



# Baha'i Report

Volume 18, Issue 2 - July 2014

[www.bahai.org.au](http://www.bahai.org.au)

A newsletter  
of the  
Australian  
Bahá'í  
Community

INSIDE



Education for  
reconciliation

3



Words of imprisoned  
poet break free

4



An Ayatollah's gift

8

## Election of national governing body



*The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia: (Back row, left to right) Dr Arini Beaumaris, Prof David Chittleborough, Mr Jonathan Hancock, Dr Vahid Saberi, Ms Anisa Naraqi (Front row, left to right) Prof Bijan Samali, Mrs Fiona McDonald, Mr Anton Jones, Prof Fariborz Moshirian*

Bahá'ís from throughout Australia elected their Faith's national governing body, the National Spiritual Assembly, on 26 April 2014.

The election by 95 delegates was the central focus of the National Bahá'í Convention held from 25 to 27 April at the Sydney Bahá'í Centre in Silverwater.

All Bahá'ís in Australia over the age of 21, men and women, were eligible to be elected to the nine-member Assembly.

The Faith has no clergy but is governed by elected councils at international, national and local levels.

As in all such Bahá'í elections, it was conducted by secret ballot, after a period of prayer, with no nominations or electioneering involved.

The Bahá'í writings specifically encourage the election of individuals with recognised ability, mature experience, a well-trained mind, unquestioned loyalty, and selfless devotion.

Voters should also give due regard to factors such as age distribution, diversity, and gender balance.

Those elected to the National Spiritual Assembly were (in alphabetical order) Arini Beaumaris, David Chittleborough, Jonathan Hancock, Anton Jones, Fiona McDonald, Fariborz Moshirian, Anisa Naraqi, Vahid Saberi and Bijan Samali.

As well as participating in the election of the National Spiritual Assembly, the convention delegates, representing electoral units in all parts of Australia, discussed issues of interest to the Australian Bahá'í Community.

Those include plans for community development, educational programs for children and young teenagers, and working with other Australians to transform the neighbourhoods in which they live.

The convention took place during the twelve-day Ridvan Festival, in which Bahá'ís celebrated events associated with the announcement by Bahá'u'lláh of His spiritual revelation.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott continued the tradition of his predecessors by addressing a special message to the Australian Bahá'í Community on the occasion of the festival.

## Top award for Harvard-bound young leader



*Prime Minister Tony Abbott presents May Samali with the General Sir John Monash Scholarship*

A member of the Marrickville Bahá'í Community, May Samali, has received a General Sir John Monash Scholarship for postgraduate studies at a university outside of Australia for 2014.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott presented Ms Samali, along with 14 others, with the scholarship on 17 April 2014 at a ceremony held at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne.

The chief executive officer of the Sir John Monash foundation, Dr Peter Binks, said: "May is an outstanding young Australian, and we are very proud of her. She is already a fine leader, and will play an important role for social enterprises in Australia".

Ms Samali, 27, will use her scholarship to undertake a Master in Public Policy course at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, beginning her studies in August this year.

She is also a recipient from the Harvard Center for Public Leadership of the 2014 Gleitsman Leadership Fellowship, which is

designed to enhance and engage the development of the next generation of public leaders.

Ms Samali graduated from the University of Sydney with first class honours in law and the university medal in economic and social science.

Ms Samali said she chose the program at the Harvard Kennedy School because of its public service ethos, which is very much in line with the "servant leader" concept emphasised in the Bahá'í Writings.

"I am a strong proponent of the concept of servant leadership, which is captured perfectly by John F. Kennedy's famous words: 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,'" she said.

Currently with Alchemy Growth Partners and 180 Degrees Consulting, Ms Samali is also a tutor in government and international relations at the University of Sydney and a member of the university's alumni council.

## Mourners farewell musician in unique way



*Greg Parker, his wife, Malini, and the New Era choir*

At the funeral in Perth of WA composer-musician Greg Parker, his brother, Mick, asked the 700 mourners to rise and give him one final round of applause.

They jumped to their feet and raised the roof in honour of the founder of the Bahá'í New Era choir, and the composer of many songs over many years.

Mr Parker, who created and directed five musical productions following a diagnosis of terminal cancer four years ago, passed away aged 59 on 16 May, 2014.

In March this year, just prior to his death, he gave an interview to the ABC TV's 7.30 (WA) in which he spoke about his forthcoming and final concert, "From Our Hearts to Yours".

During that concert, which attracted a capacity audience of 900, Mr Parker sang from his wheelchair and did some of the conducting of the Bahá'í New Era choir, which he had founded some 25 years ago.

Over the years, the choir has sung at citizenship ceremonies, an Olympic torch ceremony, at Australia Day and ANZAC Day events, and at Government House. One Governor of WA said the New Era Choir was his favourite Perth choir.

*(For more see The Australian Bahá'í Report, volume 16 issue 3, November 2012).*

## Faith leaders discuss role of religion in Australia

Representatives of the Australian Bahá'í Community joined with members of other faiths from most States in Australia at a forum in Sydney on 7 May to discuss the role of religion in 21st century Australia.

The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO) held the event to mark its tenth anniversary. APRO, of which the Australian Bahá'í Community is a founding member, brings together the peak bodies of Australia's major faith communities.

Participants came from the Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, and Sikh communities, with panels chaired by ABC religion unit journalists, Rachael Kohn, Noel Debien and John Cleary.

NSW Minister for Citizenship and Communities, the Hon Victor Dominello, gave an opening address in which he observed that there is ultimately one truth, but it is expressed differently through different religions. He thanked those present for their hard work for community

harmony, and called on them to analyse some of the difficulties our community faces and how to overcome them.

The keynote speaker, a former religion writer for The Age newspaper, Barney Zwartz, said among the key challenges for religions in Australia were the rising pressure to exclude them from the public square, the ongoing impact of the sexual abuse crisis, and the new media landscape.

Three panel discussions with representatives of all seven faith communities together with government representatives and academics examined key issues related to religion, rights and responsibilities; religions and beliefs education; and the role of inter-faith relations in building a united community.

Josie Lacey of the Jewish community chaired the forum, and Natalie Mobini of the Bahá'í community provided the concluding summation.



*(Left to right) Mrs Josey Lacey OAM, Mr Jeremy Jones AM, Mrs Carmen Lalezari and Dr Natalie Mobini*

## Elder advocates education to help reconciliation



*Aunty Millie Ingram*

Aboriginal elder Aunty Millie Ingram stressed the importance of education as a transformative power to advance reconciliation in Australia when she addressed a reception following a service at the Sydney Bahá'í Temple.

"The best thing you can do is to be informed", said Ms Ingram, who spoke at the 1 June event, held to mark National Reconciliation Week.

Ms Ingram, from Sydney's inner west, addressed the Week's theme "Let's Walk the Talk".

Ms Ingram encouraged more interest in Aboriginal news, speakers, films and plays.

"You have to change people's views about Aboriginal people," she said.

"There are over 200 nationalities in this country, and I regard you all as Australians.

"But we are the first Australians, and yet we are so far behind. We should be respected, we should be honoured, and we should be acknowledged.

"We have made a lot of gains in the last forty years but we still have a long way to go."

The Australian Bahá'í Community has been a supporter of Reconciliation Week since the first one in 1996.

At the heart of the Bahá'í teachings are the principles of the oneness of humanity and of unity in diversity.

Before the reception, a public service took place with readings from Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish scriptures.

## Words of imprisoned poet broke free



Dr Roshanak Amrein reads from "Prison Poems"

A reading of poems penned by a Bahá'í leader imprisoned in Iran enthralled audiences in Canberra and Sydney and prompted a message from Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop that was read at the events (see p.5).

The readings marked the sixth anniversary of the imprisonment of seven Bahá'í leaders in Iran who were given 20-year sentences after trials widely condemned by the international community.

The verses at the centre of the events were from the book *Prison Poems* by Mahvash Sabet, one of the seven leaders.

The poems by Mrs Sabet, a former school principal, do not focus on her plight but neither do they ignore it.

On both occasions, a video by British author Bahiyyih Nakhjavani told the story of her translation of the poems and showed striking photographic and artistic representations of Evin prison where the poet is incarcerated.

### Events

In Canberra, on 28 May, an Australian poet of Iranian background, Roshanak Amrein, read a selection of the poems to a diverse gathering at the Asia Bookroom. She also read some of her poems on complementary themes.

A local Bahá'í, Reza Khanlari, delivered a closing address, which was about his brother-in-law, Saeid Rezaei, one of the seven imprisoned leaders.

On the following evening in Sydney, Shakespearean actor Jamie Evans and movie actor Shideh Faramand recited a selection of the poems to an audience at a Paddington bookstore, Berkelouw Books. Dr Amrein also read some of her poetry, work that recently attracted national attention on the ABC Radio National Program "Poetica".

Recording artist Tahereh Maghami provided live music dedicated to the Bahá'ís of Iran.

Among those attending were members of the family of Mrs Sabet, and relatives of two other imprisoned Bahá'í leaders.

Others present included a federal court judge, a local city councillor, a prominent journalist and commentator and representatives of other religious communities.

Relatives of Mrs Sabet distributed small gifts she had made in her cell and which she had asked to be distributed to those attending the event.

### International

Mrs Sabet, who penned her poems in her Tehran cell, gained international attention when she and her cellmate, fellow Bahá'í leader Fariba Kamalabadi, were praised by American journalist Roxana Saberi, who had shared a cell with them.

In Ms Saberi's best-seller *Between Two Worlds* about her experiences in an Iranian prison, she said that Mrs Sabet and Mrs Kamalabadi were the two prisoners who inspired her the most.

"They showed me what it means to be selfless, to care more about community and beliefs than about oneself," Ms Saberi wrote.

Similar gatherings commemorating the sixth anniversary of the imprisonment of the leaders occurred in several countries around the world.



(Top) James Evans and Shideh Faramand  
(Below) Mahvash Sabet, right, with the other leaders

## Foreign Minister expresses 'deep concerns'

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop MP issued a message for an event marking the sixth anniversary of the continuing imprisonment of seven Bahá'í leaders in Iran in which she expressed "deep concerns" about the treatment of Bahá'ís and others.

"On this regrettable occasion, the Australian Government reiterates its deep concerns at the ongoing human rights abuses in Iran, including the treatment of religious minorities such as the Bahá'í community," Ms Bishop said, referring to a statement to the UN Human Rights Council.

"In that statement, Australia expressed its concern about the use of the death penalty, ongoing intimidation and arbitrary arrest of human rights defenders, political activists, journalists and lawyers, ongoing curbs on media and the internet, and the ongoing mistreatment of ethnic and religious minorities, including Bahá'ís."

"Australia welcomed the release of seven political leaders last September, but called on Iran to release all prisoners of conscience, including the seven Bahá'í leaders whose situations in detention we remember today," she said.

"We continue to urge Iran to respect the human rights of all detainees, and to ensure all trials are conducted fairly."

Issuing her message to be read at events in Canberra and Sydney, the Foreign Minister named the individual leaders, most of whom have close relatives in Australia.

"Australia will continue to monitor closely the human rights situation in Iran and continue to raise our concerns with Iran, including on freedom of religion, in a way that reflects Australia's fundamental belief in the universality of human rights," Ms Bishop said.



*The Hon Julie Bishop MP*

## Desecration of cemetery 'very distressing'



*Desecration of Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz*

Australian Bahá'ís whose relatives are buried in a Bahá'í cemetery being desecrated in Shiraz, Iran, have spoken out about how distressing they find the ongoing excavation of the graves.

In Canberra, Fahimeh Khanlari said the excavation work has damaged her brother's grave and threatens those of her grandparents, other relatives and hundreds of others.

Mrs Khanlari said her brother was buried there in 1966: "When I heard the news of the excavation, I could hardly talk to anyone and I would just cry and cry.

"This destruction of the cemetery goes against all standards of decent behaviour."

In Albany, WA, Iran Milne said her parents are buried in the cemetery, and Mahshid Ferdowsian said that among her many relatives who are buried in the cemetery is one who was executed for his Bahá'í beliefs.

The ongoing excavation of the cemetery by Iran's Revolutionary Guards with the implied consent of the authorities is one of many attacks on members of the Bahá'í Faith, the country's biggest non-Muslim religious minority, numbering 300,000.

The cemetery also has 950 graves of other Bahá'ís, including those of ten women hanged in 1983 for teaching the equivalent of Sunday school.

Australian Bahá'í spokesperson Natalie Mobini said there is an empty plot of land next to the cemetery that could be used for whatever purposes the authorities say the Bahá'í cemetery is needed, yet it seems they would rather exhume the graves of hundreds of Bahá'ís than use it.

"Desecration of cemeteries is part of a widespread, systematic persecution of Bahá'ís that is continuing in Iran," Dr Mobini said.

## Role of religious leaders in bringing gender equality



The time has come for religious leaders to become the standard bearers of the principle of the equality of women and men, the Australian Bahá'í Community said in its submission to a Federal Parliamentary inquiry.

The Bahá'í Community presented its views in response to an invitation for submissions to the inquiry into human rights issues confronting women and girls in the Indian Ocean-Asia Pacific region.

The Bahá'í submission said that proponents of extremist religious interpretations, using religious appeals as a vehicle for their own power, have sought to "tame" women and girls.

They have done that by limiting their mobility outside of the home, limiting their access to education, subjecting their bodies to harmful traditional practices, controlling attire and even killing to punish acts which were claimed to abase the family honour, it said.

"Among the casualties of this development has been the role of women in public life as evidenced, in some places, by a turn to narrowly defined notions of a woman's place in the family, the community, and the world.

"We believe the time has come for religious leaders to support unequivocally, and become the standard bearers of, the principle of the equality of women and men.

"In particular, no custom, tradition, or religious interpretation that sanctions any form of violence against women and girls should be allowed to outweigh the obligation to eradicate such violence.

"The regrettable practice of hiding behind cultural and religious traditions that permit violence against women perpetuates a climate of legal and moral impunity.

"The responsibility of states to protect women and girls from violence must take precedence over any such customs."

The submission also addressed issues such as the role of men and boys in ensuring that women have equality.

"While women bear the most direct costs of this persistent inequality, the progress of all facets of society is hindered," it said.

## Women's leadership comes into focus

Speakers focussed on the theme of women's leadership when they addressed a reception following a service held at the Bahá'í Temple in Sydney to mark International Women's Day.

In her opening address, Pittwater Mayor Jacqueline Townsend drew upon part of the Bahá'í scripture she had read in the service: "Strive then with heart and soul to distinguish yourselves by your deeds".

Cr Townsend: "Let us not leave here today without striving, with our heart and soul, for all women to be equal, and to live in peace."

The first keynote speaker, Councillor Vanessa Moskal, said gender is often an arbitrary conception.

"Cultural anthropological studies have shown that our thinking, moral judgements and personalities are not gendered even though we often think them to be," Cr Moskal said.

The second keynote speaker, Safa Rahbar, the National Discourses Officer for the Australian Bahá'í Community, said the equality of women and men is more than just a goal that we all work towards: "it is an aspect of our reality".

"This understanding has profound implications, because it means we aren't trying to bring about something new, but something which is already there."



(Left to right) Cr Jacqueline Townsend, Cr Vanessa Moskal, Mrs Safa Rahbar

## Example of servant leader put forward



An editor of "Great Spiritual Leaders", Seforosa Carroll, right, with Bridget Owen, a United Theological College student

A new Australian book, *Great Spiritual Leaders*, includes a chapter on 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

Subtitled "Studies for leadership in a pluralist society", the book also has chapters on founders of world religions such as Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad.

The book also explores some contemporary and historical exponents of their teachings.

Each chapter is written by a different author, among whom are Anna Halafoff, Mehmet Ozalp, Keith Rowe, Natalie Mobini, Benjamin Myers, and Eleanor Capper.

Two academics from the School of Theology at Charles Sturt University, Seforosa Carroll and William Emilsen, edited the volume, published by Barton Books.

## State MP praises Temple activities

A member of the NSW State Government, Rob Stokes MP, told Parliament in Sydney that the Bahá'í Temple at Ingleside is one of two internationally renowned cultural heritage landmarks in his electorate.

Mr Stokes said the Temple is "a vibrant and active place of learning, human interaction and prayer".

"Whilst I follow a different faith, one of my real joys in being the local member for Pittwater has been getting to know and understand the people who sustain and celebrate the life and work of the Bahá'í Temple.

Participants in the project conclude that among the attributes of effective leadership are the importance of exemplary service, and a vision encompassing the well-being of all humanity.

The chapter on 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the head of the Bahá'í Faith from 1892-1921, is written by Dr Natalie Mobini, the Director of External Affairs of the Australian Bahá'í Community. It focuses on his talks and activities during an extended visit to North America in 1912 during which he explained the teachings of his father, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-92), the founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

It describes how 'Abdu'l-Bahá showed outstanding leadership for a pluralist society in his contribution to the discourse on race and racism and also on gender equality.

The chapter notes how he encouraged interracial marriage, and organised a banquet where the black people were served by their white hosts, an astounding event at a time of widespread racial segregation in the United States.

He promoted gender equality, dismissing the claim of women's inferiority as "pure imagination", and saying it was crucial for justice and the progress of humanity that women "participated fully and equally in the affairs of the world".

The chapter says of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "He modelled for Bahá'ís the role of a servant leader in a pluralist society", a role offered to the wider community as one worth considering.

"Their monotheistic faith is based on the concept that there is one God and that all religions are ultimately focused on this same God as their spiritual source and foundation."

He concluded his address, presented in March this year, with words of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-92), the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith:

*"If the learned and worldly-wise men of this age were to allow mankind to inhale the fragrance of fellowship and love, every understanding heart would apprehend the meaning of true liberty, and discover the secret of undisturbed peace and absolute composure."*



Mr Rob Stokes MP



The Australian Baha'i Report is published three times a year by the Australian Bahá'í Community.

The Australian Bahá'í Community is a non-governmental organisation which encompasses and represents the membership of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia.

For more information on the stories in this newsletter, or any aspect of the Australian Bahá'í Community and its activities, please contact:

**Australian Baha'i Report**

173 Mona Vale Road  
Ingliside NSW 2101  
Australia

Phone:  
(02) 9998 9222

Email:  
opi@bahai.org.au

Website:  
www.bahai.org.au

Twitter: @Austbahai  
Facebook: /austbahai

Editorial team:

Michael Day  
Mona Forghani  
Venus Khalessi  
Natalie Mobini

Staff Writer:

Michael Day

The Australian Bahá'í Report is distributed free of charge. If you would like to have your name added to, or removed from, our mailing list, please contact us at the address above.

Copyright 2014  
National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia Inc.

Printed on 100% recycled paper

## International News

### Gift becomes powerful gesture of sympathy

A prominent Muslim cleric in Iran has made a powerful gesture of sympathy to the heavily persecuted members of the Bahá'í Faith in his country, giving hope that more leading citizens will follow suit.

Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani gifted to the Bahá'ís of Iran and the world an illuminated artwork he created which highlights a paragraph on religious tolerance from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

This dramatic move by a cleric of the high rank of Ayatollah-- regarded by Shia Muslims as experts in Islamic studies-- follows several recent statements by Muslim scholars in other parts of the world who affirm that tolerance of all religions is upheld by the Qu'ran.

The Ayatollah's symbolic action, announced on his website, was accompanied by an acknowledgement that Bahá'ís of Iran have "suffered in manifold ways as a result of blind religious prejudice". His move has won widespread acclaim throughout the world from religious leaders, including many from Islamic communities.

In presenting his gift, Ayatollah Tehrani said his act is "an expression of sympathy and care from me and on behalf of all my open-minded fellow citizens".



An illuminated calligraphic work by Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, containing the words of Bahá'u'lláh

His intricate artwork, painstakingly illuminated in a classical style, features a Bahá'í symbol and an excerpt from Bahá'u'lláh's holy scripture which reads:

*"Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God. Beware lest amidst men the flame of foolish ignorance overpower you. All things proceed from God and unto Him they return. He is the source of all things and in Him all things are ended."*

### Australian contributed to adopted country



Pam Ringwood 1930 - 2014

An Australian-born Bahá'í, Pam Ringwood, who made a significant contribution to her adopted country of New Zealand, passed away aged 83 in Auckland on 19 March 2014.

Ms Ringwood, a legal academic at the University of Auckland, gained national recognition when appointed by the New Zealand Government to the Waitangi Tribunal, which aims at assisting with the reconciliation of Maori and Europeans.

As both a lawyer and a trained social worker, Ms Ringwood became a public speaker for many charitable organisations.

As a family law specialist, Ms Ringwood mediated in family disputes and served on government organisations assisting children.

As a single woman in the 1970s, Ms Ringwood adopted three children. This was very unusual and attracted media attention.

Ms Ringwood was a member of the elected national governing body of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia, the National Spiritual Assembly, from 1960 to 1967. After moving to New Zealand in 1968, she was elected to the equivalent body.