

D.C. SGI-USA YOUTH REPRESENT BUDDHISM TO RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

For years, the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, D.C., whose mission statement echoes that of the SGI Charter's principle number seven, lacked a voice from the Buddhist community. Now, in answer to a call, the IFC found that voice in young men and women of the Washington, D.C.-area SGI-USA.

Considered by the Washington Post "one of the most dynamic and diverse interreligious coalitions in the U.S.," the IFC aims to increase understanding and dialogue among peoples of diverse faiths and to address issues of social and economic justice. For two decades, the IFC's "Spring Dialogue" engaged interreligious laity. But when the IFC decided it wanted to hear more from youth, an event aimed at sharing core values was held, and members of SGI-USA's youth division found themselves representing Buddhism.

The event, called "Coming Together To Lead the World: Questions for the New Millennium," held in Washington in February, gave SGI-USA youth a seat at the table of local representatives of participating religions. "One of the most significant aspects of this activity is that we were lumped in there with all these traditional and very much established world religions," says Steve Wunder, Washington, D.C. Region young men's leader. "For me it was really affirming to be in the same peer group."

While attending IFC planning meetings for the event, Steve found himself facing members of a variety of religions during opening ice breakers. Attendees were expected to sit and talk with someone they did not know. "I started to see how much in line with the SGI Charter interfaith activities are, but at the same time I had to deal with preconceptions I brought with me," he says. His first ice breaker was with a cloth-covered Muslim and the second with a teenage follower of Hare Krishna. "When it was over," he says, "I realized that others had the same preconceptions about me that I had about them."

The SGI-USA youth's participation served to fill a dearth of knowledge about Buddhist faith and practice after roundtable discussions led to a presentation, both orally and on poster boards, of each religion's core values. Locals Nathan Gauer, 17, Sydney Herbert, 13, and Stacey Smith, 18, presented for the SGI

"Knowing that I am planting a seed for someone to learn about the practice gives me energy," says Nathan, a senior at Chantilly High School in Virginia, who brought a guest. Afterward, members of the audience expressed appreciation to the youth of SGI-USA for bringing Buddhism to the interfaith community. "The SGI-USA youth were in a situation where they could express their religion and they were accepted and respected and that was really valuable," says Steve. "It allowed for all these walls to be brought down."

Interfaith encounters may conjure images of religious debate, or an opportunity to "fix" others' "mistaken" ideologies. But the hallmark of today's established interreligious dialogues is a venue in which to share values, overcome preconceptions, find common ground, and build coalitions. Issues the IFC works on are welfare reform, racism, and hate speech. During preparation of a joint IFC statement on welfare reform in 1997, former IFC President Fr. Paul D. Lee lamented that "the absence of Buddhists is conspicuous." The IFC had lacked Buddhist involvement since its 1978 inception, but now has encouraged SGI-USA to help bring together an inclusive representation, so that Buddhists may in time participate by joining the IFC's board of directors, and become its ninth partici-

pating faith tradition.

“To bring about change in the world we’re going to have to get over our differences,” says Nathan. “This was all about not letting those differences get in the way of communication.” For certain, there is no “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” attitude in the IFC, with attendees expecting participants to recite others’ denominational prayers as a testament of good will—in fact, such a notion would disavow the underpinnings of the IFC’s and the SGI’s mission statements. “The ultimate goal of SGI is world peace through dialogue,” says Elena Lim, a former Byakuren leader of the Dallas area who participated. “Through dialogue we can create value by discovering shared values, and from there we can reach our goal of world peace.”

—*Rosalie M. Bliss*