



## **Cultural Inclusion and Expansion Initiatives in Region 4**

### **With Love as the Guiding Force**

In January 2019, three weeks before the launch of the Cultural and Inclusion initiative, the newly selected officers of Greater St. Louis Center were meeting for the first time. They decided at the outset, that going forward, LOVE would be the guiding force in everything the center stood for and would reflect in every aspect of the center's programs. That is what Sai Baba has been telling us over and over; God is Love; Live in Love.

There was another event the officers had to give a lot of attention and time to, after many years of prayerful efforts, the center members were going to build a new prayer hall. It seemed like it would be ready in a couple months, so all members got together to decide on the details. Keeping the CIE guidelines in mind, they felt there should be a neutral entrance, with just a picture of Baba's face smiling down on all who entered, and a library room with the multi faith symbols, where people from every faith would feel welcomed and comfortable.

When it got to the main prayer hall, the discussion became more vibrant as all members' heartfelt desires came forth. For years some members wanted both Shirdi Baba and Sathya Sai Baba's pictures at the altar and this seemed the right opportunity to make the altar a reflection of everyone's heart. Some centers have decided not to keep Baba's chair at the altar, this was not an option as a member expressed, they would go on a hunger strike if it was removed! This is where the officers were grateful for what was shared on a CIE conference call led by Dr. Feely regarding how to move forward, that it should be by source, not force. Every center had to see what was comfortable for their own setting. It was decided that for the prayer hall opening, representatives of all major faiths should be invited to give a blessing. Teams were assigned for every aspect so we would be ready in time.

Did everything go smoothly till opening day? Not a thing. There were major weather issues and the construction was delayed. The pictures for the altar coming from Puttaparthi, were not ready till ten days prior. They were finally shipped from Bangalore and then got delayed in Dubai. Finally, two days before the opening, they were held up by customs in Chicago. After all the drama (Sathya Sai must have had a ring side view to laugh at our hysterics), a member was able to pick up and drive the pictures to the center, just 12 hours before the opening, for which many people were travelling from far. Also, none of the multi faith representatives seemed to have time to come that morning due to other commitments, but wait, just a day or so before, they all confirmed they could make it! Finally, the prayer hall opening went beautifully with blessings offered by a Christian Chaplain, a Jewish Priestess, a Buddhist Master, a Muslim Faith Leader, a Sikh Gyani and a Hindu Priest.



The presence of these leaders of diverse faiths in the ceremony, reinforced one of the key purposes of the prayer hall: to unite people of all faiths with a common message of love and service. What more proof did we need that this was all Sathya Sai's doing, a new place to worship and a fresh start with Unity of Faiths. The Muslim faith leader, commented on how a place such as this was needed in the community, where LOVE was the guiding principle. This was right after the heart-breaking incident at the mosque in New Zealand. The members knew how everything unfolded, that they were to move forward together in the community as a part of the whole and not be like the fish in a tank, which when placed in a big tub while the tank is being cleaned, sticks to one end only, even when it is free to cover a much larger area. Some inclusive aspects were already in place at the Sai Center, like singing the English Aarti on the first Friday of every month, making sure devotional songs in English are included every time and displaying non-English song lyrics with meaning in English. Study Circles are held on a Sunday now and the setting is more welcoming, with chair seating in a circle, thus eliminating floor seating. Other ways Center members have tried to be a part of the community is by joining the 4th of July parade every year as a group. They Walk for Values and hold signs displaying the human values Sathya Sai wants us to live by.

There is so much more that can be done: Like invite people of all faiths to Global Akhand Bhajans, sing multi-faith prayers and hymns. Center members keep in mind Sathya Sai's words, only He knew how to give the simplest most effective examples! He said that spiritual progress is gradual, if you cut off a tadpole's tail it will not survive. The tail will drop off by itself when the tadpole matures into a frog. Region 4 members will keep moving in the right direction with LOVE as the Guiding Force.

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