

## Spirit of Groups

“At the same time [1952], Mr. Toda also issued a nationwide directive that the groups, the smallest organisational unit, should take the lead in efforts to expand our movement.

...

By focusing on the groups, meetings would become more about the members rather than ceremony. This would allow members to take a more prominent role in activities and give them the confidence to take action. Anywhere that members take personal initiative to courageously engage others in Buddhist dialogue is a vitally important stage for opening fresh horizons in our movement for kosen-rufu.” (SGINL 8966)

“My mentor, Mr Toda once said:... “Becoming happy yourself is no great challenge; it’s quite simple. But the essence of Nichiren Buddhism lies in helping others become happy, too. Only when you sincerely chant to the Gohonzon, strengthen your faith, and have a spirit of selfless dedication to your Buddhist practice can you truly guide and lead others.” I hope that, as SGI leaders, you will strive with a passionate vow to help others become happy and win in their lives.” (SGINL 9626)

## Significance of Groups

Groups are the smallest organisational unit of our SGIA movement and the primary focus of our activities.

Groups are where all members experience the transformative power of dialogue and are connected and nurtured in the practice and philosophy of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

Groups are based in our local areas, from where we can sink roots of Buddhist humanism in our communities.

Groups and particularly group leadership is the foundation of all leadership training in SGIA. The ‘skill’ to facilitate inspiring and empowering dialogue is developed through prayer and commitment to the happiness of each person attending the meeting.

## Formation of Groups

Groups are formed through the appointment of a group leader, based on the location in which they are living. Group leaders are approved by the Region leadership team.

Any member can potentially become a group leader. There are no specific ‘qualifications’ and a group leader can be a youth member or a men’s or women’s member.

What is important is one’s determination and prayer to connect friends and people in our local community to the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin and to care

wholeheartedly for the individual development of the group members as well as the harmony of the community and area we live in.

It is also important that the potential group leader has a place of residence where group meetings can be safely held and that they have a Gohonzon enshrined for members to chant to.

Group leaders may also hold other leadership positions in the organisation, in fact this is encouraged. While there is a tenure recommended for other leadership positions (e.g. 2-3 years), there is no defined tenure for a group leader – it is our hope that they can continue contributing to their local community as group leaders for life, even as they move to different locations or as they hold and graduate from other leadership positions.

While anyone can potentially become a group leader, it is nonetheless a significant responsibility. For this reason, in some cases, members may wish to form a 'Gathering' first and within the period of 1 year determine, together with the local Area leaders, whether to proceed to group and group leadership appointment.

The formation of a new group does not entail recruiting members from other groups. Each new group is a new nucleus of members and friends extending into the local community.

When members move into a new area, they will be recommended to join a group, based on where they live, by the Region and Area leadership.

### **Size and Make-up of Groups**

There is no differentiation of divisions within groups – a group can and should be made up of members from all divisions wherever possible (men, women, young men, young women, high school and future group).

A group generally ranges in size from 2 to 10 members. When groups regularly have over 10 active members, it is recommended to start preparations to split the group in two, in the process providing an opportunity for one of the group members to take responsibility as a new group leader. This process is carried out as a dialogue between the group leader and the local Area and Region leaders.

If a group becomes too large, the following issues tend to arise:

- Group leaders are unable to personally encourage and contact each group member on a regular and consistent basis.
- Meetings may become overly structured and only a small number of participants tend to share their experiences at the meeting
- Capable members may not be provided with adequate opportunities to further train and develop

It is often the case that groups fluctuate in size at various times as members move into or out of a location. For group leaders, it is important to not be too disheartened

by this and continue to care for each group member and pray wholeheartedly to connect new people to the practice and the group.

## Activities of a Group Leader

The primary responsibility of a group leader is to care for and support the members in the group. The most important activity to enable this, outside of the group meeting, is home visitation – meeting individually with each group member.

Ideally the home visitation is at the members' home. However this may not always be possible. Also, to avoid misunderstandings occurring between opposite genders, it is recommended to meet with members of the opposite gender in a neutral location (e.g. a coffee shop) or together with another member or Area leader of the same gender as the group member. In any case, it is important to exercise wisdom and to take into account yours and the member's family situation when encouraging each person outside of the group meeting.

As mentioned earlier, it is important for group leaders to embody the vision and spirit of fostering and encouraging group members to stand up to one day have their own group based on the determination and commitment to share this Buddhist humanism with their local community and for their own growth as a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

The group leader's role is also important in linking the group members with the overall organisation and movement. This entails:

- Encouraging members to subscribe to *Indigo*
- Encouraging members to seek personal guidance
- Communicating the schedule of activities outside of the group
- Encouraging guests to become members and helping them learn *gongyo*
- Encouraging new members to receive Gohonzon and assisting them to put forward an application
- Encouraging members in the spirit of financial contribution

It's also important for group leaders to attend the Group and Area Leaders meeting to support other group leaders in the same Area.

## Group Meetings

“Soka Gakkai members come from all walks of life. They have different occupations and range widely in age. Discussion meetings are places where everyone can talk openly and play an active role as equals...discussion meetings should be a place where everyone can share their joy of faith and determination for the future, and freely ask questions about anything they want to know. I also hope you will make discussion meetings enjoyable, worthwhile gatherings where everyone can resolve together to strengthen their faith and contribute to the development of their communities, and go home happy and refreshed.” (SGINL 9770)

## Content of Group Meetings

The aim of the group meeting is to create an environment where all members feel they can share what is occurring in their lives and freely express on topics that are discussed. If meetings become too formal, members would be reluctant to do this. Likewise, if group meetings become too large, members would tend to feel uncomfortable sharing their personal experiences and thoughts.

Group meetings therefore need to have sufficient prepared content to stimulate discussion while not impeding the free flow of dialogue. Group leaders also need to be prepared to leave aside the prepared content in the event of members' needs to share their life experiences and need more time for dialogue.

It is highly recommended that *Indigo* is used as the source of material to study and discuss at the group meetings. This will allow members to connect to President Ikeda's guidance and unite with other members across the country.

It is also highly recommended to begin the meeting with chanting and *gongyo* (if at an appropriate time of day).

## Guidelines for Dialogue

- The spirit of dialogue is not about exerting one's opinion over others. You don't have to agree. However, the spirit is to listen with the spirit of learning, to believe that the speaker has something of value to contribute to the discussion and the mutual growth of those present at the meeting.
- Nichiren Buddhism is an eternal practice of learning the truth of life therefore nobody has 100% understanding of the truth. Faith is key and everything we do is about strengthening our faith to contribute to the growth of oneself and others. Thus diversity of perceptions is key to enriching the quality of the dialogue. Instead of responding to the tendency to control by way of solving a problem, arguing, analysing, rescuing, nit-picking or giving advice, please appreciate the significance of the other person's life and contribution.
- Ask clarifying questions with the spirit to learn, not to expose weaknesses or pin point mistakes.
- Share your thought process and realisations, i.e. talk about your assumptions and how you arrived at what you believe rather than assuming people understand the Buddhist terms and jargons.
- Challenge your assumptions, judgments and opinions.
- Respect each person's sharing of experiences and struggles by way of treating them in confidence. It is not OK to tell or share a member's experience or struggle to others even if it is with the aim of trying to encourage others. To encourage people is through challenging ourselves to share our own journey based on the practice, to listen and to pray together.

- Dialogue is also not about giving advice or opinion i.e. telling someone what they should or shouldn't do or the kind of decision they should or shouldn't make. Meddling and interfering in someone's life is not support and encouragement.

### **Group Leader's Role in Group Meetings**

The group leader's role is to act as a facilitator of dialogue in the group meeting, encouraging each member to take the opportunity to speak and moving the discussion forward as necessary. It is always important that the group meetings are conducted based on the spirit of friendship and respect for one another.

The group leader may present study/discussion material themselves or plan for other group members to do so with the spirit of stimulating and facilitating discussion and dialogues.

### **Timing of a Group Meeting**

It is recommended that a group meeting lasts for a maximum of 1.5 hours and does not go beyond 9pm at night. If agreed with the group leader hosting the meeting, members can stay longer to chat, however it's important that the meeting is firstly finished on time so members who need to leave can feel free to do so.

While some may wish to offer tea/coffee and light snacks after or during a meeting, it is not mandatory. It is also important that group meetings do not transform into meetings regularly centred around meals. This can confuse the purpose of the group meeting and place an unnecessary burden on members to provide food.

There is no set day and time to hold group meetings – it will depend on what is most suitable for the majority of the group members.

It is recommended to hold the group meeting twice monthly, however this depends on what is feasible for the group leader and the group members.

### **Location of a Group Meeting**

The group meeting should be held in the home of the group leader. This allows the group leader to take full responsibility for the group and the meeting and for members to establish a regular rhythm of attending meetings.