

## **LEADERS PANEL DISCUSSION EXPANDING DISTRICTS AND ENTRUSTING YOUTH**

**SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima has set three goals for the SGI-USA's kosen-rufu movement for the remainder of 2001:**

- 1) District Expansion**
- 2) Appointing Youth Leaders in Every District**
- 3) Propagation**

**In this panel discussion, leaders from the Virginia/Carolina Region share how they are taking on this challenge.**

**World Tribune:** What started the Virginia/Carolina Region on the road to district expansion?

**Jo Reed:** When the Virginia/ Carolina Region was founded in October 1999, we had 75 districts and 25 chapters. Of those 75 districts, 22 had a membership of more than 50. We had some chapters with eight districts, and areas with eight chapters or more.

So we began thinking about shaping smaller organizational units: a smaller district where people could receive more attention, which would mean more districts but would also mean more chapters and more areas—possibly two regions.

Each level of the organization would have a much smaller unit that is easier to care for, so the leaders would be able to assist people more and not be overwhelmed by their responsibilities.

**WT:** How much of a factor is the VCR's large geographical territory in your recent district expansion?

**Steve Doty:** It played a big part. For instance, just the organization in the state of South Carolina—which includes part of North Carolina and part of Georgia—is difficult to cover as an organization. When we split from the Washington, D.C., Region to form the VCR, it was clear that even after the split the VCR is still huge—even unmanageable, in a sense, in its current state.

**Ken Nelson:** We had been talking—particularly in Columbia and the Greenville-Asheville areas of South Carolina—about creating smaller organizational units for geographical reasons and then making sure it is small enough: If you appoint somebody leader of a district with 75 people, it is a daunting task. But we had been unable to resolve this problem.

Then, after the last region planning board meeting, where Steve Doty again discussed district expansion, I realized that the stumbling block was that we had been looking at splitting from the top down. That brought out all kinds of defensive feelings.

So we said, "Let's start at the member level and determine how we can create the best organization for these members to practice in." And then it started making sense! We finally had the key to how to make this all work.

**Steve Shropshier:** The real key was bringing in the district leaders, because they know the

membership better than anyone else. Through discussion with them and trying to think of each individual member's situation, we came up with a plan that everybody could agree on.

It is just like a planning meeting: The more people you get there, the more it becomes their meeting and the better that meeting is going to be. It's the same way with district expansion: The more people you get involved in it and share their ideas, the more it becomes their plan. And when it is their plan they want to make it work and they're excited about it.

**Ken:** I was not so sure how great an idea that would be—bringing the district leaders in to discuss things. Having sat through many leaders meetings, I have found that the more people you have involved in discussion, the more difficult it is to get to a consensus. I was afraid that when we brought the district leaders in, the talk would just ramble on. But it worked out great.

**Ana Cain:** The members in our district were struggling to attend meetings. It took some of them many hours just to get to meetings. There were only two members at first, and now there are seven.

I have been chanting for Florence District to be a district for a long time. When the time came, the members were ready. There was no hesitation. I think it was just leaders who were kind of worried about it. [Laughter.] But I kept on urging them, "Why not!?" I think this organization is great because we do worry about who is going to help each individual.

**Ken:** Within Columbia, S.C., once we had the discussion, everybody realized district expansion was something we needed to do, we had a way to do it, and that this is the direction of the organization, then everyone's concerns vanished.

The Capitol Chapter leaders and the district leaders wanted the members in Florence to be their own district, but as they only had about seven people, we thought that was pretty small, and we were not sure they should do it.

But they said, "We can do it!" And so, they are going to do it!

**Jo:** In some areas where there were problems in people's lives and they were chanting a lot of daimoku, that foundation of daimoku made them open and enthusiastic.

**Ken:** In Charlotte, N.C., a lot of people are fighting through financial problems or health problems, and so there is a daimoku level building that is higher than it has been before. They are becoming ready for anything. They have got this feeling, "We are going to make something grow."

**Jo:** It may seem counter-intuitive—one tends to think that people have so many problems, they cannot think about reorganization right now. But actually what is happening is that because they are chanting so much, they are really able to stretch and explore and be open to things.

**Steve Shropshier:** One man told me he knew this day was going to come, and he dreaded it, because he hated leaving that comfort zone: It made him feel real comfortable to go to the district meetings and have a house full of people.

Yet he knew we were not going to grow that way, because it was the same people there, the same few people were talking all the time, and other people did not have that opportunity to grow.

It is kind of like a root-bound plant in a pot—you have got to spread it out for it to grow.

**WT:** Did you have any district leaders who were adamant about not wanting to split their district?

**Steve Shropshier:** We had one who was very reluctant, because he was looking at splitting the district in a negative light. If you take the attitude that you are splitting something, it puts kind of a negative connotation on it.

We helped him understand that it was not so much splitting the district as it was putting the district in a position so it could expand. That put a more positive light on it and helped him through it.

We also took special precautions so that our pioneers would not have to drive too far. At the same time, we wanted to spread them out a little bit, so they could help not only us but our young people. They are a tremendous asset for our area—it is the great fortune we have in this region.

**Ken:** What was central for this whole thing was dialogue, dialogue, dialogue. We talked about it, we thought about it, we chanted about it, we met on different levels, and continued to discuss and look at all the aspects. We did not just sit down one afternoon and chop 'em up and send 'em on their way.

**Steve Shropshier:** I think you have got to look at every area differently. From going to different districts, I found that districts are like people—they are all different, even in the same town, in the same area.

So when you look in an area, reorganization has to be done on an individual basis. You do not want to do something rash and alienate anybody, and it would be very easy to do that.

**Ken:** This needs to be an ongoing process. It is not like we can do this one time and will never have to do it again. You know, I want to get out in my garden but it is too wet today to do it, but even so you have to keep cultivating.

I think it is the same thing with the organization. We have to keep tilling the ground, and when districts get too big, split and keep cultivating the organization.

**WT:** General Director Danny Nagashima has been encouraging us to find youth leadership at every level. How are you finding leaders for the new districts, and how are you finding youth leaders?

**Steve Shropshier:** Danny said to be bold—to give people a chance and see what they can do.

**Ken:** Since we can recommend high-school age youth to district-level positions, we're really "mining" the organization to find youth who can take responsibility.

My own kids have told me the district meetings are boring. Well, if we give them

responsibility, we can send them into the districts and say, “OK, make it not boring anymore.”

But the bottom line is, the people who can fill these positions are there. We just need to give them the opportunity.

**Ronnie Smith:** Of course, students’ primary job is to study hard at school. As SGI President Ikeda always says, we should put priority on studying while young.

However, it is also true that people need to strengthen their lives by practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism while young. Through their Buddhist practice in their districts, young people will definitely develop strength in their lives and learn about the significance of the role of the SGI for the betterment of society and the world.

**Jo:** When I was a new member of a district as small as the ones we are talking about now, because I was a college-age youth I had enormous care: I was visited often by my leaders, and they had me lead gongyo and make presentations.

In a smaller group, you are more likely to recognize people and take care of them in this way.

**Ken:** And that is why we are all here—somebody looked after us!

**Ronnie:** After I had been practicing a couple weeks, they asked me to explain the Gohonzon at an introductory meeting at the community center. I cannot tell you how scary that was for me.

After doing it the first time and blowing it, I thought, “Great, they’ll never ask me again,” but they asked me the following week! I remember thinking how much they trusted me, how much they cared about me, to allow me to continue to do that presentation, to develop confidence in myself.

That they gave me, and the other youth at the time—even though we were not “the best” at explaining things—a chance to participate meant a lot to us.

Sometimes we want to make sure the youth are polished, prepared and perfect, but as youth we were far from perfect ourselves. And yet, I think we made great contributions in spite of our lack of polish.

Let’s continue our efforts at trusting the youth and giving them the opportunity to participate and put a new face on our organization to reflect the youth of today.

**WT:** What unique contributions do you think the members of Virginia/Carolina Region can make to kosen-rufu in America?

**Ken:** One thing I think we’ve learned through this process is that a few “superstars” can’t accomplish kosen-rufu by themselves. Everybody has the feeling we have all got to make it together, that if everyone is on board, we can accomplish anything.

**Steve Shropshier:** It has really been a member-driven thing here, and we are really proud of that. I think that is what the SGI-USA is all about here—it has got to come from the people.

**Ronnie:** I want to respond to Danny’s call that we really take individual care of each

district member, giving youth a new sense of responsibility in their districts and setting in motion full-fledged propagation activity.

It has to start with sowing seeds of the Mystic Law in people's lives and raising them to the point where they can live up to their individual, noble missions for kosen-rufu. It is my determination to see many ideal districts emerge with many new, youthful Bodhisattvas of the Earth taking the lead.

—*Robin Meader and Jim Wells of the Washington, D.C., Bureau conducted this interview for the World Tribune.*