

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í Community

Festival marked by elections and celebrations

Delegates from throughout Australia elected the national governing body of the Bahá'í Faith during the annual convention held from 29 April to 1 May at the Bahá'í Centre in Silverwater, Sydney.

Ninety-five delegates cast their votes for the nine-member National Spiritual Assembly in a reverent atmosphere, free of nominations or electioneering.

The members of the National Spiritual Assembly for the coming year are Arini Beaumaris, Anton Jones, Eric Kingston, Fiona McDonald, Fariborz Moshirian, Golshah Naghdy, Vahid Saberi, Bijan Samali, and John Walker.

All adult Bahá'ís in Australia, men and women, were eligible for election. The election is held every year during the Ridvan Festival, the holiest festival on the Bahá'í calendar.

The festival, running from 21 April to 2 May, commemorates the first public declaration by the Faith's founder, Bahá'u'lláh, that He was a Messenger of God. His declaration occurred in 1863 in the Garden of Ridvan, outside Baghdad, from which the festival takes its name.

The Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, sent a well-received message to the convention (right), which included greetings on the occasion of Ridvan.

Local events

Also elected during the Ridvan festival were nine-member local governing bodies, known as Local Spiritual Assemblies, in some 200 communities throughout Australia.

The festival was celebrated in various ways throughout the country. In the Hills Shire in Sydney, for example, the local mayor, Cr Mike Thomas, his deputy Cr Justin Taunton and five councillors joined members of a variety of community organisations as guests at an event organised by the local Bahá'í community.

The program included talks, musical performances and the screening of a film.



Members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia

I am very pleased to provide this message to the Australian Bahá'í Community for this year's Ridvan Festival.

This important cultural event, commemorating the start of Baha'u'llah's prophethood, is a period of celebration and marks the elections to the Australian National Spiritual Assembly.

Our nation is enriched by the contributions of all who make Australia home, including the Australian Bahá'í Community with its plurality of culture and traditions.

Your commitment to interfaith harmony and your dedication to service provide a valuable example to all Australians.

I applaud your work in helping to build a socially cohesive society and in advancing the course towards peace in Australia and the world.

My warmest wishes to everyone participating in this vibrant and joyful festival and I trust it will be a truly memorable occasion.

The Honourable Julia Gillard MP
Prime Minister of Australia



Cr Mike Thomas speaking at the Ridvan celebration in the Hills Shire

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New National Secretary for the Australian Bahá'í Community



Eric Kingston

A research scientist with extensive experience in management in the corporate and university sectors is the new National Secretary of the Australian Bahá'í Community.

Dr Eric Kingston succeeds Dr Arini Beaumaris who will move to undertake consulting and projects in her fields of expertise, moral education and organisational development.

"I look forward to taking on the responsibilities in this new and challenging role and I pay warm tribute to the enthusiasm, skills and dedication of my predecessor, Dr Arini Beaumaris," Dr Kingston said.

Prior to taking up his new position, Dr Kingston was Senior Manager (Research Contracts) with RMIT University and before that General Manager Operations for the same institution's research commercialisation arm.

From 1986-99, Dr Kingston, whose doctorate is in chemistry, held senior positions with BHP Company Ltd, commencing in scientific research and progressing to become BHP Petroleum's senior expert on strategic environmental issues, working on international committees and participating in United Nations sponsored environmental meetings.

Staff changes in the Office of External Affairs



Natalie Mobini

The new Director of the Office of External Affairs for the Australian Bahá'í Community is Natalie Mobini.

Dr Mobini succeeds Tessa Scrine, who has been appointed to a board of senior advisers to Bahá'í communities in Australasia and the Pacific.

Dr Mobini, who will be based in Canberra, served in Sydney as the Community's public information officer from 1998 until May 2011. She completed her doctorate in Indonesian history at Monash University where she also taught South East Asian history.

In her new role, Dr Mobini will be responsible for fostering the Australian Bahá'í Community's relationship with the Australian Government, diplomatic missions, and national NGOs, with particular focus on human rights, peace and the equality of women and men.

Dr Mobini said she felt honoured to be appointed to the new position and is excited to take up the new challenges involved.

"I am fortunate to follow in the footsteps of Tessa Scrine, who has played a significant role both for the Bahá'í community and the NGO sector in general," she said.

Ms Scrine will continue to be Convenor of the Australian Forum of Human Rights Organisations (AFHRO), a voluntary position she has held since 2005. AFHRO is a network of more than 50 NGOs which share information and collaborate in the promotion and defence of human rights.

New Director of Public Information

A lawyer with expertise in information technology and a keen interest in human rights, Venus Khalessi, has taken up the Sydney-based post of Director of Public Information for the Australian Bahá'í Community.

Until her appointment in May 2011, Mrs Khalessi was a solicitor specialising in commercial litigation for a Sydney legal firm, William Roberts Lawyers.

In addition to her legal qualifications, Mrs Khalessi gained first class honours in information and communication technology, and employed her experience in both IT and intellectual property matters as an advisor with the accounting firm, KPMG.

While studying human rights law, Mrs Khalessi completed a research paper on the persecutions endured by Bahá'ís in Iran since the 1979 revolution.

"I feel privileged to work on a day to day basis for the Australian Bahá'í Community because this is the most meaningful work I could ever imagine being involved in," Mrs Khalessi said.

"I look forward to working with those involved in interfaith dialogue and to meeting the creative and vibrant individuals who are working for the same goals as the Australian Bahá'í Community."

* Mr Michael Day, who is based in Brisbane, will continue in his role as National Media Officer of the Australian Bahá'í Community.



Venus Khalessi



Michael Day

'Place of Peace' discovered in the suburbs of Sydney



An interior view of the Bahá'í Temple is juxtaposed with an image from nature in "All roads lead to heaven," one of the photographs featured in the exhibition at the Museum of Sydney

Photographer and author Louise Hawson has included strikingly beautiful photographs of the Sydney Bahá'í Temple in her recently launched book *52 Suburbs*.

The book, based on a year long search for beauty in the suburbs of Sydney, has its origins in her blog and has now been extended into an exhibition at the Museum of Sydney.

In explaining her project Ms Hawson says she has lived in Sydney for more than 30 years but had not set foot in most of its more than 600 suburbs.

"So from September 2009 to October 2010 I explored and photographed one new suburb a week in search of the beauty in the 'burb'."

The Bahá'í Temple appears in her blog among

the images of "places of peace" in suburb 18, Ingleside.

Ms Hawson said that after talking to a friend about the Bahá'í Faith, she became curious and that led to her visit to the Temple.

The photographs of the Temple are juxtaposed against other images, such as flora, people, the landscape, and scriptures of the world's religions.

The book *52 Suburbs* is available at most major and independent bookstores including the Bahá'í Temple Bookshop. Visit the blog at www.52suburbs.com.

Selected photographs, including those of the Bahá'í Temple, are on exhibition at the Museum of Sydney until October 2011.

Celebrations to mark golden anniversary

Celebrations in September will mark the 50th anniversary of the Bahá'í Temple, a Sydney landmark which attracted widespread media attention at its opening in 1961.

Media attention turned to the Bahá'í House of Worship in Ingleside even before its inauguration because a helicopter was used to install the crown of the dome, a task beyond any crane in Sydney at the time.

As thousands converged for its opening ceremony, a newspaper quoted a policeman describing the Temple as the "angel of Sydney" because of the towering white dome.

During the years that have followed, increasing numbers of people have come to know the Temple for its essential purposes rather than only for its unusual beauty and its prominence in the landscape.

Those purposes are to help unify humanity as one family and to advance the recognition of the essential oneness of the world's religions. They will be reflected in a series of activities to mark the golden anniversary.

In the years since the opening of the House of Worship, Sydney's Bahá'í population has multiplied from a few hundred to thousands now living in all parts of the city.



A helicopter installs the lantern in the dome of the Bahá'í Temple in 1961

Heartfelt pleas as relatives call for justice



Mehrzad Mumtahan, left, and Saman Samimi spoke about the imprisonment of their relatives in Iran

Australian relatives of seven Bahá'í leaders jailed in Iran delivered heartfelt pleas for justice for their loved ones when they addressed a reception following a special service for the seven at the Bahá'í Temple in Sydney on 15 May 2011.

The occasion was one of many held around the world to mark the third anniversary of the jailing of the leaders.

Many in the capacity audience were reduced to tears as they heard of the life-threatening conditions under which the leaders have been held during the three years since they were rounded up in dawn raids.

There were calls for their immediate release in accordance with the demand of governments and human rights organisations worldwide.

Sydney filmmaker Mehrzad Mumtahan, whose uncle Saeid Rezaei is one of the seven,

said most of the group had developed serious illnesses due to the conditions of their captivity both before and after their sham trial in 2010.

"My uncle has suffered from abdominal pain throughout his incarceration but has been denied surgery," Mr Mumtahan said.

"He has asked for continued prayers because it gives them hope that total strangers are thinking of them," he said.

"I can't imagine how they go through this and show a brave face," said Saman Samimi, whose cousin Mahvash Sabet is one of two women among the seven leaders.

"They are unbelievable souls," he said.

Earlier at the service in the Temple, the program highlighted the call for justice found in all the scriptures of the world.



Arrested Bahá'í Farhad Sedghi

Arrested for teaching accountability

Australian Bahá'ís have deplored a recent crackdown on Iranian Bahá'ís who provide higher education to young members banned from universities because of their religion.

Security forces carried out coordinated raids on as many as 30 Bahá'í homes in the cities of Tehran, Karaj, Isfahan and Shiraz on 21 May, and arrested some 14 Bahá'ís.

All of the targets were individuals closely involved with the operations of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE).

Those arrested included Farhad Sedghi, who has been teaching accountancy to young Iranian Bahá'ís for 24 years. He is the brother of a member of the Dubbo Bahá'í community, Nasser Sedghi, a well-known businessman in the town.

"We deplore this action of the Iranian authorities, which blatantly contravenes international standards of human rights," Australian Bahá'í Community spokesperson Natalie Mobini said.

"These innocent individuals should be released from jail immediately," she said.

"The BIHE has worked to meet the tertiary education needs of young Bahá'ís whom the Iranian Government prevents from going to university because of their religion.

"Such is the quality of education delivered by the BIHE that some of its graduates have been accepted for postgraduate study in universities here in Australia.

"It is deplorable enough that the Iranian authorities deny young Bahá'ís the opportunity to gain a higher education in their own country's universities - now it is even more so when they are seeking to close down the community's efforts to provide such education by alternative means.

"We ask that educational organisations, academics and individuals throughout Australia register with the government of Iran and its representatives in Australia their strong disapproval of its systematic, ongoing efforts to deny to young Bahá'ís their fundamental human right to access higher education."



Dubbo businessman Nasser Sedghi is concerned about the arrest of his brother, Farhad

'Oneness of humanity should underpin multiculturalism'

The Australian Bahá'í Community has recommended that the principle of the oneness of humanity be adopted as a guiding principle of multiculturalism in Australia.

The recommendation was contained in the Community's submission to the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia being conducted by the Federal Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Migration.

"In emphasising the fundamental oneness of all humanity, we do not seek to deny the magnificent diversity that characterises the human species and, indeed, the people of Australia," the Community said.

"If, however, multiculturalism were to be based on policies and attitudes that regard society as unalterably divided - a virtually impermeable 'community of communities' - then it would risk reinforcing old barriers and insularities, rather than assisting in the building of a new community that is genuinely united in its diversity."

Young people

The Community recommended that immigration settlement programs aim to cultivate the capacity of every individual to take charge of their development and contribute to the well-being of their family and community.

"Too often migrants, especially refugees and humanitarian entrants, are perceived as helpless people, overwhelmed by their circumstances and needs, rather than capable agents of change in their communities," it said.

Girls and boys at the pivotal age between 12 and 15 should receive special attention, the Community said.

"This stage of development presents an important opportunity for parents, communities, and institutions to help young people not only to develop a positive identity, but also to elevate their thinking and to adopt an outward-looking orientation, which inspires them to work towards the betterment of their communities," it said.

Given that many migrants to Australia have come from countries that lack a culture of respect and protection for human rights, settlement programs should incorporate human rights education and be presented within a



A Bahá'í delegation met with WA Minister for Multicultural Interests, John Castrilli (fourth from left), on 3 May to inform him about the activities of the Bahá'í Community of Western Australia

human rights framework, the Community said.

Without such education, not only would migrants be less likely to seek assistance and redress if their own rights are violated, but they were also less likely to recognise and identify the human rights of others, it said.

Multi-Faith Australia

Australia's recent immigration program has greatly extended the multi-faith nature of Australian society, the Community said.

"We believe that Australia should continue to embrace a plurality of religious identities and beliefs, gathered together under the canopy of just laws and operating within a human rights framework, as the foundation for a cohesive and prosperous society," it said.

To prevent religious prejudice and hatred, efforts should be made to educate children and adults, equipping them with skills and opportunities to learn about other belief systems.

"Interaction with people of different faiths is important to strengthen appreciation of diverse religious traditions as well as helping individuals to recognise the shared humanity of all people," it said.

"Without such interaction, other religions remain shrouded in mystery and it is easy for them to become the object of ignorant fears and fantasies."

The Community also recommended more government support for inter-faith initiatives at local, state and national levels, and measures to encourage religious leaders to guide their followers to learn about, and enjoy a peaceful coexistence with, those who think and behave differently.

Expert musician producing albums by Bahá'í artists



Louie Shelton in his recording studio

All the signs of a stellar career are visible in Louie Shelton's recording studio on the Gold Coast.

Adorning the walls of Louie's studio are framed copies of the many hit records to which he contributed as one of the most prominent session guitarists in popular music.

The names of the recording artists are familiar to many: Lionel Richie, Barbra Streisand, Neil Diamond, Art Garfunkel, Boz Scaggs.

If there were also a photo gallery of all the artists Louie Shelton has worked with, it would include such singers as John Lennon, Kenny Rogers, Ella Fitzgerald, Diana Ross, Marvin Gaye and many others.

What is not immediately apparent is that Louie, a long-standing Bahá'í, is now producing albums of Bahá'í singer-songwriters who have created songs inspired by their faith.

Professional links with Bahá'í musicians have long been one strand in a multi-faceted career that has included not only working at the elite level as a session musician but also composing film and television scores, creating his own music and producing albums for others.

Among the Bahá'í musicians Louie Shelton has worked alongside are Seals and Crofts, the US duo whose songs *Summer Breeze*, *Humming Bird* and *Diamond Girl* were some of the biggest hits of the 1970s. He played guitar on

those songs and produced their gold and platinum albums, and he also worked with another internationally successful Bahá'í duo, England Dan and John Ford Coley.

Louie Shelton's path to becoming a session musician and to adopting the Bahá'í Faith as his religion began in Arkansas where he was raised, and where as a schoolboy he saw Elvis Presley perform before the singer became famous.

It was there that Louie witnessed federal troops escorting African-American students to high school after the State Governor had refused them enrollment.

"I was a fan of African-American music already and I knew there was something wrong about segregation, and I just didn't understand it," he says.

His answers were to come in California where he met Bahá'ís and joined the faith that has the oneness of mankind as its central teaching and has no place for any racist notions.

In Los Angeles, Louie composed an opening riff for The Monkees' song *Last Train to Clarksville*. It was to become a smash hit, with his distinctive riff making it instantly recognisable when radio stations played the song.

From that moment on, Louie Shelton was in demand not only by individual singers but also by immensely popular groups like *The Mamas & the Papas*, *The Carpenters* and *The Jackson 5*.

Not everything in the music industry was glamorous, as he points out.

"Drinking and drugs were the biggest factor in the demise of people in my industry," he says, happy that he was never involved.

"I was a logical person and figured out that drugs were not going to make me a great musician. Even today, for great musician friends, whether Christians or Bahá'ís or of whatever faith they choose, it is their beliefs that keeps them on the straight path."

Tired of the crime rate in Los Angeles, Louie and his wife Donnie and children came to

Louie Shelton performing at Tamworth



Australia in the 1980s, returning briefly to the United States in the 1990s only to come back and settle permanently in the Gold Coast.

In Australia, Louie has produced successful bands like *Noiseworks*, *Southern Sons*, *Mother Hubbard* and *The Wolverines*, and was involved with artists like Tommy Emmanuel and *Human Nature*.

He regularly visits the United States and in 2009 attended a ceremony to admit him into the Musicians Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee.

Asked about the current Bahá'í songs he is

producing, Louie Shelton gives a demonstration, picking up one of the many guitars in his studio and engaging his magic fingers to produce a captivating, lilting melody.

"I am trying to bring to Bahá'í projects a world class standard for singers who may not have access to the best technology or the budget," he says.

Louie pushes the start button on one of the recent Bahá'í tracks he has produced. His guitar work immaculately enhances the voice as both soar into the spiritual realm.

Multi-faith events focus on women as agents of change

Bahá'í representative Tessa Scrine was among religious leaders at the Commonwealth Day multi-faith ceremony in Canberra on 14 March 2011 attended by Governor General Quentin Bryce.

Religious community representatives delivered a unified message about the important role of women as agents of change in society, the theme of the event.

Readers from Bahá'í, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Sikh, and Sukyo Mahikari communities read quotations which focused on the role of women.

The Bahá'í readers were Ehsan Farshid, 17, and Alexa Pelkowitz, 16. They included the following Bahá'í quotation in their readings:

"Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour, including environment and development, will the moral and psychological climate be created in which a peaceful, harmonious, and sustainable civilization can emerge and flourish."

The Governor General presented a message from Queen Elizabeth II, who said that this year the Commonwealth is reflecting on what more could be achieved if women were able to play an even larger role.

Australian Capital Territory deputy chief minister Katy Gallagher delivered a message on behalf of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

"Australian women are agents of change across all sectors of the community, and often at great personal sacrifice," the message said.

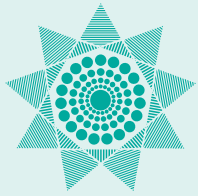


Bahá'í representative Tessa Scrine meets Governor General Quentin Bryce at the Commonwealth Day service in Canberra

"Their achievements should be recognised and celebrated and their inspirational stories told to others who in turn may be inspired to achieve change."

At a Commonwealth Day observance in Perth attended by the Governor of Western Australia, Dr Ken Michael, two Bahá'ís, Fiona McDonald and Wendy Wisniewski, read quotations from the Bahá'í Writings.

At a similar event in Brisbane attended by Queensland Governor Penelope Wensley, a local Bahá'í, Susan Handley, was among representatives of seven religions who delivered readings.



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Australians help restore the Queen of Carmel

Australian volunteers were among Bahá'ís from many countries who worked on the recently completed project to restore the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel.

The Shrine is cherished by Bahá'ís because it contains the sacred remains of the Báb (1819-50), the prophet who foretold the advent of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-92), the founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

In its setting amidst terraced gardens of sublime beauty on the northern slopes of Mt Carmel, the domed Shrine is a resplendent sight and has long been a landmark of Haifa, Israel's third most populous city.

But time and the environment had taken their toll on the original 1909 stone building and on its marble-clad superstructure and dome, which had been added in 1953.

A restoration and earthquake protection project began in 2008. The building was largely hidden under safety covers for two years as work was carried out to improve its resistance to tremors and to restore its golden dome and stonework.

The project finished in April 2011, allowing the restored Shrine to be unveiled two years ahead of schedule.

Expert architects, engineers and artisans had worked on the project assisted by many young volunteers trained by expert conservators.

Kira Simmons, 22, of Canberra worked for eight months in the stone restoration team and three months in the gilding team.

"When I saw the photos of the newly restored Shrine, I had to cry," said Kira, who had returned home before the completion of the project.

"It touched my heart in every possible way and I missed being in Haifa and being able to be so close to the Holy

Shrines. The result of the restoration project is magnificent and this was only accomplished through the combined effort of many volunteers."

Right: Kira Simmons

Far right: Young volunteers help to restore the Shrine

Twenty-year-old Gilda Kouhbor of Wollongong volunteered during weekends and before and after her shifts as a full-time security guard at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa.

"While there was work to be done, just like at any

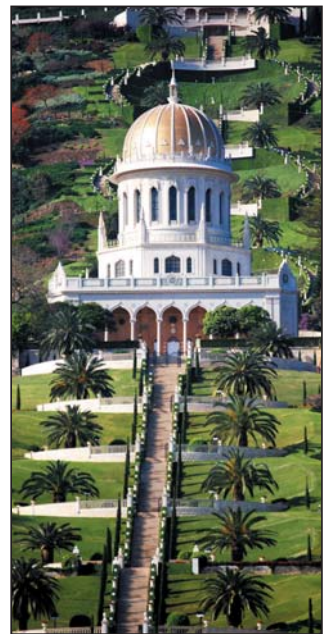
other work site, I had to keep reminding myself about where I was, that it wasn't just a regular work site, that it was one of the holiest places on earth and that any volunteering had to be done with the utmost dignity," Gilda said.

Justin Henri, 20, of Melbourne, said one of his tasks was removing chips and shards of the old tiles that covered the dome, an experience that gave him a vantage point to look out over Haifa.

"I felt overwhelmed with emotion and unworthy to be one of the few who were allowed to help," said Justin, who also carried out his tasks in the spare hours between shifts as a security guard.

Addressing a public reception held to celebrate the completion of the project, Haifa mayor Yona Yahav said the work had been of the "utmost importance" and was something unique "in this city, in Israel - in fact the world".

In 2008, the Shrine of the Báb was inscribed - along with the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh near Acre - as a site of "outstanding universal value" on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Last year 760,000 tourists and 7,500 Bahá'í pilgrims visited the Shrine.



The Shrine of the Báb after restoration

