

**EARTH CHARTER MAKES US THINK
BY AL ALBERGATE
SGI-USA DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

Al Albergate's trip to the Earth Charter Conference in Brazil proved that the charter brings people together 'to discuss how we're going to create a better world. It makes people think.'

Imagine this: You are thousands of miles away from home, seated around a table with five virtual strangers. These people come from four different countries — the United States, Nicaragua, the Philippines and Brazil. Fortunately for you, everybody speaks some English, and Portuguese and Spanish are very similar. Your mission as a group: Come up with suggestions for a universal document to guide the people of planet Earth to a safer, healthier, more just and peaceful future.

I recently found myself in just such a situation as SGI-USA's official representative at the Earth Charter Continental Conference of the Americas in Cuiaba, Brazil. I was among a half-dozen delegates from the States out of 90 from 24 countries, mostly in Central and South America, and the Caribbean. SGI President Ikeda often enlightens us about the power of dialogue and the importance of education and cultural exchange to peace — my experience in Cuiaba showed that it works. My small group had to overcome differences of language and culture, age and gender, experience and attitude, but we made it work and enjoyed the process.

The process of the Earth Charter: While it's in draft form, still being molded into shape, the *process* is one of the most important aspects of the Earth Charter movement. It's this process that is bringing people together to discuss how we're going to create a better world. It makes people think.

For example, one section of the current charter draft reads, "Reduce unnecessary wants and promote the equitable distribution of wealth." During an Earth Charter discussion at an SGI-USA community center in California last year, this point excited one woman to ask with real concern, "Am I going to have to give up my dream to have a five-bedroom house?"

That the Earth Charter covers a lot more ground than what we might expect of an environmental campaign became clear at the Cuiaba conference. One man from Honduras, who is fighting to eliminate corruption there, cited the importance of the Earth Charter to his country's development. Another man, representing the Brazil Indigenous Movement, spoke about the need to establish an alliance with the white man, so that Indians can share their knowledge of nature for the good of all.

The charter not only has the power to pull together diverse people and stimulate dialogue on a broad range of issues, but it resonates with Buddhist philosophy. At the Cuiaba conference, a representative of a therapists trade union called for a "human ecology" to heal our inner lives. The world is just a mirror of our souls, he explained. Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff addressed the ethical implications of the Earth Charter, saying, "All things have to do with each other." We are interdependent, he declared, "essential links in a chain that sustains Earth."

The Earth Charter continues to present SGI-USA members with an opportunity to bring Buddhist practice and principles to bear in discussions with a variety of people about problems that affect all of us. Not that we haven't done a lot already: Since we first became

involved in mid-1997, SGI-USA members have sponsored 22 Earth Charter consultations involving approximately 1,300 of their fellow members and friends. This is more than any other organization in the United States!

In what figures to be the final year of opportunity to give input to the international drafting committee before it presents a final version to the United Nations in 2000, it has been suggested that each of our regions hold at least one such activity. The networking possibilities are endless. But more important, it is an opportunity for each one of us to think about how we live, change what no longer makes sense about our lifestyles and help others to do the same.

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