



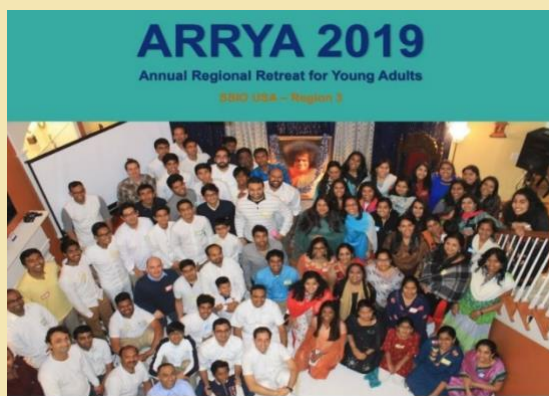
### Cultural Inclusion and Expansion Initiatives in Region 3

During the Region 3 officer's orientation meeting January 26-27, 2019 in Gainesville, Florida, the newly selected officers were given presentations and study circles to discuss issues related to cultural inclusiveness. Groups then presented humorous and insightful skits with role playing to encourage awareness and empathy. The goal was to encourage discussion and a sharing of various perspectives and to align our center programs with Sathya Sai Baba's teachings as much as possible. It was emphasized that no individual or center would be asked to make any changes and for each to ultimately follow their heart and conscience.

Best practices related to having inclusive centers from the current center guidelines and operation manuals were reviewed. These include holding meetings at non-denominational locations, using simple altars that appeal to a variety of faiths and cultures, not having a requirement or expectation for wearing whites or Indian clothing, using greeters to help orient newcomers, using English in our informal conversations with each other, having translations for all songs and prayers, and incorporating some English songs and prayers into the program.

During the Annual Regional Retreat for Young Adults (ARRYA) February 16-17, 2019 in Atlanta, Georgia with the theme "ARISE! If not me, then who? If not now, then when?", study circles were conducted by YA's on Cultural Inclusion and Expansion. Some take away points and comments from the YA's during the study circles included:

- Learn about other faiths
- Have more practical study circle topics that deal with issues faced in our day to day lives
- Encourage different opinions and have more conversations between YA's and senior members
- Do interfaith prayer programs
- Focus more on Service
- Speak kindly and softly
- Talk to SSE children to get their perspectives and understand their interests



Orlando Sai Center - Have a loving and welcoming environment at all times. At the Orlando Sai Center there are posters based on different religions. This fosters belonging, warmth and ownership



During the annual regional retreat held May 24-27 in Jacksonville, Florida, a talk was given on CIE to dispel the following misunderstandings and clarify goals of the initiative:

- The objective is not to recruit new members, but rather to follow Sai's teachings in thought, word and deed in our centers
- The objective is not to dictate how people can worship, but rather to encourage empathy and design our programs so that each person has some element in the program with which they can connect
- The objective is not to blame or criticize any one group, but rather to educate all with regards to following Sai's wishes and teachings.



- The objective is not to divide people, but rather to connect and reach out to more people

Sample Study Circle comments from Ft Lauderdale, Orlando, Raleigh, and Sarasota/Bradenton Centers:

- In your own perspective, what is the function and purpose of a Sai Center?
  - A common place to bring together a group of people who understand the value and practicality of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba's teachings.
  - Acknowledgement of the inclusiveness of all faiths and religions.
  - Expansion in terms of personal spiritual development and thinking
  - Find your center and center your-self
  - To realize who we really are: Divine
- How does one share the joy and the message of Sai with new members and fellow members of the Center?
  - Always be Happy and Joyful. Newcomers will inquire into the source of that joy, and will want to know more
  - Use Sai Baba as our example to 'act well' and to know our role in the play of life.
  - Having a Multifaith prayer as part of the devotional program preferably at the beginning – this leads to a feeling of belonging and ownership
  - We must practice what we speak. Be transparent
  - Sing in different languages that represent all cultures. Projecting songs of different languages and their meanings is helpful since this helps to transcend language barriers, but focuses more on God, and on creating a prayerful atmosphere
  - Have a loving and welcoming environment at all times. At the Orlando Sai Center there are posters based on different religions. These foster belonging, warmth and ownership
- What are some common characteristics and aspirations among Americans of All Origins?
  - To be respected, to feel included, to be loved, to be able to help and serve.
- In addition to routine service activities, how can we foster love towards our fellow beings of all cultures in practical ways?
  - Having greeters welcome and orient newcomers and explain the various aspects of the programs
  - Include recognizable elements in our program to let them know that Sai Baba's center is for all, including for people from their own religion and culture

Throughout the region, most devotees were very happy with the introduction of this initiative and many commented that they were waiting for something like this for a long time. A few devotees were apprehensive and cautious for potential change. They were lovingly and respectfully encouraged to share their perspectives and most of their concerns were allayed once they realized that all opinions are to be valued and no changes are to be mandated. Sai Baba confirms this by saying: *"Love cannot be acquired by force, it should naturally originate from the Source."* (March 16, 2003)

More information about CIE initiative is available at [www.sathyasai.us/cie](http://www.sathyasai.us/cie).