

## **NATIONAL LEADERS DISCUSS FOCUS OF ACTIVITIES THE DISTRICT: GROWING, NURTURING AND WINNING**

**The following discussion was held recently among the SGI-USA national leaders, focusing on the organization's three goals of district expansion, appointing young men's and young women's district leaders, and propagating Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Participants include General Director Danny Nagashima, Women's Leader Matilda Buck, Men's Leader Tariq Hasan, Youth Leader James Herrmann, Young Women's Leader Wendy DeSouza and Young Men's Leader Steve Mortan.**

**Danny Nagashima:** During my visits to many cities in recent months, I have been focusing on three main goals for our movement: developing and expanding the number of districts in the SGI-USA, so that each member can have quality care in their faith and practice; giving young men and young women the opportunity to take responsibility as district leaders; and sharing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism with others and helping them take faith.

I recall that on his very first journey outside Japan in 1960, in order to help build the foundation of kosen-rufu in the United States, SGI President Ikeda formed several districts, first in Honolulu, then in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle and Chicago.

At that time he compared the organization to an orchard, in which each district is like a single fruit tree, while the fruit represents each individual. Without the tree, there would be no fruit. Similarly, he said that the real basis of the organization is each district that composes it; when a district is formed and becomes fully functional, kosen-rufu in that area will grow in leaps and bounds.

**Matilda Buck:** I believe that our SGI-USA districts are unique in history. Imagine—neighborhood gatherings, held regularly, on a small scale, where ordinary people are able to express their spirituality, find encouragement from their peers and study profound Buddhist teachings—these are our districts. The reason that I decided, almost 30 years ago, to attend SGI-USA meetings regularly and eventually become a group leader was because I saw that the district was the place I could truly live a contributive life with my Buddhist practice.

**Steve Mortan:** Many young men tell me stories of how their districts are growing in size. Some districts are even bigger than chapters. I can't help but think of the overwhelming effort that our district leaders are constantly giving to help each and every member develop their faith.

It reminds me of my first year of teaching high school, when I had five classes of 40 students each. Each day I struggled with how I could give the proper attention to each one of my students. I was hoping to split my classes, and have another teacher teach the other half of students. The very next year, I was given two classes of only 20 students in each of them. It was wonderful. I could give my all to helping each student. In the end, it was the students that benefited from this change.

**Matilda:** We may have a tendency to feel more secure if we have a large meeting, but the

best ones I attend are small enough to engage most of the members in dialogue. The congregation model, where a large group just listens to one or two people, does not encourage many people. That is why I think it's wise to break up into smaller districts.

**James Herrmann:** In discussion with youth leaders across America, we decided that to support the SGI-USA's goal of district expansion we would focus on appointing district level leadership. By the end of the year, we have made it our objective to have young men's and young women's district leaders in every district.

**Tariq Hasan:** When it comes to appointing leaders, I often hear there are not enough people available. Although this may be true in some cases, I believe that more often than not we probably do have people who can step up to the responsibility if given the opportunity.

SGI President Ikeda has said: "Capable people definitely exist. The question is whether leaders can find them. ... Ultimately, the ability to find capable people depends on whether we can see others' strengths. And the only way to do this is to develop our own life condition" (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 2, p. 117). I believe that "many capable people exist" is especially true about our youth division.

**James:** I was recently invited to attend a district meeting. I was told there were no youth there, and the district leaders asked me to come and encourage them about this. I asked them, "How can I support you?" I spoke with the district leader many times over the next few months. We talked about propagation. We chanted. We wracked our brains to think about how we could find and encourage youth.

Finally, when the district leader called to confirm the meeting date, he said there would be youth there. When I arrived at the meeting, there were 10 guests—most of them in their teens and 20s! What I learned was that through making a determination, praying and taking action, anything is possible.

**Tariq:** I was appointed a young men's district leader when I was 23 years old after one year of practice. I was a scary looking person. I am sure that if I looked like that today, I would not be appointed anything. I did not have much experience in faith, but grappling with how to take care of the members made me expand my life in a hurry.

Most importantly, my men's division and women's division leaders were always there to give me advice. I believe it is so important for the men's division to have this relationship with the youth. Youth is a time of great dreams tempered by great anxiety and upheaval. If the men's division can be true older brothers to the youth, helping give them the opportunity to grow without being judgmental and gaining their trust so that they can seek them out for advice, then our youth can continuously grow and ensure the future of Buddhism.

Whenever someone questions whether or not a certain youth should be appointed to a position due to their lack of experience or perceived capability, I always smile inside and think about my seniors in faith who took a chance with me.

**Steve:** In my teens, I sometimes wondered why my district leaders would invest so much time into helping people who were not always interested in practicing Buddhism. Now I see the fruits of their efforts, as many of those members they supported are becoming

victorious in their lives. It really clarifies what it means to take action as a disciple of President Ikeda.

Being a young men's district leader made a lifelong impression on me. It was the first time I realized how difficult it is to care for other people, encourage them and together awaken to our shared mission of kosen-rufu. I had to develop myself, so I sought out President Ikeda as my example. Slowly but surely, I began to expand my capability.

**Wendy DeSouza:** In the past 10 years, I have lived in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Chicago and Los Angeles. In many of these places, I was either an official or unofficial young women's district leader. Since I was moving around so much for college, the men's and women's district leaders always made me feel included and gave me responsibility. I was even appointed a district leader in Ghana.

I didn't have a lot of training, and I was very disorganized. Yet I did my best to home visit members and share my own experiences in faith. To be honest, without my district "home," I would not have been able to make it through some very tough times living on my own in a new place.

**James:** In some cases, youth themselves may be reluctant to take on district leadership. But President Ikeda is wholeheartedly encouraging us to take the lead in our districts, to create an oasis of hope and genuine dialogue where all members can be nourished. Even if some of them feel they can't do it, all they have to do is try. As President Ikeda has said: "Resolving to do something in the first place is proof that you are progressing. Even if you have the tendency to make a determination but only stick to it for two or three days, it is O.K., as long as you keep refreshing that determination" (*Discussions on Youth*, vol. 1, p. 51).

**Wendy:** Reflecting on my experiences in the district, I would say that I learned three key points, which are also my determinations for this year: In faith, put the mentor-disciple relationship first; in study, put Nichiren Daishonin's writings first; in action, put visiting members first.

**Danny:** In this new century, I would like to return to the spirit of propagation and emphasize the basics of faith, practice and study—all for the sake of ourselves and others. The Daishonin writes: "Now in the Latter Day of the Law, the daimoku that Nichiren chants is different from that of previous ages. It is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo encompassing practice for oneself and for others" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1022).

In July, on a plane to the island of Tonga, I had a wonderful talk with a Christian minister sitting next to me about life and philosophy. I felt that the dialogue really expanded both our perspectives. Through this kind of heart-to-heart talk, we can surely share our confidence in our practice and feel the challenge and joy that result from these sincere exchanges. President Ikeda has said: "'You've done well. You were able to plant the seed of Buddhahood in your friend's heart. That's a splendid thing.' So saying, you should praise and encourage one another" (*My Dear Friends in America*, p. 77).

**Matilda:** The Daishonin's Buddhism is dynamic—dynamic in self-transformation and in helping others to practice. In "Letter to Jakunichi-bo," he says, "Nichiren's disciples and lay believers should realize the profound karmic relationship they share with him and

spread the Lotus Sutra as he does” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 994). So if we want to experience true and maximum benefit, we will introduce others and help them practice Buddhism.

The district is where we bring our friends, and how they are greeted will form an indelible impression. A district that is focused on supporting newcomers will become a happy place. Prayer is really important. If everyone could chant that a guest will be able to begin the practice, imagine the support this gives to the member who brought the guest.

I think we need to be bold in asking if a newcomer would like to try chanting. Maybe their sponsor is very busy or new themselves, but there are many people in the district that could help teach this person gongyo — others could offer a ride, etc. The main point is the united focus.

**James:** I was very inspired to read President Ikeda’s message to all of us on May 3. He wrote: “The Daishonin also states, ‘I entrust you with the propagation of Buddhism in your province’ (WND, 1117). In light of these words, we each have a unique and noble mission that has been entrusted to us by the Daishonin to ensure the widespread propagation of the Mystic Law in our respective communities and regions” (May 11 *World Tribune*, p. 11).

To me, being “entrusted” means taking personal responsibility. It means that we ourselves feel personally responsible for the objective. Based on this message, I believe that we should take personal responsibility for the “widespread propagation of the Mystic Law in our respective communities.”

If young people truly determine the future of society, then it is young people who must take the lead in teaching other youth about Buddhism.

**Steve:** For many young people, myself included, it takes courage and determination to share our practice. Our Family Youth Festivals and the Victory Over Violence campaign can create a warm atmosphere of dialogue. With so much violence in society, the youth of SGI-USA are making efforts to reach out in their communities to share this philosophy. With the support of men’s and women’s division members, each of these activities is a warm, welcoming space for dialogue and exchange.

I want to see the youth flood these activities with our friends and boldly lead a new era of propagation in the 21st century.

**Wendy:** When I think of propagation, I don’t think about campaigns. I think of my father. My sister and I made a determination for our father to start practicing this year. Even though he did not support our practice for more than two decades, he has recently been very receptive, asking many questions. A few months ago while visiting my sister, he decided to read *The Buddha in Daily Life*, and was so encouraged by it that he asked my sister if he could keep it “as a reference.”

What I want more than anything else is for my father to become happy. I want to transfer this same feeling to everyone I meet who is seeking this practice.

**Matilda:** Sometimes we may wonder, “How can I propel my life forward right now?” I believe if we embrace these three clear goals of propagation, entrusting youth and expanding the number of districts, we can have a personal victory.

In one sense these are organizational goals, but we are the organization. We have real

power in our lives when we pray and act with the same intent as the Daishonin. President Ikeda tells us that we have the powerful identity and mission of Bodhisattvas of the Earth—bodhisattvas whose core is Buddhahood. When we chant from that perspective, we can find the wisdom and courage to transform our lives and our society.

So Buddha is as Buddha does. When we take the action that will ensure these goals, we are taking responsibility for kosen-rufu. That puts us in dynamic harmony with our mentor's work and the Daishonin's intent. That's power!