

**DECADE OF INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE CULMINATES IN TRIP TO THIRD  
PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS  
BY AL ALBERGATE, SGI-USA DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

When one travels to the ends of the earth, it helps to have a great purpose.

Arriving last November 29th in Cape Town, that sun-drenched city on the dramatic southern tip of the African continent where the Indian and Atlantic oceans converge, I carried within me a mixture of excitement, anticipation, a sense of progress and fulfillment.

On behalf of the SGI-USA, I would be attending the third (since 1893) Parliament of the World's Religions, an international interfaith gathering of some 7,000 people from 138 countries, December 1–8.

It would be a stretch to compare my emotions with those likely felt by the first sailors from Europe to lay eyes on the Cape of Good Hope in the fifteenth century. Yet I could justify my excitement with the knowledge that the participation of the SGI-USA in the Parliament of the World's Religions culminated almost a decade of pioneering efforts in the field of interfaith relations.

When I joined the staff of our national headquarters in 1989, we were involved in no interfaith work to speak of. SGI-USA, then called NSA, was about to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary—three decades of sometimes spectacular growth in membership resulting in thousands of chanting Buddhists and dozens of community centers established across the United States.

Understandably, as a new religious organization in this country, much of our work had gone into building our own foundation. Attempts to reach out to the community, other than for propagation purposes, were sporadic and of limited duration, and often connected with large-scale events such as our culture festivals.

As the decade of the nineties dawned, certainly many more Americans had become aware of the SGI's presence. Unfortunately, understanding and tolerance do not necessarily accompany awareness, especially when it comes to religion. That same period, 1960–90, also had witnessed the rise in popularity of various other new religious groups, a few of which produced disastrous, even fatal, results. The news media also began to take notice of the SGI, and some of the articles and stories were misleading and inaccurate.

The visit to the United States in 1990 of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda heralded the beginning of necessary changes in the religious organization. Along with these developments came the recognition that relationships in the community, based on friendship and trust, were very important building blocks toward a more peaceful society.

In terms of our image in the community and the mass media, it became apparent that a large part of the problem was that little was known about us, even among other religions and those who teach about religion. And much of what they did know was either inaccurate or outdated. The message was clear: either become socially engaged or remain misunderstood.

While in Cape Town for the third parliament, my mind occasionally flashed back to that day more than six years ago in Chicago when I first walked into the Palmer House Hotel late in the summer of 1993 to attend the second Parliament of the World's Religions. I was still a relative neophyte in interfaith relationships.

The halls of the hotel were jam packed with people representing every conceivable religion and spiritual tradition. From morning until late at night, the hotel's meeting

rooms teemed with a bewildering variety of seminars, lectures and panel discussions, many of them going on simultaneously. The task of deciding where to go reminded me of being a freshman at a large university trying to work out a class schedule. There were a number of interesting speakers; I remember specifically Louis Farrakhan and the Dalai Lama. We had at least three official representatives from the SGI-USA in attendance, but we were there mainly to observe and make friends.

In the years between Chicago and Cape Town, SGI-USA representatives gradually began to look into local, national and international interfaith organizations and, where appropriate, became involved. This outreach led to our co-sponsoring the international meeting of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies in 1996 in Chicago; offering a presentation on Nam-myoho-renge-kyo at the national Buddhist-Catholic Retreat/Dialogue in 1998 in Malibu, California; and participation in the United Religions Initiative's Third Global Summit in 1998 at Stanford University, just to mention a few.

In a related effort, representatives of both the SGI-USA and the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century founded by President Ikeda have become fixtures at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion, a gathering of thousands of professors of religion.

In this same period the SGI internationally gave formal recognition to the importance of interfaith work with the issuance of the SGI Charter. The seventh of its ten points says:

“SGI shall, based on the Buddhist spirit of tolerance, respect other religions, engage in dialogue and work together with them toward the resolution of fundamental issues concerning humanity.”

That language is strikingly similar to the goals expressed by Jim Kenney, a key organizer of the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town. His greeting statement reads: “We have joined with one another in a spirit of dialogue and cooperation, seeking to discover new ways to rise to the challenges and the opportunities of life at the threshold of a new century.”

For the SGI-USA, as I mentioned above, Cape Town represented the culmination of years of efforts in the interfaith arena, and to my knowledge those efforts have been unmatched by any other SGI organization. But I believe the real significance of Cape Town lay in the international effort. For this was the first time that SGI leaders from Japan participated in an international interfaith event of this magnitude and stature.

Soka Gakkai vice presidents Tadashige Takamura and Toshinori Iwazumi, along with Rie Tsumura of SGI Public Relations, made the 30-hour trip from Tokyo. Sunday, December 5, their first full day in Cape Town, was just that, full. Dr. Takamura, Dean of the Faculty of Law at Soka University in Japan, kicked off the clear, bright morning at the Cape Technikon college campus with an address entitled, “Applying Buddhist Values in Conflict Resolution.”

After taking some quick snapshots at the entrance to campus with that unique landmark, Table Mountain, in the background, we rushed to our waiting vehicles for the thirty-minute drive to a Cape Town suburb. There twenty or so local SGI members had gathered for the monthly World Peace Prayer Meeting at the pleasant home of Jane and Terry Volbrecht. This was approximately two-thirds of the membership of Cape Town, we were told, and a rare occasion to be able to host and hold a dialogue with SGI delegates from Japan.

We all shared a pleasant buffet lunch in the verdant back yard before duty called once again. On the way back to the city we stopped off at the beautiful Ivy League-style campus

of the University of Cape Town for a seminar where we knew we would find people whom the Japanese delegates wanted to meet, and who wanted to meet them.

By 4 p.m. we returned to the Cape Technikon campus. Vice President Iwazumi delivered an address entitled “Applying Buddhist Values in Building a Culture of Peace,” based largely on his family’s experience in World War II and his role in editing “*Cries For Peace*,” a 90-volume series of testimonials from atomic bomb victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

We topped off that very full day at the Good Hope Center, the largest indoor venue in Cape Town, where former South African President Nelson Mandela praised religions for providing education for the people of his country and later giving hope to those imprisoned, as he was, during the apartheid era.

The Good Hope Center also was temporary home to many information booths representing the various religions and spiritual paths attending the Parliament. And there, bordered by Muslim Youth on our right and Bio-democracy to the left, was our cheerful SGI information booth. Throughout the week, passersby chatted with SGI members, picked up literature, watched SGI videos or simply gazed at our colorful posters.

Our other consistent presence was a few blocks further downtown at the modern Cape Town Civic Center. With the support of the SGI in Tokyo, the SGI-USA had shipped its traveling exhibit, “*Treasuring the Future: Children’s Rights and Realities*,” to South Africa. The exhibit was on display for eight days in an immense corridor where many local citizens, as well as visitors to the Parliament, had the opportunity to view it and pick up information on the SGI.

The exhibit never travels without SGI-USA headquarters staff members Gary Murie and Malina Moore, also in Cape Town courtesy of the SGI. Malina was called upon to do double duty, which meant participating in a panel discussion in which she presented both the exhibit and the SGI-USA’s Youth Peace Committee’s “*Victory Over Violence*” campaign.

During the weeklong almost non-stop flow of seminars, speeches, exhibitions and musical presentations, I sat on a panel on the Earth Charter. I talked about the rationale for SGI’s involvement based on Buddhist principles and SGI President Ikeda’s peace proposals. Also, I described briefly the 36 informational meetings sponsored by the SGI-USA since August of 1997 to encourage dialogue on this important international movement towards building a peaceful, sustainable society.

Rounding out the seven team members from Japan and the United States was Nancy Simms, an SGI-USA staff member who had been invited by the Parliament organizers to assist in the Media Center, where she worked in the mornings during the duration of our eleven-day visit. It seems Nancy was everywhere, helping both us and assisting the Parliament coordinators—sometimes supporting the evening plenary session preparations and also with consultations in preparation for the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, to be held at the United Nations from August 28–31, 2000.

The total effort of SGI—Japan, U.S., South Africa—was truly memorable, and I believe appreciated. I would be remiss to leave out the unplanned book donation at the University of the Western Cape, where SGI leaders presented more than fifty Buddhist volumes, including many works by President Ikeda.

And I can still see Mr. Iwazumi on stage at the Good Hope Center one evening, reciting one of President Ikeda’s poems. And, finally on that same stage at the concluding session on December 8 sat Dr. Takamura along with other religious representatives, as the Dalai

Lama exhorted us to do more than just pray to make the world a better place.

As the year 2000 quickly approached, I felt hopeful that a new era was opening in which SGI members around the world will create many more opportunities to, in the words of Mr. Ikeda,

“Plant in people’s hearts the seeds of trust and friendship,  
The seeds of philosophy and happiness,  
The seeds of peace!” □