

**It's Up To You, New York**  
**By RIC ORNELLAS and LESLIE WINES**  
**New York Correspondents**

*In June 1996, when SGI President Ikeda last came to New York, he asked the members here to create a “New” New York. On a recent Sunday afternoon, district representatives from the New York East Region — starting from downtown, through Chinatown, up the Eastside (including the United Nations) and along the East River, through Harlem and ending in the Bronx — met at the New York Culture Center to discuss the “New” New York. Participants included Philip Bonds, Diana T. Cruz, Lucrecia Evans, Mark Godwin, Keewon Chung, Albert Lee, Ken Ferrara, Priscilla Crowell and Jeannette Emmarco. Alan Ellis moderated. Following are excerpts from their discussion.*

**Ellis:** In light of your experience as a district leader, what do you feel President Ikeda meant by a “New” New York?

**Bonds:** I think President Ikeda wants us to speak from the heart and become a family, a dynamic family!

**Cruz:** I feel there needs to be a bringing together of our organization with the diverse society that we live in. We need to work together on common goals like education, health and culture — concerns to all.

**Evans:** I feel President Ikeda meant for us to realize the importance of propagating Buddhism and actually living every moment as a bodhisattva.

**Godwin:** It's been two years since President Ikeda's visit, and I'm just beginning to really ponder his vision for New York. I think he is always asking us to create greater unity among our district members, making it easier for them to achieve their goals and giving them time to focus on showing greater actual proof in daily life.

**Chung:** In Korea, where I'm from, the members weren't allowed to meet in public because of the government's suppression [in the past]. The SGI is now recognized in [Korean] society, and their activities — they often sponsor community cleanups — are valued. We need to do the same in New York.

**Lee:** In 1996, I was a driver in President Ikeda's carpool. I was with him when he stopped one day at a park on the Westside Highway. He remarked on the many different kinds of people there, and immediately he went to speak to the children. I felt this was the “New” New York — our youth and our diversity.

We have so many young people in Chinatown, and they are full of energy. But they don't like to go to discussion meetings. Their parents bring them, but they are bored. I've noticed that there are many churches in China, and they're always having outings in the summertime for the kids and they love it. So that's what we're planning for our youth division: outings!

**Ellis:** What actions have you taken toward the realization of a “New” New York in your district?

**Chung:** In our district right now we're going through growing pains. Most of us never practiced together before. We're just getting to know one another through district activities like the monthly discussions meetings, planning meetings and home visits.

**Godwin:** We're new to one another. You want to have the same deep bonds, maybe even deeper bonds than before, but first you have to get to know one another. The recent reorganization has thrown us into a new stew, and it is all churning and cooking. It really is like culture shock.

**Bonds:** I think we should go back to the basics in our districts — chanting together, dialogues, gongyo practice, home visits — so the members are filled with joy. Then they take that joy from the district back to the community.

**Ferrara:** I've had more fright than joy by this reorganization. I've practiced for many years, and prior to 1990 we had many guidelines and leaders who told us what to do. I like rules and regulations because it makes it easier to practice and to tell the members what to do. I like being correct — but this is more challenging.

**Godwin:** I used to feel frightened when we first reorganized, too! Not anymore. The other district leaders are making the same transition that I am, and they're so committed that they inspire me forward.

**Cruz:** In my district I tried to open up to the members. It was a big personal step for me because I was raised to be wary of others. But I'm glad I did because I feel more trust from the members.

**Lee:** I look to develop our youth, so whenever I visit them, I talk to their siblings and try to get to know them. I want to attract them in the future to our activities.

**Evans:** In our district we have 10-hour chanting sessions every Sunday toward the revitalization of Harlem. We also had a Spring Festival to introduce the SGI in our neighborhood, and last night we had a meeting to introduce Buddhism to guests.

**Cruz:** Our district's men's division members can't make it to our weekday discussion meetings because of schedule conflicts. When we changed to weekend meetings, we had one man attend. We were so happy, and I think he was overwhelmed by all these beaming women who surrounded him like a prize catch.

**Crowell:** Our district is mainly youth — boys and girls and junior and high school students — so I try to visit them in their homes as much as I can and feature them in the meetings. On the other hand, the members in our district are very good about returning my telephone calls. If I call 10 times, they will return my calls 10 times.

**Ellis:** What has been your most intense challenge in moving to a neighborhood-based practice?

**Emmarco:** In our district, we live in the same neighborhood, there is a closeness and sense of commitment. However, our problem is communication. This is New York, and everyone is so busy. It is a challenge.

**Ferrara:** My intense challenge in the reorganization has been that the members wanted to be sure the reorganization was not a carbon copy of the old one. They didn't want a "top-down" organization but a "member-up" district.

**Chung:** In my former district, the district leader's motto was "Serve the Members," so we trusted her. I feel that as a district leader I have to gain the members' trust, and that is difficult.

**Cruz:** My challenge has been to stop talking. I like to talk. I have to stop myself and let the members talk. When they do, their ideas are really good and fresh.

**Ferrara:** The former leaders of the district I work with were very considerate of the members' needs. When I wasn't the same way, there was tension. I find it difficult to let go of my role as a district leader and be a friend. I feel like I'm losing control.

**Bonds:** Learning how to guide and not control is difficult.

**Evans:** I understand what the others are saying, but I have the opposite problem. My members seem to sit back and want someone to tell them what to do. I really have to encourage them to bring out their own ideas.

*At the end of the dialogue, David Dalessandro, New York East Region leader, thanked the district leaders for participating. He quoted from President Ikeda's June 15, 1996, speech: "I would therefore like the organization in New York to be a gathering of lions — each one, a person of truly outstanding ability and caliber. Each individual is important. Everything starts from treasuring just one person. This is the eternal formula for the development of kosen-rufu."*

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