

Islanders Unite With Mainland Friends
By PHIL SIMPSON, Atlanta Bureau Chief
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The Florida Nature and Culture Center this weekend hosted its first international conference since its opening last year, with a distinctly Caribbean flavor. Members from 11 Caribbean islands joined with comrades from seven southern states for the Atlanta Joint Territory Conference and Caribbean General Meeting.

Simultaneous translation of several of the weekend's events allowed this diverse group, which speaks four languages, to laugh with, listen to and share stories with one another to their hearts' content. "This is the first time in my whole life to be able to listen to a lecture on the Goshu in Dutch, my language," said Consuelo Renfurm from Curaçao. "I was able to listen to it with my heart. I am so deeply affected."

Islanders shared their islands' histories and circumstances with the mainlanders. St. Maarten, an island ruled by two countries, France and Holland, has people of 72 nationalities living on it. SGI history began there with one woman, Valerie Giterson, bringing the Gohonzon there in 1984, followed by another, Violet Lake, in 1985.

They faced disaster in 1995 when Hurricane Luis devastated the island.

"The first night, I stayed in my home," Ms. Lake said. "But after that, I decided to go to one of the shelters. I could only reach as far as my neighbor's garage, however. We were there from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 the next morning.... Instead of sleeping, we chanted the entire 16 hours for our island and its people. I could not believe we survived. I want to thank all the members in the United States who sent food and supplies and prayed for our safety." In fact, the Caribbean members wanted to hold this first general meeting in September, the most active month for hurricanes, to make a cause to change the islands' hurricane karma.

Hurricanes aren't the only problem on the islands. Christine Davis of St. Thomas spoke of her people's struggle to free themselves from violence. "True freedom is a spirit unfettered, like the human revolution we experience in this organization," she said. "We have seen a time now in which our land has been invaded by violence and disharmony. It is very important for us to change this situation."

Reflecting on the history of the region, Consuelo Renfurm said: "At one time, the Caribbean islands were one unit and all the Indians lived in peace together. Then the Europeans came and said they wanted a piece of the pie.... But now the SGI has come to the Caribbean and we are united once again with one heart."

St. Croix members are sure that kosen-rufu will be soon achieved in the Caribbean. Paolo Calzolari from Antigua assured all, "We are one of the smallest countries in the world, but we want to inherit the spirit of SGI President Ikeda and become the first place in the world to achieve kosen-rufu."

Unez Moore of Trinidad and Tobago, known as the Rainbow Country because of its many nationalities, reported that these most southerly of the islands have 150 members. And the men's division members in St. Lucia explained that they were determined to break down the gender barriers that exist on their island. Recently, their efforts seem to be reflected in society, as two women have been elected to government positions, which is unprecedented.

At the conference, sister city/country relationships were formed among the membership of the Atlanta Joint Territory and the islands. People have long wanted to have ongoing relationships with each other, and now with the friendships solidified at the FNCC, the members have gotten their wish.

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