

**RAISING YOUTH IS A FOCUS OF
DISCUSSION AT CEC SESSION
BY MARGIE HALL, MANAGING EDITOR**

The 44th session of the SGI-USA Central Executive Committee took place June 11–13 at the SGI Plaza in Santa Monica, Calif., with national leaders and representatives of eight zones attending from around the country. The eight zones, which encompass 27 regions, are Central (Midwest; Chicago 1, 2 and 3 regions); Pacific (Hawaii 1 and 2); Mid-Atlantic (Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.); Northwestern (Seattle; San Francisco 1 and 2); Northeastern (Brooklyn/Queens/Long Island; New Jersey; New York West; New York East; and New England); Southern (Florida, Atlanta and Caribbean); So. California (L.A. 1; L.A. Coastal; Los Angeles; L.A. 4; Orange County; and San Diego); Western (Rocky Mountain; Texas/Oklahoma).

The overall success of the nationwide May Contribution activity was apparent in various reports given after SGI-USA General Director Fred Zaitso's opening words (see his letter on page 1). Then it was unanimously agreed that throughout the country, a meeting for all leaders would be held on a regular basis (monthly or bimonthly). Encouragement in faith, communication of organizational direction and inspirational dialogue would be emphasized for these gatherings.

An update was given by several individuals on the temple issue, including the challenges each area is facing with the ongoing process of educating one another to deepen our understanding of and commitment to the issue. It requires the courage to pray and make efforts continuously to engage in compassionate dialogue to enable everyone to realize the truth and spirit of the Daishonin's teaching. A proposal was accepted that a nationwide temple issue committee would be formed and that the entire membership use prayer, study and outreach, with propagation as basic to our efforts.

Regarding the Entrance Examination held in April, SGI-USA Study Department Leader Eugene Hirahara reported that more than 1,500 candidates participated nationwide. In discussions with members on his travels, he observed that few people study on a daily basis; curriculum study is not being applied in most areas; it is difficult to develop qualified lecturers; orthodox study principles are not integral to regular activities such as the monthly World Peace Prayer meetings and discussion meetings; and a basic study program for children is needed.

Mr. Hirahara also announced that the current study coordinators position would change to Study Department Leader at the region and area levels, with a term of one year, which would end in June 2000. He emphasized that Buddhist study deepens faith; it gives impetus to advancing kosen-rufu; and study is the key to establishing a new humanistic philosophy. He determined that study coordinators would work together with the line leadership to improve the study program in each area.

Harry Sakurai, executive director of the Florida Nature and Culture Center, reviewed the schedule for upcoming conferences, and said that a new brochure will be prepared and distributed among the membership. (See opposite page for the FNCC schedule.)

On Raising Youth

A presentation on raising youth was made by General Director Zaitso, who visited Columbine High School with the local region leaders when he was in Denver one week

after the tragic shootings and offered flowers and daimoku for the peaceful repose of the 15 victims. "It's a beautiful campus and community," he said. "Within this beautiful environment, my heart ached..." He pointed out that in the SGI-USA, the youth "are the great treasure and hope for the future of America. Exactly as President Ikeda has been demonstrating with his dedicated action for over 50 years, to cherish and nurture our youth must be our crucial priority."

Mr. Zaitso related his experience as a cherished new youth in his district in the Soka Gakkai, holding leadership responsibilities several months after beginning his practice and a year later being entrusted with giving Goshu lectures at age 20. "The organization boldly entrusted me with responsibility even though they may have had many worries or reservations in doing so," he said. "I recall always having good communication with my men's and women's division leaders. Clearly, they were entrusting the youth, but they were not leaving us alone by ourselves. I felt their support.

"The most important point in raising youth is to first chant and pray for the growth of youth," he continued. "The atmosphere of camaraderie, trust and family is the result of joyfully fighting side by side for the growth and development of one's district and chapter ... that feeling of togetherness created warm hearts, trust and support among everyone."

The general director related Nanjo Tokimitsu as a great example of the spirit of youth. "He was 16 years old when he went to visit the Daishonin following the deaths of his father and brother. Nikko Shonin was a strong influence on the development of Tokimitsu's faith. The Atsuhara Persecution presented a grave danger, but Nanjo Tokimitsu played a significant role in protecting the believers in that area. He continued to provide support to the Daishonin throughout this period and to lead the propagation campaign. Nichiren Daishonin's confident encouragement was the key to young Tokimitsu's growth and development.

"I hope that the youth of today will stand up to protect the members with the same spirit," he added. "President Ikeda says that young people should advance without concern about making mistakes or failing. Youth must not be weak or wait for others to train them; they should develop themselves. He often mentions that a lion travels alone, without seeking protection from others. Youth can take the lead in propagation, publications promotion and the temple issue."

Following Mr. Zaitso's talk, much discussion ensued among the CEC representatives on the topic of raising youth. Questions arose such as how to attract youth who are not involved in activities? How to create activities that will be attractive to them? How to speed up the process of passing the baton for the future?

SGI-USA Youth Division Leader Ed Feasel then spoke about the youth's anticipation and excitement about their culture festival and other activities in the fall, saying, "President Ikeda's recent guidance to us was to make minimum effort with maximum result, based on propagation efforts and discussion meeting attendance." It was suggested that 50 percent of youth participants be junior high and high school students or Student Division members.

Also, the Youth Peace Committee is launching an exciting program called "Victory Over Violence," to be implemented in every district across the country. There will be a video, information packet and a pledge form that every member, as well as family and friends, can sign. These materials will be available in July, with the expectation that they will be used by the youth division members in organizing the district discussion meetings during August. The Victory Over Violence Pledge forms will be distributed for signatures

at the August discussion meetings.

Membership Guidelines

On the topic of membership guidelines, approximately 500 surveys were completed by district leaders. Proposed guidelines based on their feedback were made. Revised official guidelines will be forthcoming soon.

Public Relations

Bill Aiken, national director of media relations, announced that the newly created SGI-USA Office of Public Affairs was officially opened April 3 in downtown Washington, D.C. It will serve as a communication point with elected officials and peace and human rights organizations involved in issues related to religious liberty and children's rights, for the purpose of advancing solutions to issues facing the United States and global society. The office would also be a source for information regarding the philosophy and activities of the SGI-USA and President Ikeda.

Teleconference

During the nationwide teleconference on the last day of the CEC gathering, General Director Zaitzu said that this year, more than 10,000 guests nationwide were introduced at various SGI functions. What is needed now is our confident encouragement to those guests for them to begin their practice, he said. He also announced that the national headquarters has appointed SGI-USA Young Women's Division Leader Renu Jiandani to spearhead the promotion of publications and SGI-USA Young Men's Division Leader James Herrmann to spearhead propagation efforts.

In her speech, Renu Jiandani said that each district will receive a promotions package and an updated list of subscribers showing those whose subscriptions have recently expired. Traditionally it has been the women's division who have encouraged us to read the publications, she explained, but now the youth can gain this experience, encouraging each member in their districts to subscribe to the periodicals. She shared that a friend who had many personal problems subscribed to the *World Tribune*, and although she was unable to attend activities, the newspaper provided the nourishment that allowed her to develop her own practice and receive the Gohonzon a year later.

James Herrmann stressed that the propagation movement will be based on true concern for others, and not for a numerical result. We need to discover what suffering and unrealized goals people have in order to show them the value of practicing Buddhism, he said. Nothing is a greater source of joy than seeing others become happy. Let's share our own experiences in doing propagation, he said, even when giving personal guidance.

Women's Secretariat Leader Linda Johnson spoke about the temple issue, saying that the action plan is prayer, study and outreach: pray to correctly understand the issue and help others to do the same; study by subscribing to and reading our publications; outreach means to visit all our members and also to share Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism with others, including the temple members, to clarify the correct practice of his teachings. Our courageous dialogue does not detract from the spirit of tolerance or religious freedom, because shakubuku is based on compassion, she said.

“In America, we have enjoyed tremendous success in sharing the Daishonin’s Buddhism. We are unique and remarkable when compared to other Buddhist religions in the depth and diversity of our roots in American soil. ‘We indeed have a success story,’ writes Phil Hammond, professor of religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara. We can be rightfully proud of that history.”

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