

New group to update **Catholic Charities** with fresh ideas



BY LIDIA WASOWICZ

Award-winning journalist Wasowicz, former West Coast science editor and senior science writer for United Press International, has been writing for Catholic San Francisco since 2011.

Defying the adage that youth is wasted on the young, Catholic Charities San Francisco has launched a group of professionals ages 21 to 40 to infuse its initiatives with time, talent and treasure in line with the shifting needs of evolving times.

The span of personalities, perspectives and positions represented by the initial crop of participants bodes well for advancing the nonprofit's aim of attracting a younger generation of doers and donors to its 35-plus programs that offer shelter, safety, security and sustenance to more than 100,000 children, teens, adults and seniors in the San Francisco Archdiocese.

The several dozen attendees at two get-togethers preceding the Jan. 30 inaugural meeting included a 22-year-old University of California, Berkeley, mathematics major who converted as a child, a 34-year-old aerospace industry official, a 35-year-old economist who grew up Protestant near Toronto, Canada, a 36-year-old development manager drawn in by a relative who once headed Catholic Charities Los Angeles and a 38-year-old think tank analyst.

"My hope for this program is that it is both beneficial to Catholic Charities and the members who make up the Young Professionals group," said Bridget Mahoney, 35, Catholic Charities director of development and instigator of and adviser to the budding network. "I hope it opens a new revenue stream for our development team to tap into and creates more active volunteers, and that it is something that people will want to be a part of."

Fueling those hopes, the startup has engendered enthusiasm and elicited engagement.

"My assessment of the program is one of admiration," said Victoria Marcondes, who was 6 when she secretly began fostering a relationship with



Lorna Baggott shares what Catholic Charities campaign, "Serving with Love" means to her. Right, interested Young Professionals hear from Catholic Charities Development Team about the vision for the group.

God by walking into open churches after school, memorizing the rosary without possessing one and reading the Bible online. At 16 she received the sacraments of initiation on April 20, 2019, despite parental opposition. “The group gives me hope for the future of our local communities and the United States as a whole.”

The parishioner at St. Hilary Church in Tiburon has committed to not only put her faith into action but also persuade others to follow suit.

“I see my peers at school and in my community look so lost and helpless,” said Marcondes, a UC Berkeley senior planning a career in finance. “They turn to substances and harmful experiences rather than loving communities and God.”

Young Professionals can give them direction, purpose and joy, she noted.

That direction includes opportunities to answer Christ’s cardinal call to help the poor, said Jon Hartley, a transplant from Canada and Protestantism.

The parishioner at Church of the Nativity in Menlo Park, who became Catholic in 2008 after reading the seminal works of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas at the University of Chicago and who volunteers at the Order of Malta and Missionaries of Charity, looks forward to increased involvement with the Catholic Charities youth group.

As does Lorna Baggott, development manager of the Order of Malta Clinic of Northern California who was inspired to check out the newly minted program by her great-uncle Msgr. William Barry, a former director of Catholic Charities Los Angeles, one of 13 sister agencies in the state.

Baggott, a parishioner at St. Dominic’s Church in San Francisco, applauds Young Professionals for opening the door to new friendships, promoting community outreach, living out the faith and involving the next generation of Catholic leaders.

Similarly hooked, Richard Maher, a policy advocate and analyst for American First Policy Institute

and parishioner at Star of the Sea Church in San Francisco, is “very much willing to do anything that is asked of me.”

He sees unlimited benefits in offering “Christ’s healing ministry ... to those most wounded among us” while sharing struggles and solutions with fellow Young Professionals facing challenges posed by San Francisco’s temporal temptations and secular sway.

Kirsten Lukens, a subcontract manager at global security, defense and aerospace contractor Lockheed Martin, added: “I look forward to meeting and connecting with more Catholic young adults and serving our community sincerely and wholeheartedly.”

That’s just the outcome envisioned by Mahoney and colleagues.

“This consortium is already an inspiration,” said Ellen Hammerle, chief executive officer. “Meeting so many young Catholics who are invigorated by this opportunity, they yearn to give back, and doing so through CCSF programs and services is an amazing bridge for them that is aligned with their religious beliefs and values.”

While Catholicism predominates among those expressing interest thus far, Young Professionals welcomes members of all spiritual persuasions and invites the numerous San Francisco Bay Area associations with a parallel profile and purpose to support its ministry and mission.

“Driving factors to get involved also include benefits that this group will offer such as leadership development, networking, expanding upon charitable works, seeking deeper friendships and relationships and opportunities to connect with our actual board members, all through fundraising, volunteering and advocacy,” Mahoney said.

Aware of their prime location, organizers strayed out of the box to ensure they benefit from the area’s massive concentration of entrepreneurial and technical know-how.

“This Young Professionals group brings fresh >





Lauren Diefendorf, Grace Kiesel, Sabrina Carpenter, Dana Diefendorf, and Clare Rudolph gathered at Howells Wine Bar to learn how to join CCSF Young Professionals.

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KIRSTEN LUKENS

perspectives and diverse talents to our organization, enhancing our ability to develop innovative solutions,” said Hugo Kostelni, a board member under 40. “By incorporating younger voices and skills, we strengthen our capacity to address complex social challenges effectively.”

The team has pioneered strategies that take into account members’ rare abilities and limited availability.

“This program offers an opportunity to apply professional skills to meaningful social impact in ways traditional volunteering models don’t always allow,” Kostelni said.

Under the plan, Young Professionals create projects that are carried out virtually and in person over six to eight weeks and reflect one of Catholic Charities’ four focal points: homelessness and housing; children and youth; immigration; and aging support services.

“We want to assure anyone who is joining that this group will not take away from your life but supplement it,” said Elizabeth Driskill, communications and marketing coordinator.

And enrich it by expanding social capital, developing leadership skills, learning from peers, enhancing a resume, discovering career opportunities, finding a “side gig,” giving of self and staying inspired, Mahoney said.

“I want this group to be something that adds value and meaning and not something that is viewed as an obligation or constraint,” she said.

Early projections indicate her wish is within reach.

Marcondes will never forget her introductory evenings with Young Professionals, when she found consolation, camaraderie and commitment to provide solace to those feeling lonely, hopeless or unloved.

“Knowing there was a group dedicated to connecting young Catholics felt like a dream come true,” she recalled.

It was likewise for Lukens, a newlywed who met her husband at Lourdes, who sees service as the cornerstone of her future family’s life and who sets faith as the guidepost for the directions she takes and decisions she makes.

“Having a network of people I can connect with morally, spiritually and socially is comforting and empowering in navigating personal and professional milestones,” she said.

Such Christ-centered connectivity sets the group apart from many of the other nonprofits proliferating in San Francisco, said Tony Alioto, director of marketing and communications.

“At the end of the day, the Catholic Charities Young Professionals group is driven by faith, by the belief that all people, regardless of circumstance, deserve to be loved,” he said. ■



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or visit www.CatholicCharitiesSF.org/youngprofessionals