

**TOWARD THE NOV. 18 COMMEMORATIVE MEETINGS
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SGI President Ikeda recently sent us the wonderful poem “Soar— Into the Vast Skies of Freedom! Into the New Century!” In it, he affirms us as Bodhisattvas of the Earth who are beginning a new and empowered era. These are his words:

*Our lives renewed,
we begin a grand movement,
spreading the spirit of true friendship
throughout society.*

— Aug. 11 *World Tribune*, p. 5

Of course we do this as individuals, but as an organization, the place where we spread the spirit of true friendship is in our districts. That is where kosen-rufu grows. That is why at this CEC we spent many hours discussing the growth of the districts.

Above all, I want to praise all of you for your most earnest and tireless efforts to help form these districts through the challenging task of the geographical reorganization. Thank you for nurturing the leadership that supports these districts. Because of your efforts, we have happy and thriving groups all across our country. As President Ikeda says, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth have emerged!

These districts will be holding Nov. 18 Commemorative Meetings soon to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Soka Gakkai. I know this because I've already been invited to several. These are always great meetings. Everyone makes tremendous efforts to visit old friends, bring guests, bring food and work hard to have a wonderful program. It seems everyone contributes something to these shining meetings. I think that is why we always enjoy the November meetings so much—everyone feels it is their meeting.

When people feel needed and can contribute, it creates a happy atmosphere of unity and purpose, and the spirit of true friendship is felt by members and guests. Through preparing for these meetings, many new people can stand up and take responsibility. When they do this, they strengthen the bodhisattva in their lives. They move from just attending a meeting to truly taking action to encourage others to practice. This brings them personal joy, growth and benefit.

So I have a proposal: Why don't we as leaders make the November meetings a focus for us to help the districts take the next step in their growth? Can all of us, together with the chapter leaders, visit the district leaders and find out what help they need?

Some districts are like a small family where the same group of people have been together for a long time. How can we work with them to inspire them to expand their family and bring in fresh faces and ideas?

Then there are big districts where many members participate and new people are joining, but the leaders feel overwhelmed trying to take care of their daily lives and really care for all these members. And they don't seem to find people who are willing to take on new leadership. So let's use our experience and work with them, helping them to inspire people to take responsibility.

Then there are places that are so large that they usually meet at the group level. Let's be

bold and trust those group leaders to become district leaders. I can still remember the first night when, after being a group leader for a year, my partner and I held our very first district meeting. We were nervous, we were excited, and we were independent. But most of all, we felt determined to respond to the trust that others had in us.

There are districts that have grown very naturally, where there are people ready to become leaders if that district were divided in half. I know that members who have practiced together and built friendships and talked to others about this Buddhism don't really want to split up. During the CEC, we discussed this, and we thought that, even if that district only divided into two, perhaps in a case like that it could become a chapter. Then, the members could remain together and new people could still take responsibility.

All of your zone leaders had so many ideas about how we could help support and foster leadership at the district level. Among their ideas was to invite the many youth leaders who recently graduated into the men's and women's division to take responsibility as district leaders. We also have many vice leaders at various levels who have so much experience to share in helping to develop a new district.

I really believe that there is so much untapped potential among our existing membership. There is so much room for very organic, natural growth. If we become bold and trust those members, we can make it happen.

These are just some of the ideas that we discussed, but it is so important that all of you join in with your wisdom and creativity. The important thing is that we come up with ways of supporting the districts—the forefront of taking care of our members.

I want to close with guidance that I heard recently from SGI North America Bureau Director Norimasa Saito. I had a discussion with him about depression, and I want to share with you what he said: “When I talk to SGI-USA members, they often cry, men or women. They feel they have some kind of sin or guilt. They feel they must suffer to rid themselves of their karma. Perhaps they have been given guidance that they must eradicate their heavy karma, that they must chant and chant to get rid of their fundamental darkness. We shouldn't be stuck in the past in that way—our future happiness lies in this moment, in challenging this moment, in how we feel this moment. ‘This is the Buddhism of the sun,’ President Ikeda says. If we have a spirit of hope and joy, we attract benefit. If we think we can't win, or that we have somehow sinned, this is not Nichiren Daishonin's spirit. Challenging ourselves to believe in ourselves—that is Buddhism. Within ourselves, we have boundless wisdom. The moment we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we are actually changing our karma. Doing SGI activities, we are changing our karma.

“A woman who lost her child was told by her leaders, ‘This is your karma to have your child die.’ She carried the pain for 20 years because of a leader's words. Instead, as leaders we should cry together with them and tell them there is meaning and value in what they are going through. We should stick together and continue to encourage them, like the Daishonin encouraged Lady Nanjo. President Ikeda always encourages us to advance with a positive and hopeful spirit.

“Our goal is to become happy. We may have to suffer a bit now, but we are Buddhas, so we should live with assurance. Essentially, we must praise humans. That is the focus of guidance.”

During our conversation, I realized that as leaders, when people approach us with problems, it's so important that we lead them along the path of hope.

As leaders, let's ask ourselves: “Am I someone who nurtures hope in others? In my own life, am I feeling hope? Am I creating an organization that inspires people to have hope?”

Let's use this time preparing for the November meetings as an opportunity to meet with the district leaders and to use our creativity to find ways to help them. Because of all of you, we have such a wonderful organization, so with real pride in what we've done so far, let's move another step forward in creating an organizational structure that is functional, flexible and can support the many, many new members we will welcome!