

## It's Not Just Niceness

Interfaith activities aren't just about "niceness toward each other," the Rev. James Lawson said at an interfaith discussion held recently at the SGI-USA community center in Santa Monica, Calif. They're about uniting toward a common goal. "Human solidarity is a *must* for the kind of world we want," the noted civil rights activist stressed.

These sentiments resonate strongly with the spirit underlying the SGI-USA's efforts at interfaith dialogue in recent years. The world's problems cannot be solved by one person, one country or one religious organization alone. People must transcend religious differences and work together for solutions, an idea expressed in Article 7 of the SGI Charter: "SGI shall, based on the Buddhist spirit of tolerance, respect other religions, engage in dialogue and work together with them toward the resolution of fundamental issues concerning humanity."

As good neighbors, we join with others in our communities to deal with the tough issues facing people of all faiths. "It is no exaggeration to say that human solidarity, the bonds of humanity, are at the very core of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism," SGI President Ikeda writes in his 1996 peace proposal.

He goes on to raise an important point about how cooperation with other faiths squares with Nichiren Daishonin's harsh criticisms of the major religions of his day. "Because of its doctrinal vigor, Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism has often been viewed historically as rejectionist or dogmatic," he says. "This, however, must be termed a biased and one-dimensional view. While he consistently maintained the rigor and purity of his teaching, Nichiren Daishonin also emphasized: 'The Nirvana Sutra states: "The sufferings of all living beings are the sufferings of the Buddha." And I say: "The sufferings experienced by all people are the sufferings of Nichiren"' (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 758)."

As is clear in this and other statements, Nichiren Daishonin's intent was to relieve the sufferings of and bring happiness to all people. When he spoke harshly of other faiths, he did so in a climate where he had to distinguish and protect the integrity of his teaching. Because the other sects were united to destroy him, there was no basis on which the Daishonin could work together with them. Nevertheless, his underlying desire was to show people the way to happy, fulfilling lives.

When we, as followers of Nichiren Daishonin, engage in interfaith activities, we do so embracing this same concern. As practitioners of a world religion, we are well aware of our social mission to use the wisdom that arises from our practice to deal with issues of the day. And toward that end, we need to talk with like-minded people to create ways in which we can cooperate toward our common goals.

For much of the SGI-USA's history, we were concerned primarily with establishing a viable organization in this country. Now that such a foundation has been laid — and we have been freed of the parochial ideas of a conservative priesthood — interfaith activities by appointed representatives are becoming more common, as are all manner of community outreach. (Official interfaith activities are approved by the joint territories and joined in by representatives the joint territories appoint.)

Our interfaith activities are not about doctrinal debate or compromise. As SGI members, we maintain the spirit to spread our teachings to individuals who are seeking answers in their daily lives. Our conviction does not preclude us from respecting others, though. Through religious dialogue, we can learn about other faiths and others can learn about us and our beliefs. In the end, we will likely find much common ground on which we can

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stand together.

“We can start by discussing the mutual problems that we face as human beings,” Shin’ichi Yamamoto says in *The New Human Revolution*. “Or we can discuss the imperatives for achieving world peace from a humanitarian standpoint.” He goes on to share Josei Toda’s view that if the Daishonin, Shakyamuni, Jesus Christ and Mohammed could meet, they would quickly reach a consensus on what needed to be done to ensure humanity’s happiness.

“Since such a conference, unfortunately, is not possible, the only solution is for the different groups’ believers today to return to the spirit of these religious teachers — who devoted their lives to the people’s salvation — and talk with one another from that standpoint,” Shin’ichi concludes.

The SGI promotes various activities in the realms of peace, education and culture — all to contribute to the betterment of society. Based on Nichiren Daishonin’s compassion for all people, the SGI will continue to make interfaith activities a natural and important aspect of our movement.

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