

Community Relations Involvement To Expand in '97

BY DAVE MCNEILL, MANAGING EDITOR

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How do local communities benefit from the presence of the SGI-USA? Does the community view the local SGI-USA organization as an asset? These are some of the questions posed to joint territories in the SGI-USA Community Relations Guidelines for 1997.

"We want to stimulate discussion and thought," Community Relations Director Al Albergate says. "We want people to start thinking about what it is we can do as an organization in our communities."

Historically, the SGI-USA has encouraged individual members to get involved and win trust in society by responding to the community's diverse needs. While individual contributions will remain vital, the guidelines say, the public relations department is also asking that the joint territories themselves sponsor some kind of organizational activity.

The specific kind of action will be left to each joint territory to decide. The guidelines suggest that each area consider having one or two activities in the coming year under three general categories: community involvement, United Nations education and support, and interfaith relations. Community involvement may include community center-based activities, such as SGI-USA exhibitions or open houses.

The guidelines were left purposely general, Mr. Albergate says, because each area is so different and the needs of the community vary greatly.

The guidelines are part of the SGI-USA movement's natural evolution.

For the past several years, the organization has been broadening its focus from internal growth to its place in the larger community. The friends of the SGI idea is a case in point.

"With the start of that movement, we realized that our approach to kosen-rufu should include not just those people who practice Buddhism but those who supported our movement," he said.

Another idea coming to the fore is the idea that SGI-USA community centers are part of and perhaps should be open to the larger community where appropriate.

An impetus for this idea is the story of the opening of a new culture center in Argentina last year.

SGI President Ikeda suggested that the culture center be a center for the entire community. In fact, a chorus and an orchestra from the city played at the opening ceremony, helping the local SGI organization celebrate the new building.

The tone of the guidelines makes it clear that this is not a mandate.

"We simply want people to consider having activities, and we understand the great differences in each area," Mr. Albergate says. "Some areas are more experienced than others with community involvement. For those areas with little experience, perhaps they could start with an open house or hosting an SGI-USA exhibition."

The important part, he emphasizes, is discussion and building consensus to the point where everyone is comfortable and enthusiastic about the specific project before they get involved.

Based on this consensus, the public relations department hopes that members in each area can ask themselves how they can become more involved in the community, with the understanding that, as the guidelines say, "good community relations are a necessary element in the creation of a peaceful world."

Copies of the 1997 guidelines have been sent to each joint territory office and public relations committee.

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