

Bishop William Swing wants a U.N. for religions

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William Swing has preached before a crowd of 200,000 gathered along the Pamba River in India, held hands with Mother Teresa, visited the Dalai Lama at his palace in exile, and was told, "All the best, Yank," in a private audience with Pope John Paul II.

As head of the Episcopal Church in California for 27 years - he retired in 2006 - Bishop Swing led the charge to help those with HIV at a time when fear ruled and the disease was called "gay cancer." His support of gun control brought threats to his life. His welcoming of the homeless into Grace Cathedral in San Francisco prompted an outcry from neighbors.

Even his father, who went to church only once - to hear him preach - remarked at the end of the service, "You really told those sons of bitches a thing or two."

At 74, William Swing, born and reared in Huntington, W.Va., is hardly letting up. His latest endeavor is nothing less than uniting the religions of the world.

"For this, I have been called the Antichrist, New Age, nuts and an apostate," Swing said with a smile in his office in the Presidio of San Francisco. "Religions can be a reason for people to destroy one another. But there are people in every society who want to build a civil society. We support them."

Swing, who sees himself as a "spiritual entrepreneur," took out a \$1 million line of credit to build his organization, United Religions Initiative. "When I got the line of credit, I was living on a clergy's salary. I have gambled everything on this."

The wager appears to have paid off. United Religions Initiative, marking its 10th anniversary this year, is in 78 countries, bringing together Christians and Jews, Hindus and Muslims, missionaries and animists, and Mormons and Mennonites. The organization has taken orphans off the streets of Pakistan, brokered peace talks in northern Uganda and integrated child soldiers back into their villages, and drawn Palestinian and Jewish women together in the Middle East.

"Bishop Swing is a leader with a conscience," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who got to know him in the early 1980s, when she was mayor. "He led the church to provide the first nightly shelter for the homeless within the cathedral, and then developed a wonderful apartment complex for homeless families. He is a kind man."

San Francisco philanthropist Cissie Swig, who has known Swing since he was bishop and now serves on the United Religions Initiative advisory board, said, "He has made a commitment for the rest of his life to bring people together. I think individuals have to agree to disagree, and to respect differences."

Rabbi Stephen Pearce, head of Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, said of his friend: "Bill is religion-blind, color-blind, blind to the differences of people. From his point of view, there is more that unites us than divides us. His mission is phenomenal."

Unlikely road to religion

William Edwin Swing's path to religion was an unlikely one. His mother, Elsie Belle Holliday, was a Methodist who went to church only occasionally. His father, William Lee Swing, was raised a German Catholic (his family name was Schwing) and was "deeply suspicious of religion." His parents were divorced when he was 13.

"My dad was a golf pro who drank too much. He was a big star. A big mouth. An egotistical jerk," laughed Swing, who inherited his mother's optimism and longevity and his dad's bright blue eyes and love of golf (he has a 9 handicap). "My dad's grandparents came from Germany. They all drank beer, blew glass and played sports. I'm the first man in my family not to blow glass."

Huntington, then a town of about 90,000, was "a terrific place to grow up," Swing said. "We rode our bikes everywhere. Everyone boxed - and just about everyone played marbles."

Laughing until his eyes watered, Swing said, "For physical education, the coach would blindfold you, put gloves on your hands, and you'd flail around trying to hit someone. I thought it was great."

One day when Swing was 10 or 11, he and his buddies were out playing football in the dead of winter.

"We were in the back lot of St. Peter's, an Episcopal church, and the priest came out and said, 'Hey, boys, Christmas is coming. How many of you would like to wear a uniform and light candles?' I thought, 'That's within my skill set.' This particular church was the center of the community for all of us boys."

Fingering the heavy gold ring of a bishop, set with an amethyst and the seal of the Diocese of California, he joked, "So I became an acolyte, and next thing you know, I was a bishop."

Turning serious, he recalled a particular sermon at St. Peter's. "The priest said, 'I want you to think about when there was no Huntington, W.Va.; when there were no oceans, no mountains, no Earth, no sun, no moon; there was nothing, there was only God.' I followed that every step of the way. It dawned on me the immensity and mystery of all of this."

After graduating from Kenyon College, Swing attended the Virginia Theological Seminary. He was ordained a deacon in 1961, and ordained a priest in the steel town of Wheeling six months later.

Swing was newly married to Mary Taylor, whom he'd met on a blind date at a square dance.

"I thought Bill was cute when I first met him," Mary Swing said. "He was blond and blue-eyed - beautiful eyes - and was funny. For me, it was love right away. It took him a little longer."

Chuckling, she said that sermonizing was not one of her husband's God-given gifts. "They wanted to fire him from his first job. He was told his voice was so weak, and even if it weren't so weak, it wouldn't be worth listening to."

But Swing persevered, working on content and delivery. After serving as an assistant for several years at St. Matthew's in Wheeling, he was appointed vicar and given two churches in the area: St. Thomas' and St. Matthew's.

"At St. Thomas, we went from a church that was a little plumbing garage to building a brand-new church on top of a hill with 3 acres of land," Swing recalled. He soon had the idea of getting a third church.

Church at a racetrack

Mary Swing recalled: "Bill would drive past this racetrack, Waterford Park. One day he stopped there. It had everything: a grocery store, a barbershop, a bank, but not a church. He talked to the president of the track, and said, 'Why don't we start a church for the hot walkers and jockeys and all of that?'

"We loved going to the races. When they passed the plate for the offering, they'd give us tips on horses. We'd have dinner, bet on the horses, and make enough to pay for the evening. Bill was always creative."

In 1969, he was sent to Washington, D.C., where he was rector at St. Columba's. There he became friends with George H.W. Bush, then head of the CIA.

"When George became president, he would send me handwritten notes - he has terrible handwriting," Swing said. "During the AIDS epidemic, I gave him briefings. I got to stay at Camp David and golf with him. He's a good hacker. He was fun to play with and plays fast."

When Swing started at St. Columba's, the church had 300 members. By the time he left in 1979, it was 2,000 members strong, making it one of the largest churches in America.

Consecrated bishop

On Sept. 29, 1979, Swing, then 43, was consecrated bishop of California.

"There was a big service, and it was ceremonial and historic," Swing said. "But I couldn't wait to get consecration over with so I could work."

In late December 1980, Swing got a call from Feinstein.

"She said, 'We've got a little homeless problem. Will you help us through the winter?' The first night, Jan. 1, 1981, we housed 40 people. The second night was 250 people. Before long, it was 1,000, which is when we had to move to another site." Episcopal services now house 60 percent of San Francisco's homeless population.

Sitting in his office in the Presidio, surrounded by personal mementos and photos showing him with an array of religious leaders, from Mother Teresa to Hindu leader Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram, Swing reflected on his proudest moments as bishop.

"Making it 27 years," he said. "Staying married. Being sane, and having a sense of humor at the end of the day. We lived through the AIDS epidemic, the Oakland hills fire, the earthquake, and women's ordination, and gay and lesbian ordinations.

"Part of the job is dealing with things you have no control of. The other part is that you get to innovate. We started the homeless program. We started the Community Bank of the Bay in Oakland to make loans to minority folks who couldn't get loans. We started an academy for lay people, a school for deacons and the Canal Ministry in Marin, and we raised \$110,000 to support a seminary in Papua New Guinea."

Swing retired at age 70. "After 27 years on the job, you get deeply tired. As a Christian, I wanted to go back to my amateur status. Now when I go to church in Burlingame, for the first time in 47 years, I get to sit with my wife."

A new goal to unite religions

The idea for United Religions Initiative came about in 1993, when Swing was asked to host at Grace Cathedral the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations.

"I said, 'Sure,' and went to bed that night thinking the nations of the world have met every day for 50 years, yet the religions of the world have not spoken. So I figured if there is a United Nations, there has to be a United Religions."

He and his wife set out in 1996 on a global tour to meet religious leaders of the world, including the Dalai Lama at his palace in India. It took an additional four years of planning, debating and writing the organization's charter for United Religions to be founded.

Charles Gibbs, an Episcopal priest who serves as the initiative's executive director, said, "Even though I was born and raised in the Episcopal Church, I never believed Christianity was the only answer. Religions do a lot of good, and evoke the absolute best in people. But extremism happens when religions claim to have the unique path to the Ultimate."

At 74, Swing counts his blessings, notably his two children and three grandchildren. His mind and body are strong. He carries his own bag and plays 18 holes. He has an assistant, but prefers to call people directly.

When he thinks of God, he doesn't envision some kind of "nice old gent."

"The nice old gent would not have created the world the way it is," Swing said. "The nice old gent would have created Mister Rogers' neighborhood. I think hell exists on Earth. A lot of people live in hell."

Asked what he will ask God if he gets the chance, he quipped, "Besides who shot John Kennedy?"

"I'd have two questions," he said, folding his hands in his lap. "How'd I do? And, is this what you had in mind for me? Then I'd ask: How are *you* doing?"

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