

## **WORLD SIKH COUNCIL – AMERICA REGION**

The World Sikh Council – America Region is the umbrella organization representative of Sikhs in the United States. Its membership consists of Sikh gurdwaras and organizations that meet its criteria for membership. The major governing purpose is that the organization should represent the collective view of all Sikhs in the region.

### **History of Umbrella Sikh Organizations in the US**

Up to 1970, the Sikh community in the United States was small. There was only one<sup>1</sup> gurdwara in the country - the one in Stockton, California. Relaxation of immigration rules resulted in significant growth in the Sikh population and emergence of numerous Sikh organizations. The need for an umbrella organization representative of all Sikhs in the country was felt and representatives of various Sikh societies and gurdwaras met in 1978 and 1979 to set up the Sikh Council of North America (SCNA). This Council thrived for a few years. However, after the June 1984 attack on Darbar Sahib and the massacres of Sikhs in India, the Council, which honored Mrs. Gandhi with a *sirpao* in 1983, was too discredited and faded away.

At the International Sikh Convention held in New York on July 28, 1984, the World Sikh Organization (WSO) was set up. Every country was to have a National Sikh Organization. An important objective was to strive, through peaceful means, for the establishment of a Sikh Nation, Khalistan, in order to protect the Sikh faith and identity. The WSO failed to accomplish any of its goals. The National Sikh Organization continued on for a while but was essentially ineffective.

The International Sikh Organization (ISO) stepped into this vacuum in October 1987. The primary agenda of the ISO has been to support freedom for Sikhs in Khalistan through peaceful means and to highlight human rights violations by the Indian Government against Sikhs. It has not developed a representative “umbrella” structure.

Several Sikhs from across the world attended the Parliament of World’s Religions held in Chicago in 1993. Some of them had a meeting at which it was resolved that an International Sikh Organization for peace, understanding, and religious education was needed. An Organizing Committee was appointed to develop a Constitution. A proposal prepared by this Committee was presented at the Vishav Sikh Sammelan held in September 1995 in Amritsar, Punjab.

Singh Sahib Bhai Manjit Singh Ji, Acting Jathedar, Sri

Akal Takhat Sahib, made an extended visit to USA in 1994. A thirty-two member committee was selected to set up an organization linking all North American Sikh religious organizations directly to Sri Akal Takhat Sahib.

At the 1995 Vishav Sikh Sammelan it was resolved that a World Sikh Council be set up. Under Singh Sahib Bhai Manjit Singh Ji’s direction, a Memorandum of Association was drawn up in December 1995. It listed fourteen founder members and three ex-officio members. Eighty-six other members were to be co-opted, from around the world, by the fourteen founder members. In addition, membership was open to “donor members” approved by the Chairman. Later, the constitution was revised to raise the number of co-opted members to 500 and to provide for Jathedar, Sri Akal Takhat Sahib, to be the ex-officio Patron-in-Chief. A Western Regional Office of this “top-down” organization was established in June 1996 in Los Angeles, California.

Unaware of the above efforts, representatives of 25 Gurdwaras and Sikh associations in the USA met in Glenrock, NJ in April 1996. They set up the National Sikh Council – USA. It was to be a voluntary association of gurdwaras and other Sikh organizations. A second meeting was held in Maryland in September 1996, at the invitation of Singh Sahib Bhai Manjit Singh Ji, to unite the two efforts. Representatives of thirty-six Sikh institutions and about a dozen other invitees attended. The meeting approved the Articles and By-laws for the organization which was renamed the “Vishav Sikh Council – USA” as a regional unit of the World (Vishav) Sikh Council. The Council was registered as a non-profit organization on October 17, 1996.

### **The January 1997 Meeting In Anandpur Sahib**

The Vishav (World) Sikh Council met in Anandpur Sahib on January 4, 1997. Singh Sahib Bhai Ranjit Singh Ji, Jathedar Sri Akal Takhat Sahib, quashed the previous constitution as not representative of the Panth. A new Constitution was released on December 21, 1997. VSC-USA contacted Jathedar Sahib and explained its structure. Singh Sahib approved of the “bottom-up” structure and advised that VSC-USA continue its work.

In line with the provision in the Constitution of the World Sikh Council that Regional Councils should select their own Regional Committees, members of the Board of Directors of VSC-USA selected a six-member Executive Committee in April 1998. The names were submitted to the President of the VSC and to the Patron for approval. After some discussion, Jathedar Sahib agreed to accept five persons selected by the VSC-USA but added another eight names to constitute the initial 13 member Executive Committee of World Sikh Council – America Region

(WSC-AR). The objective of this committee was to set up the Regional Council for the America Region.

In February 1999, the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee first suspended and later removed Singh Sahib Bhai Ranjit Singh Ji from his position. The WSC-AR issued a press release strongly condemning this illegal act. WSC-AR issued another press release condemning interference of the Punjab government in the religious affairs of the Sikhs and calling upon Sikhs of the world to devise a system of independently selecting the Jathedar, Sri Akal Takhat Sahib.

The Council and its Regional Committee met in Richmond Hill, NY, Gurdwara Sahib on November 14, 1998. Articles of Incorporation and By-laws were approved. The Articles were submitted to the Patron for approval and the approval was duly received.

### **Working of the World Sikh Council – America Region**

According to its “bottom-up” structure to properly seek and voice the opinions of the Panth, the Council consisting of representatives of the member institutions is the General Body of the WSC-AR. Members pay a nominal one-time fee on joining. The General Body selects a Regional Committee of sixteen to run its affairs. Members of the Regional Committee have tenure of three years and no one can serve more than two terms. Therefore, five or six members of the Regional Committee retire every year. The vacancies are filled through a two-step selection process. Member organizations nominate a number of persons, not exceeding the number of vacancies, they consider most suitable. The Secretary-General compiles a list of nominations and sends it back to the Members for the second step in which they choose a number of persons, not exceeding the number of vacancies, from this list of nominations. Persons receiving the most nominations at the second step are requested to serve on the Regional Committee for three-year terms. Then, the Regional Committee selects the Executive Committee from its own members. All sixteen members are asked to name up to five members. The five receiving the most nominations are requested to serve on the Executive Committee. Finally, the Executive Committee selects officers from its own members. This procedure implies that officers and the Executive Committee have a term of one year. No person may serve on the Executive Committee for more than two consecutive years. Every person serves at the pleasure of the committee that selected him/her. Thus, the General Body has the authority to replace the Regional Committee or any member thereof at any time. Similarly, the Regional Committee has authority over the Executive Committee and the Executive Committee over the officers.

<sup>1</sup> There was another gurdwara in El Centro, California but that had ceased to follow Sikh practices.

No officer or member of any Committee may issue public statements or represent the Council in any matter without approval of the entire Regional Committee. All decisions are to be unanimous and not majority based.

At this time (October 2008) WSC-AR includes the following organizations:

1. Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, Stockton, CA
2. Gurdwara Sahib Fremont, Fremont, CA
3. Guru Nanak Sikh Mission, Livingston, CA
4. Sikh Gurdwara of LA, North Hollywood, CA
5. Sikh Gurdwara Riverside, Riverside, CA
6. Colorado Singh Sabha, Denver, CO
7. Guru Singh Sabha of Augusta, Augusta, GA
8. Sikh Study Circle of Atlanta, Atlanta, GA
9. Sikh Religious Society of Chicago, Palatine, IL
10. Sikh Society of South, New Orleans, LA
11. New England Sikh Study Circle, Boston, MA
12. Sikh Gurdwara of Michigan, Rochester Hills, MI
13. Sikh Society of Michigan, Madison Heights, MI
14. Guru Nanak Foundation of Jackson, MS
15. Sikh Gurdwara of North Carolina, Durham, NC
16. Sikh Sabha of Upper Valley, Hanover, NH
17. Garden State Sikh Association, Bridgewater, NJ
18. Guru Nanak Sikh Society of Delaware Valley, Sewell, NJ
19. Siri Guru Singh Sabha, Glenrock, NJ
20. Sikh Sabha of New Jersey, Lawrenceville, NJ
21. Gurdwara Baba Deep Singh, Las Vegas, NV
22. Sikh Cultural Society Inc., Richmond Hills, NY
23. Sikh Cultural & Edu. Society of Western NY, Buffalo, NY
24. Sikh Religious Society of Dayton, Dayton, OH
25. Guru Nanak Found. of Greater Cleveland, Richfield, OH
26. Guru Gobind Singh Sikh Society, Bedford, OH
27. Guru Nanak Religious Soc. of Central Ohio, Columbus, OH
28. Sikh Sadh Sangat, Easton, PA
29. Philadelphia Sikh Society, Millbourne, PA
30. Tristate Sikh Cultural Society, Monroeville, PA
31. Mid South Sikh Sabha, Memphis, TN
32. Sikh Center of Gulf Coast, Houston, TX
33. Siri Guru Singh Sabha, Richardson, TX
34. Sikh Gurdwara of North Texas, Garland, TX
35. Singh Sabha Gurdwara, Fairfax, VA
36. Sikh Association of Central Virginia, VA
37. Sikh Religious Society of Wisconsin, Brookfield, WI

Other Sikh Institutions:

1. Siri Guru Granth Sahib Found., Anaheim, CA
2. Sikhs Serving America, Topeka, KS
3. Sikh Youth Fed. of North America, White Plains, NY
4. Sikh Heritage Foundation, Long Island, NY
5. Sikh Educational & Religious Found., Dublin, OH
6. Sikh Youth Federation of USA, Toledo, OH
7. Academy of Guru Granth Studies, Arlington, TX

Over the last several years, the Council has been involved, among others, in the following:

1. Organized an International Convention to celebrate the 300<sup>th</sup>

year of the Khalsa in Seacaucus, New Jersey. Sponsored an International Conference at San Jose State University to observe the 300<sup>th</sup> year of Sri Guru Arjan Sahib's martyrdom. Organized the Gurmat Sangeet Darbar at Stockton Gurdwara Sahib commemorating 300 years of Siri Guru Granth Sahib's Gurgaddi.

2. The Education Committee edited the book: "The Sikhs" published by Teacher Created Materials. It also re-wrote the Sikh chapter in the "Essence of World Religions" booklet published by the Jain Association of North America. Assisted in preparation of the document: "Cultural Profile of Sikhs" for the RCMP, Canada. Also participated in publication of the book "Religion in Ohio" created by the Interfaith Association of Central Ohio for the Ohio Bicentennial Commission and published by Ohio University Press.
3. Participated in numerous interfaith events as representative organization of Sikhs in America including International Inter-religious Encounter, Monterrey, Mexico, and the Sikh-Catholic Retreat, Washington, D.C. Co-sponsored the annual conference of North American Interfaith Network, 2003. Represented Sikhs in America in "Religion for Peace" and Council for Parliament of World's Religions, North America Interfaith Network, the World Sikh Summit, London, UK and at Religion and Foreign Policy Workshop, New York, NY.
4. Supported the Peoples' Commission to investigate torture and murder of innocent Sikhs by Indian Government. Following the 9/11/2001 tragedy, communicated with government agencies and the media regarding hate crimes against Sikhs. Assisted in organizing events to prevent hate crimes. Supported Sikhs held for wearing the kirpaan. Took a stand regarding wearing the kirpaan at a White House event and also at a meeting with Pope Benedict. Protested the contents of the video, "Terrorism: A War Without Borders" distributed by the State Department, as containing falsehoods about Sikhs. Organized vigils across the country observing 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack on Darbar Sahib. Represented USA Sikhs at the South Asia Council for Minorities Conference, New Delhi, India.
5. Protested unlawful removal of Singh Sahib Bhai Ranjit Singh Ji from his position as Jathedar, Sri Akal Takhat Sahib.
6. Took a leadership role in terminating Indian Government's request to UNESCO to grant "World Cultural Heritage" status to Darbar Sahib.
7. Supported fundraising for victims of hurricane Katrina.

WSC-AR encourages all Sikh organizations in the USA to join as members and have their voice heard. Working together is the best way to safeguard Sikh interests. Unlike self-appointed leaders and private organizations WSC-AR is a Panthic organization not controlled by any person or group of persons but providing a truly grassroots structure with representatives who are at all times accountable to the membership.

Detailed information regarding WSC-AR and its various committees is available on its website. Contact address is: contact@worldsikhcouncil.org



## THE WORLD SIKH COUNCIL – AMERICA REGION

by

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