

AN EARTH CHARTER CONSULTATION: OUR EXPERIENCE—REDWOOD COAST AREA, SANTA ROSA, CALIF.

In his last three peace proposals, SGI President Ikeda has mentioned the Earth Charter as a vitally important document for the new century. In his 1999 peace proposal, he urges all people to be guided by two things: renouncing war and establishing an earth charter to start “a new millennium of harmony and peaceful coexistence founded on respect for the sanctity of life.” Elsewhere, he has called it a grass-roots movement, a world document that is coming not from high government officials but rather from the people themselves.

“It is hard to overstate the significance of the Earth Charter, which is being undertaken through the united efforts of concerned people throughout the world from all national and cultural backgrounds,” he says in *Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter*. “I offer heartfelt prayers for the rewarding and successful civil society consultations involved in the drafting process.”

If President Ikeda was offering his heartfelt prayers for the success of consultations on the Earth Charter, the members of Redwood Coast Area in Santa Rosa knew they must succeed with theirs.

The Earth Charter is a world document concerned with peace, freedom and justice, as well as environmental protection and economic well-being. Our involvement in it started when two young men’s division members, Craig Ellis and Ivan Meyreles, had a dream of getting involved with the community to promote this “people’s treaty” that is so close to President Ikeda’s heart.

In October 1998, our local Earth Charter planning meetings began. According to Craig, it was really discouraging for many months. Attendance was poor and the people who came to the meetings kept changing. There was often a lack of unity or focus. At first he didn’t see the Charter’s value at all, but it seemed so important to SGI President Ikeda, so Craig chanted to understand our mentor’s commitment.

The tiny Redwood Coast planning group chanted to involve the local community, as well as many other SGI members, to create a forum to discuss the Earth Charter (which is still in draft form) and become a part of the making of a document that pledges to protect the earth and all life on it. By the spring of 1999, they had breathed enough life and hope into the vision to begin to make it a reality. Ideas were turning into action.

A key organizer of the group, Area Leader Peter Hendrickson, contacted the New College, a private college with a strong emphasis on personal empowerment, diversity, social change and environmental concerns. The New College agreed to co-sponsor the Earth Charter event and offered to hold it on its campus.

Soon Sonoma County Center for Peace & Justice, an organization that seeks to create a community in which people are “nurtured by diverse traditions that foster compassion, solidarity and reconciliation,” also agreed to co-sponsor the event due to the efforts of Joelle Goncalves, the office manager and also an SGI member.

I wrote an article on the upcoming event, which was printed in their widely distributed local publication; and Joelle launched a public relations campaign made all over Santa Rosa and nearby towns.

Susan Breyer, from Sustainable Sonoma County, offered to talk about sustainability at the event. That prompted Laura Hendrickson to admit that many of us didn’t really know what sustainability meant. It seemed to be about a lot more than recycling paper and plas-

tic. We needed the expertise of members in the community who were more knowledgeable than ourselves to develop a better vocabulary and understanding of the environment.

We realized although we really didn't know a whole lot about ecology or other things stated in the Earth Charter, such as global ethics, gender equality, and economic well-being, we didn't have to be experts or have all the answers on how to create a peaceful, sustainable world. Trained in the SGI, we were good at organizing, motivating, and most of all at creating an arena for dialogue—a place where people felt free to open their hearts to one another. That was our job.

Our Earth Charter Consultation was held on July 17, and it was more exciting and wonderful than any of us had dreamed possible—more than 100 people participated. The SGI Marin Chorus performed before we heard from speakers Al Albergate and Susan Breyer (see photos this page).

After a short intermission, we read the Earth Charter out loud and broke into eight groups so that everyone would have a chance to participate in dialogue. The next 45 minutes were alive with ideas, criticism, appreciation and lots and lots of rekindled hope. I caught conversations that sounded like we were making an impact. “This is great. We are learning to dialogue, to really listen to others' points of view. Most of the time we stay in our homes and watch TV. We no longer have neighborhoods where neighbors know one another. Dialogue is the only way to create a paradigm shift.... It comes down to individuals making it happen.... We must respect all life, have hope, take neighborhood action.”

Other people talked about doing simple things like carpooling, turning off lights, using ceramic cups at work instead of paper or Styrofoam, and about bringing the Earth Charter into schools and churches. “The world's out of balance. Life's out of balance,” one man said. He talked about Native American elders who have said that now is the time to regain balance. “Ask questions: Where are you going? What are you doing? What are your relationships? Build your communities. Be kind to one another.”

The Year of Victory in the Community for the New Century is the SGI theme for 1999. We the people of Redwood Coast experienced victory of the community, by the community and for the community as all of us took a joyful step together on our journey toward peace upon this land, our planet Earth.

—SYLVAN WARNER