"What is a Dharmasala?" - A Sanskrit Word Meaning "Place Where Dharma is Performed"
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# "What is a Dharmasala?" - A Sanskrit Word Meaning "Place Where Dharma is Performed"

In the following "Church News" section of the paper we make frequent references to the Dharmasalas of the Saiva Siddhanta Church. Because all may not be familiar with the term, and particularly its meaning within the Church, we take this opportunity to talk about the Dharmasalas in a general and definitive way.

The word "dharmasala" is from the Sanskrit language. It could be roughly translated in English as: "a place where dharma is performed." A Saiva dharmasala is thus a place where the Saiva dharma is performed. The dharmasala is the local mission of Saiva Siddhanta Church. It consists of a group of families, as well as single persons, who are confirmed members of the Church, and who, working through the American church system, strive to live and promote the Saiva dharma.

What is the American church system? It is a religious structural system which evolved in the colonial era of this great country through the efforts of different groups of immigrants to practice and promote their various religions and sects. The early leaders of each religion set up "churches" wherever people gathered who believed as they did. The church was both the congregation and the actual building where worship was conducted. Each member in the American church system participates according to his own interest and motivation. Nothing is compulsory. Most participate on a part-time basis.

The Saiva dharmasalas of Saiva Siddhanta Church run on this system. The structural rules are written in The Book of Discipline, for all to read and study. Dharmasala membership is for staunch devotees, and yet, is a free-flowing affiliation. Each individual and each family has its own karma to work through, each one has his own personal life. The Dharmasalas are not communally organized. Each family is completely autonomous, and membership in a particular Dharmasala can extend as far as one day's journey by car. The purpose of the Dharmasala is to

improve the quality of life of the individual.

The Dharmasalas are administrated by two main bodies of members, working closely with a swami of the Church: the Senior Group of Elders, and the Council on Ministries. The Council studies the needs of the church members, and provides programs to fill those needs. The Senior Group keeps an overview, votes on the suggestions of the Council, and performs other administrative functions as well. Each decision is made unanimously; all must agree before a project is initiated. This policy helps create an environment of mutual understanding and cooperation.

In addition to these two administrative bodies, each Dharmasala has two adult groups, the United Saivite Men and the United Saivite Women, two adult counselors, and a youth and children's counselor. And, from among the grihasthas of the Dharmasalas, appointed and ordained ministers will distinguish themselves.

Presently there are two dharmasalas of Saiva Siddhanta Church, one in Flushing New York, and the other in San Francisco, California. As the Confirmed Church membership grows, many more Dharmasalas will be formed. A Dharmasala can form anywhere there are three men confirmed in the Church.

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