

**NEW ENGLAND REGION CHALLENGES PREJUDICE,  
CELEBRATES DIVERSITY  
BY FLETCHER DALTON, NEW ENGLAND REGION BUREAU CHIEF**

When we first met, there was no comprehension of the depth of the experience we were about to have,” says New England Region Leader Steve Potoff, recalling the 1997 formation of New England’s Diversity Committee. “Made up mostly of area and region leaders, the committee was divided. Some were calling for change, others didn’t perceive that change was needed.

“For at least a year before the formation of the Diversity Committee, minority members formed groups to study the problem of diversity,” Steve explains. “Among these were the African American Men’s Group, the African American Women’s Group and a group combining the two. Members from these groups are active participants in the region’s Diversity Committee.

“Our first step,” Steve continues, “was to chant daimoku to trust each other — and trust that open dialogue would lead us to mutual understanding.”

In 1997, SGI-USA General Director Fred Zaitzu announced that SGI-USA would form a Diversity Committee. This action was based on SGI President Daisaku Ikeda’s desire, expressed in *The New Human Revolution* and in speeches and lectures, that appreciation of diversity in the SGI-USA would serve as an example to the entire world. Soon after Mr. Zaitzu’s announcement, the New England Region formed its committee.

“At that first meeting,” Steve remembers, wincing, “one person brought a passage from Nichiren Daishonin’s writings stating that we are all Bodhisattvas of the Earth. ‘If we could focus on that point,’ she said, ‘and recognize our common equality based on our Buddha nature, then our committee could progress quickly from there.’

“Well, the idea was unanimously and vociferously rejected as being simplistic and naive,” Steve says. “‘We are not ready to go there yet’ was the sentiment being expressed. ‘First, we have to deal with the many issues that have been silently and negatively affecting our relationships for so many years.’ One of the issues was the fact that the metropolitan Boston area has a bad reputation for many, based on riots and confrontations around the issues of school integration and busing, as well as a bitter history of race relations in general. Many members of the New England Region come from and live in areas that bear the scars of racial unrest.

“Our monthly meetings were difficult ones,” Steve admits, “but confrontation and crying gradually gave way to laughing and hugging. Friendships deepened and we began to grasp the real challenges of diversity. After nearly a year, we felt ready to embrace the Daishonin’s writings and President Ikeda’s encouragement as prime points. We could now form our expanded Diversity Committee. We sought representatives from all areas of diversity: race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability. We also asked the committee members to be diligent in attendance, objectivity and confidentiality.

“The first meetings of the expanded committee were let’s-get-acquainted gatherings,” Steve explains. “Various techniques and game playing were used to help us develop mutual appreciation. Then came a significant evolution for the committee: We discussed the importance of not just fighting prejudice but also of treasuring diversity. These discussions led to a regional cultural diversity festival, featuring ethnic history, involving the performing arts, the visual arts and culinary treats. Seven hundred members attended the festival.”

The regional committee meets every month and is now proposing activities to further involve the entire membership. Upcoming is a Friendship Meeting, which will focus on small groups of members participating in dialogue, seated around card tables. The goal is to get members to know each other on a personal level, apart from participation in specific activities, to heighten their awareness of each other's goals, problems and dreams, and to care more deeply for one another.

Something President Ikeda has said defines the Diversity Committee's mission: "I believe friendship is the most genuinely humane relationship of which we are capable. To be understood and appreciated for oneself — as the unadorned human being we are inside — is a vital experience in life."

While realizing that there is much work ahead, Steve is confident about the future of the Diversity Committee. "We are eager to advance with the many opportunities our diversity offers us," he concludes.

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