



✠ THE USES OF US ✠

*The Journey and Future of the San Francisco  
Swedenborgian Church*

*This document can be viewed from many perspectives, and each of its authors harbors a different vision for its meaning. It is a love letter – expressing the intimate passion, fostered in faith, which deeply cares for a loved one. It is a portrait – showing the expansive and complex picture of our congregation in all of its historical colors. It is a map – documenting our journey out of the wilderness, leading to a treasured future. It is a blueprint – laying out the design and structure of a congregation that has weathered a century and a half of growth and tests, and guiding the construction of a future as noble and sacred as the madrone trees upon which our Sanctuary rests.*

*Ultimately, this document is the foundation for our intentional future as a congregation: the vehicle through which the wisdom of the current congregation can be translated into ministries that are of use in service to the communities of our city, our region and the world extending another hundred years.*

The Writing Group

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Believing that the doctrines and principles of the true church of the Lord Jesus Christ should be more fully practiced by us who receive them, and more widely disseminated among those who know them not, and that those uses can be better performed by concentrating our energies in the form of a Church Society than when acting in our individual capacity... We the undersigned, receivers of the doctrines, and members of various New Church Societies, now resident in the City of San Francisco and State of California, do hereby form and declare ourselves a Society of the New Jerusalem Church, and agree to be governed by the Doctrines of Charity and Faith as taught in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg... The primary object of this Society shall be to perform spiritual uses, and to ultimate the good and truths of the Church.”* First New Church Society of San Francisco Bylaws.

Thus began the formal establishment of a society of Swedenborgians in San Francisco in 1852. It was an era of new beginnings for these founders. Only five years prior had the settlement at the peninsula’s tip been christened the “City of San Francisco.” The following year would see the Gold Rush rapidly transform it into a thriving metropolitan and cultural center. In 1850 California became the 31<sup>st</sup> state admitted to the United States. The natural geographic beauty of San Francisco coupled with its temperate climate and commercial opportunity attracted new residents from around the world. With them came their spiritual beliefs, including Swedenborgian theology. Hence the environment in which this church community was born.

In the course of its 157-year history the San Francisco Swedenborgian society would be dominated by six ministry periods<sup>1</sup>, three of which led the church for a combined total of 103 of those 157 years.<sup>2</sup> For better and worse, this society has strongly

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of referencing ministry periods, the ministries of Revs. Lawrence and Rivers (including their co-ministry and Rev. Rivers’ continuing ministry after Rev. Lawrence’s departure) are referred to as one. They will be forever intertwined in the hearts of their congregants.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Worcester: 44 years; Rev. Tobisch: 41 years; Revs. Lawrence and Rivers: 18 years. It should also be noted that Revs. Lawrence’s and Rivers’s relationship with this church extends beyond their

identified itself with its ministerial leadership. Now, however, in its 158<sup>th</sup> year, the society has undertaken a process of self-reflection in order to determine the best and most appropriate direction for its future.

### **HOW THIS REPORT CAME TO BE**

*“There is no such thing as an ‘isolated’ individual. We are designed and created to live in community, and the whole effort of the Divine, through revelation and through the subtler workings of providence, is to keep open to us the paths that lead to growth of perceptive and loving communities.”* Rev. Dr. George Dole<sup>3</sup>

June 2008 saw the departure of the church’s beloved minister, Rev. Rachel Rivers, after 18 years of service.<sup>4</sup> The church council, under the leadership of Council President Joy Barnitz, enlisted the services of a professional interim minister, Rev. Jeffrey Cheifetz. This community then embarked on an interim journey towards preparing itself for its future, its future minister, and its relationship with that future minister. Congregational meetings were held, archives examined, and a writing group comprised of church members was commissioned to analyze the findings, do further research, and prepare this report.<sup>5</sup>

### **THE SAN FRANCISCO SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH COMMUNITY**

The San Francisco Swedenborgian Church is a Christian church, experienced through the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg. It is a member of the General Convention

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official ministry period. From 1986 to 1988 Rev. Lawrence served as an Associate Minister under Rev. Capon, and Rev. Rivers assisted in an unofficial capacity.

<sup>3</sup> Dole, G., A Thoughtful Soul: Reflections from Swedenborg, Swedenborgian Foundation Publishers, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Lawrence had previously departed in 2001 to assume duties as Acting Dean of the Swedenborgian House of Studies in Berkeley, California.

<sup>5</sup> The members of the writing group authoring this paper are Annette Bailey, Janet Bailey, and Greg Sondern.

of Swedenborgian Churches<sup>6</sup> and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States.

The San Francisco Swedenborgian church community subscribes to Swedenborg's Science of Correspondences, which holds that there is a relationship between God and all matter. The Christian Bible is the inspired word of God. Its stories contain inner meanings meant to guide the reader in his or her journey of regeneration into a more glorified human. Swedenborgians read the Bible for its symbolic inner meaning rather than as mere literal exposition.

The San Francisco church community has a long and valued history of welcoming seekers from diverse spiritual backgrounds and beliefs. Many in its congregation identify themselves as Christian and Swedenborgian; many others would not use those words but find in this church a welcoming environment in which reason as well as faith play a role in exploration of the spiritual path.

Its Sunday morning worship style is one of reverent worship. Swedenborgian ministers generally eschew grand attempts at oratory effect when delivering sermons. It is a theology aimed at appealing to the intellect rather than manipulating passions.<sup>7</sup> Describing the denomination, the Perennial Dictionary of World Religions observes, “[t]he Swedenborgian Church has never been large, though it has attracted some persons of excellent intellect. In the 1970s the two Swedenborgian denominations in America reported a total of about eight thousand members. Swedenborgianism has had, however, an influence on American spiritual life out of proportion to its numbers. New England transcendentalism, spiritualism, theosophy, and ‘new thought’ ... have all, in various ways, been deeply affected by the wisdom of the Swedish philosopher.”<sup>8</sup> Being intellectual does not preclude Swedenborgians from passion in their faith. To this day the San Francisco church remains a place, as one parishioner put it, “where smart people cry.”

Whereas the earliest San Francisco Swedenborgians were well steeped in Swedenborgian tenets, the 2009 community is made up of members from many faith backgrounds. They found Swedenborg by way of the church sanctuary and grounds – renowned for architectural and historic significance – or on account of their quests for a new spiritual home. Today's congregants possessed the courage and strength to break

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<sup>6</sup> The General Convention is one of two North American sects of Swedenborgian denominations, the other being the General Church of the New Jerusalem.

<sup>7</sup> See Swedenborg, E., True Christianity, Note 146, for further discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Crim, K., The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989.

with the familiar: the faiths in which they had been raised, and to seek out a spirituality that more fully resonated with them.

In addition, many San Francisco Swedenborgians were drawn to this church because of needs not served by other spiritual communities. They are comprised of mixed race and interfaith couples as well as members of the gay community. Swedenborgian theology recognizes humans as spiritual beings who happen to be cloaked in physical bodies during Earthly life. This Earthly life is the precursor to one's real life that will be lived in the spiritual world. Accordingly, this belief structure renders one's race, creed, gender, and sexual orientation irrelevant to the spiritual essence of each being. So it is that this community takes great pride in its openness and acceptance of all. Its theology has always placed it at the forefront of social movements.

The San Francisco church has evolved and grown over the years, becoming the largest church community in its denomination. Yet it possesses one of the smallest numbers of second, third, and fourth generation Swedenborgians – those who were born into the denomination. Survey any Sunday morning attendance and – unlike in its sister churches in the East – nary a second or later generation Swedenborgian is in the room. This makeup of the congregation may be a key factor in the church's finding itself in a somewhat distant relationship with other congregations within its denomination, and with other Christian denominations in San Francisco.

This congregation needs to be aware of how it is viewed outside the sanctuary doors, so that it can go forward in strengthening bonds both within the denomination and with the greater Christian community. Our faith's emphasis on personal inquiry breeds a contemplative, introspective nature, which to outsiders may appear aloof or removed. Our fellow Swedenborgians, adhering to a more storied and structured congregational model with multi-generational parishioners, may have trouble understanding how our fluid membership could have immersed itself enough in Swedenborgian theology to fully grasp its teachings. In recent years, members of our congregation had not regularly shown up in great numbers at either denominational or interfaith events to participate as members of the larger body. There have been long periods during which we have not reached out to other congregations in our denomination nor been active in the broader Christian community here at home.

The San Francisco church excels at attracting new members but hasn't managed to hold on to many of them, let alone their offspring. This fact isn't necessarily an indictment. Other socioeconomic factors may explain the departure of this community's members and offspring for other geographical or spiritual homes. Not having a large

following generation to depend upon has left the San Francisco church in constant need of new members, with its membership rolls resembling a revolving door. Despite its perpetual need to attract new members, this church has no systematic process for doing so.

The San Francisco church exemplifies the denominational sentiment that “faced with a modest number of members in their congregations, not a few Swedenborgians [find] comfort in the ‘permeation theory,’ according to which ‘the whole world is being gradually permeated by the new truths’” and “[t]hough the world has not accepted the writings of Swedenborg...[his] teachings have influenced its thought far more than it is aware.”<sup>9</sup> Yet this particular church community needs to be aware that its ability to continually draw new members is what has historically sustained it.

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<sup>9</sup> Marguerite Beck Block, The New Church in the New World: A Study of Swedenborgianism in America (new edition), New York: Swedenborgian Publishing Association, 1984, p. 357.



# 1

## ***OUR HERITAGE***

*“As the world grows older, let it grow wiser. Let us endeavor to learn something from those who have gone before us.”* Rev. Thomas Worcester, 1873.

### **THE HISTORY OF THE SAN FRANCISCO SOCIETY** **OF THE NEW JERUSALEM**

Despite its uniqueness and fame, the San Francisco Swedenborgian church at Lyon and Washington streets is not the first Swedenborgian house of worship to grace San Francisco. It is the fifth.

The 2009 San Francisco church society has its roots in a colorful past involving intrepid ministers. Its story officially began when 13 members signed the by-laws in 1852. They had been meeting informally to study Swedenborg’s writings and began holding religious services in the Superior Courtroom on Durant Street (now Grant Avenue in Chinatown).<sup>10</sup> In their isolation from the Eastern Swedenborgian churches, the early society acted independently, relying on laymen to conduct services, administer communion, and perform rites and sacraments such as baptisms.<sup>11</sup> The society retained the services of a Rev. Thomas Sturtevant, who came West on a square rigger with his wife and small child. Unfortunately, before the reverend could establish a formal

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<sup>10</sup> Anonymous, A Brief Account of the Institution of the San Francisco Society of the New Church, Edward Bosqui & Co., Printers, 1870.

<sup>11</sup> Rev. Othmar Tobisch, “The Centennial Event,” Undated.

Swedenborgian church, he decided to mine gold in the Sierras, where he contracted typhus fever and died.<sup>12</sup>

The society's next minister proved hardier. Rev. John Doughty, from Brooklyn, New York, was an educated man, lawyer, and devotee of Swedenborg's "Heavenly Doctrines." He set out for California on horseback. While crossing the open plains, he somehow became separated from his traveling party. He was captured by Indians but while under guard, managed to escape astride his horse, "followed by a shower of arrows. Later on in the journey he found himself minus a horse and shoes, and was forced to finish the march on foot in shoes made from the bark of trees."<sup>13</sup>

Rev. Doughty proved to be an engaging minister and able administrator who succeeded in building two church structures for his growing congregation, in two successive locations on O'Farrell Street.<sup>14</sup> In addition to performing ministerial duties for the San Francisco society, Rev. Doughty served in the California State Assembly from 1854-1855, practiced law, was a justice of the peace, and became district attorney for Solano County. That he was not technically ordained as a minister did not prove to be an impediment for the society until 1867.<sup>15</sup>

In that year, concern grew among some members over their lack of ecclesiastical rules and precedents, particularly with regard to rites and sacraments.<sup>16</sup> Compounding the dispute was the recent arrival of a young Joseph Worcester, a source of excitement for many members of the society. The son of the famous Swedenborgian minister Thomas

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<sup>12</sup> Adrienne Kopa, "The Garden Church of San Francisco, A History," Undated, P. 9. Sources conflict as to when Rev. Sturtevant arrived in San Francisco. He may have arrived as early as 1850 and commenced informal services, or arrived in January 1852.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Othmar Tobisch, "The Centennial Event," supra, citing an undated and unnamed newspaper clipping in his possession. See also: Wong, R. and Lawrence, J., "A Brief History of the San Francisco Swedenborigan Church."

<sup>14</sup> In 1863 a lot on O'Farrell Street between Mason and Taylor was purchased, and in 1865 the first church building was constructed. By 1890 the society had outgrown its space. A larger lot was purchased farther down O'Farrell Street, at 1626 O'Farrell, between Fillmore and Webster. The second church was built in Gothic style and could seat 600 persons. It later suffered damage from a fire. See attached images of these two churches.

<sup>15</sup> Adrienne Kopa, "The Garden Church of San Francisco, A History," Undated, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 11. Reference is made in an unconfirmed secondary source that Rev. Doughty became ordained on June 19, 1868. Ordained by whom and in what capacity is not stated. Most likely his parish "ordained" him.

Worcester,<sup>17</sup> Joseph Worcester was Swedenborgian royalty. A subset of society members asked Worcester, who had studied at Harvard, to return to Boston to complete his theological education and then return to San Francisco duly ordained. They would await him. This he did in 1869<sup>18</sup> and commenced leadership of a newly formed San Francisco Society of the New Jerusalem, a splinter group from the original First New Jerusalem Society of San Francisco. (The societies would become informally known as the Lyon Street and O'Farrell Street societies, respectively.)

For 30 years, Rev. Worcester's congregation worshipped in Druid's Hall at 413 Sutter Street, San Francisco,<sup>19</sup> while Rev. Doughty's congregation continued at the second O'Farrell Street location. The two Swedenborgian societies co-existed in San Francisco and jointly founded the Pacific Coast New Church Association in 1890, the year of its first meeting.<sup>20 21</sup>

When Rev. Doughty died in 1893, Rev. Worcester paid tribute to him at his funeral by describing his "humility of character, his good nature, his unswerving devotion to the tenets of Swedenborg and the purity of his life."<sup>22</sup>

The hallmark of Rev. Worcester's tenure was the construction of the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church at Lyon and Washington Streets. It is the sole remaining Swedenborgian church in the city.

A scholar and lifelong bachelor, Rev. Worcester was described as one who lived in service to others. He survived on a yearly income from his father's estate and refused to accept pay for his ministerial duties. In addition to serving the society, Rev. Worcester served as chaplain at the Protestant Orphan Asylum. He established the Worcester boys' home as a place where orphans could learn to cope with the harsh realities of life in San Francisco. He also secretly aided ex-convicts in their transition back into society. Where

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Worcester was the founder of the first Swedenborgian Church in Boston and translator of the 1833 edition of *The True Christian Religion*. Thomas Worcester ordained his son, Joseph Worcester.

<sup>18</sup> Some reports have Joseph Worcester assuming leadership in 1867, but it is more likely he became ordained in 1869 at which time he assumed leadership of the second society.

<sup>19</sup> Paget, Nan, "A Timeline History," *The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> In 1915 the O'Farrell Street Society in concert with the PCNCA invited the General Convention to San Francisco for its annual meeting. The East Coast denominational leadership declined. It would not be until 1949 that the denomination held a convention west of the Mississippi – in San Francisco and Los Angeles jointly.

<sup>22</sup> Adrienne Kopa, "The Garden Church of San Francisco, A History," *supra*, p. 12.

appropriate, he assigned some of his ex-convict mentees as “big brothers” to his orphan boys.<sup>23</sup>

Rev. Worcester continued to serve the Lyon Street church until his death in 1913. The years following Revs. Doughty and Worcester were difficult for the two societies, each of which underwent a succession of short-term ministers as they successively lost members.<sup>24</sup> Many parishioners had fled to the East Bay after the 1906 earthquake and fire. In 1926, Rev. Franklin Blackmer of the Lyon Street society oversaw the incorporation of a Berkeley Society of the New Jerusalem, thus establishing a third Bay Area Swedenborgian society.<sup>25</sup>

On June 8, 1931, all three societies merged into one and signed into existence a new constitution and bylaws. The new society assumed the name of the Lyon Street society: the San Francisco Society of the New Jerusalem. Two parishes were formed – the San Francisco parish and the Berkeley parish.<sup>26</sup> The two parishes were co-pastored by Revs. Thomas French and Othmar Tobisch until Rev. French retired in 1932.<sup>27</sup>

Rev. Othmar Tobisch would remain at the Lyon Street church for four decades, until his retirement in 1970. His contributions have been as significant to the church’s development as those of Rev. Worcester. Whereas Rev. Worcester built the church structure, Rev. Tobisch built a thriving and enduring congregation.

On August 4, 1929 – two months before the stock market crash that plunged the country into the Great Depression – Rev. Tobisch arrived to preach his first Sunday sermon. The Lyon Street church was already in crisis, with dwindling membership and finances. When he commenced his first sermon, only three people were present, one of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> The O’Farrell Street society: Rev. Frank Higgins, 1894-1895; Rev. D. V. Bowen, 1896-1898; Rev. Andrew Parson, 1901-1903; Rev. De Ronden-Pos, 1905-1908; Rev. J. S. David, 1909-1916. The Lyon Street society: Rev. Albert Bjorck 1915-1916; Rev. Astlee Guylee, 1919-1921; Rev. Franklin Blackmer, 1924-1926; Rev. Astlee Guylee, 1926-1929. As set forth in a ministerial roster prepared by Rev. Othmar Tobisch, addendum to “The Centennial Event.”

<sup>25</sup> Paget, N., “A Timeline History,” The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. The O’Farrell Street church and Lyon Street church merged into one, with the Lyon Street building and grounds designated as the home for the newly merged, single San Francisco parish.

<sup>27</sup> Rev. French served as minister to the O’Farrell Street church from 1916 to 1932. Rev. Tobisch took over the Lyon Street church in 1929 and served both it and the Berkeley/El Cerrito Parrish. In 1946, the Berkeley/El Cerrito Parrish received its full-time minister, Rev. Owen Turley; Rev. Turley served until 1950. The Society purchased land in El Cerrito and began building a Swedenborgian church, which became the Hillside Swedenborgian Community Church. The Society sold the Berkeley church property. See also Paget, N., “A Timeline History.”

whom was his wife.<sup>28</sup> From 1929 to 1970, Rev. Tobisch would shepherd the church through the Great Depression, World War II, the advent of the Nuclear Age, the Korean conflict, the beginnings of space exploration, and the social upheaval of the 1960s.

By 1950, the Sunday school rolls counted 70 children, plus an additional 25 infants cared for in the nursery. Rev. Tobisch presided over an active couples club, singles club, teen group, and women's alliance. He also traveled to Sacramento each month to teach Swedenborgian theology to a group of eight adult students.<sup>29</sup>

Rev. Tobisch became the most "marrying" minister in town, propelling the Lyon Street church into the second most popular place to get married in the United States. (The first was the Little Church Around the Corner in New York.)<sup>30</sup> Under his leadership, the San Francisco Swedenborgian society opened itself to serving the needs of the Bay Area at large. It sanctioned the performance of rites and sacraments for everyone, including members of society denied such services by other ministries. In a highly segregated American society, where non-whites suffered de facto denial of intrinsic rights and women had only recently obtained the right to vote, the San Francisco Swedenborgian church opened itself to serving the spiritual needs of all persons without regard to race, creed, or gender. In this sense the church was ahead of its time and, in fact, its notoriety derived more from its service to diverse persons than from the unique artistry of its buildings and grounds.<sup>31</sup>

Rev. Tobisch did not toil alone. His wife, Margit Tobisch, acted as an unpaid but skilled business manager, documentarian, librarian, secretary, and historical scribe. Rev. Tobisch and Mrs. Tobisch were in essence the first example of this church's utilizing a minister-business manager relationship. They divided their duties along pastoral lines, with Rev. Tobisch performing all rites and sacraments and managing pastoral care, and Mrs. Tobisch assuming responsibility for nearly everything else. They also had two children, a son and a daughter.

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<sup>28</sup> Adrienne Kopa, "The Garden Church of San Francisco, A History," *supra*, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes, Annual Meeting of the San Francisco Society, March 11, 1951.

<sup>30</sup> Paget, N., "A History of our San Francisco Wedding Ministry," 2008. See also various internet commentaries on this topic corroborating the understanding.

<sup>31</sup> Newspaper articles during Rev. Tobisch's tenure focus extensively on the openness of the Swedenborgian Church community towards serving the spiritual needs of diverse cultural and racial communities. References to the unique building structure are secondary. Interestingly, with the revival of interest in the Arts and Crafts movement, modern-day articles and blogs focus on the structure first with minimal reference to its living church community.

In 1970, Rev. Erwin Reddekopp arrived, accompanied by his wife, Lisa Redekopp, to serve in the shadow of two legends, Rev. Worcester and Rev. Tobisch. Of the 101 years that the Lyon Street society had been in existence, 85 of those years had been under their leadership. Rev. Reddekopp's first year at the Lyon Street church saw him performing nearly all of the 270 weddings held there<sup>32</sup> – surely an exhausting task in itself – while at the same time trying to establish a foothold in ministerial leadership. Adding to his challenge was the cultural climate of the 1970s, a time of flux when American society flirted with alternative lifestyles and values. This climate of dissension and change was mirrored within the church itself, as it struggled for a new identity. Differences arose between congregants as to the future direction of the church and preservation of the grounds.<sup>33</sup> Rev. Reddekopp reported to the council that his first year at the Lyon Street church was his “most challenging, inspirational, and difficult year in the ministry so far.” Council member Mrs. Phyllis Bosley likewise reported that “it was also a difficult year for the San Francisco Parish Church committee...”<sup>34</sup> Membership declined and the Sunday school ceased to exist. A number of parishioners who embraced the experimental spirit of the 1970s had begun to attend Hillside Swedenborgian Community Church in El Cerrito, whose pastor actively encouraged alternative expressions of spirituality. The San Francisco church continued to provide a more traditional approach to worship, with Rev. Reddekopp preaching intellectually engrossing sermons. Congregational turmoil continued, and Rev. Reddekopp's tenure lasted nine years.

Rev. Edwin Capon assumed ministerial leadership in 1979, at the end of a long and long distinguished Swedenborgian career.<sup>35</sup> Having served for many years as the president of the Swedenborgian seminary as well as a parish minister, Rev. Capon “was viewed by many ‘to have the right stuff’ for steering the church’s way into modernity.”<sup>36</sup>

During his 11 years with the San Francisco church, he left a legacy of highly detailed and insightful minister's reports which may serve as a lodestar for the journey of

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<sup>32</sup> Prior to the 1990s, nearly all weddings performed at the church were performed by the resident minister. Guest ministers were a rarity. See Council Minutes from 1970-1990, particularly the detailed notes kept by Rev. Capon.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews with older congregants.

<sup>34</sup> Minutes, San Francisco Society of the New Jerusalem, 41<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting, October 17, 1971.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Rev. Capon served on the teaching faculty and as president of the Swedenborgian School of Religion for 22 years; Chair of the Council of Ministers for two terms; and pastor of 4 prior churches including two in the Boston area (Bridgewater and Elmwood). After San Francisco, he would serve two full terms as president of the denomination (1992-1998).

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence, J., “The Messenger,” April 2009.

this 2009 congregation. A seasoned minister, he was secure in himself and his abilities. His minister's reports are candid reflections on himself and the church. Unfortunately, as the end of his tenure approached, those reports show him overextended, worn out and counting the days until his retirement.<sup>37</sup>

On the anniversary of his first year, Rev. Capon observed, *“No parish I have ever served has afforded me the same opportunity to come into contact with so many new people, people who come to see out beautiful church, people who come here to be married, or readers of Swedenborg who are just discovering that others of his readers have established a church... While showing interest in new people, it has not, however, been my wish to neglect older members and friends, some of whom have been inactive. I had hoped that I might visit all on our list during the past 12 months. This has not happened, largely, I think, because of the unusual number of weddings the minister has here take up to a third of the minister's time... I give hospital calls a high priority. I will continue to try to visit all in our directory.”* He also noted, *“We have not had a Sunday morning educational program for children, lacking both children and teachers.”*<sup>38</sup>

Three years into his tenure, in 1982, church attendance had declined while the number of weddings increased. Rev. Capon observed, *“The wedding program of the San Francisco Parish is probably the most successful of our church's activities. The number of weddings continues to increase... I try to be responsive whenever it seems appropriate [to the prospective couples' inquiries about the church] without making like an evangelist. Needless to say, our wedding income remains essential to our financial health and is part of the reason we can afford to maintain and improve our facilities in such a satisfactory way... but overall attendance for the last 12 months seems to be down. I find this discouraging, although I am aware that we are in a period when traditional worship is not seen as essential or even useful for the nurture of the spiritual life. I wonder whether I should be doing something different or whether there should be someone different in the pulpit. I am more than willing to consider changes and innovations in our worship, but my own make-up places limitations on the extent to which I can innovate.”* He concluded this report by noting that the number of weddings was making him less available for traditional forms of parish work, a great regret. He wanted it known that he was ready to respond to pastoral requests for service in times of need, whenever there might be an illness or crisis, bereavement or spiritual distress.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See Rev. Capon's answers to the Ministers Questionnaire, January 1990

<sup>38</sup> Minister's Report to the San Francisco Society of the New Jerusalem, October 26, 1980.

<sup>39</sup> Minister's Report to the San Francisco Society of the New Jerusalem, October 31, 1982.

In addition to the wedding ministry, Rev. Capon found himself saddled with any number of diverse administrative duties. When a construction company destroyed the parking zone in front of the church, it was Rev. Capon on the phone haggling to have it replaced.<sup>40</sup> When a cold spell emphasized the lack of heat in the choir loft, it was Rev. Capon who tackled the problem by installing a heater. (Unfortunately, the additional load blew a fuse and the organ wouldn't play.)<sup>41</sup> In the late 1980s and 1990 when the number of weddings started to decrease, it was Rev. Capon who researched the appropriate newspapers and bridal publications in which to advertise, and placed the ads himself.<sup>42</sup>

Thus it was his great frustration that he could not serve in the traditional role of parish minister. In 1988, Rev. Capon stated, *"I am feeling concerned about my ability to do all that needs to be done here by myself. Additional secretarial time is certainly going to help. But I have to learn to say No to tasks that can be done by members; if there are not enough members to do them, they will simply have to go undone. I am also facing the reality that I was found to have very high blood pressure last June, which has only partially been brought under control. Too much stress will undoubtedly have a negative effect."*<sup>43</sup>

An East Bay resident, Rev. Capon was working six days per week. After the closure of the Bay Bridge on account of the 1989 earthquake, he started spending nights in the parish house several times a week.<sup>44</sup> In June 1989, Rev. Capon submitted the following request: *"I repeat my request for a new letter of employment. I would ask that my present contract be extended to August 31, 1991, that... I have one weekend free a month, that I go from a 6 day week to a 5 day week. I would not expect a raise... I feel the need of more time with my wife and a little less tiring schedule... I look forward to continuing this work at a slower pace."*<sup>45</sup>

During his tenure, the church council brought in assistant pastors to relieve Rev. Capon of part of the work load. Rev. James Lawrence was brought in to serve as Associate Pastor from 1986 to 1988.<sup>46</sup> Capon expressed gratitude for the help. Rev.

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<sup>40</sup> Minister's Report to the Church Committee & Board of Trustees, May 31, 1988.

<sup>41</sup> Minister's Report to Church Committee & Board of Trustees, February 18, 1989.

<sup>42</sup> Minister's Report to the Church Committee & Board of Trustees, February 3, 1990.

<sup>43</sup> Minister's Report to the Church Committee & Board of Trustees, September 16, 1988.

<sup>44</sup> Minister's Report to the Church Committee & Board of Trustees, November 11, 1989.

<sup>45</sup> Minister's Report to the Church Committee & Board of Trustees, June 3, 1989.

<sup>46</sup> Annual Report of Pastor Edwin G. Capon, October 1986; Minister's Report to the Church Committee & Board of Trustees, April 24, 1988.



Rachel Rivers, who was married to Rev. Lawrence, came to the Bay Area with him and served briefly as Associate Pastor of the El Cerrito church. After her departure from that church, she preached occasional sermons and provided some assistance to the San Francisco church, but unofficially and without pay. Following Revs. Lawrence's and Rivers's departure, Rev. Capon found himself struggling on his own once again. The council was aware of his plight but had difficulty funding the salaries of two ministers. They toyed with the alternate idea of hiring a business manager in lieu of a second pastor.<sup>47</sup> In the end, however, they stayed with the model with which they were familiar and hired Rev. Susan Turley Moore as Associate Pastor. Rev. Capon and Rev. Turley Moore co-pastored until 1990, when Rev. Capon retired and Revs. Lawrence and Rivers returned as official co-ministers.

Also occurring in 1990 was the separation of the two parishes within the San Francisco Society of the New Jerusalem. Up to this point the East Bay parish had been holding services at its Hillside Community Church in El Cerrito with its own ministers and lay leaders. The parishes met annually to review finances and conduct the business of the Society. However, they had grown apart, with finances as one serious source of tension. When the split occurred, disagreements arose regarding the Society's assets, and the General Convention ultimately managed the distribution of assets.

Under Revs. Lawrence's and Rivers's leadership, the San Francisco church began to thrive again. The wedding ministry prospered in the early 1990s, and its income largely supported the church ministry. (A secondary benefit was the abundant supply of ornate, fresh flower arrangements decorating the sanctuary.) The spirit of serving the greater community reached its heyday in the early 1990s when the San Francisco church sanctioned rites and sacraments for gay couples.

The congregation received a healthy dose of Swedenborgian teaching each week. Rev. Lawrence generally delivered the sermon three times per month, with Rev. Rivers serving as liturgist; Rev. Rivers preached once per month, with Rev. Lawrence assuming liturgical duties. Rev. Rivers also gave the children's talk, which occurred on the third Sunday of the month. Rev. Lawrence's sermons combined an intense understanding of Swedenborgian theology with the ability to convey complex concepts in understandable terms. One of his best-known instruments in this task was the use of popular comics such as *Calvin and Hobbes*. His skill in illuminating the intellectual side of Swedenborg blended perfectly with the approach of Rev. Rivers, who embraced her faith in a passionate and personal manner. Preaching without notes, she brought to the pulpit a

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<sup>47</sup> Church Committee Minutes, January 9, 1989

lifetime of immersion in Swedenborgian theology; in her sermons, she shared life experiences that movingly illustrated their application. Many congregants appreciated what they perceived as a complete head-heart relationship from the pulpit. Only on rare occasions were guest ministers utilized, and if so, they were dignitaries within the Swedenborgian denomination.

Rev. Rivers also conducted regular classes in Swedenborgian theology on weekday evenings at the San Francisco church. Rev. Lawrence deftly managed church operations. Even after divorcing in the early 1990s, Revs. Lawrence and Rivers continued to serve harmoniously as co-pastors.

With the wedding ministry humming along, and with active and energetic co-ministers, church attendance grew. By 1998 and 1999 the Sunday school program thrived with 57 children. Indeed, housing the Sunday school became a particular problem. The church experimented with moving the nursery children to the Brides' room so that the four- to seven-year-olds – now numbering 24 children – could squeeze into the nursery room.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, housing the adults attending Sunday service also became a concern. The council began to contemplate holding two Sunday morning services.

At around this time the congregation also experienced a flowering of calls to ministry; several parishioners enrolled in divinity school and received ordination.

As the church found itself growing from a small parish church to a medium-sized or “program” church, the council wrestled with understanding what the church was becoming. Rather than being supported financially by donations from the congregation – the usual model for healthy churches – the San Francisco church continued to be financially dependent on its rites and sacraments ministry, which was robust but would not be so forever.<sup>49</sup> This would prove problematic for Rev. Rivers's tenure in the early 2000s.

Despite the good fortune of a nearly full sanctuary on Sunday mornings, the council recognized that its membership was transient. Council President Ron Frostestad observed at the time, “if we really look at our retention rate of new attendees perhaps we fail them... We really keep very few of our weekly visitors... We need cradle to grave programs” for families, children, singles, seniors.<sup>50</sup> A serious concern was that the busy wedding ministry threatened to divert Rev. Lawrence's and Rivers's energy from pastoral

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<sup>48</sup> Church Council Minutes, February 10, 1999.

<sup>49</sup> Church Council Minutes, November 18, 1998.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

care, the activity to which God had called them. Although the church was operating in the black and had all the outward appearances of success, Mr. Frostestad noted, “we don’t have the financial underpinnings for our future.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the church would prove vulnerable to the vicissitudes of wedding trends and the economy.

In 2001, the locus of ministerial education for the denomination moved from Massachusetts to Berkeley, California. Rev. Lawrence was named Acting Dean<sup>52</sup> of the newly formed Swedenborgian House of Studies at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. He left the ministry of the San Francisco church to assume his new academic duties.

Rev. Rivers assumed full ministerial duties for the church. She shepherded the congregation through the shock of September 11, 2001, and the mourning and anxiety that followed. She also held the church together through a period of severe financial drought as wedding revenue dried up, congregational giving remained minimal, and the church had to dig into its reserves for operating expenses. This church was not immune to the axiom that economic distress leads to interpersonal distress among members of social units. Rev. Rivers assumed leadership during a time that would challenge any minister, let alone one who readily admitted that her strengths and talents lay with matters of pastoral care – not administration or building maintenance. Add to this mix a church council inexperienced in the nuances of business operations, which had been managed almost exclusively by the departing minister.

About many matters, Rev. Rivers and the council had little control. For example, the number of weddings citywide was down, a fact corroborated by the lower-than-average number of licenses issued by the county clerk. The early 2000s saw the trend of young couples electing to hold their ceremonies in nontraditional venues such as art galleries, forest settings, or beaches. Another factor affecting the wedding ministry was that other San Francisco religious institutions began to follow the Swedenborgian church’s lead in offering rites and sacraments for diverse communities, such as interfaith and interracial couples and gay couples. This greater variety of options reduced the demand for its services that the Swedenborgian church had historically enjoyed.

Ministers attract particular congregations, as congregants form attachments to a minister’s personality and style. When Rev. Lawrence departed, many parishioners

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Rev. Lawrence was subsequently appointed Dean.

likewise departed. The dwindling Sunday attendance further affected congregational giving.

Despite the economic downturn, the leadership continued to budget and attempt to operate as though it were still a medium-sized and growing “program” church, without recognizing that it may have been contracting to its former size as a small, family church. The same was true for congregants. When the diminishing rites and sacraments ministry reduced the volume of fresh flowers in the sanctuary, the council attempted to stretch the budget by providing flowers bi-weekly rather than weekly. Parishioners complained, and the council capitulated by undoing that particular budget cut.<sup>53</sup>

Not long into her solo ministry, Rev. Rivers found at least one aspect of her experience to echo that of Rev. Capon. The business of running the church interfered with her traditional ministerial duties and quickly became overwhelming. In addition, acting as the sole preacher was taking its toll. Rev. Rivers candidly informed the church council that preaching for eight consecutive weeks had meant that some of the tasks on her plate went undone. For example, she responded to all calls, but could not find sufficient time for greeting, retreat planning, and sending notes of congratulation or sympathy. Given these demands, she asked council members to inform her if they observed parishioners who appeared to be in need of special counsel.<sup>54</sup>

The church soon began to rely extensively on guest speakers, including speakers from non-Swedenborgian denominations and sometimes from faiths other than Christianity. Weekly emails were sent advising of the preaching schedule and offering the curriculum vitae of upcoming speakers. An unintended result was that congregants developed the habit of reviewing the stats and title of the upcoming speaker’s talk and deciding whether the proposed message and speaker would be worthy of their Sunday morning time. Sunday attendance began to fluctuate wildly. In many cases, spouses appeared for Sunday service alone.

While many congregants valued the diversity of viewpoints on Sunday morning, many others felt acutely the lack of Swedenborgian instruction from the pulpit. At a 2004 council meeting, a council member pointed out that “since Swedenborg has a unique message, and Swedenborgians [have been] the core of our worshippers,... guest preachers sometimes break the continuity of our message and faith.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Church Council Minutes, April 23, 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Church Council Minutes, March 14, 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Church Council Minutes, September 16, 2004.

Through these difficulties, Rev. Rivers pressed on. The wedding ministry improved with the addition of a better website and church administrative personnel skilled in wedding hostessing. The congregation stabilized. Congregational giving saw a dramatic rise in response to appeals, and the church once again began operating in the black. Despite the drama of the years 2001-2008, there is no doubt among the parishioners that Rev. Rivers loved them and the church grounds. That love and devotion helped to keep the church body from disintegrating during a time of challenging transition.

## THE SANCTUARY: THEOLOGY ON DISPLAY

*“In the memory of many of its inhabitants, this church has been and still is a haven from the speeding world... Unforgettable, for all who those worshipped there, are the experience of calm, the elation of the spirit, the rest in the shade of great trees.”* Rev. Othmar Tobisch, 1931<sup>56</sup>

One cannot discuss the history of this church without broaching the subject of the buildings and grounds. Exuding Swedenborgian theology, they are themselves a ministry. From the beginning they garnered attention. A San Francisco reporter – perhaps one of limited imagination – wrote, “the church is, perhaps, the most peculiar specimen of sacred architecture which this city affords.”<sup>57</sup>

Taking form at the end of the 19th century, the structure and grounds were not only a contrast to the ornately Gothic O’Farrell Street church but also to all other churches in the city of San Francisco. Observers noted that more typically, “given a bit of ground of these dimensions and seven thousand five hundred dollars, the average board of church trustees would have felt it incumbent on them to see that the building covered the whole lot... The church would rise, a box-like horror, with a steeple or two and a strip of land running around it like a skimpy ribbon... But these builders appreciate the value of a setting. They took as little as might be of their land for a church, and turned all the rest of the site into an Eden full of flowering things and living green – a place where God seems very near... It would have been economy of space to have entered from the street, but this would have been the ordinary way and much too commonplace...”<sup>58</sup>

It is well documented that the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church is one of the earliest and finest examples of Arts and Crafts movement in the United States. (See attached the National Historic Landmark Nomination Report.) Rev. Joseph Worcester, who had been developing his ideas about architecture and its relationship to nature and Swedenborgian theology, had gathered around him a talented group of artists and intellectuals. For the design and building of the church, he enlisted the collaboration of

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<sup>56</sup> Quotation reprinted in the June 1981 Messenger.

<sup>57</sup> “A Quaint Church Edifice,” article in the San Francisco Newspaper, “The Call,” April 1, 1895.

<sup>58</sup> Craft, Mabel Claire, The House Beautiful, Publisher Unknown, Feb. 1901.

luminaries including landscape painter William Keith, designer Bruce Porter, and architects A. Page Brown, A.C. Schweinfurth, and Bernard Maybeck (at that time a draftsman in Brown's firm).

Less well known than the building's design pedigree is the spiritual significance of nearly every nook and cranny. Rev. Worcester would not be deterred from his vision of a design that combined nature, art and spirit in an environment of rustic simplicity. When his architect informed him that his ideas were not good architecture, Rev. Worcester famously replied that he cared nothing for the canons of architecture. The building must teach its lesson. Overlooking no detail, Rev. Worcester created the first and arguably singular representation of Swedenborgian theology in structural form.

The first San Francisco Swedenborgian community set about constructing a structure that would inspire and serve both its inner Swedenborgian community and the outer San Francisco metropolis to which it belonged. Rev. Worcester caused the San Francisco church structure to be built, but he could not have done it without the financial, artistic, and logistical support of his church community. He initially struggled with financing the project, but the community rose to the challenge and gave. Rev. Worcester solely maintained the accounts and destroyed all records disclosing the amounts donated by each person. He believed that no one should know who gave nor the amounts given. The community understood that there would be no accolades bestowed for their generosity nor criticisms levied against small donations.<sup>59</sup> The first community gave in the spirit of love. They also gave in faith for the outcome of the structure.

His dream included a roof supported by forest trees encased in their bark. According to Swedenborg, the ancients worshipped in groves where they set up pillars because groves signify heavenly wisdom and intelligence.<sup>60</sup> Rev. Worcester traveled to the Santa Cruz mountains where he personally chose eight young madrone trees. Initially, the mountaineer on whose land the trees grew saw no value in them beyond their top market price. When felling them, however, he reflected upon their intended purpose. The young man said to Rev. Worcester, "No hands but mine have touched these trees, and I can't bear to think of them being handled like freight. If you will let me carry them to the city in my wagon, it shall not cost you any more than by train." Carry them he did. He wrapped each tree separately and rested them on a cushion of hay so no bark would be damaged. Hitching his horses to the wagon, he and his wife transported them to San Francisco. Dangling from the harnesses were sleigh bells that jingled for the 90-

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<sup>59</sup> Harzfeld, Joan, "The Story Book Church," The Family Digest, Undated.

<sup>60</sup> Swedenborg, E., Heaven and Hell; Arcana Coelestia, Notes 10643-10644.

mile trek to Lyon Street. At the construction site, his very hands assisted in placing the madrones into their resting place where they were transformed into the pillars of the church.<sup>61</sup>

The exterior of the church is finished in mission-like brick and red tile. Rev. Worcester did much of the brickwork himself. He wanted the mortar “pointed” so that each brick should cast a distinct shadow. He cut away the mortar in order to leave a sharp line at the lower edge of each brick. “I explained it very carefully to the bricklayers, but they couldn’t understand, so I had to take my trowel and follow the workmen around, and as they laid each row I pointed the mortar,” he said.<sup>62</sup>

The interior of the sanctuary is likewise planned with care and deference to symbolism. Rev. Worcester intended that the church should be free of pomp and pretense. Inside there would be no gilt, no plaster, no paint. Four unframed paintings by William Keith depict the cycle of harvest and rain, seed and fruit. The stained glass windows were designed by Bruce Porter specifically for this church, and they carry out the nature motif. The round window above the chancel depicts a garden scene with a dove peacefully quenching its thirst for water. According to Swedenborg, water symbolizes divine truth. As the dove quenches its thirst, so may the congregants of this church quench their spiritual needs. The stained glass window on garden side depicts St. Christopher carrying the Christ child in his arms across a river. It tells the story of struggle and regeneration as he succeeds in crossing the stream of temptations.

Above the chancel rests a gnarled Sierra cypress signifying the persistency of life over hardships. The six stones above the chancel represent the six long-term ministers who have led this church.<sup>63</sup> In Swedenborgian theology, stones signify holy truths.<sup>64</sup> When referenced together with wood, stones represent intellect, and the wood represents free will.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Harzfeld, Joan, “The Story Book Church,” *The Family Digest*, Undated; See also: Adrienne Kopa, “The Garden Church of San Francisco, A History,” *supra*, pp. 5, 6. When the mountaineer’s wife died soon after, Rev. Worcester officiated at her burial, and many years later he helped the couple’s daughter train as a nurse in San Francisco. (*Ibid.*)

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. See also: Wong, R. and Lawrence, J., “A Brief History of the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church.”

<sup>63</sup> Revs. Worcester, Tobisch, Reddekopp, Capon, Lawrence, and Rivers.

<sup>64</sup> Swedenborg, E., *Secrets of Heaven*, Note 114.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 643, where Swedenborg interprets Habakkuk 2:11: “A stone in the wall cries out, and a beam of wood answers.”



Over the pulpit perches a charred black dove. On the morning after the 1906 earthquake, Rev. Worcester anxiously made his way across town towards the church, fearing the condition in which he would find it. Chaos reigned around him. As he picked his way across the smoldering ruins, he watched the ground where he placed his feet and there, in the street outside an art shop, he found a charred dove amid the debris. The heat had melted its head and neck so that upon cooling it appeared to gaze heavenward. According to Swedenborg, doves represent a state of receiving truths and goods of faith in one who is being regenerated.<sup>66</sup> Rev. Worcester cradled the dove in his arms for the remainder of his trek to the church, where he discovered to his relief that it had survived the earthquake. He placed the dove above the pulpit where it has perched ever since.<sup>67</sup> Some time later the companionship of a white dove was added.

The giant clam shell at the front of the sanctuary serves as the baptismal font. Swedenborgian theology holds that a relationship exists between God and all matter. It is fitting that the vessel, by which scores of babies and adults have been baptized into the Christian faith, was constructed not by human hands, but by God.<sup>68</sup>

The narrow slit of a window over the choir loft is comprised of medieval amber glass, reputedly from Westminster Abbey. Bruce Porter is said to have been in London sketching the cathedral while one of its windows was being repaired. He pleaded to be given the broken pieces and in turn gave the pieces to Rev. Worcester for the Lyon Street church. They were threaded together and crafted into the present window. (Swedenborg visited London many times. It is where most of his theology books were published and is the city from which he passed into the spiritual world. In letters home Swedenborg stated, “whatever is worthy I have seen in this town.” The only location he ever mentioned with particularity is Westminster Abbey, in connection with the tomb of the 17th-century French scholar Isaac Casaubon, which is said to have deeply moved him.<sup>69</sup>)

Traditional pews would not do for Rev. Worcester, who again envisioned something functional with symbolic meaning. Instead of pews, he commissioned rush-woven chairs, each one handmade without nails. The seats are constructed from tule rushes from the deltas of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. The rushes relate back to the story of the infant Moses, whose mother floated him down the river in a little ark

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<sup>66</sup> Swedenborg, E., Secrets of Heaven, Note 870.

<sup>67</sup> Wagner, Dorothy, “What the Guidebooks Miss,” *Coast Banker*, September 30, 1929.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Frost is reputed to have been baptized from this shell. In 1989, Rev. Capon baptized Zelda Rae Williams, the infant daughter of actor Robin Williams. See *Minister’s Report*: June-Sep. 1989.

<sup>69</sup> Trobridge, G., Swedenborg: Life and Teaching 1938, Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2004, pp. 34, 292-293.

made of rushes. Swedenborg states that while rushes denote something of low value, they nevertheless represent that which is derived from the truth. The low value comes from Moses being the “first rising” of the Lord’s divine law.<sup>70</sup> As the rushes cradled the baby Moses, the rush-woven seats support the weight of those who attend services in the sanctuary.

When Rev. Worcester conceived of such seating for his congregation, none readily existed. In 1894, an old Scotsman, A. J. Forbes, was contacted about rush seating for the church. He replied that he hadn’t made a rush seat for 35 years but he thought he could remember how. He submitted the following bid:

*“We will make the eighty chairs for the following prices. In Pine, \$4.00 each. In Maple, \$4.50 each. We will furnish you with the proper flag, make a soaking bot for the boys and learn them to make a cottage mat, i.e. not fancy, at the following terms. I will pick it (the flag) out and learn the boys to put in a good cottage mat for nothing. Soaking bot nothing. If we get the job, we can commence immediately.”<sup>71</sup>*

The church chose the more expensive maple for its chairs. Despite the reference to assistants, Mr. Forbes worked tirelessly in handcrafting each of the chairs himself. But he was not a religious man and wanted no one to mistake that fact. He wrote to Rev. Worcester saying he was worried that people might think he was influenced to do this work by religious feeling. He wanted it understood that all religious feeling had been driven out of him by the churches! (Emphasis in the original.)<sup>72</sup>

The chairs were reputedly financed by a generous gift, intended to be anonymous, from Mrs. Phoebe Apperson Hearst, mother of William Randolph Hearst. Mrs. Hearst had become a close friend of Rev. Worcester while the construction of the church was underway.<sup>73</sup>

Mrs. Hearst’s other gift to the sanctuary was the “Praying Madonna,” a bronze copy of the famous Nuremberg Madonna. A man-made symbol of beauty, the Madonna has struggled to find her place in this sanctuary of natural beauty. She has been moved to and from every conceivable spot in an effort to fit in, thus assuming the affectionate moniker “preying Madonna.” She served in the choir loft for a time, until choir members

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<sup>70</sup> Swedenborg, E., *Arcana Coelestia* 6723

<sup>71</sup> Forbes & Son bid for work, November 1894.

<sup>72</sup> Citation by the San Francisco Examiner, September 30, 1895, referencing letter to Worcester.

<sup>73</sup> Mrs. Hearst was a major benefactor of the University of California, Berkeley, and for a time lived in Piedmont, not far from Rev. Worcester. She was of the Presbyterian faith. Freudenheim, L., “Mission Style Furniture.”

expressed concern that an earthquake could topple her over, causing injuries.<sup>74</sup> The Praying Madonna has found a duly prominent spot in the front row where she currently presides. One cannot now imagine the sanctuary without her. Like her fellow congregants, she earned her place here.

Outside the sanctuary, the garden continues the representation of Swedenborgian theology. Trees from all over the world have been planted here. Their significance, however, does not end with their international citizenry. Upon entering the gates a visitor is confronted by a majestic Irish yew with its spires pointing to heaven, suggesting knowledge of immortality. Nearby is the famed Cedar of Lebanon, prominent fixture of the Old Testament, signifying a spiritual and rational mind. When the tree first arrived in this country, it was too small to survive transplanting. It had to be nursed to strength by the U.C. Berkeley botany department before being deemed safe to present to Rev. Worcester.<sup>75</sup> In 2009, this tree soars into the sky above the church, one of the tallest trees in San Francisco.

Also noteworthy is the selection of the majestic California Redwood, which symbolizes unity of mankind, churches, and different races. The Olive tree from the Holy Land represents love to the Lord and wisdom of love. In 1940 Rev. Tobisch drew a diagram of the garden setting forth the symbolism to be found there. (A copy of the diagram is attached.)

The hand-wrought iron cross that stands in the flower bed near the redwood, is from the Santa Barbara Mission, where Rev. Worcester had traveled for inspiration. He admired the cross, and after returning to San Francisco, found it had been shipped to him.<sup>76</sup>

Those who enter these quiet grounds experience a sense of the spiritual and a leaving behind of the Earthly. That experience is by design. It arises from attention to detail in Swedenborgian theology.

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<sup>74</sup> Council notes, Rev. Lawrence, acting Secretary.

<sup>75</sup> Wagner, D., "What the Guide Books Miss," *Coast Banker*, September 30, 1929.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

# ***INTERLUDE/PRAYER***

*That which makes heaven within a person also makes the Church, for the Church is the Lord's heaven on earth. . . . That is called the Church where the Lord is acknowledged, and where the Word is; for the essentials of the Church are love to the Lord, and faith in the Lord from the Lord; and the Word teaches how a person must live in order to receive love and faith from the Lord.*

*Arcana Coelestia # 10760-1*

*It is important to step back and breathe—to regain our calm, our energy and our focus. We take this breath mindful of the lesson that our history, and lives, have shown us: things go awry when we lose balance. We stumble. We fall. We forget. Things don't work as well as they can. We lose ourselves. We lose our center.*

*Our Minister is not the Church. We are the Church. This process—this journey that we are taking toward issuing the call for our next Minister—is what will define us as a congregation. Not the arrival of this Minister.*

*Our charge is to regain the balance of our needs and of our uses—both the physical and spiritual. Our love, which we hold as our highest offering, has at times proved a disservice to previous Ministers. This often entailed overseeing duties that they neither understood nor had training to perform. The Councils and congregants stepped in to “help,” but the systems, or lack thereof, simply led to new emergencies or imbalances.*

*This Interim process is the moment in time that we need to breathe and balance so that we will come out of it with a call that will show those listening that we know ourselves, our gifts and our faults, and that we are a community that has taken the care to build a structure that will support itself as well as those who lead it.*

# 2

## ***OUR MINISTRIES AND NEEDS***

As captivating as the church's history may be, the purpose of this document is not just to tell a story of days past. It is to use the historical lens to examine the present life of the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church and to look toward the future, while making explicit those long-standing themes that affect the present and may influence—for better or worse—possible futures.

How does this church minister to its congregation and to the wider community? What are the elements that enable and nourish these ministries? Like the roots of a tree, the individual “pieces” that create and support the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church are deeply intertwined and have, over the years, come together to appear sometimes as a whole rather than a collection of parts. If we are to manage and maintain healthy systems, and identify the need for and create new ones, the congregation must first work to know the treasure we have. Only then can we determine the course on which we will ask our stewards to lead us.

### **CHURCH MINISTRIES**

#### **The Pastor's Ministry to the Congregation**

As a congregation, we have traditionally been inward-focused, emphasizing study, fellowship and Sunday worship. Yet “use” is a fundamental aspect of our theology. We are aware that, as a congregation, we could give greater attention to the ways in which we ourselves minister and are of use, both within our church and outside it—in Swedenborg's words, “expressing compassion in action... putting our hearts into service to our country, our community, and our neighbor.” (Arcana Coelestia [7038]).

We have embraced ministers with the gifts and skills to teach, inspire, guide and challenge the congregation through worship, prayer, study, fellowship, arts and service. Aspects of the minister's pastoral role include:

**Worship leader.** The heart of our congregational fellowship and worship is Sunday morning service. We are inspired and guided through engaging, thought-provoking sermons from our minister grounded in Swedenborgian theology, and from occasional guest preachers and parishioners offering unique perspectives. Our liturgy is a touchstone for meditation and inspiration.

**Teaching.** Classes on Swedenborg's writings, and other topics related to spiritual growth, provide a crucial opportunity for in-depth exploration and fellowship. Classes have been offered on Sundays or during the week (often on Wednesday nights), and have been successfully led by the lead minister, other ministers and by parishioners. There may also be opportunities to complement the denomination's distance-learning classes, and the continuing-education programs offered by the Swedenborgian House of Studies.

**Pastoral care.** The minister provides guidance in spiritual matters through individual discussion, counsel, and visiting the homebound and ill.

**Congregational leader.** Caring for our congregation includes leading us forward—marshalling our time, talent and treasure to guide and challenge us to grow beyond our present boundaries in both a spiritual and institutional manner.

### **The Music Program**

When parishioners discuss what is meaningful about the Sunday service, one of the elements most often mentioned is the music. The church's small volunteer choir, bolstered by four paid section leaders/soloists and conducted by the music director, fills the sanctuary with sound, illuminating the worship experience.

The music program also includes occasional concerts, publicized to the wider community. Examples are the choir's holiday concert in December, and performances by guest musicians, such as chamber ensembles.

The music director works closely with the minister to be sure that music chosen for Sunday worship reflects the themes and message for each service. Ministers have differed in the amount of time and input they have wanted to spend on this function. For example, Rev. Lawrence typically chose the hymns for Sunday services himself, while

Rev. Rivers preferred a weekly meeting with the music director at which that week's hymns were among the topics discussed.

The position of music director is a less-than-half-time job, with the music director spending approximately 12 to 15 hours a week working directly for the church. Additional payment for rites and sacraments (such as weddings) is covered, in large part, by a portion of the fees collected for these services.

Regarding rites and sacraments, the music director is in frequent, open communication with all the people involved, including the officiant, office manager and wedding hostess. In the case of weddings, the music director usually communicates directly with the couple to discuss repertoire. For memorial services or baptisms, the music director or the officiant may discuss music with the family.

Concerts are primarily overseen by the music director, with agreement from minister and church council about the nature of the event.

### **Rites and Sacraments**

Weddings, baptisms, memorial services, and other ceremonies—collectively known as rites and sacraments—have long been a significant part of the church's ministry. These services function as an outreach ministry as well as an important spiritual center for a community of seekers that exists outside of the congregation. For thousands of people over the years who have held or attended one of these events, the ceremony has been their first point of contact with the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church, and often with Swedenborgian theology. Many are touched and moved by the intimacy of the sanctuary and the spiritual message expressed through its architecture. Some may go on to become members, others return occasionally to attend services, still others simply cherish their memory of this special place. One is struck by the number of people, not only in the Bay Area but far and wide, for whom the Swedenborgian Church holds a special place in their hearts.

Throughout the years, the church has also welcomed those who may have been shut out from sacraments at other churches because of political or religious controversy. The church has been a leader in performing weddings for same-sex couples and couples of mixed religion or race, as well as memorials for victims of AIDS.

For years, rites and sacraments have provided the vast majority of the church's operating income. Congregational giving makes up a much smaller proportion of income

than is typical at most churches. However, the number of ceremonies and level of funding have been shrinking from the historic highs of the 1990's as more local churches offer these services—with some of those churches offering dedicated parking, which this church does not provide.

Previous ministers have relied on rites and sacraments not only for income, but as an important way to actively build the congregation and reach those who need the ministry. Yet this focus can be time-consuming and stressful for ministers. The minister typically meets with couples or families for a minimum of 1½ hours to design and discuss details of the upcoming ceremony, with more meetings welcomed if the celebrants wish. Additional or ongoing phone and email contact can require substantial time. There have been periods in the life of the church when as many as eight ceremonies took place on a single busy weekend. (A related problem is that congregational events customarily do not take place in the sanctuary or parish house when a sacramental ceremony is being held.) Ministers have found that devoting a large proportion of time to weddings and other rites, has left less time and energy for creating programs that serve the needs of church members. From time to time, other ministers have been hired on a part-time or ad-hoc basis to perform rites and sacraments and alleviate some of the pressure. Although recently a Rites and Sacraments Minister was named, the position was informal and not well articulated. (Couples and families are also welcome to engage their own officiants, and many choose to do so.)

The rites and sacraments ministry is promoted primarily through word of mouth, as well as through advertising, Bay Area wedding planners, and wedding web sites with links to the church's wedding site ([sfwedding.org](http://sfwedding.org)). A focused promotion effort could bolster the ministry and increase the church's outreach, but staffing would need to be in place to handle the activity that resulted from successful outreach campaigns.

### **Programs for Children and Families**

While the church has had strong children's programs during several periods in its history, its young people tend not to stay with the church when they reach adulthood. This may have as much to do with the demographics of San Francisco as with the church's efforts. However, it should be noted that some churches rely on building future generations through the children who grow up in the church, but that model has not been true of the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church.

In the most recent growth cycle, the number of children grew from just a few



enrolled in Sunday School in the mid 1980s, to an average of 40 children each Sunday in the early 1990s. This dramatic expansion was largely the result of efforts by Rev. Lawrence and Rev. Rivers soon after they began their joint ministry. They sent letters to couples who had been married in the church, and to families whose children had been baptized there. The mailing campaign proved so successful that additional space for Sunday school was sought in nearby buildings. Invitations continued to be sent out each summer.

Sunday-school classes are divided by age and grade and take place during the 11:00 a.m. worship service. Teachers have primarily been parents and other adult volunteers from the congregation, with a longtime, non-clergy coordinator (paid a small stipend) responsible for the planning, scheduling and parent communication. Volunteers have also organized the annual family events such as the Christmas pageant and the Easter egg hunt. In various years the program has been overseen by the full-time minister, a part-time minister, an intern, or a parishioner. Care for infants to three-year-olds is provided by paid sitters.

During active years, children have helped prepare the sanctuary before the service or helped clean up after the service. They have assisted with readings, poems or songs on particular Sundays, such as during Advent. On the last Sunday of each month, children come into the sanctuary for the first part of the morning service to hear a “children’s talk” given by the minister.

In the past, older children and teens have participated in confirmation classes, youth groups, and youth retreats, sometimes held in conjunction with Hillside Swedenborgian Community Church in El Cerrito.

From its peak in 1999, when nearly 60 children were enrolled, the Sunday school program has declined to four or fewer children each Sunday. (Rev. Tobisch’s tenure saw a similar pattern.) The most recent decline is due in part to a drop-off in adult parishioners; however, a thriving program for children and families is an important ministry, and the program would benefit from a minister with experience in working with active family programs, and ideas for revitalizing this ministry.

### **Church Operations**

The office manager works closely with the minister and the music director to support their duties. Yet, more broadly, the person in this position traditionally does—or oversees—whatever needs to be done at and for the church that is not included in the

minister's duties. Hence the many titles that are used to describe this position in addition to office manager—Administrative Assistant, Church Secretary, Minister's Assistant, Business Manager, Event Coordinator.

The office manager's stated duties include payroll, paying bills, depositing checks, tracking pledges, acknowledging donations and providing documents for taxes; calling vendors for information and bids; overseeing the work of outside contractors, from electricians and painters to the ongoing janitorial and gardening services; general office duties, such as filing, collating worship bulletins, printing name tags, ordering supplies, sorting mail; sanctuary duties, from changing candles to arranging chairs; redesigning and reordering church literature; updating the database; tracking and maintaining book nook inventory; running light errands, such as pick-up or drop-off of items and post-office runs; filling in for all other non-ministerial positions during vacations.

The office manager is also the person who answers all general inquiries to the church via phone, e-mail and letter...and the person who runs up the stairs, and sometimes up the stairs and out to the sanctuary, every time the buzzer rings signifying that someone has entered either the sanctuary or the parish house.

In addition are the duties related to rites and sacraments, especially weddings. Those half-hour ceremonies take weeks of planning and dozens of hours to produce. The office manager recruits, trains, and supports all the non-pastoral staff and coordinates all of the people associated with these events—including the wedding hostesses, who work for the church (as contractors); the wedding planners, who work for the couple; the caterers; and the families and guests. In addition to scheduling, the office manager tracks revenues and pays staff engaged by the church. Typically, when the office manager becomes overwhelmed, the only paid staff member at the church available to step in and help has been the lead minister. Yet when the minister is at the post office or picking up supplies for the parish house, these errands take time away from the minister's role serving the community's spiritual needs. This is a key organizational hurdle that the church has struggled with for years, and one of the factors contributing to burnout of ministers, staff and volunteers.

Whatever the appropriate solutions, and there are many choices to make in finding those solutions, the clarifying and compartmentalizing of the duties that sustain our community and spiritual home must be addressed, decisions made and plans implemented if we are to move forward and grow as an intentional community that supports its stated purpose and most importantly supports those that serve this

community. Lack of clarity and systems concerning these duties is a major reason why our Lead Ministers have found themselves stretched thin, distracted and unable to give what they have wanted and needed to give to the life of our church.

### **Care and Maintenance of the Facility**

Any building requires maintenance, and an older, historic building requires special attention to remain healthy and sound. Stewardship of the church's buildings and grounds is essential to the continuation of the church's mission. A number of critical issues—including seismic improvements, handicapped accessibility, and conservation and security of the building and historical objects—will need to be addressed, budgeted for and managed in the near future, by the church council and leaders.<sup>77</sup>

One reason that the church has been able to manage on a modest budget thus far is that it has been blessed by the services of a sexton—a parishioner who has for over 20 years generously given of his time, skills and experience as a general contractor. Although he has worked on a staggering variety of maintenance projects over the years—some volunteer, some paid, many a combination of the two—he has no formal professional relationship with the church.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, many parishioners have no idea of the behind-the-scenes work that goes into maintaining our precious buildings and grounds.

Most prominent among the sexton's many ongoing services are his ongoing inspections and maintenance of the sanctuary, during which he identifies existing and potential problems and needed repairs. His duties range from ordering and storing equipment and supplies, to keeping light fixtures, door locks and fuses in good repair, to painting and touching up high-use areas, to setting up furniture for special events and cleaning up litter left on the sidewalk after receptions. He has also managed or carried out a number of special projects, such as overseeing electrical upgrades in the parish house, working on the bathroom remodel in the parish house annex, replacing all toilets in the buildings with low-flow fixtures, overseeing sewer line replacement, replacing door and windows in children's room, and taking the four William Keith paintings in the sanctuary to be cleaned and restored, then re-hanging them.

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<sup>77</sup> See Appendices.

<sup>78</sup> The word *sexton* is derived from the Latin *sacristan*; it means “custodian of sacred objects.” More recently, a sexton was the church officer charged with maintenance of the physical plant.

It is largely because of the sexton's dedicated attention that the church has been able to shift funds from deferred maintenance to more urgent budgetary needs in recent years. Yet the building will soon need costly capital improvements—including critical seismic upgrades and other repairs—to assure its preservation.

To assist in evaluating, budgeting, and moving forward on critical repairs and maintenance, it would be valuable to prepare an inventory of all church property, listing each piece of the physical plant (for example, furnace, garden fences, doors and windows, plumbing fixtures). This would make it possible to systematically track repairs and maintenance, lay out maintenance schedules, and budget to anticipate the needs of our precious structure and grounds.

## **THE INTERIM JOURNEY**

From the time when the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church was left bereft by Joseph Worcester's death, there have been many examples of "unintentional" interim ministers—those who followed beloved, long-term ministers, found themselves in an environment of conflict and confusion, were never completely accepted by the congregation, and departed quickly amid great turmoil.

Upon Rev. Rivers's retirement from parish ministry, the church sought to depart from this tumultuous pattern. Instead of moving immediately to call a new minister, the church council chose, in 2008, to hire a professional interim minister: Rev. Jeffrey Cheifetz, an ordained Presbyterian minister with specific training and experience in interim ministry.

The purpose of the interim period is to prepare the congregation for new pastoral leadership. This partly requires time and space to let go of the leader(s) who have left, so that the new, permanent minister will not be burdened with the unavoidable reality of *not* being a carbon copy of the departed minister. The interim time is also an opportunity to examine assumptions, systems and patterns—some of them functional, some of them not so functional. These systems—some of which have never been thought through, or not for many years—range from office procedures to maintenance schedules to roles and responsibilities to the appropriate relationship between minister and council. The interim process is designed to take the church through the uncomfortable and challenging stages of growth and change: from unconscious incompetence (*not* being aware of what is *not* working), through conscious incompetence (identifying unhealthy patterns), into competence (beginning to change dysfunctional patterns—first consciously, with great effort and attention, then unconsciously, when the new habits become ingrained).

The process of examination and preparation is neither easy nor painless. It is designed to ensure not only that we call the right minister, but that we allow that minister to serve in the way s/he is most gifted—and that we do so in partnership, without putting up unnecessary barriers to success. This document is part of that journey.

In the fall-winter of 2008-2009, church members participated in five lengthy meetings, led by the interim minister, during which they examined their history, strengths and weaknesses. The meetings yielded both expected findings and some surprises.

At the meetings, attendees named several **core values**:

- Swedenborgian theology and its tenets—including goods and truths as essentials of the divine and as products of love and wisdom; our belief in regeneration and that what we create on earth is what we will live in the afterlife.
- The complementarity of this unique theology to many faiths and spiritual belief systems.
- Non-discrimination—all persons are children of God.

Among the church's **strengths**:

- The openness of our ministry to diverse persons, including rites and sacraments performed for the community at large.
- Acceptance of other spiritual viewpoints.
- The unique architecture of the sanctuary and church grounds, and the church's deep connection to the Arts and Crafts movement.
- The music program.
- The allegorical understanding of the Bible that is fundamental to Swedenborgian theology.

Attendees identified a number of challenges, ranging from the abstract (not to simply “live off the laurels of Worcester and the early days”) to highly specific (examine the motto printed in Sunday bulletins to determine whether it is still relevant or should be changed). The major **challenges**:

- A pattern of over-identifying with a pastor and becoming easily infatuated with charismatic persons of authority.
- A need to guard against this infatuation; not to allow rules to be bent or broken because a minister is well-liked.
- Defining and maintaining roles for council, congregation, ministers and staff.
- Maintaining a strong council to whom the ministers report, and maintaining clear roles for ministers and interns in relation to the council.

- Taking care not to breach contracts or church bylaws in the quest for an immediate perceived benefit
- Supporting ministers in their roles and responsibilities to avoid overwork and overstress.
- Promote and maintain the wedding (rites and sacraments) ministry, while at the same time not allowing it to interfere with congregational ministry.
- Maintain connection with the larger denomination and community.

Among the congregation's ideas and **visions for the future**:

- An ordained Swedenborgian minister to lead the congregation.
- Greater use of the church's proximity to the denomination's seminary.
- Wider outreach and service through activities such as dinners for the homeless.
- Defined rules of conduct regarding ethical matters, ranging from finances to personal relationships between ministers and congregants. Awareness and application of denominational rules.
- Classes to encourage study of Swedenborgian theology and its application to daily life.
- Greater involvement of youth—empowering them to program their own youth ministry, and perhaps sending youth to national convention.
- Involving non-parents as volunteers in youth ministry, so that youth may benefit from new adult relationships and non-parents can benefit from ties with families.
- Preservation of the spiritual nature of the church grounds.
- Break the church's economic dependence on weddings.

## **WHAT MAY BE LEARNED FROM THE HISTORY OF MINISTERS**

*“Quickly comes to every organization the necessity of choosing a leader, and in a religious body the leader is the teacher. But the wisdom to teach and to lead the members ... does not come from them but from the Lord. It is this that gives the teacher honor in their eyes; but the willingness to honor, good as it is, must be watched lest it attach to the person instead of the office. The power to choose their teacher, with the power to displace him, rests with the people, as acceptance of teaching does, and so long as it continues intact there can be no hierarchy.”*

Rev. Joseph Worcester, 1897<sup>79</sup>

Some interesting similarities run through the church’s history with its ministers. Almost without exception, the long-term ministers led this church during times in their personal lives when they did not have minor children in the home, giving them greater flexibility to serve the church 24/7, if needed. Rev. Worcester was a lifelong bachelor. Revs. Lawrence and Rivers did not have children during their ministries.<sup>80</sup> Revs. Reddekopp’s and Capon’s children were mostly grown or near-grown. The only long-term minister with the responsibilities of a nuclear family was Rev. Tobisch. However, he enjoyed the benefit of a spouse who did not engage in a career outside the home or church.

The majority of ministers had other forms of financial support in addition to (or, in Rev. Worcester’s case, instead of) their ministerial salaries. They were beneficiaries of family trust funds, or possessed investment income, or had outside practices such as counseling or publishing.

The church’s long-serving ministers have historically guided through strength of personality. While strong and dynamic leadership has successfully revived and energized dormant congregations, it can also, and has, led to dysfunction in how the church community operates, both spiritually and practically.

From the time of Worcester’s death—when a congregational letter acknowledged that “our love for [the church’s] spiritual principles and our affection for the man who through the years has interpreted them for us have become...fused”<sup>81</sup>—to the departure

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<sup>79</sup> Worcester, J., “The Organized Church, A Voice From the West,” *New Church Messenger*, December 8, 1897.

<sup>80</sup> Rev. Lawrence did assume step-parenting responsibilities during his final two years at the church.

<sup>81</sup> Adrienne Kopa, “The Garden Church of San Francisco, A History,” Undated, p.15.



of Rev. Lawrence, over-identification with ministers has led to unanticipated crisis and confusion, creating an unmanageable environment for the ministers who immediately followed.

Examining recent history, Rev. Lawrence was a fountain of energy who became so involved with church operations and council that he was regarded as running the council, rather than answering to it. While congregants valued the perceived “head-heart” complementarity of Rev. Lawrence’s and Rev. Rivers’s styles, the stage was set for conflict when Rev. Lawrence left for his new position at the Swedenborgian House of Studies and Rev. Rivers took on the job of Lead Minister. Rev. Rivers was an impassioned preacher and outstanding teacher who gave her heart to make the church a place of spiritual peace and nourishment. Operations were not her passion, and many operational systems had never been clearly defined. All of this left the church with an exhausted minister and a council—unpracticed in leadership—frantically scrambling to back-fill all of the needed work to support both the minister and the church. Attempts were made to bring in part-time ministerial help for Rev. Rivers, especially with the rites and sacraments duties. However, this effort had the unintended consequence of leaving Rev. Rivers feeling as if she were losing control, and parishioners taking sides between her and the part-time ministers.

When a minister is faced with an overwhelming number of ill-defined tasks, burnout can result, and it is not only the minister who suffers. The congregation also loses when burnout saps the spiritual attention a minister would otherwise give the congregation. And parishioners themselves risk burnout by jumping in to rescue the minister—perpetuating the dysfunctional system, or lack of systems, and leading to new emergencies and imbalances.

A minister who does not share leadership with the council leaves the church vulnerable to ineffective decision-making and to breaching of boundaries, and also risks leaving behind a council ill-equipped to lead when there is a change in the pulpit.

One lesson to be learned is that the society must move forward with both a strong minister and a strong council – with the lines of responsibility, and the responsibilities themselves, clearly defined. Boundaries and a protocol addressing what should be done by whom must be established, in the name of clarity and unity of purpose.

As we delineate roles and responsibilities and identify the most important qualities we seek in a new minister, we must keep in mind that the church is not the next minister. The church is not our historic building. We—the congregation—are the church. Even as we seek the “right person” as minister, we wish to do so informed by an

understanding of our history and ourselves. In discerning who we are—we, the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church—we can be the “right people” as we call the next minister.

# 3

## ***FUTURE USES***

*Before anything is brought back into order, it is quite normal for it to be brought first into a kind of confusion, a virtual chaos. In this way, things that fit together badly are severed from each other; and when they have been severed, then the Lord arranges them in order.*

*Arcana Coelestia # 842*

Before we can be useful, we must determine how we are to be useful. What do we want to tell the world about us that will allow them to see the beauty and value that each of us has found in our church? How do we help the world find us? Why should we exist? Within our church, who serves whom? Does the congregation serve the Minister's vision, or is the Minister's job to manifest the vision created by the Congregation? Does the sanctuary exist to serve the spiritual needs of the Congregation, or is it the engine, the heart that will continue to pump the financial life blood of this physical world into our communal body? Can these views co-exist in harmony? And what do we do once we are comfortable and confident in our answers?

### **LOOKING FORWARD: THE USES OF THE CHURCH COUNCIL**

The Church Council manages our church and is ultimately responsible for seeing that projects and duties are carried out and for approving financial expenditures. While this may seem obvious, our history shows several instances where the Council allowed itself to be subordinate to its Minister. It is not hard to see why this has happened. The Council is made up of hard-working volunteers, the Minister is paid, and when all is going well it seems easiest to let the Minister run the church. Yet we have seen the problems that can arise when our community operates this way.

We have been blessed to be led by extraordinary Ministers through multiple cycles of depletion and abundance, turmoil and harmony. Rev. Tobisch arrived months before the Great Depression and—starting with four parishioners at his first service—presided over the growth of the congregation to a large and lively one. Rev. Tobisch ran the enterprise, drew the people and formed our rites and sacraments into a powerful

outreach ministry as well as the financial support that has sustained us ever since. Rev. Tobisch was succeeded by two strong, experienced and capable Ministers in Rev. Reddenkopp and Rev. Capon. They were more deferential to the Council, but they kept alive and built upon the structures of Rev. Tobisch.

We enjoyed another extensive run of increased attendance and parishioner energy under Revs. Lawrence and Rivers. Rev. Lawrence's drive and talent for operations, however, resulted in Council becoming accustomed to relying on its Minister to take care of whatever needed to be done. We were left with an operating structure which placed a disproportionately heavy burden upon the Lead Minister(s), and indeed, which relied on two ordained Ministers. Upon Rev. Lawrence's departure, our remaining Minister was not prepared to manage all of these duties. Our systems failed our Minister—and this is the responsibility of the Council. We must have systems and procedures in place, with the Council ultimately responsible for church operations, so that the Lead Minister can manage those systems and dedicate more energy towards the pastoral care and spiritual guidance of our community.

With this in mind, our Church Council has taken this interim period to begin addressing the Church's systems so that they may better support our community and our Minister. The Council has worked to define some of our most basic needs and identify efficient, cost-effective systems to support our operations, and ultimately, the work of our Minister. These efforts include defining employment policies; reviewing financial liabilities to protect our community; and moving forward with office systems to protect data, track members' information and communicate more efficiently the news and needs of our church.

It is useful to remember that this church belongs to no Minister; it is God's church; the Church is within each of us. The Minister leads in partnership with the Council; the Minister reports to the Council, who are the elected representatives of the congregation. While it is customary, and expected, that much of the work of the Church be given to the Lead Minister in his/her capacity as Head of Staff, it is the Council that is responsible for the stewardship of the Church.

### **LOOKING FORWARD: THE USES OF MINISTERS**

When we look at the roles we expect our Minister to assume, the list can seem overwhelming. Spiritual guide; teacher; counselor; head of staff; program manager; chief executive officer; chief operating officer; head of recruitment; ambassador; chief

negotiator; even, at times, chief bottle washer and go-fer. We may not consciously think of our Minister this way, but this is what we have asked of our Ministers—and these skills are more than one person should realistically be expected to possess.

More generally, our Minister is the face of our church to our communities, both internally and externally. One source of support that has been underutilized is that of the greater Swedenborgian community. Off and on throughout our history, we have been more or less connected with the broader church community. In recent years we have had a less visible presence at denominational gatherings such as the annual convention. We need to create stronger connections and have been doing so during our interim process, with our Interim Minister and Council President attending both the national Convention and the Pacific Coast Association (PCA) Convention.

Our fellow churches, our local governing body and the denomination as a whole are all wrestling with the same questions that we are faced with, such as declining numbers. In his address at the 2009 PCA Convention, the PCA President expressed the association's desire to be a better resource to its member churches and urged churches to share their strengths with each other to improve our greater community. An example of this type of resource sharing is the wedding model used by Wayfarers Chapel in Southern California; our church may have much to learn (and to share) about outreach and financial health from our fellow church. PCA has funds to assist local endeavors, such as sending teens to Convention or supporting other initiatives. We can do better at participating with those organizations that want to help us.

Our new minister will need to be aware that we are not just a church; we are a spiritual enterprise with many facets, which can be complex to manage. Currently, the enterprise includes, but is not limited to, rites and sacraments events, concerts, classes, lectures and community outreach, as well as congregational worship.

The potential exists to develop further endeavors to minister to the church community, and to reach out beyond the church walls, by utilizing the sanctuary more actively while maintaining respect for its sacred role. During the late summer of 2009 the Church Council moved forward to explore new uses for our facilities—both to extend our reach to a broad community in the hopes of making our church better known and understood, as well as generating greater revenue for the church to fund projects that will further our spiritual mission. This effort has been led by a volunteer from our church community who has committed to at least six months of work toward researching and creating these initiatives. The vision for this effort is to create a self-sustaining role, an Operations Director, who will oversee our facilities to ensure their upkeep and

appearance so that they may endure for future congregants even as they are used in more active and varied ways. In addition to the potential to generate additional income for the church, the position would take some of the administrative burden off both the Lead Minister and the Office Manager, so that they can focus more of their energies toward the needs of the congregation. The Lead Minister would oversee this function and work with the Operations Director to maintain clear standards for the use of our property.

We continue to examine the meaning and purposes of our rites and sacraments ministry. To view this ministry as a “wedding business” does a profound disservice. Yes, rites and sacraments are an important source of financial support and have introduced many future members to the church. But the deeper purpose has always been to unite families and communities, bringing the Lord’s blessing to our earthly commitments. The ordained ministers who perform these ceremonies encounter and touch people at moments of great spiritual need. Can we better support our Rites and Sacraments Ministers in addressing these needs?

The role of the building and grounds also needs to be articulated. What is the relationship of the congregation to the building, and what are the congregation’s stewardship responsibilities? What ministry might there be for the building among those who are passionate about San Francisco history and architecture? What are other ways in which to engage with the community for mutual benefit? Can the congregation afford to finance the maintenance which can no longer be deferred, and if not, what are the options? Whatever the case, it seems clear that we must find a way to relieve our minister of the burden of maintaining our sacred sanctuary, while allowing the building to fulfill its role as a ministry and treasure not only to our congregation, but to the wider community.

As Head of Staff, the Lead Minister is ultimately the day-to-day supervisor of anyone working for and/or being paid by the church. These are the current roles that our church has staffed and that the Lead Minister directly oversees, to ensure alignment of all the spiritual endeavors of the church. What follows is a description of functions/roles, not necessarily positions:

Office Manager: The Lead Minister’s partner on a daily basis. This position supports the Lead Minister, while also possessing the initiative to take duties and chores off the plate of the Lead Minister, and the capabilities to follow through to complete these projects.

Music Director: The third of the three salaried positions that we currently have on staff, in addition to the Minister and Office Manager. (The Music Director also oversees the four section leaders in the choir, who are paid contractors). This is a part-time position of

12 to 15 hours a week. Special events, such as weddings, require additional time, with the extra hours compensated through fees paid directly by those using the services.

Rites and Sacraments (R&S) Minister: These ceremonies have been and will continue to be performed by a variety of ministers, and some participants bring in their own non-Swedenborgian officiants. It would be valuable to have an ordained Swedenborgian minister formally designated as the Lead for R&S, with the role more clearly defined than in the past, to provide continuity as well as greater potential for outreach and ministry. This would also free more time for the church's Lead Minister to devote to the core needs of the Congregation (it has been recommended that the Lead Minister devote no more than 20 percent of his/her time to Rites and Sacraments).

Children and Family Ministry Coordinator: This position has been performed both by ordained ministers and by lay people. The current coordinator is a parishioner who receives a small stipend.

Wedding Hostess: People in these positions work on the day of a wedding, with some pre-event preparation work, and are paid out of the proceeds the church earns from the event. The Office Manager is currently responsible for recruiting, training and managing these contractors.

Sexton: Generally the Sexton's work has been pro bono, but the Sexton has at times been compensated for his efforts, depending on the time and labor required for a specific project.

Contractors: The parameters of these positions depend on the services being provided. Ideally, professional services (legal, financial, etc.) report to the Church Council and are supported by the Office Manager. General maintenance services (gardener, janitor, painter, etc.) work and communicate with the Office Manager.

Operations Director: Operations duties are currently carried out by volunteers and include investigating ways to extend our reach into non-pastoral communities and generate additional revenue. However, any functions that are created will need to be performed by church staff. If the Operations Director eventually becomes a staff position, it could focus on maintaining the buildings and grounds as well as creating revenue-generating uses for the property. This position might also manage support staff.

Volunteers: A parishioner maintains the church web site. On Sundays parishioners act as greeters, ushers and liturgists. The after-service coffee hour, and refreshments for special events, are also provided by parishioners. While volunteer committee heads recruit and

coordinate much of this assistance, the Lead Minister will need to be aware of these needs and to urge congregants to become involved.

It is rare that a single individual excels at more than one or two of the areas that are important to ministry—worship, pastoral counseling, education, outreach, administration. As we prepare to call our next minister, rather than expecting one person to possess all these skills, it would be wise for us to ask candidates to tell us which of the several areas they feel called in. We can then work with these candidates to understand how the needs of the church might be met given their call.

Perhaps one candidate will be truly called to worship and education. S/he will be passionate about caring for families: children in Sunday School, youth testing their understanding, adults engaging in the joy of spiritual study. S/he might preach two to three Sundays per month and focus on fostering the development of imaginative lay leaders. Under this minister's leadership, another minister may be called to take on the responsibilities of the R&S ministry part-time, working closely with the Lead Minister to ensure that services and outreach are conducted in a manner consistent with Swedenborgian theology.

Another candidate may be truly called to worship and outreach. S/he will be passionate about working in a community filled with seekers interested in spirituality; the R&S ministry may become one means of engagement with this community along with other programs. S/he will preach two to three Sundays a month and bring a wealth of other thinkers to our community. Under the leadership of this minister, an associate may be called who takes on the responsibilities of the congregation's educational programs, some of which may also draw in new members.

In any of these cases, an Operations Director might be engaged to manage the buildings and grounds, outreach, and administrative responsibilities, which may include junior staff.

## **LOOKING FORWARD: THE USES OF THE CONGREGATION**

*True worship of the Lord involves being useful. And useful actions, during our live in the world, involve each one of us doing our job rightly, whatever our position may be, and in this way serving our country, our communities, and our neighbor, from the heart. It also involves acting with integrity toward the people we associate with, and doing our*



*duty prudently according to the character of each of them.*  
*Arcana Coelestia #7038*

While we are the largest and healthiest Swedenborgian congregation in our denomination, we have seen a steady drop in attendance at our weekly services over the last 10 years. This trend has left us just slightly ahead of where we were in 1990, shortly after the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church transitioned to new ministers. Despite the lowered attendance, we have had a dramatic increase in congregational giving—from \$1,000 per Sunday attendee per year in 2001 to \$2,800 per attendee/year in 2008—beginning in 2003 when the congregation was specifically asked to increase giving. This suggests two facts about our congregation: that they will step forward and support our community financially when asked—but that they need to be asked. This is something we must be conscious of as congregants—how can we take the initiative, rather than expecting someone else to step forward, and rather than waiting to be asked?

The church community also depends upon its members' time and talents, with some cheerfully responding to calls for help and others seeing needs and creating ways to meet them. In addition to the weekly coffee-hour and hospitality volunteers, a parishioner with internet expertise built, and others have continued to maintain, the church's web site; a retired secretary volunteered to organize the minister's offices; volunteers serve on the council, sing in the choir, decorate the parish house and sanctuary, keep the buildings in repair. During the past decade, parishioners have assumed more and more of the tasks involved in organizing and running the annual Memorial Day Weekend retreat in Sonoma County, with many of the retreat workshops (as well as virtually all the logistics) now conducted by parishioners.

In the late 1990s, roughly 20 parishioners took it upon themselves to form, without clergy, a spiritual growth study (and social) group that lasted several years. This intention and commitment to create in community is still alive and healthy: Last fall, two brand-new church members proposed and formed a year-long creative writing group that was so popular it became oversubscribed—an example of our congregation's passion for the artistic expression of our faith.

Volunteerism has been and continues to be an important component of our community's health—not only responding to calls for help, but also being alert to needs and finding ways to meet them. What we lack, and what would help to ensure ongoing health, are systems and succession plans that allow hard-working volunteers to contribute without burning out, and that allow us to quickly fill the gaps when volunteers are no

longer able to serve. These systems might begin with keeping detailed records of our activities—not only to avoid duplication of effort, but to preserve knowledge and learnings while they are fresh, tracking our history as it is being written.

Let us end our new beginning and begin our new church in the words that make us a community:

*Affirmation of Faith*

We worship the one God, our Savior Jesus Christ: Creator, Redeemer, Regenerator; who brings us into being, frees us from evils, and seeks to give us the full humanity for which we have been created. Today the Lord comes to us anew in the spiritual understanding of the Holy Word. With its enlightenment and renewal of life, this disclosure is the Second

Coming in Spirit, making possible a new and larger life as we love God and love the good which comes from God in all people. So far as we honor the Lord in worship and in life as the visible God in whom is the invisible Divine, we walk in the light of the Holy City, New Jerusalem.

*Amen.*

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