

The Monthly Saṅkīrtana Festival

IN HER BOOK *Lord Krishna's Cuisine*, well-known cook and author Yamunā Devī Dāsi reveals an age-old secret about rice, a staple for so many parts of the world. When rice is mixed with other foods, like beans, its interaction with that food creates a complete protein. Modern research confirms that although both foods are nourishing on their own, the blend is replete with a perfect balance of amino acids, making the combination a kind of superfood.

So it is with the staples of devotional service, hearing and chanting. When devotees mix hearing and chanting with the compassionate act of giving Kṛṣṇa consciousness to the public, the mixture's spiritual potency is exponentially greater than each individual practice. This is because hearing and chanting please Lord Caitanya. Giving what one hears and chants to others pleases Him even more. As Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī says while praising the devotional service of Haridāsa Ṭhākura:

Some behave very well but do not preach the cult of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, whereas others preach but do not behave properly. You simultaneously perform both duties in relation to the holy name by your personal behavior and by your preaching. Therefore you are the spiritual master of the entire world, for you are the most advanced devotee in the world.¹

Śrīla Prabhupāda considered distributing transcendental literature as enhanced hearing and chanting (*saṅkīrtana*). He writes, “[M]y *guru mahārāja*’s opinion is that press is the *bṛhat mṛdaṅga*, or the biggest, or the greater *mṛdaṅga*. The sound of press goes long distance, long distant places, so the organization of press and literature and public sales should be our main business.”²

Furthermore, when we come together to brainstorm plans and set goals, not only does the *saṅkīrtana* movement expand, but also all those who participate in it naturally gain unique or deepened insights into the process of devotional service. In his purport to *Bhagavad-gītā* 11.55, Śrīla Prabhupāda writes:

The highest benefit one can render to human society is relieving one’s neighbor from all material problems. In such a way, a pure devotee is engaged in the service of the Lord. Now we can imagine how merciful Kṛṣṇa is to those engaged in His service, risking everything for Him. Certainly such persons must reach the supreme planet after leaving the body.

In summary, when devotees hear, chant, and come together to share this process with others, both the distributors and the recipients are nourished by the superfood of such spiritual practice. Devotees know this secret and absorb themselves in thoughts of how to benefit people by devising ways to increase the distribution of the holy names all over the world.

Ṭhākura Bhaktivinoda, for example, devised a marketplace of the holy name – something akin to today’s multilevel or network marketing – through which people could embrace the chanting of God’s names and widely spread the process

to others through dynamic promotion. He defined *dharma* as the showing of compassion to all living beings by distributing the holy names; and he showed by example how a busy householder with heavy professional duties could contribute significantly to Lord Caitanya's movement.

Today's interconnected world, brimming with innovative social networking systems and high-tech capacities for organizing people, provides more facilities than ever before for spreading Lord Caitanya's *saṅkīrtana* movement. Now is the ideal time, therefore, for spiritual entrepreneurs to advance Lord Caitanya's movement far and wide, completely nourishing and satisfying the souls of both the givers and the receivers.

The Monthly Sankīrtana Festival (MSF) is a proven way to bring people together for complete spiritual nourishment. In essence, it is a monthly gathering of devotees to unite them in spreading the *saṅkīrtana* movement. In this chapter I will share with you what I've learned by developing the MSF into a regular and festive event. Here's how it works:

Devotees choose a specific day each month to work as a team to distribute the holy name, *kṛṣṇa-prasāda*, and transcendental literature. To help as many devotees as possible participate, I started by choosing a weekend day.

Of course, the MSF can be as elaborate or as simple as time, place, and circumstance allow, but even in its humblest form – for example, with just a few family members or friends joining in – the MSF is always a success. Why? Because in the sincere attempt to cooperate and distribute Lord Caitanya's mercy, even the smallest effort results in immediate spiritual benefits to all who participate. Why? As we shall see, it's because such service not only pleases Lord Caitanya but also increases the devotees' capacity for service. And when the MSF matures and becomes a grand event that engages hundreds of devotees and state-of-the-art facilities, it is all the more blissful, productive, and pleasing to the Lord.

My friend Willy Jolley used to say, "Just as there's a recipe

for baking delicious cakes and pies, there's also a recipe for success." The main ingredients in the recipe for a successful MSF are:

- a lot of people each doing a little
- all the participants having fun together
- everyone working together to meet fresh challenges

A Lot of People Each Doing a Little

A large team of people working together – each doing a little – creates a sustainable effort, because when people contribute according to their ability and their capacity and see that their humble efforts are useful to the team, they feel encouraged and want to do more. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "Cooperation begins where competition leaves off."

In a symphony orchestra, every musician is given his or her part to play. Even the triangle player's role (tiny compared to the first violinist's) adds flavor to the symphony's crescendo. Similarly, the MSF gives all team members an opportunity to do their best according to their capacities and talents. By the law of synergy, each individual team member's results are increased, and through teamwork, the members' combined efforts produce better-than-imagined results. Especially important: the more teammates work together to please Lord Caitanya, the more they discover unity in their diversity.

Here are three principles you can apply to attract a lot of people to participate in your MSF:

- lower the bar of expectations
- emphasize teamwork
- encourage and empower team members

Many people are afraid to go out in public to introduce spiritual books. They worry they'll be rejected or embarrassed when they don't know what to say.

Lower the Bar of Expectations

One of the best ways to help people overcome fear of participating is to change the idea of what will be expected of them if they do. I highly recommend that team leaders allow beginners to join the *saṅkīrtana* team just to watch, learn, and have fun – and nothing else.

When I'm invited to introduce the MSF to communities that have never held one before, I repeatedly assure those new to *saṅkīrtana* that on our first day out in public, no one is expected to distribute books or to perform in any way. Our only goal is to move the team out the door to the designated *saṅkīrtana* spot as efficiently as possible. This effort is actually more difficult than distributing books, but for most newcomers it seems less intimidating. I tell them that when we arrive at our spot we'll touch the pavement together, and by doing so we'll complete our goal for the day. Anything we do after that will be extra.

At first the group members think I'm joking. When they see I'm serious, they feel the burden of expectation lift and they become eager to join. There's an inverse relationship between expectation and performance, especially for beginners and newly formed teams. The lower the initial expectation, the more people feel like jumping in. When we set the bar of expectation ridiculously low, people often say, "Oh, come on, I can do more than *that!*" I've also found that when team members are freed from the fear of failure, they tend to use their natural genius to innovate and expand their efforts.

In contrast, when new people sense a high degree of difficulty from the start, they tend to feel nervous and even look for ways to avoid coming out for the MSF that day. No one likes to fail, especially while others are watching.

In summary, the first golden rule for attracting a lot of people to participate in your MSF is to make team members comfortable by keeping the initial goals and expectations outlandishly low.

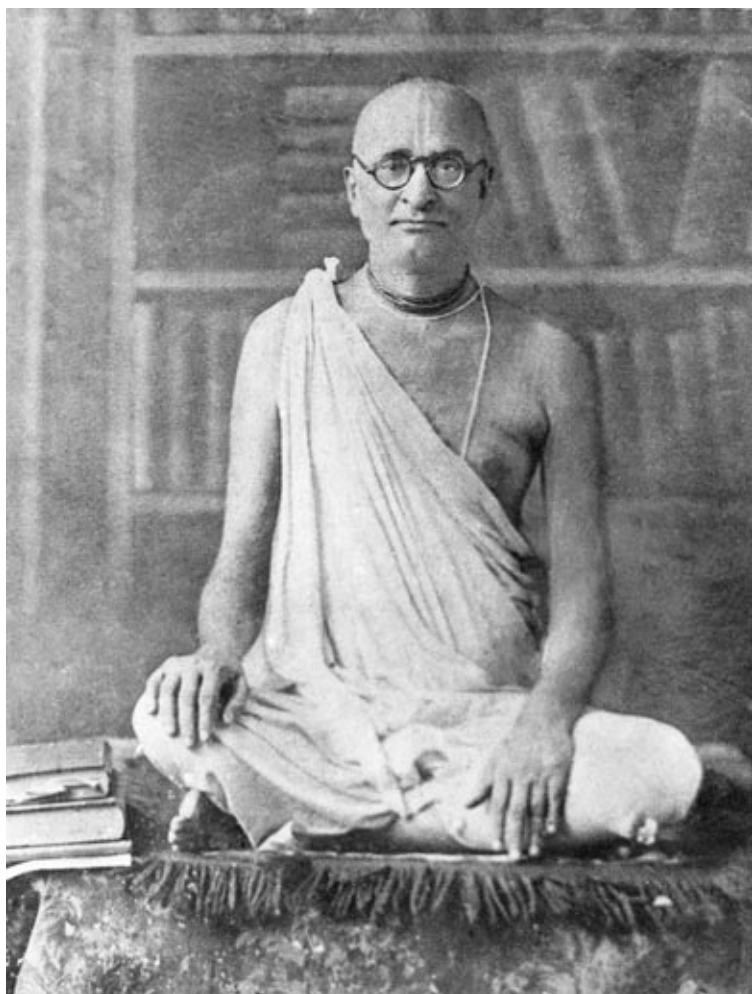
Emphasize Teamwork

The next key ingredient for involving a lot of people in your MSF is to promote teamwork. In the worlds of sports and business there is a wealth of information about the benefits of teamwork – efficiency, morale, innovation, support. Henry Ford writes, “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.” Other experts also give plenty of useful tips on how to build effective teams, including clarifying vision and goals, building trust and commitment, and so on. One can study and use these methods to create a successful MSF.

Śrīla Prabhupāda repeatedly asked ISKCON members to work together, and he emphasized love and trust as the basis for doing so. “Our ISKCON should be taken as being a family based upon love and trust.”³ Working together is natural; in the spiritual world devotees absorbed in pure devotional service to Kṛṣṇa work within their own like-minded groups (*gaṇas*). The more we promote an atmosphere of love and trust, the more people will come forward to join us.

As teams form, at candid moments even those who have already joined them sometimes reveal that they hesitate to distribute books for fear of being looked down on if they don’t do well enough. Emphasizing team achievement over individual success is a good way to remove this fear, for the dynamic inherent in any team is for its members to appreciate one another. When members contribute to the team goal, they gain self-confidence and gradually lose the inhibition caused by thinking they might underperform. Furthermore, to help promote a positive atmosphere for beginners, there should be no emphasis on who is higher and who lower. In such an atmosphere, new participants steadily develop courage and poise, and their results naturally increase as they gain maturity and skill.

In summary, lowering expectations and promoting teamwork are essential ingredients for building a successful MSF program.



Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Prabhupāda, the son of Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, developed our family business by establishing multiple printing presses and making available an array of transcendental books and other publications. He wrote more than sixty books and three hundred scholarly articles aimed at Western academics and the intelligentsia of his time.

Encourage Team Members

The next key ingredient is encouragement. In fact, the credo for setting up and building a solid MSF team is “Encourage the heck out of everyone!” Who doesn’t need encouragement? In the material world, even the noblest soul has detractors (not to mention the cynical voice sitting on each person’s shoulder saying, “Who do you think you are? You can’t do this!”).

Encouraged people are freer to do their best. I’ve found that after only one well-deserved dose of encouragement, remarkably, people can recover from their own low estimate of themselves and thrive for a month or even years. When people get a taste for serving in a place where encouraging others is the norm, they not only stay but also bring others onto the team.

In his best-selling book, *The One Minute Manager*, Kenneth Blanchard teaches leaders to “catch employees doing something right” and then to take a minute to praise them for their good work. Lord Caitanya, the perfect leader and teacher, took time to encourage His devotees. In *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta (Madhya-līlā 12.116–17)*, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī gives as an example how the Lord inspired His followers as they worked as a team to clean the Guṇḍicā temple: “When He saw someone doing nicely, the Lord praised him. . . . The Lord would say, ‘You have done well. Please teach this to others so that they may act in the same way.’”

In the Brahma-gāyatrī mantra, the word *pracodayāt* means “to enliven, encourage, or inspire.” Through the Gāyatrī mantra and other mantras devotees chant daily, they pray to the Lord and their spiritual master for encouragement on the path of devotional service.

Those who encourage others in divine service certainly follow in the footsteps of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Śrī Kṛṣṇa, as shown in His dealings with His devotees. *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (1.11.22) gives this image of the Lord encouraging His devotees: “The Almighty Lord greeted everyone present by bowing His head, exchanging greetings, embracing, shaking

hands, looking and smiling, giving assurances and awarding benedictions, even to the lowest in rank.”

A book distributor is an agent representing Kṛṣṇa. An agent follows the policies and examples of the one he or she represents. What better way, then, to become an agent of Kṛṣṇa than to encourage those who serve Him.

Śrīla Prabhupāda himself was an exemplar of encouragement. He wrote thousands of letters with encouraging words like these:

So your work is the most important preaching work, may Kṛṣṇa bless you more and more.

You are working so hard for broadcasting the glories of Lord Kṛṣṇa’s lotus feet, and thus my *guru mahārāja* will be so pleased upon you.

I am very pleased to hear that you are distributing many of my books, especially *Kṛṣṇa Book*. You are a very sincere girl. Please continue to engage wholeheartedly in Kṛṣṇa’s service and there is no doubt that you may go back to home, back to Godhead.

Try following in Śrīla Prabhupāda footsteps by applying this useful and unifying technique: look for people doing well and take a moment to voice your appreciation and encourage them. Or write encouraging notes, emails, or letters to those who are doing well and let them know they are doing a good job. You might be surprised at the results. One act of conscious approval can give recipients just what they need to turn their life around or to raise their service to the next level. What a positive place the world would be if everyone were to adopt this principle of encouraging the heck out of people.

Embedded in the word encouragement is the word “courage,” which derives from the Latin, *cor*, “heart.” Thus the heart is both the seat of courage and the target of encouragement. In *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (1.2.17), Sūta Gosvāmī says that when devotees hear and chant, Kṛṣṇa helps them from within their

hearts by removing unwanted desires, and when they hear and chant together, they feel more and more encouraged as their doubts and misgivings fade away.

Another way to invoke an encouraging environment, then, is to emphasize and schedule time for hearing and chanting among the members of your team. Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī notes that the sound of Lord Caitanya’s voice, as He chants the holy names and pastimes of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, reassures everyone by scaring away the “elephantine vices” in the heart. “May that lion be seated in the core of the heart of every living being. Thus with His resounding roar may He drive away one’s elephantine vices.”⁴

As the vices in our heart subside, the bravery to cross over the material ocean grows and our eagerness to spread the *saṅkīrtana* movement steadily increases. Who wouldn’t want to join a group of devotees bravely determined to go back to Godhead and to bring others with them?

In summary, the more one encourages the team, the more the respective capacities of the MSF team members expand.

Empowerment

Related to encouragement is empowerment, which is the final element that attracts people to join an MSF. Harry Truman, former President of the United States, expresses the attitude that forms the basis of empowerment: “It’s amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.”

Śrīla Prabhupāda exhibits this mood when writing to one of his godbrothers in the fall of 1965, when he was all alone trying to jumpstart the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement in America. In a long letter to that godbrother, dated November 8, 1965, we find an outstanding example of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s humility and detachment:

So here is a chance of cooperation between us and I shall be glad to know if you are ready for this cooperation. I came

here to study the situation and I find it very nice and if you are also agreeable to cooperate with it, it will be all very nice by the will of Śrīla Prabhupāda. So I am writing you directly this letter to elicit your opinion. If you agree then take it for granted that I am one of the worker of the Śrī Māyāpur Caitanya Maṭha. I have no ambition for becoming the proprietor of any Maṭha or Mandir, but I want working facilities.

A leader who gives up attachment to the credit for his or her work, whose sole purpose is to please the Lord, becomes empowered to empower others. Movements and organizations grow when leaders empower their team members to take initiative by giving them authorship, credit, and control of their various projects. Lord Caitanya empowered and sent out Śrī Rūpa and Śrī Sanātana, asking them to write about devotional service and to reveal the holy sites of Vraja. He inspired Nityānanda Prabhu to capture Bengal. He elevated Haridāsa Ṭhākura to the post of *nāmācārya*. To the Kūrma *brāhmaṇa* and to everyone else He met, He gave the instruction to become a guru!

As Śrīla Prabhupāda expanded his team of devotees, he repeatedly used phrases such as “organize freely,” “do the needful,” and “do it!” In a letter to Karandhara Dāsa dated December 22, 1972, Śrīla Prabhupāda writes: “The Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement is for training men to be independently thoughtful and competent in all types of departments of knowledge and action, not for making bureaucracy.” Great leaders are willing to let others shine. As empowered team members excel, the brilliance of their accomplishments reflects on the leaders who empowered them. Napoleon Bonaparte notes, “Soldiers generally win battles; generals get credit for them.”

As you develop your MSE, look for people who show a keen interest. These are the people who show up and who are first to offer help and useful suggestions. It’s our duty to look beyond externals, such as people’s appearance, inexperience, cultural backgrounds, or sex. Instead, look to their potential and empower them.

For example, during a meeting to discuss the MSF, eager participants might suggest improvements. In reply, one can ask whether those persons are willing to help make their ideas come to life. If they agree, the leader should engage them as soon as possible in the service and give them the authority to accomplish it.

The first words Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta spoke to Abhay – who later became the great world *ācārya*, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda – empowered him to carry Lord Caitanya’s message to the West. What a great act of instant empowerment. The results couldn’t be more obvious.

This is a classic example of how the system of disciplic succession works. Empowered teachers constantly see how to empower new teachers to spread Kṛṣṇa’s message, inspiring them to carry it forward to the next generation. Thus in his purport to *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Ādi-līlā* 10.160, Śrīla Prabhupāda also writes:

It was the desire of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu that His cult be spread all over the world. Therefore there is a great necessity for many, many disciples of the branches of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu’s disciplic succession. His cult should be spread not only in a few villages, or in Bengal, or in India, but all over the world.

Śrīla Prabhupāda again emphasized this same truth as he spoke to his intimate followers, representatives of the GBC, just before he left this world: “One [who] can understand the order of Caitanya Mahāprabhu, he can become guru. Or one who understands his guru’s order, the same *paramparā*, he can become guru.”⁵

As early as 1968, Śrīla Prabhupāda emphasized the importance of his disciples’ becoming learned from reading his books and taking the responsibility of initiating others into the line of devotional service. Śrīla Prabhupāda writes:

Next January there will be an examination on this *Bhagavad-gītā*. Papers will be sent by me to all centers, and those securing the minimum passing grade will be given the title as Bhakti-śāstri. Similarly, another examination will be held on Lord Caitanya's Appearance Day in February 1970, and it will be upon *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* and *Bhagavad-gītā*. Those passing will get the title of Bhakti-vaibhava. Another examination will be held sometimes in 1971 on the four books, *Bhagavad-gītā*, *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, *Teachings of Lord Caitanya*, and *The Nectar of Devotion*. One who will pass this examination will be awarded with the title of Bhaktivedanta. I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta, so that the family transcendental diploma will continue through the generations. Those possessing the title of Bhaktivedanta will be allowed to initiate disciples. Maybe by 1975, all of my disciples will be allowed to initiate and increase the numbers of the generations. That is my program. So we should not simply publish these books for reading by outsiders, but our students must be well versed in all of our books so that we can be prepared to defeat all opposing parties in the matter of self-realization.

His Divine Grace also writes, "Our International Society for Krishna Consciousness is one of the branches of the Caitanya tree."⁶ That branch will go on living and will remain vital only because its members continue to teach, empower, and connect new members to the spiritual family tree. As Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī explains, "From each branch of the tree have grown hundreds and thousands of subbranches of disciples and granddisciples."⁷ Thus the MSF and the family tree of Lord Caitanya grows.

Tools of Empowerment

Now let's take a closer look at some of the tools the leaders of an MSF can use to empower team members.

Enlightened companies practice employee empowerment: they give workers decision-making authority and thus

motivate them and increase their productivity. Moreover, when managers regularly consult and brainstorm with their employees – whose eyes are everywhere – they discover valuable information about how the company can improve its products, services, and policies.

Again, when everyone’s ideas and contributions to the team, no matter how humble, are honored, team members feel freer to contribute ideas and bring forth useful and sometimes groundbreaking innovations.

Śrīla Prabhupāda encouraged his students to come together for regular group discussions of Kṛṣṇa conscious philosophy. He called them *iṣṭha-goṣṭhīs*. In a 1975 meeting with *saṅkīrtana* leaders in Vṛndāvana, Śrīla Prabhupāda pointed out that every devotee has creative potency, an inner genius, and that the qualification for pulling that genius out of oneself (and others) is a sincere desire to serve Kṛṣṇa.* So, in an atmosphere where innovation, open discussion, and fresh ideas are welcomed, devotees come up with amazingly useful ideas from that inner genius.

Meet with the team members before and after every MSF and discuss with them what’s working well and where there’s room for improvement. At ISV we call this method of continually capturing suggested improvements and then acting on them *always better service* (ABS). As we practice the ABS principle, teammates notice incremental improvements and become eager to do more. A well-known management rule says that when team members see that things are improving, they do more than expected. When they see that things are staying the same, they do just what they have to. When they see that things are declining, they quit.

One night after a Sunday program at ISKCON Potomac,

* This point came out in interviews I conducted with Brahmā Dāsa, Gopavṛndapāla Dāsa, and Tripurārī Swami, who were all present at this 1975 *iṣṭha-goṣṭhī* with Śrīla Prabhupāda. They all agreed that this is what Śrīla Prabhupāda said.

I met with a group of devotees to brainstorm ideas for increasing their *saṅkīrtana* and book distribution results for the year. We huddled in a small room and discussed possible improvements, taking suggestions from everyone present as one person wrote down all the ideas on a whiteboard. In a short hour we had collected forty-five fresh ideas for expanding book distribution, refining systems, procuring useful new tools, and improving the team's efficiency. Through consensus we prioritized the points and made specific, time-bound goals for the top ten ideas, assigning a devotee to see to the completion of each. The results were amazing. Working on only ten of their goals, the Potomac team tripled their book distribution in just a year and a half. Needless to say, the Potomac team is still growing, due to the devotees' strong optimism about their future.

As I write, ISKCON's communities worldwide are overflowing with multitalented, part-time participants who live in their own homes but regularly come to an ISKCON temple, eager for service and spiritual friendship. In the Eleventh Canto of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (5.38–40), Karabhājana Muni says that the pious souls in Satya-yuga “eagerly desire to take birth in this Age of Kali,” knowing that they can achieve complete success by participating in *saṅkīrtana*. These devotees, the Muni says, will take birth in many places, but especially in South India. Now, because people move freely about the planet, these pious souls end up in various places around the world to help push on the *saṅkīrtana* movement. Five hundred years ago, Lord Caitanya said, “I order every man within this universe to accept this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement and distribute it everywhere.”⁸ Thus according to scripture, the wave of sincere people from India and other parts of the world currently flooding the *saṅkīrtana* movement has been sent by the Lord's arrangement. Considering all this, don't be surprised when people become attracted to your *saṅkīrtana* team and take Lord Caitanya's order to heart. They may have taken birth to do just that.

As you build your MSF, you can start with a few willing people. And as you “encourage the heck out of them” and empower them, more people will join. At ISV we began with just a handful of devotees in 2006. By sticking to the recipe for MSF success, we’ve increased our results every year since then. Three years after our startup, more than a hundred devotees went out at a single MSF. These results have been duplicated in devotee communities from Laguna Beach to Baltimore and Toronto and anywhere else leaders have followed this recipe for success.

All the Participants Having Fun Together

The second main ingredient of a successful MSF is to have fun. People like to have fun, and they go everywhere from sporting events to shopping malls to places of natural beauty to look for it. Dale Carnegie, entrepreneur and author, writes, “People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing.”

Devotees who work together toward a worthy goal in a spirit of cooperation naturally have fun. When Lord Caitanya organized His devotees to clean the Guṇḍicā temple, they formed a production line, working together to bring hundreds of pots of water to wash the temple inside and out. As they worked they communicated with one another only by saying the name of Kṛṣṇa. Meanwhile, Lord Caitanya worked alongside His devotees, setting an example that encouraged them in their service. The entire process became yet another joyous festival. The *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (*Madhya-līlā* 12.85) recounts: “Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu washed and cleansed the temple in great jubilation, chanting the holy name of Lord Kṛṣṇa all the time. Similarly, all the devotees were also chanting and at the same time performing their respective duties.”

In addition to cooperating and working toward goals, people need a social life. Without it, they become bored. As the proverb goes, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

Fortunately, the spiritual world and the *saṅkīrtana* movement are always festive.

The word *festival* derives from the Latin *festā*, “joyous.” The spiritual world is an eternal festival, where every word is a song, every step a dance, and where Kṛṣṇa’s flute captures the minds and hearts of everyone. Kṛṣṇa’s eternal affinity for His flute means that He’s “all play and no work.” We never see a picture of Kṛṣṇa working in a factory; instead, we see Him playing with His cows, friends, family, and *gopīs*.

Kṛṣṇa goes out every day to play in the forest with his cows and cowherd friends, and every day there’s a festival to greet Him when He gets back. Kṛṣṇa’s mother and father, Yaśodā and Nanda, are so attached to Him that they follow Him out of the village. Only by reminding Nanda Mahārāja that he has to organize the decorating of the village for Kṛṣṇa’s return can Kṛṣṇa convince His father to return home, because the source of Nanda’s happiness or fun is in pleasing Kṛṣṇa with other devotees.⁹

Śrīla Prabhupāda comments in his purport to *Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā* 5.22 that the residents of the spiritual world move about for “pleasure trips only.” Even Lord Caitanya, the strictest *sannyāsī*, enjoyed festivals with His devotees during each season of the year: mango-eating, splashing and swimming in the Ganges, cleaning the Guṇḍicā temple, chanting and dancing all night at Śrīvāsa Ṭhākura’s home, and so on.

After each of Mahāprabhu’s pastimes of cleaning the Guṇḍicā temple, going to see Lord Jagannātha, or performing *saṅkīrtana*, He would sport with His devotees:

There were many gardens near the Guṇḍicā temple, and Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu and His devotees used to perform the pastimes of Vṛndāvana in each of them. In the lake named Indradyumna, He sported in the water. The Lord personally splashed all the devotees with water, and the devotees, surrounding Him on all sides, also splashed the Lord. While in the water they sometimes formed one circle and sometimes

many circles, and while in the water they used to play cymbals and imitate the croaking of frogs. Sometimes two would pair off to fight in the water. One would emerge victorious and the other defeated, and the Lord would watch all this fun.¹⁰

Locana Dāsa Ṭhākura called Mahāprabhu’s method “simply joyful.”¹¹ MSF planners should follow Lord Caitanya’s example and think about how to make their local MSF a joyful experience. At one MSF, the *saṅkīrtana* team rode around the city on a double-decker bus, singing *harināma* and distributing books and *prasāda* at various stops. Devotees from every part of the *yātrā* showed up for that MSF because it was so much fun.

As Lord Caitanya and His followers had picnics, played games, and at times cleaned the temple together, so do His contemporary devotees, as part of their MSFs. After all, spirit souls are *ānanda-mayo ’bhyāsāt* – they just want to have fun. If we tax our brains to make our events fun for both adults and children, people will flock to our door and join the MSF.

When we invite people to sing, dance, and eat delicious food in the company of the all-attractive Person, they show up, because that’s what everyone is really looking for. What’s more, when they participate in a festival designed to share the bliss of *saṅkīrtana*, Lord Caitanya fills the hearts of all with happiness and satisfies their desires. Karabhājana Muni says that serving Lord Caitanya’s lotus feet gives complete fulfillment of the innermost desire of the soul (*abhīṣṭa-doham*).¹²

Everyone Rising Together to Meet Fresh Challenges

The third main ingredient of the MSF is to always generate fresh challenges. Will McCoy, my old friend and a successful entrepreneur, says, “Goals are potent.” The instant one sets a goal, one’s mind begins to think about how to achieve it. Poet Robert Browning writes, “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”

Newcomers may thrive when expectations are low, but seasoned team members thrive on facing fresh challenges and meeting goals. The first step in getting your MSF team ready for fresh challenges is to define your mission.

Earlier, in the chapter “You Must Organize,” I elaborated on how to develop a mission statement and set goals. Here, I will discuss establishing principles.

The word *mission* comes from the Latin *mittere*, “to send,” and has origins in the Christian idea of delivering the Holy Spirit into the world. For lack of a clear mission or goal, people become pessimistic and begin to wander in their lives. But in the words of W. Clement Stone, businessman and philanthropist, “When a person discovers his or her mission, he or she feels its demand and becomes filled with enthusiasm and a burning desire to get to work on it.”

Without a mission, a community is merely a gathering of people without direction, because they aren’t sure where to go. In fact, the word *community* is a back formation from the word “common”; a group of people with a common mission was originally called a community.

There’s a famous line in the hit musical *South Pacific*: “If you don’t have a dream, how you gonna have a dream come true?” A well-defined mission that seems worthwhile naturally inspires people to join in. Spreading the *saṅkīrtana* movement is a most attractive mission, for not only does it have unlimited scope for expansion, but it also keeps devotees deeply absorbed in thinking about how to do good for others. Kṛṣṇa discusses in the *Gītā* (17.16) that the way to a satisfied mind is to make it austere. Śrīla Prabhupāda comments on that verse, “To make the mind austere is to detach it from sense gratification. It should be so trained that it can be always thinking of doing good for others.”

People are naturally fascinated by noble and expansive goals, and when given a part in achieving them, they feel uplifted and also excel in other aspects of their devotional lives. Śrīla Prabhupāda writes that an *uttama* devotee is one who

constantly meditates on spreading the *saṅkīrtana* movement: “Always thinking of Kṛṣṇa, devising means by which to spread the holy name of Kṛṣṇa, he understands that his only business is in spreading the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement all over the world.”¹³

As I previously mentioned, ISV’s mantras include “Always better service,” “No book left behind,” and “We serve all living beings by widely spreading the holy names of Kṛṣṇa.”

Śrīla Prabhupāda told one of his top managers that he should “generate fresh challenges” so that the devotees in his community would be inspired to rise up and meet them. When your MSF team members set fresh goals for themselves each month, their capacity to fulfill them grows over time. Stretching a little more each month, the devotees gain superior strength and knowledge in Kṛṣṇa consciousness while rising to meet fresh challenges. To strengthen team members’ determination to meet new challenges, MSF leaders should guide their teams to increase their hearing and chanting of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books.

When NASA builds a rocket bound for outer space, its technicians, engineers, accountants, and janitors all work as a team to accomplish the task. When the rocket finally blasts off, the team members then celebrate together because they have all done their parts to reach the goal.

What’s most remarkable about the event is not the launch itself but what happened during the rocket’s construction. Although the launch from Cape Canaveral is what makes front-page news, the more significant accomplishments go unnoticed by the public because they happen behind the scenes. The news behind the news is that the group’s goal and the pressure of deadlines have driven the men and women of NASA forward cooperatively and allowed them to invent new technologies. In fact, the modern science of project management evolved in part from projects at NASA.

Why does the pressure of meeting a deadline and team goals bring out the best in people? It’s due to the law of forced

efficiency, which states that when people work toward a fixed deadline, their productivity increases. It should be noted here that the terms “forced efficiency” and “fixed deadline” do not refer to the weight of quotas imposed in an authoritarian manner. Rather, when a team of devotees schedules an MSF and then participates in setting goals for themselves and their team, everyone involved, including the team leader, welcomes the pressure that comes from trying to meet their deadlines and the MSF’s goals. In fact, rising to meet those goals, they find themselves with the capacity to do more and to get things done in newer and better ways. Combined with the devotional maturity that comes from strong *sādhana* and caring leadership, they find themselves craving more service and relishing the pressure. This relish acts as a catalyst for their internal exchange of service with Kṛṣṇa. As Śrīla Prabhupāda writes in his purport to *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.2.6, “This relation of servant and the served is the most congenial form of intimacy.”

Developing Themes for the MSF

At ISV we compose mind-catching themes to reflect the freshness of each MSF. The theme is then advertised ahead of time through postcards, posters, and emails. Here are examples of some of our themes:

The MSF of Steady Improvements: During this MSF, the devotees meet together to brainstorm and make lists of areas in which they can improve their personal *sādhana*, elements of the *saṅkīrtana*, and all kinds of temple functions, as well as the quality of their book distribution. After these planning sessions, the devotees go out together to distribute books and test the improvements they’ve made.

The MSF of Loving Exchanges: This MSF is based on the fourth verse of Rūpa Gosvāmī’s *Nectar of Instruction*, where he lists the six loving exchanges between devotees: “Offering gifts in charity, accepting charitable gifts, revealing one’s mind in

confidence, inquiring confidentially, accepting *prasāda*, and offering *prasāda* are the six symptoms of love shared by one devotee and another.” The devotees study this verse and then increase these loving exchanges among the community’s members. They then extend themselves by going out and sharing these same loving exchanges with the public.

The MSF of 30,000, an Occasion for Selfless Service: 30,000 is the number of books the ISV devotees decided to distribute during one December marathon. You can choose numbers according to the time and occasion. Big numbers capture the imagination of everyone in the community, and all kinds of people come forward to help realize the goal.

The MSF of Learning Foreign Languages: We choose a particular foreign language commonly spoken in our area. Team members learn how to say a few words in this language so that they can present books to people in a way that accommodates them.

With these three main ingredients – a lot of people each doing a little; making the event fun; and devising regular, fresh challenges – you are ready to put together an effective MSF. Here are some more practical steps to help you proceed.

Plan Ahead

The further ahead you plan your MSF, the better. Ideally, you should sit with your team members at the beginning of the year and plan all the MSFs, writing the dates and themes into a yearly schedule and posting it where everyone in the community can see it. In busy Vaiṣṇava communities, devotees are engaged in many projects. To ensure the best possible attendance at the MSF, be sure that the dates are in harmony with other important scheduled events.

One way to harmonize the yearly schedule of MSFs is to plan them to coincide with auspicious days. In May, for instance,

you might want to dovetail the MSF with Lord Nṛsimha’s appearance day. Working toward that holy day, devotees can go out to distribute books while meditating on the mood of Lord Nṛsimha’s great devotee Prahlāda Mahārāja, who laments for the fallen conditioned souls. Prahlāda doesn’t want to go to a cave, doesn’t want to stay away from the big cities and towns. Rather, he prays to live among the fallen souls and give them relief from *māyā*, helping to “lift the burden of material life from their heads.”

Carrying out an MSF a week or two before a holy day gives devotees extra impetus to remember Kṛṣṇa as they distribute books. When the holy day arrives, a representative of the *saṅkīrtana* team can read out to the Deities, assembled devotees, and guests something that explains the theme of the MSF and how the goals were met, including book scores, individual triumphs, and unique obstacles that were overcome. What’s more, when guests and members of the congregation hear these offerings, they become inspired to join future MSFs. Having worked hard together to meet their goals, devotees deeply relish hearing the team’s offering to the Lord and His devotees.

Here’s a sample offering from a December marathon, written and read before our Deities and all the devotees and guests present by ISV’s fulfillment director, Rasika-śekhara Dāsa:

Hare Kṛṣṇa! Dear devotees,

Please accept my humble obeisances. All Glories to Śrīla Prabhupāda!

Our annual book distribution marathon referred to as “The MSF of 25,000 Books, an Occasion for Selfless Service,” began in the second week of October and was concluded yesterday, January 5. The main goal of this *saṅkīrtana* festival was to distribute at least 25,000 books – an initial goal, which was revised in early December to 30,000 books.

This annual book distribution marathon turned out to be a historic event, with ISV devotees distributing thousands of

Śrīla Prabhupāda's books throughout the Bay Area and at distant spots, including other parts of the US, Europe, and India.

Book distribution occurred with much enthusiasm during practically all weekends of the marathon (MSF), during several *harināma* performances in Palo Alto, during special days marking festivals such as Dussehra and Diwali, on Govardhana-pūjā, Thanksgiving, World Enlightenment Day, the day marking the advent of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the Christmas holidays, and on so many weekdays involving spontaneous and voluntary *saṅkīrtana* activity.

The highlight of this MSF was that by going door to door at large apartment complexes, devotees distributed hundreds of book packs, *Bhagavad-gītās*, and *Kṛṣṇa Books* all across the Bay Area. Both adults and children were active participants in door-to-door book distribution, including Sunday school kids, who organized their own *saṅkīrtana* with a goal of 2,500 books, and who succeeded in distributing 2,894 books.

In addition, numerous cases of *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* and sets of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* were distributed at temple programs, and hundreds of *Gītās* were shipped for placement in motels all across the US, with extensive devotee participation by MotelGita team members from different states. (The MotelGita team succeeded in placing more than 10,000 *Bhagavad-gītās* in this marathon).

During this MSF Śrīla Prabhupāda's books were also placed in libraries, distributed at weddings and special events, at Indian stores and other venues, and at nearby and distant temples. Book distribution continued through Smart Boxes placed in various establishments. The Smart Box team set a goal of opening new Smart Boxes. We are pleased to announce that by their untiring efforts they were able to open nineteen new Smart Boxes in the Bay Area alone.

The final results of the marathon can be summarized as follows:

- More than 150 devotees participated in book distribution.
- They distributed 31,099 books, surpassing ISV's MSF goal and setting a new record for book distribution, crossing the

previous high of 23,581 books distributed during the previous marathon.

- ISV devotees raised \$55,383, setting another new record, surpassing the previous high of \$33,864 set also during the last annual marathon. The *lakṣmī* score includes donations, \$27,309 of which was made to ISV MotelGita in this year's marathon.

We thank all participating devotees, including members of Team ISV and all donors and sponsors who contributed to the success of this MSF.

On behalf of Team ISV, MSF of 30,000 *kī jaya!*

Hearing the results of their team effort read before Śrīla Prabhupāda and the Deities, the devotees cheer and feel great satisfaction knowing that they have given their life energy to serve Kṛṣṇa. In fact, an offering like this to the Deities of the results of one's devotional service is one of the items Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī lists in his instructions on how to discharge devotional service:

When the Deity is coming out, the servitors in the temple put forward the daily accounts before Them: so much was the collection, so much was the expenditure. The whole idea is that the Deity is considered to be the proprietor of the whole establishment, and all the priests and other people taking care of the temple are considered to be the servants of the Deity. This system is very, very old and is still followed.¹⁴

Śrīla Prabhupāda confirms the importance of making a substantial offering: "But simply a festival of flowers and fruits does not constitute worship. The one who serves the message of the guru really worships him."¹⁵ And in a letter to Satsvarūpa Dāsa Goswami dated September 2, 1974, Śrīla Prabhupāda tells of his specific appreciation for an offering of book distribution results:

Your letter is very much pleasing to me with the report of the book distribution. Whenever I get report of my book selling I feel strength. Even now in this weakened condition I have got strength from your report. You should know that in this work you have Kṛṣṇa's blessings.

Getting It Done

Here's a list of things you'll need or need to do in order to pull your MSF together:

Saṅkīrtana spots: Assign someone to brainstorm and research where the team can go to distribute books. Every city or town has different opportunities and challenges. Discover what you can do with what you have. Until you try a spot, you won't know for sure whether or not it is good. I've seen devotees assume that some spots are not good and neglect them only to find out later that they are fantastic.

Most urban areas provide multiple arenas for *saṅkīrtana*: door-to-door, events, city streets, and so on. Some spots, like downtown areas, may require a permit. Other spots, like events, street fairs, vegetarian fairs, and so on, may require that you register in advance. When *saṅkīrtana* spots are arranged ahead of time, the MSF team members can go out confidently, knowing that they will be fully engaged.

Saṅkīrtana lunches: In preparation for the MSF, a team works to make bagged lunches for all the book distributors to take with them. Someone hands them to each devotee as he or she leaves. After being out on book distribution for a while, devotees get new life from tasting *prasāda*, and those who lovingly cooked and packed the lunches relish transcendental bliss from having served the devotees.

Books: Obviously, team members need a variety of books to take out for distribution. When the books are made available

well in advance of the MSF, devotees can pick up what they need without wasting time. Ideally, there should be a balanced mix of large, medium, and small books, along with foreign-language books.

Invest in BBT books and hold them sacred. Scripture is imported from the spiritual world. Stock up on a variety of books and keep them in a clean, temperature-controlled, well-organized space. Promote the idea that the space is as sacred as the Deity room.

Credit card acceptance devices: Nowadays, it's easy to accept credit cards while on *saṅkīrtana*. Square, PayPal, and others provide services and devices so that one can accept credit and debit cards on the fly. Since many people *only* use credit cards, having these systems and devices ready for your MSF team members is a must.

Sharing *prasāda*: *Prasāda* for distribution to the public should be thoughtfully prepared and packaged. For example, it should be hygienically packaged and labeled. With *prasāda* in hand, the devotees are confident that they have a “secret weapon” at their disposal as they go out to meet the public. Vaiṣṇavas become more eager to meet people, because giving out delicious food makes fast friends. First-class *prasāda* – for both the MSF team members and the public – thus completes a successful MSF. Śrīla Prabhupāda writes:

By rendering a little service, even by eating *prasāda*, what to speak of chanting and dancing, everyone can be promoted to Vaikuṅṭha-loka. It is therefore requested that all our devotees in the ISKCON community become pure Vaiṣṇavas, so that by their mercy all the people of the world will be transferred to Vaikuṅṭha-loka, even without their knowledge. Everyone should be given a chance to take *prasāda* and thus be induced to chant the holy names Hare Kṛṣṇa and also dance in ecstasy. By these three processes, although performed without knowledge or education, even an animal went back to Godhead.¹⁶

Mantra cards: Devotees can liberally distribute cards with the *mahā-mantra* written on them as well as your temple’s or the event leader’s personal contact information, and gain an added sense of giving to the public and making the temple community and atmosphere more available to them.

Rallying the troops: On the MSF day, team members should first meet to hear, chant, and prepare for the day. As they start out the door to their preassigned spots, I’ve noticed that devotees are often laughing, smiling, and praying due to their feelings of anticipation and spiritual progress. Śrīla Prabhupāda writes about the life preaching brings: “Yes, the preaching work is giving you new life. My *guru mahārāja* Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī used to say: *pran ache yar sei hetu pracar*, ‘One can preach who has got life.’ So one who is preaching this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement means he has got real life.”¹⁷

After-party: At ISV, after a day out on book distribution, we enjoy meeting up at the temple or someone’s home to share stories of our adventures. To facilitate such get-togethers, team leaders can prompt their group members to recount what happened the day they went out. We have the devotees sit in a circle. Then we ask each person to express his or her experiences and realizations. We’ve found that by sharing these encounters, we feel bliss and learn valuable lessons.

Reporting scores: At ISV everyone reports their book and collection scores conveniently through a Google group. A devotee is assigned to tally the scores, report them to the “World Sāṅkīrtana Newsletter,” and get them ready for the offering to the Deities. Keeping abreast of the results in this way helps keep the team inspired.

The Good News Action Broadcast (GNAB): It’s important for any expanding movement or enterprise to broadcast good

news. As author Alexandre Dumas famously said, “Nothing succeeds like success.” The GNAB is the passing on of good news from the *saṅkīrtana* field. When devotees go out on *saṅkīrtana*, amazing things happen. I have always encouraged participants to write down their experiences and post them to our Google group so the entire community can read them. Through the GNAB the devotees hear about breakthroughs, realizations, or sudden feelings of compassion their teammates relished while in the field, by Lord Caitanya’s mercy.

Here’s a sample of a GNAB that I wrote and posted on a Google group maintained by ISV:

Dayānidhi Prabhu and I went together to Cash and Carry on Saturday. As soon as we set up our table, people at once began coming over to see what we had. Dayānidhi, although an experienced book distributor, had not been out on *saṅkīrtana* for many years. At first he mostly watched, but then he jumped in, head first. Really funny! The first man he spoke to argued with him for about ten minutes, giving many reasons why he didn’t want to buy a book. The man also kept repeating, “I am God,” to which Dayānidhi persistently replied, “You’re a part of God.” The man finally walked away. About twenty minutes later, however, he came back and said, “I’d like to take back my words. I’ve decided to buy a book.” He gave Dayānidhi \$20 and took a couple of books with him. Just see. You never know! Using the same kindhearted persistence, I saw Dayānidhi convince many people after that to also take books and give donations. And he left everyone with a good impression. He is a valuable new member of Team ISV! Please, everybody, welcome him to Team ISV and congratulate him for his efforts next time you see him. Go, Go, Go! With gratitude.

Because performing *saṅkīrtana* is a transcendental activity, the GNABs are very pleasing to hear, and they create a buzz about *saṅkīrtana*.

New Services and Teams Within Teams

As the MSF develops, more organization is required to handle the various activities as they are created. I've already discussed encouragement and empowerment as important ingredients for developing successful participation in the MSF. You also need to organize. So here is a better idea of how to develop the MSF with empowered "teams within teams." This is based on how the necessary service positions have evolved over the years at ISV to support the book distribution.

Fulfillment Director: The fulfillment director keeps the books flowing by liaising with the BBT. Someone must be assigned to order the proper ratio of books and make sure they are paid for, shipped, stored, and dispensed. This service includes good record keeping.

Packing/Stamping Director: Each book should be stamped with the contact information of the local temple, community, or event leader. A nice selection of books can then be bundled together so that people buy several books at a time.

Accounts Director: To take care of every penny collected, a team member should be assigned to keep careful accounts and then generate reports so that you can see how you are doing.

Communications Director: This position is extremely important. Keeping the devotees in touch with one another and broadcasting good news creates an enlivening esprit de corps in the community.

Cooking Team: An army runs on its stomach. You'll need a team to make memorable *prasāda* not only for team members but also for distribution to the public.

Design Team: Fliers, postcards, posters, and so on, all need good designs. This team brainstorms and produces attractive posters, cards, and other collaterals to promote the MSF.

Devotee Care Team: This team’s goal is to make sure that devotees are getting what they need – spiritual guidance, counseling, rides, mediation, support during illness, job counseling, and help with time management and childcare – whatever it takes to keep the devotees grounded and happy. Because ISV is built around the principle of *saṅkīrtana*, and because *saṅkīrtana* is its mission, everyone in the community is part of the team no matter what their service.

The above list shows how preparing for an MSF opens service opportunities for everyone. When you open the MSF to everyone – mothers, children, parents, the seasoned, first-timers, and so on – everyone will serve according to his or her liking and capacity.

As more people join, you will be induced to expand your vision and capabilities. As newcomers join, you’ll find you need to orient and tutor them. Pairing new people with veterans in an apprenticeship system to make sure first-timers have a good experience on *saṅkīrtana* is essential.

In 2006, when ISV held its first Monthly Saṅkīrtana Festival, we decided to schedule one weekend every month, during which everyone could go out on *saṅkīrtana* together. After our first outing the devotees were so euphoric from the experience that some of them said, “Let’s do it every week!” But we didn’t. We held steady at once a month. After we had performed the MSF for three months in a row, some devotees said, “Let’s do it every *other* month.” We didn’t do that either. Holding to our original plan, by the time a year had gone by, everyone had become steady at performing the MSF once a month. As a result of the momentum, capacity, and taste gained over the years of performing the MSF, devotees now go out more

frequently than once a month, even though we still have a designated MSF each month.

Śrīla Prabhupāda encouraged all the devotees in his temples to go out on *saṅkīrtana*. I participated in such an event while a resident of the *brahmacārī* ashram on the top floor of ISKCON's twelve-story temple in New York City. It was there that I got my first lesson in the power of "a lot of people each doing a little." It was the summer of 1976 when the devotees of 340 West Fifty-Fifth Street in Manhattan came together to organize a one-day event that would engage everyone in our temple community in book distribution. Śrīla Prabhupāda had written a message to the devotees in Los Angeles on April 15, 1973, in his own handwriting, to inspire them: "Everyone should go with the *saṅkīrtana* party as soon as possible." On December 6, 1974, he also wrote in a letter to Śrī Govinda, "Regarding the temple management, one man can be left behind, while the others go out."

The devotees in that high-rise lived together and worked untiringly, each in their own unique ways, to serve Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Govinda. There were offerings to be cooked, pots to be washed, *āratis* to be performed, and so on. Getting everyone out the door – all on the same day – for the single purpose of distributing books, required sacrifice and smart planning.

From our community, a dozen devotees, most of them *brahmacārīs*, were going daily to the streets and airports around New York to distribute books. During that era, most devotees thought of book distribution as a full-time service that not everyone could do.

So, as we were preparing for the day when all the devotees in the temple would go out – women with children, cooks, *pūjārīs*, and temple leaders included – everyone was excited and a little nervous. Some were skeptical, thinking such an event might be a lot of work with only a small return.

But the devotees' smiles and vigor that morning as they left the building were telling. On my way out of the temple I held the front door wide open, allowing a group of devotees to exit

with their arms full of books. Among them I noticed that a mother pushing a stroller had tucked copies of *Śrī Īsopaniṣad* and *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* in with her baby. “A transcendental Trojan horse,” I thought.

That day, even the temple president, busy as he was, left the management helm to lead the devotees onto the field of battle. As the proverb goes, “Not the cry, but the flight of the wild swan, leads the flock to fly and follow.”

Amid the euphoria, no one had talked much about the results this excursion might bring. But the next morning, when the book distribution scores were tallied and announced to the Deities, I was stunned. Over a hundred devotees had gone out to distribute that day, setting a new temple record for numbers of books distributed in one day. I marked this event permanently in my memory.

When it came time to organize our *saṅkīrtana* team at ISV, we brought Śrīla Prabhupāda’s “everyone to go with the *saṅkīrtana* party as soon as possible” out of storage, dusted it off, and made plans to invite all the members of our congregation to join. Try it. It works.