

## **107<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly Bishop's Welcome Message**

February 8, 2019

Aloha Kakou/Good Morning without boundaries!

I would like to welcome everyone to our 107<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly.

Although it is nothing compared to cold weather on the Mainland, still it has been a bit rainy and chilly in Hawaii and so I would like to extend a special warm welcome of Aloha to our guests from the Buddhist Churches of America: Mr. Gary Mukai (and his wife Karen) and Mrs. Celeste Sterrett (and her husband Dan).

“Welcome to Hawaii and Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii.”

Though your stay with us is brief, I hope that it will be meaningful and enjoyable and you will be able to experience some of our Island hospitality. Again, Aloha and E Komo Mai, “Welcome and Please come in!”

At this time, I would also like to welcome and introduce another Big Islander Rev. Blayne Higa who recently completed his Graduate Studies at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley. (He really needs no introduction as I am sure all of you already know who he is, as he has been involved with Hawaii Kyodan in so many ways from Chair of the Committee on Social Concerns, President of Moiliili Hongwanji, First Vice President of Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii and as a Minister's Aide who was assisting at Moiliili Hongwanji.) He is currently undergoing Orientation at HQ. After his Orientation, he will remain at HQ for March and April to help with some special projects and endeavors because of his qualifications in chaplaincy and his relationships with the larger community. After which time, as of May 1, 2019, he has been assigned to be the Resident Minister of Kona Hongwanji. Welcome Home, Rev. Blayne Higa.

Further, I want to take this opportunity (even though some individuals may not be here today already) to thank those who served as Officers, Directors, Advisors, Honorary Advisors, Committee Chairs and Committee members of the various Standing Committees, Special Committees and Special Ad-Hoc Task Forces of Hawaii Kyodan including the HQ Staff and volunteers including my wife, Tamayo, who helped during this past year. It is together with the support, dedication, commitment and generosity of the Ministers and Lay Members at the local temples, it made it possible for Hawaii Kyodan to not only exist, but also share the Nembutsu Dharma and contribute to the betterment of society. I express my deepest appreciation.

Just imagine, this year, we are celebrating 130 years in Hawaii. It is true, we are dealing with many issues and grappling with many concerns and at the top of my list are: the search for alternate sources of income, personnel concerns, and increasing our outreach or capacity to share the Dharma with more people, both in quantity and quality. However, though we must be serious about these things, at the same time, we should also exhibit our joy and gratitude for Namo Amida Butsu, The-Buddha's-Name-Which-Calls and The-Buddha's-Name-Which-I-Call, and let it show! As I say this I am thinking of a phrase from the Shoshinge, “...though the light of the sun is veiled by clouds and mists, beneath the clouds and mists there is brightness, not dark.” We need to be realistic, but we can also be optimistic. As a Sangha, let us express our joy and gratitude and warmly welcome all who have a wish to listen to the Dharma. Thank you, Rev. Umitani for that moving Dharma Message, earlier. Smile, let me hear the joy in your voices, and the Nembutsu!

In observance of our 130<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the 2019 Hawaii Kyodan Calendar tried to capture and summarize some highlights of our past 130 years. However, there is no way that 12 pages could capture everything and much was centered on pre-WW II, but I sincerely hope that

you took the opportunity to really take in some of the extraordinary and milestones events and implications of those significant events and accomplishments of Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii which, by the way, is YOU! Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii is not only the Headquarters Office. It is all of us!

What Hawaii Kyodan has accomplished in the past 130 years is due to all of our combined efforts both minister and lay. Sure certain things were perhaps centrally located, but it was because every part supported another part that the whole became a reality. For example, today, we see the Dharmacakra everywhere as a symbol of Buddhism. Even at Punchbowl a national cemetery, we see the Dharmachakra on gravestones and even the Main Sanctuary at Punchbowl. I did not realize that significance of the Dharmachakra in the Main Sanctuary at Punchbowl, but after reviewing the history I realize how significant it is! There was a time when even if you were Buddhist your grave might have another religious symbol on it because there was no other option. There was a time when Buddhist symbols were not recognized by the military and/or government. And even beyond that, it is my understanding that the Dharma Wheel became the international symbol of Buddhism for the entire world when it was adopted at a World Buddhist Conference, but the recommendation came from Buddhists in Hawaii. Now, how amazing is that! Tiny little Hawaii and a handful of Hawaii Buddhists made a huge impact on the rest of the Buddhist world.

Further, so many of our programs and projects like Project Dana and the Living Treasures of Hawaii benefit not only our members, but the larger community as well. Yesterday, I am happy and proud to say that Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii was recognized by the Hawaiian community at the Hawaiian Caucus held at the State Capitol for our support of the Hawaiian people. Please look at the Certificates on display which YOU received.

Did you know that around 10 years ago, during Bishop Okano's tenure, the Catholic Bishop of Hawaii visited Hawaii Betsuin? In more recent times, a Buddhist gatha was sung in a Christian Cathedral, a Greek Orthodox Bishop said "Namo Amida Butsu" at the end of his message and a Christian choir director after his choir sang as part of a Peace Day Observance bowed to the Buddha as a sign of respect. To me, these are all signs of the respect and appreciation for Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii and the Buddha-Dharma.

Finally, the greatest contribution of Hawaii Kyodan which is not mentioned enough, to me, is how we have guided and nurtured so many people in Hawaii whether it be with secular education like language schools or religious education taught at Dharma Schools or with our preschools, Hongwanji Mission School and PBA which taught not only ABCs and 123s, but emphasized the values of hard work, perseverance loyalty, honesty, giving back to the community and so forth, from the immigrant contract laborers of 130 years ago to supreme court justices and astronauts, and more recently the inclusion and acceptance of LGBTQ with our support of Marriage Equality in Hawaii.

I recall a conversation I had with an individual at another organization's event which I attended representing us. This individual had recently moved to Hawaii but he was somewhat familiar with some of the things Hongwanji did in Hawaii and he was astonished to find out about our membership. He thought we were a much larger organization. I took his comments as a compliment. We do have a legacy!

In the calendar, did you notice the photo of a little girl named Emiko Ryusaki? Isn't it amazing that a 12 year old girl could say "Please don't cry. If you do, I cannot go to that beautiful place (the Pure Land). I'm not dying. I'm going to be with Lord Buddha (Amida Buddha)." My mind cannot fully fathom the depth and breadth of Amida Buddha's Wisdom and

Compassion that has provided assurance and guidance to tens of thousands and if you count from the beginning maybe even millions of people here in Hawaii through Hawaii Kyodan. I am right now thinking of what the late Bishop Ryokan Ara of the Tendai Mission of Hawaii, who recently passed away, always kept repeating to me. It was his conclusion that “If it were not for the Hongwanji, the State of Hawaii would be a very different place.” “That even today, the future of Buddhism in Hawaii, depends on what Honpa Hongwanji does or does not do.”

I still firmly believe that we need more of the Buddha-Dharma to inspire and guide us as a Sangha. In this area, I ask for especially the help of the ministers to share about living the Dharma with Gomonshu’s “A Way of Living as a Nembutsu Follower” as a guide and, once again, “Passages on (nurturing) the Sangha” which I compiled.

Our future begins right now. Maybe I am naïve and sentimental, but it is my conviction that HHMH cannot fold. If we do, there would be a huge vacuum that will be felt not only by our members and Buddhism in Hawaii, but even by the State of Hawaii. But the time has come for us to move forward together by embracing change.

To one and all assembled, please know that your work and efforts are deeply appreciated. Before I close, I want to acknowledge Pieper Toyama, our State Kyodan President, for his dedication and commitment and his Dharma-centeredness.

Let us make manifest our theme and slogan for 2019 Embrace Change: Transformation (Walk in Peace). May we be guided and try to live the Dharma. Namo Amida Butsu and Welcome to Giseikai!