

**SIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE SOCIETY FOR
BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN STUDIES
DIALOGUE FOR THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY
BY LIBBY BURKE, SEATTLE CORRESPONDENT**

SGI-USA made another significant step toward open participation in the inter-religious community this summer. As many as 30 SGI-USA members joined more than 250 religious practitioners from many sects of Buddhism and Christianity at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Wash., site of the Sixth International Conference of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, held Aug. 5-12.

The theme of the SBCS 2000 conference was "Buddhism, Christianity and Global Healing." Conference participants were warmly greeted during the opening ceremonies by a message from SGI President Daisaku Ikeda. Read at the opening ceremony by SGI Vice President Fred M. Zaitso, the message states in part: "Gatherings such as yours bring together Buddhist and Christian voices in sustained dialogue on the future of humanity. To provide the opportunity for this type of engagement is an important endeavor, and I offer my heartfelt gratitude for what you are achieving." President Ikeda discusses in detail his views on the importance of the role inter-religious dialogue as an activity that promotes peace and global healing, and the importance of religion in restoring the environment.

The message continues: "The encounter between these two streams of philosophy [Buddhism and Christianity] which have influenced peoples of South and North as well as East and West is perhaps one of the most important in any attempt to address the complex and tenacious problems afflicting humanity. I, among many concerned others, hold the greatest respect for each participant of this conference, as you open this forum of dialogue and continue to move forward in your exchange of views." This message was key in setting a warm, encouraging and challenging tone for the conference.

SGI-USA members from the Seattle-Tacoma area were eager participants in this quadrennial conference, broadening their perspectives and experience about these vital issues. They had the opportunity to meet with many international participants who are working daily to address the questions of global healing from different perspectives in their respective cultures and in the world religious community as a whole. As President Ikeda's message states: "Our global experience with these issues urges us to re-examine our ideals of civilization, especially with regard to the course of life and living, to nature, to our system of values and to life itself. Within this sphere of inquiry, religion that attends to the healing and revitalization of the human spirit points the way to the restoration of peace in society and of the natural ecosystem." With this in mind, several hundred participants met, listened to each other and conducted heartfelt dialogue.

The conference director, Paul Ingram, professor of comparative religion at Pacific Lutheran University, introduced the SGI-USA as "the most socially-engaged Buddhist organization in America," and showed great appreciation to SGI-USA in supporting the planning of the activities. A significant contribution contribution to the conference was President Ikeda's "Dialogue With Nature" exhibition of photographs and poetry. The Scandinavian Cultural Center in which the exhibition was housed was home to the Earth Charter working group and other daily activities, and many conference participants made a point of viewing the exhibition and commenting on its inspiring images.

In addition, a conference tour of Seattle religious sites included a stop at the SGI-USA Seattle Culture Center, where participants were warmly greeted by members of the youth

division, and refreshed with tea and snacks prepared by the women's division. They then enjoyed a tour of the building and a lively presentation on the basics of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

In addition to President Ikeda's message and exhibition, SGI participation in the conference included presentations by Virginia Straus, director of the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, SGI-USA Director of Media Relations Bill Aiken and SGI-USA Director of Community Relations Al Albergate, all of whom also participated in the daily working group titled "Spirituality and the Earth Charter: Buddhist and Christian Approaches."

There were several afternoon presentations of interest to SGI-USA members. "Prison and Practice," presented by Virginia Parkham, outlined the activities of Buddhist prison ministries, including efforts of SGI-USA members in this arena. Dr. Ruben Habito presented a talk entitled "Nichiren: Buddhist Mystic and Prophet," while Dr. Gene Reeves spoke on "Skillful [Expedient] Means As a Route to Global Health" based on the Lotus Sutra. In each of these presentations, the SGI-USA members present were invited to participate in dialogue conveying their thoughts on the ideas presented. Lively discussions ensued and many friends were made.

Each evening, all participants came together in a plenary session. Each session began and ended with a Buddhist or Christian "blessing." As his "blessing," Al Albergate read a passage from one of the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, "The Gift of Rice," which states: "Life is the foremost of all treasures. It is expounded that even the treasures of the entire major world system cannot equal the value of one's body and life" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1125).

In her plenary address, Virginia Straus outlined the Buddhist consultations that occurred in the drafting of the Earth Charter. These included SGI's activities in support of the grassroots consultation with 40 meetings that went on around the country, SGI's organization of an Asian tour at the request of former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (which sent Earth Council representatives to eight countries in two weeks) and the key support of the Latin American SGI organizations.

In each working group session on the Earth Charter Initiative, a Buddhist and a Christian perspective was given, followed by discussion. During one of these sessions, Bill Aiken presented the "Buddhist World View" in the form of a talk on the Ten Worlds and the Three Thousand Realms in a Single Life Moment. One of the other Buddhist scholars present, Sallie King, mentioned how succinct she found it, as it resonated with her continuing search to understand the conditions and motivations of human beings in a Buddhist context.

As the SGI-USA's participation grows in various inter-religious activities, many opportunities such as this will present themselves so that members may learn more about actions they can take toward a peaceful and sustainable planet, including fighting the three poisons of greed, anger and ignorance. President Ikeda's message states: "Greed, the impulsive drive to achieve one's goal even at the cost of harming others or the environment, is not the compulsory outcome of satisfying one's physical and spiritual needs. It can be restrained and sublimated. In this regard, religion can be instrumental in redirecting desire and encouraging its most elevating expressions: the yearning for self-identity, for values, or service to others; the desire for knowledge, for artistic and cultural creativity, and for religiosity." The SBCS 2000 Conference was an intensive opportunity for all participants, Buddhist and Christian alike, to rededicate themselves to this purpose.