

## **Goal:**

To increase diversity in numbers of people of color in the sangha at Fire Lotus/ZMM/MRO, as well as changes to the systemic environment to foster more diverse programming, more avenues to formal student practice, current sangha member support and teacher support, more diversity of teachers, and scholarship support.

## **Areas of Concern:**

### **1. Lack of Teachers of Color**

People of color come to MRO as whole people – meaning they bring all of their experiences with the world to the temple and their practice, including experiences with power, privilege, oppression, and racism. Therefore, it is essential that there are teachers capable of navigating with POC sangha members those intersections of racism, power, privilege, and oppression with nuance, personal experience, and skill. It is also important for POC sangha members to see themselves in their teachers, and see the possibilities of becoming a Zen teacher and leader. Also people of color do not have targeted mentorship and engagement and education efforts about the path of the formal student at the temple. Because of this, many don't feel it is possible, or even feasible, or can't see how this path can pertain to their lives.

### **2. Lack of Financial and Moral Support for Formal Student Training**

There are costs associated with every aspect of Zen training, including all activities required for those on the formal student path to grow and enhance their spiritual practice. For many POCs who have been historically and contemporarily subjected to financial, racial, and professional oppression and disenfranchisement, their access to the financial means by which to pay for these workshops, retreats, etc. is very limited. This impacts the ability of people of color to seek

avenues to becoming formal students, or to successfully complete the necessary steps. While sliding scale and opportunities to work to pay off some of the costs of the retreats/workshops are offered, I have been informed in my own discussions with Zen leaders that financial barriers remain for more extensive activities such as residencies for POCs. Additionally, the work option is not always a possibility for many people of color who have work, family, and other obligations that prevent them from working hours at the temple. And the major scholarships offered are for specific and targeted areas, such as those in the arts, education, and healthcare professions. Those who work in lower-paying industries like direct social service, social justice, community-based work, etc. are not captured.

### **3. Lack of Diversity in Programming That Would Appeal to People of Color**

Just as the temple has recognized a desire for some sangha members for the temple to address issues surrounding climate change and other matters, people of color also desire for the temple to create programming to address issues that are important to them. Sangha members are coming to the practice and the temple with different experiences and lenses, and, thus, the programming must be expansive, diverse, and fluid enough to speak to those differences.

### **4. Lack of Opportunities for POCs Who Are Not Formal Students for Leadership and Involvement in Temple Initiatives**

People of color spend the majority of their time experiencing isolation from the larger white society, including professional, spiritual, and social spaces that remain white-dominated. Therefore, it is important that such scenarios are not perpetuated in their spiritual practice spaces. Denying active sangha members who are not formal students opportunities to engage on a deeper level in temple initiatives and

activities, or to step into leadership on various initiatives, further fosters their all-too-familiar experience with disconnection.

**5. Hierarchy of the MRO Barriers exist to increasing diversity because of the many complicated layers of decision-making and engagement that takes place at MRO.**

Decisions are made at the top without a wide net of engagement and assessment of needs among those whom those decisions would impact. It is difficult to know who makes decisions, and to control the way decisions or policies are communicated to the community at large. There is also a lack of accountability for the role in continued barriers to diversity within that hierarchy.

**6. Lack of Community Engagement on Issues of Importance to POCs**

People of color have been under extreme attack and increased pressure over the last several years, from the murder of Trayvon Martin, to the uprising in Ferguson, MO after the shooting of Michael Brown, to numerous deaths at the hands of police, and the continued rise of racial-, ethnic-, religious-motivated hate crimes since the last Presidential campaign. MRO has not had a system-wide engagement on these issues, nor has it participated in any organized community efforts to engage on a larger scale. Assistance and support is needed in creating avenues for ways for sangha members to engage on these issues together.

**Proposals For Change:**

**1. Lack of Teachers of Color:**

- A. Identify Potential Teachers of Color
- B. Temple Support (financial and moral) to engage with and contract with teachers of color

- C. Schedule Dharma Talks from teachers of color on Sundays at least once every two months
- D. Temple support (financial and moral) for retreats with teachers of color
- E. Proper announcements and advertising for teaching days with these teachers of color

## **2. Lack of Financial and Moral Support for Formal Student Training**

- A. Specific scholarships for those who engage in social justice work, social work, and other lower- -paying, service professions
- B. Create a formal, online application for all workshops and retreats to more dignified (not having to describe your circumstances by phone or in person to a non- -person of color).
- C. More full scholarships targeted for people of color for Ango, Sesshin, and residential stays.
- D. Better, more specific, and more visible communication (not just on the website) about all of the available scholarships and opportunities for financial support and the process for applying for these opportunities

## **3. Lack of Diversity in Programming That Would Appeal to People of Color**

- A. Work with sangha members of color who want to participate on creating ideas for targeted programming (not just formal students)
- B. Provide financial, staff, facility space, and moral support for planning and executing such targeted programming for people of color

**4. Lack of Opportunities for Non-Formal POC Students for Leadership and Involvement in Temple Initiatives**

- A. Discuss policies that are barriers to participation sangha members who are not formal students, and identify those that could be changed, eliminated, or amended
- B. Identify current initiatives that could easily integrate POC sangha members who are not formal students
- C. Create a specific action plan to communicate available opportunities to engage with interested sangha members who are not formal students, and to create lists of those interested in certain areas that can be accessed for future engagement

**5. Hierarchy of MRO**

- A. Explain and illustrate the organizational flow chart
- B. Identify who is the contact person for different areas of engagement at MRO, and communicate how to contact them
- C. Improve communication between various entities along the hierarchy so there is a consistent message and engagement on the issue of increasing diversity
- D. Eliminate hierarchal behavior and systems from any MRO groups for people of color as these perpetuate larger issues of oppression in the larger society

**6. Lack of Community Engagement on Issues of Importance to POCs**

- A. Identify ways in which MRO can get involved in more community and societal issues that impact people of color
- B. Create an action plan (with specific calendar timeline) of activities to plan and execute

- C. Encourage and facilitate leadership of these activities by members of color (sangha members who are not formal students)
- D. Provide financial, moral, facility space (if needed), and staff support for these activities

### **People of Color Tea Group**

The People of Color Tea Group is currently suspended. The decision was made earlier this year by the current facilitators of the group. I do not wish to have the group remain suspended. During a recent discussion with the current group facilitators, I was asked if I would be willing to step up into a one of the facilitator/leadership roles for the group, as the current leadership expressed fatigue and the desire to step back. I agreed. I would like to have a formal discussion with MRO leadership and the Board of Directors about necessary supports to revitalize the group.

### **Diversity Proposal Meeting Request/Action Item**

I am requesting a meeting with MRO leadership to discuss this proposal and how best to move forward on enacting the proposed changes. So as not to perpetuate societal systems of oppression and privilege, I feel it is important for me (and anyone else) to speak directly in their own voice (instead of messages and concerns being delivered by those along the hierarchy. I am also requesting to be added to the meeting agenda of the Board of Directors to bring these concerns to it as well. As I have agreed to take on a leadership role in advancing diversity issues at MRO, I am requesting your support, input, and cooperation in my efforts.

**Please Note:** due to hierarchal concerns (not my own) of my place in the hierarchy as a non-formal student in regard to the POC group, this proposal solely represents my own statements (based on my more than a decade of experience as a sangha members, my relationships with other POCs who have come and gone from MRO, and my work as a professional Policy Advocate). You may receive other follow-up and

## MRO Diversity Proposal Tanya Marie Bonner July 28, 2017

proposals from others as well. I ask that you respect, allow, and engage the voices of ALL in this process of increasing diversity, and have faith in their ability to represent themselves in a manner in keeping with the Dharma and as whole people and professionals. Thank you.