



Cultural Inclusion and Expansion Initiatives in Region 9

Region 9 includes Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. There are six Centers and six Groups in the region. All of the Centers and two Groups participated in the Cultural Inclusion and Expansion (CIE) Initiative and completed all the study circles. In preparation, the Center officers conducted the study circles amongst themselves, first. They then made adjustments to the meeting schedules for their own Centers to create opportunities for all devotees to participate including SSE teachers, SSE students and Young Adults.

The CIE Initiative was launched on March 24th. Based on their previously scheduled activities, Centers worked at their own pace, so their end dates varied. Some Centers took a break from studying CIE for the summer due to lower attendance, and others finished the study circles before the summer began. One Center and some Groups are still in process with their CIE study circles and are scheduled to finish by January 2020. Most Centers agreed to revisit the CIE study periodically in order to reflect on progress and consider new changes.

Most Centers explored the CIE topics through study circle discussions; in addition, one Center surveyed their membership online for feedback about which topics they would like to discuss further, experiment with changing, change and not change in response to their learning.

Here are the changes made thus far throughout our Region:

Altar: In response to the CIE study circles, most Centers have chosen to simplify their altar décor to include a photograph of Sai Baba, a light, and a container of vibuthi (sacred ash), and, in some cases, the Sarva Dharma symbol. Some Centers recognized the need to remove images and statues representing Hindu deities in order to reflect Sai Baba's universality, while some small Centers or Groups meeting in private homes, out of respect for the hosts, have kept some Hindu deities at their altars. One ongoing conversation we are pursuing in our Region is whether the presence of a chair for Swami, as part of the altar, is appropriate to the goal of unity in diversity.





Devotional Singing: As a result of the CIE study circles, Centers have recognized the importance of incorporating more English and world language songs, as well as more unison songs into their programs, limiting the inclusion of traditional Hindu and Sanskrit songs as part of the Center devotional programs. Centers are including multi-faith prayers and English language Aarati as part of their programs, and providing practice sessions for devotees to learn these. In the future, more progress can be made to include opening and closing songs representative of Sai Baba's universal teachings.

Culture: In order to become more welcoming and honoring of the local culture, Centers are making an effort to encourage attendees of Indian origin to speak in English, rather than their own Indian languages, throughout their time at the Sai Center. Additionally, devotees are being invited to wear modest Western clothes, rather than traditional Indian attire. Holidays and festivals from all faiths are being studied by SSE students, discussed and honored within the Centers. As we continue to explore CIE on an ongoing basis and devotees make efforts to understand and embrace the diversity of the local cultures, we may choose to make further changes in our Centers.

Welcoming Newcomers: One Center is revising their Newcomer packet to provide additional explanation of Sai traditions in order to be more welcoming. Other Centers are encouraging Newcomers to ask questions so that they can grow to understand the Sai Center as they participate. With Sai Baba's grace, we will continue to make every effort to reach out to visitors and new members, inviting them to bring their knowledge and faith into our Centers.

All of this has been accomplished throughout the Region, not by force, but, as Dr. Feely described, by Source, encouraging devotees to seek Sai Baba's guidance and to follow their own consciences. An observation shared by one of the groups in the region sums it all up: "The major change resulting from the CIE study circles was more internal than external. Members have understood that manifesting oneness in the outside world comes from realizing oneness within. External changes are important, but internal transformation is what is key."

More information about CIE initiative is available at <http://www.sathyasai.us/cie>.