

Sai Ram

MULTI-FAITH INITIATIVE

Sathya Sai Baba Centers of Northern California and Nevada, Region 7

A humble proposal offered to our omnipresent Swami. May He guide our every step.

Background

1. Swami's Mission

"I have come to light the lamp of Love in your hearts, to see that it shines day by day with added luster. *I have not come on behalf of any exclusive religion.* I have not come on a mission of publicity for a sect or creed or cause, nor have I come to collect followers for a doctrine. I have no plan to attract disciples or devotees into my fold or any fold. I have come to tell you of this unitary faith, this spiritual principle, this path of Love, this virtue of Love, this duty of Love, this obligation of Love."
4 July 1968, Baba

2. Breakout session at the First Center Officer's meeting on October 8, 2011

Conducted by Suzanne Slyman and Prema Rao

Study circle type discussion on the question - "Based on your understanding of Swami's teachings, please share specific ideas on how you (in your role as a _____ coordinator) can contribute to make your center a Sai Ideal center and welcome all - regardless of race, religious background and geographic origin.

*The essence of the question: "How to make centers a better place so that **ALL** feel welcome and experience Swami's universal love and teachings"*

All Center Officers (and YAs) were divided into role-alike groups where they discussed the question and came up with implementable suggestions. The overwhelming response was that LOVE is the answer to making all feel welcome. This would require current center members to be more expansive in their conduct and to include all as their near and dear – and not just those who they feel comfortable with (cliques based on language, geographical origin etc).

One recurring, specific suggestion was to have more multi-faith awareness opportunities. A proposal was written up by the Devotion wing and shared with Sekhar Boddupalli in Nov 2012.

3. International Sathya Sai Organization guidelines

The document, "Guidelines for Centers and Groups" for the International Sathya Sai Organization highlights Swami's objective for centers as follows.

"The Organisations named after Me are not to be used for publicising My Name or creating a new cult around My worship. They must try to spread interest in recitation of God's Name, meditation, and other spiritual exercises that lead man Godward. They must demonstrate the joy derivable from devotional singing and remembering the Lord's Name, the peace that one can draw from good company. They must render selfless service to the helpless, the sick, the distressed, the illiterate, and the needy. Their service should not be exhibitionistic; it must seek no reward, not even gratitude or thanks from the recipients." [1968.2.23] Baba

"The main objective of the Sathya Sai Organisation ... is to help humanity recognize its inherent divinity. ... So, your duty is to emphasise the One, to experience the One in all you do and speak. Do not give any importance to differences of religion, sect, status, or color. Have the feeling of One-ness permeate all your acts. Only those who do so have a place in this Organisation; the rest can withdraw." [1975.1.6] Baba

"It is not correct to say that you like only Rama or Krishna or Siva or Sai Baba. There is only one God, and He is omnipresent. Do not hate other religions. A Hindu should become a better Hindu, a Christian a better Christian, and a Muslim a better Muslim. ... You will find the unity of all religions only when you fill your heart with love." [1999.11.19] Baba

Objective

The initial objective of the 'Multi-faith Initiative' was two-fold. It is to address two of Swami's key teachings – 1) Remembering the Lord's name (namasmarana) and Unity of Faiths (religions). The over-arching objective is to understand and practice the concept of "All are One", "Brotherhood of Man, Fatherhood of God".

The initial objective was within the Devotion wing and therefore, focused on Devotion related practices such as chants, songs, presentations.

1. Remembering the Lord's name

"The present age is described in the Sastras as very conducive to liberation, for, while in the past ages, rigorous penance was prescribed as the means, the Kali age in which you are, requires only Namasmarana to win liberation!" SSS Vol IV Ch 18 [Genuine kinsman] p106

One can be liberated now by the spiritual practice of singing the glory of the Lord and listening to the Name being sung. ... It can help the process of liberation not only for the members of the group ... the whole world can benefit by the vibrations. [1982.1.26] I insist on group singing of the Names of the Lord. [1968.7.8] The Lord has said, "Where my devotees sing, there I seat my- self." [1957.7.11] Sathya Sai Baba

2. Unity of Faiths (religions)

The document, 'Operations Manual for Centers and Groups in International Sathya Sai Organization' emphasizes cultural relevance in centers.

"The best Center meetings are those that (1) provide spiritual upliftment to Center members and (2) are welcoming to people in the community in which the Center resides. To satisfy point (2), Center meetings have to have a spiritual basis but not be oriented to any one religion or language."

"However, no particular Name can be raised to a status higher than the rest, for all Names are His and He answers to all." Ref: SSS Vol VI Ch 44 [Name, the never failing fountain] p196-198

Phase I Multi-faith Initiative, 2012 – 2014

Our intention is to implement the Multi-faith Initiative in a gradual, loving manner using Swami's teachings of "Being a Source, not a force" and "First Understanding, then Adjustment".

Team - Devotees representing the 6 major religions per Swami's Sarva Dharma symbol

1. Buddhism – Seyna DeSilva (Concord)
 2. Christianity – Holly Spragens (Peninsula)
 3. Hinduism - Arun Balaraman (CSJ)
 4. Islam – Sathyam Warner (Reno)
 5. Judaism – Beth Sandweiss (Oakland)
 6. Zoroastranism – Jeroo Captain (Sacramento)
- Project Coordinator: Sekhar Boddupalli (Sacramento)
Regional Contact: Prema Rao

Building Awareness

I. Team level

Visit Religious places of worship

II. Center level

1. Simple repetitive chants and songs which all can learn and participate at centers, GAB
2. More advanced chants, perhaps related to 'mother nature' (unifying principle in all religions)
3. Instrumental music from different faiths (promoting healing power)
4. Study circle (fact, history, Swami's teachings, unifying themes)
5. SSE lesson plans (fact, history, Swami's teachings, unifying themes)
6. Power point presentations on different religions
7. Scripts for plays/skits
8. Visit religious places collectively – field trips
9. Celebrate 6 festival days (one for each religion)
 - o 2-4 weeks prior to festival day – Chants, unison songs, music, study circle, SSE lessons
 - o On festival day - Chants, unison songs, ppt presentations, plays/skits, games, prasad
 - o Festival days - options
 - Buddhism – Buddha Poornima
 - Christianity – Easter, Christmas
 - Hinduism – Sivarathri, Ramanavami, Gurupoornima, Janmasthanmi, Navarathri
 - Islam – Id El Fitr, Ramadan
 - Judaism – Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah
 - Zoroastranism – Nav Roz

III. Regional level

- GAB
- Swami's Birthday
- Sai Reflections Day – Mahasamadhi/Easwaramma Day
- Mini-retreat – Introduce Multi-faith saadhana for implementation in centers (see #9 above)

IV. Community level

- Multi-faith Day, Interfaith Day, Community Day – "Love all, Serve all" as the theme
 - o Keynote speaker (Father Charles), talks by different groups
 - o Songs, chants
 - o Plays, skits
 - o Collective service project (assembling toiletries kits, blanket project, Love letters etc.)
 - o Cultural awareness booths, food

It is interesting to note that a community level event was first envisioned 9 years ago! All in Swami's time!

Progress report, 2014

Plans for the Multi-faith Initiative were to increase awareness of the topic in our region by the following means. Updates provided below.

Multi-faith Team has worked on these aspects

1. Visited places of worship.
2. Jeroo prepared original study material on Zoroastranism.

Other devotees who have helped implement elements of this initiative in our region

1. Multi-faith chants – Obtained multi-faith chants (mp3) from Region 1 (Srikanth Vaidyanathan) and shared with Devotion Coordinators (CD and email). Requested centers to play chants at the beginning of devotion program from June 2013 to Nov 2013. Some centers have done this with fervor and have reported that center members can recite fluently. Unfortunately, not all centers have embraced this initiative (reasons vary).
2. SSE lesson plans - Usha Prasad requested Center Education Coordinators to implement in classes. Some centers have followed through. We have provided SSE the study material obtained from Region 6
3. Study circles – Region 6 material (on 4 religions) available on our Regional website http://www.region7saicenters.org/omsairam/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48&Itemid=28
4. Multi-faith songs – Sacramento Sai Center, promoted by Sreedhar Gopalakrishnan (DC), led a 1 h Multi-faith presentation (songs, chants) at GAB 2013. Additionally, the Sai Reflections Day children's program was focused on Multi-faith songs
5. Plays – Swami's Birthday program, under the leadership of Raghuram, presented a Multi-faith play
6. Presentations – Being implemented at some centers, such as CSJ, Sacramento.

Overall, the Multi-faith Initiative has found resonance with some centers and young adults.

Our original intention was to roll out the Multi-faith Initiative at the center level this year. Implementation of 6 festival days during the year was halted this year because of National team's recommendation to study the topics of "Love" and "Service". If possible, it would be good to implement the Multi-faith project next year, 2016.

Based on our original objectives, these are pending action items for the Multi-faith Initiative:

1. Identify 6 festival dates during the year to celebrate 6 major religions
2. Study circle material – Prepare on Hinduism (Arun), Modify Christianity document (Holly)
3. Prepare plays/scripts to be enacted at different centers on the festival days
4. Prepare power point presentations as a way to bring greater awareness of different religions
5. Devotion - Create CD (a remix or original recording) which has songs, chants, music from all religions
6. Prepare a package for each religion (chants, songs, study circle, play/skits, presentation) to be distributed to centers for implementation
7. Regional event with Sai group (to talk of each religion briefly and unveil #5 above; one Sai center has expressed an interest in hosting this meeting)
8. Community event with non-Sai groups (if there is energy/interest, need to prepare proposal and get approval)

Phase II Multi-faith Initiative, 2015
IDEAS TO EXPLORE

Guiding principles: Expansion is My life; Unity in Diversity; Religion of Love, Love all, Serve all

Project Coordinators: Giri Giridharan, Aishwarya Jayagopal, Paparao Kavalipati

From original team: Holly Spragens, Jeroo Captain, Sekhar Boddupalli, Arun Balaraman, Prema Rao

New members: Deepika Singaraju, Lakshmi Vyakaran, Raghu Kanadam, Maneesha Munshi, Riaz Ahmed, Satya Kalra, Subha Madapusi, Usha Prasad, Sreedhar Gopalakrishnan, Kaladhar Voruganti, Syamala Voruganti, Sathyanand Balan, Anita Shankar, Maria Bonilla, Geetha Mohan

Others?: Aruna Narayanan, Balaji Shanmugam, Murali Krishna, Srinivas Talluri, Ashwin Goyal, Kalavathi Subramaniam, MN Reddy, Srinivas Rao

Regional Leads: Prema Rao, Arun Balaraman, Suzanne Slyman

Centers represented: CSJ, Pleasanton, Peninsula, Santa Rosa, Sacramento, Fremont, San Jose, Oakland

Level	Lead	Team	Task	Timeline
Individual GIRI	Giri	Giri	Prayers at home	?
Center PAPARAO	Deepika	Deepika	Organize center package	Nov – Dec 2015
		Arun, Holly	1. Study circle	Mar – Apr 2015
		Sreedhar	2. Songs, chants, music	Feb – May 2015
		Usha, Subha, Jeroo	3. SSE lesson plans	Feb – Aug 2015
			4. Power point presentations	Feb – Sept 2015
		Kaladhar, Syamala	5. Plays, skits	Feb – Nov 2015
	Prema	Devotion coordinators	Celebrate festivals	Jan – Dec 2016
	Raghu	Service coordinators	IFTAR – host dinner during Ramadan*	June/July 2015
Raghu	Devotion coordinators	Christmas caroling*	Dec 2015	
Region AISHWARYA			Coordinate visits to places of worship	Jan – Dec 2016
			Mini-retreat, 'Year of Multi-faith awareness'	Jan 2016
Community GIRI AISHWARYA GIRI/AISHWARYA	Raghu	Maria, Prema, Suzanne	Namasmarana- Repeating names of God*	?
	Raghu	Maria, Prema, Suzanne	Bethlehem in the South Bay*	Dec 2015
	Lakshmi	Holly, Satya, Geetha, Prema, Suzanne	Public meeting with some/all of these - 1. Interface with community 2. Service –project on environment? 3. Adoration – Songs, chants 4. Illumination – Talks, plays (SSE, YA) 5. Logistics – all day 6. Food, cultural booths	?

* Details provided in a separate document

Some examples of Multi-faith (Interfaith) meetings in the community

http://www.mercurynews.com/faith/ci_27346840/world-religion-day-campbell-brings-faithful-together?source=rss

http://news.yahoo.com/christians-jews-muslims-hold-peace-pilgrimage-london-191454056.html?soc_src=mediacontentstory&soc_trk=ma

<http://www.interfaithsustain.com/womens-multi-faith-eco-gathering-environmental-issues-in-religious-traditions/>