or vulnerability they may be. Each Open Cathedral has its own committed congregation, some of whom serve as ushers, servers, and singers. Local congregations and community groups sign up to donate a meal for after-service fellowship, and ministry staff is available for one-on-one care.

Building on the success of Open Cathedrals, SFNM last year began offering a weekly Buddhist Meditation Group on Monday evenings. Emerging programs for 2020 include a weekly outdoor Yogic Movements course, based on Tai Chi breathing and movement practices, and an outdoor Open Shabbat.

By offering a growing diversity of community programs, SFNM is both multifaith and interfaith. “Multifaith” here refers to how each program unapologetically expresses the prominent tenets and practices of its own religious tradition. “Interfaith” here refers to how denominational differences within each tradition are included. For example, every Open Cathedral of-

fers the Eucharist, though rotating ministers use differing words of institution based on their various ordinations; every Meditation Group offers a dharma talk, though rotating facilitators use diverse skillful means appropriate to their lineages, such as a Zen story or a Theravada *metta* chant. In another kind of interfaith expression, SFNM joins its partner organizations in leading an annual interfaith vigil on the winter solstice, which incorporates many traditions, for people who died on the streets in that year.

SAN FRANCISCO NIGHT MINISTRY'S NEW VISION IN PRACTICE

Furthering its new vision of providing "the social services of multi-faith spiritual care," SFNM has been taking steps to transform itself from an extension of Christian ministry into a nonsectarian religious nonprofit that is structured and governed according to widely accepted standards. This new direction is not about divorcing SFNM from its Christian roots. To the contrary, SFNM is gambling that it is through its new multifaith form that its Christian ministry will survive and thrive.

San Francisco Night Ministry is also evolving out of what in nonprofit studies is known as its "founder stage," in which a charismatic leader both provides the bulk of direct services and also runs the organization. Each successive night minister effectively has been a new "founder." San Francisco Night Ministry's hiring of an executive director was a significant step in a new direction, allowing the night minister to focus more energy on direct spiritual care services. San Francisco Night Ministry is working to retain its charm and eccentricity while decentralizing its services and professionalizing its systems.

San Francisco Night Ministry hopes to attract a broader base of financial and volunteer support by becoming a more recognizable inhabitant of the city's nonprofit ecosystem. One approach is to raise both consciousness and funding by connecting privileged and marginalized residents of San Francisco in a "ministry of awareness." San Francisco Night Ministry offers to technology companies an opportunity to sponsor group night walks of their employees with the night minister. San Francisco Night Ministry remains vigilant that such walks do not devolve into a kind of safari, instead emphasizing a "street retreat" approach in which participants are challenged to work with what arises in themselves and in relationship. Included in the walks are heart-centered debriefing sessions. Ministry of awareness

walks not only bridge communities—and strengthen interconnectedness in the city—but also lean into an innovative, even entrepreneurial, spirit around generating resources.

In other avenues, secular grant-making foundations that historically have passed over SFNM are responding favorably to its new vision. Though SFNM has never sought nor received public funding, SFNM's provision of nonproselytizing, nonsectarian spiritual care services in its night ministry might qualify.

Finally, SFNM has trained religiously diverse new spiritual care leaders in its multifaith clinical pastoral education (CPE) programs, which are accredited by the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education. In spring 2020, SFNM experimented with a Buddhist-centered program. San Francisco Night Ministry also added elements in the CPE unit that focus on fundraising and strategic planning. San Francisco Night Ministry is the rare CPE center that offers a community-based program from its own nonprofit clinical placement site. Clinical pastoral education students are required to launch a peer-to-peer fundraising campaign for SFNM with the goal of engaging new support from at least ten distinct donors. The project provides an opportunity for students to learn the art of funding ministry in the digital age. Importantly, every student participates in CPE regardless of the amount of funds they raise. Students are also invited to intrateam meetings—in which SFNM staff plan and promote new programs—and interteam meetings (akin to interdisciplinary teams in health care), in which students interact on behalf of SFNM in community coalition meetings.

As of this writing, SFNM continues to discern its path forward. In whatever way SFNM's journey unfolds, I offer this vision for what it might inspire in others who are pondering new forms and models of ministry.

San Francisco Night Ministry's motto is "rekindling hope in dark times." My hope is that a spirit of wisdom will lead all of us who love the San Francisco Night Ministry as we navigate through its dark night—its dark womb of transformation—and into a new life of compassionate service under the morning stars . . . for another fifty years to come.