

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

Volume 10, Issue 2 - June 2006

A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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Equality "a prerequisite for peace"

Establishing the full equality of women and men is a prerequisite for the achievement of world peace, and men must step forward to play their part.

This was the message conveyed by Katina Jones, Director of the Australian Bahá'í Community's Office for Equality, at a reception held in the Information Centre at the Bahá'í House of Worship to mark International Women's Day in March.

Ms Jones was sharing her reflections on the 2006 United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which she attended in New York from 27 February to 10 March. Some 21 Bahá'í delegates from 10 countries participated in the 50th Session of the Commission, together with 1500 other representatives from more than 400 organisations around the world.

This year the Commission focused on two themes: the enhanced participation of women in development, and promoting the equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels.

"The 50th Session offered us the opportunity to pause and think, not just about the achievements made in the advancement of women during the past 60 years, but especially to think of ways in which we can push the women's agenda forward", said Ms Jones.

"I am very excited about the future and our role in it", she said.

Guests attending the reception for International Women's Day. Back row (l to r): Thelma Palmer, Kitty Knight, Diane Sackelariou. Front row: Mina Singh Batra, Stella Cornelius, Judith Altman



Katina Jones at the Bahá'í House of Worship

Bahá'í vision of equality

Quoting from the Bahá'í writings, Ms Jones described the elimination of discrimination against women as "a spiritual and moral imperative that must ultimately reshape existing legal, economic, and social arrangements".

"Bahá'í scripture emphatically states that women will be the greatest factor in establishing universal peace and international arbitration", she said.

"But promoting the entry of greater numbers of women into positions of prominence and authority is a necessary but not sufficient step in creating a just social order.

"A community based on partnership, a community in which aggression and the use of force are supplanted by cooperation and consultation, requires the transformation of the human heart".

Men share the responsibility of promoting gender equality, Ms Jones said.

"It is essential that men engage in a careful, deliberate examination of attitudes, feelings and behaviour deeply rooted in cultural habit that block the equal participation of women and stifle the growth of men.

"The willingness of men to take responsibility for equality will create an optimum environment for progress", she said.

"We see a glorious future", Ms Jones concluded. "But it will only happen if we work for it".

National Convention held in Brisbane



The annual National Convention of the Bahá'í Community in Australia was held at the University of Queensland in Brisbane in April.

Ninety-five delegates from around the country elected the members of the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly, the Faith's national governing body, for the coming year.

Those elected to the National Assembly were (left to right): Dr Marjorie Tidman, Dr Vahid Saberi, Mrs Fiona McDonald, Dr Golshah Naghdy, Mr John Walker, Ms Kath Podger, Ms Tessa Scrine, Professor Bijan Samali, and Professor Fariborz Moshirian.

Mass arrests in Shiraz

Iranian officials arrested 54 Bahá'ís in the city of Shiraz on 19 May.

Those arrested, who were mainly youth, were engaged in teaching classes to underprivileged children in a school as a community service activity conducted by a local non-government organization.

This was the largest number of Bahá'ís taken at once since the 1980s, when persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran was at its height.

Despite being in possession of a letter of permission from the Islamic Council of Shiraz, those arrested were detained for at least five

days before being released on bail, pending a court summons.

At the end of May, three of those arrested remained in jail. None of those arrested has been formally charged with any offence.

The arrests coincided with raids on six Bahá'í homes during which notebooks, computers, books and other documents were confiscated.

Since the beginning of 2005, more than 125 Bahá'ís have been arrested and detained without cause across Iran. While most were held for less than a week, others were jailed for up to three months.

Bahá'ís form the largest non-Islamic religious minority in Iran, with over 300,000 members. For the past 25 years, they have faced systematic persecution solely on the basis of their religious beliefs.

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, more than 200 Bahá'ís have been executed or killed, hundreds more have been imprisoned, and tens of thousands have been deprived of jobs, pensions, businesses, and educational opportunities. All national and local Bahá'í administrative institutions have been banned by the government, and Bahá'í holy places, cemeteries and community properties have been confiscated, vandalised, or destroyed.

Classified as "unprotected infidels", Bahá'ís have no legal recourse for the denial of their rights.

Three of the young Bahá'ís arrested in Shiraz on 19 May



Grave concern for Bahá'ís in Iran

The House of Representatives has expressed grave concern at Iranian government monitoring of Bahá'ís, giving strong bipartisan support to a motion presented on 29 May.

The motion was moved by Jennie George MP in response to evidence, which emerged at the United Nations in March, that the Iranian Government has instructed the army, Revolutionary Guard, intelligence and police agencies to identify Bahá'ís and monitor their activities.

The motion describes such action as "an unacceptable interference with the rights of members of religious minorities", expresses fear that it "could be used as the basis for persecution and discrimination against members of the Bahá'í faith", and urges the government to take up these concerns with the Australian Embassy in Tehran and representatives of the Iranian government.

In moving the motion, Ms George pointed out that the latest developments were occurring "in the wake of mounting attacks on the Bahá'ís published in government sanctioned press, radio and TV broadcasts in Iran".

MPs speak out

Speaking in support of the motion, Michael Keenan MP said "The steps being taken currently by the Iranian government are truly frightening, and those with a good knowledge of history should be extraordinarily worried about the actions of that regime. Specifically, steps being taken to monitor and identify people of the Bahá'í faith, combined with an increase in the ferocity of media propaganda vilifying them, are grave cause for concern".

"Given the situation as it now stands, the Bahá'ís in Iran can only be living in fear about what these measures might mean in practice", said Mr Keenan. "I do not think this parliament or the world in general should keep quiet".

Referring to the arrests of 54 Bahá'ís in the city of Shiraz in May, Graham Edwards MP said, "I offer my thoughts and hopes to them and to other people who are being persecuted by this authoritarian regime. I would simply hope that the beliefs and principles of the Bahá'í,

which call for mercy, compassion and loving kindness, might be visited upon those people who were recently arrested".

Other members who spoke in support of the motion were Kim Wilkie, Russell Broadbent, and Andrew Southcott.

Speaking on ABC Radio National following passage of the motion, the National Secretary, John Walker, said "The Bahá'ís in Australia have been terribly concerned about this, in particular for the wellbeing and safety of the Bahá'í community in Iran. They have approached the various Members of Parliament in Australia and there has been a wonderful reaction ...which has led to this motion being put in the House and carried yesterday".

"We hope that the Australian government itself will continue to maintain pressure on the Iranian government ... The Bahá'ís of Australia are very grateful to the government of Australia for the efforts that it has made".

Foreign Minister expresses concern

In a statement, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, said "The Australian Government is concerned by the recent report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief concerning the treatment of the Bahá'í community in Iran.

"Our Embassy in Tehran has been asked to monitor closely the situation and make representations to the Iranian Government.

"Our Embassy in Tehran has previously made representations to the Iranian Government highlighting our concerns over the treatment of followers of the Bahá'í religion in Iran. In December 2005 Australia co-sponsored a UN General Assembly resolution expressing serious concern at the human rights situation in Iran and making specific mention of the treatment of the Bahá'í community.

"Australia's firm position is that the right to freedom of religion must be respected in all countries in accordance with international human rights instruments and the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief of 1981".

"I do not think this parliament or the world in general should keep quiet"

Michael Keenan MP

West Australian MP, Graham Edwards, pictured with local Bahá'ís Hamed Sharafizad, Fleur Sharafizad and David Marshall



The reconciliation challenge



Lynette Riley-Mundine speaking at the Bahá'í National Centre

Reconciliation is a challenge that needs to be taken up by all Australians in our personal lives, our community and our place of work.

This was the response of Lynette Riley-Mundine to the question, "What is reconciliation?" when she addressed a reception to mark National Reconciliation Week at the Bahá'í National Centre in Sydney on 28 May.

"I throw down the gauntlet to you all", she said. "I ask you to take up the challenge: responsibility for yourself, your community and the place where you work. Put reconciliation into action where it counts".

A descendant of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi Nations, Ms Riley-Mundine has been intimately involved with the reconciliation process for many years. She pointed out that reconciliation carries personal challenges for Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal people.

"For Aboriginal people it is often about being able to grieve, to have these injustices recognised, and to then put these injustices to the side, so they can grow and move on with their lives".

For non-Aboriginal Australians, Ms Riley-Mundine said, reconciliation must involve "getting an education about Aboriginal peoples' histories and cultures". She asked how many Australians could name five or ten Aboriginal tribes.

Reconciliation also involves getting to know Aboriginal people as individuals, she said.

"Reconciliation is people working together and getting to know each other as people, not as stereotypes.

"Aboriginal people are often lumped as a whole homogenous group and the individuals, talents, skills and all that goes with being human is overlooked. How horrible to be never seen as a person. Yet that is what happens to Aboriginal people", she said.

Ms Riley-Mundine called for an attitude that extends far beyond tolerance.

"I don't like this word because I find it patronising", she said. "I don't want people to tolerate me; it isn't just about accepting difference. It is about understanding and awareness. It is about respect".

"We each need to take personal responsibility for what we are doing in reconciliation ... What are we doing to change ourselves, our community, and where we work?"

The reception was followed by a special service in the Bahá'í House of Worship featuring readings selected from the scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith and other world religions.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of National Reconciliation Week, which has been supported since its inception by the Australian Bahá'í community.

Bahá'í cemetery opens



Laird Varzaly represented the Bahá'í Council for South Australia at the official opening of the "Garden of Eternity"

South Australia's first cemetery space dedicated to followers of the Bahá'í Faith has been opened at Centennial Park cemetery in Adelaide.

Known as the "Garden of Eternity", the new area was officially opened in May.

"The opening of this new area reflects the needs of South Australia's growing Bahá'í community", said Bryan Elliott, CEO of Centennial Park, speaking at the opening. "With the opening of the Garden of Eternity, I hope that the needs of your growing community can be met well into the future".

Bahá'í burial law is based on the belief that the body should be allowed to gradually return to the elements of nature, following the release of the soul to the next world. It stipulates burial of

the body as soon as possible, preferably not more than one hour's distance from the place of death.

While there is no objection to burial in general cemetery space, the introduction of a designated area will make it easier to comply with certain burial requirements, such as the preferred direction of the grave.

The opening took on added poignancy for Bahá'ís from Iran, where Bahá'í cemeteries have been desecrated in the 25 years since the 1979 revolution. Bahá'ís in Iran are permitted to bury their dead only in designated areas of wasteland, and are not allowed to mark the graves of their loved ones.

The Bahá'í Faith has been present in South Australia since the 1920s.

Commonwealth Games bring religions together

The Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games brought together athletes representing the diverse nations of the Commonwealth - and also its diverse religions.

Victorian Bahá'ís Niloufar Nia and Ladan Wise were among 43 volunteers from seven faiths who worked together at the Religious Services Centre in the Athletes Village to help support worshippers from all faiths.

The Centre provided prayer rooms for Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim use, with the Christian area available for Jewish worship and the Hindu area available to those of the Sikh and Bahá'í Faiths.

The Bahá'í volunteers conducted several devotional services during the Games, at which

athletes and officials from all religious backgrounds were welcome to participate in a program of readings from the Scriptures of the world's religions.

They were particularly delighted to welcome Bahá'í members from a number of Games teams, including a coach from the Gambian boxing team, and a table tennis player from the Seychelles.

"Volunteering at the Religious Services Centre was such a rewarding and interesting experience", commented Ms Nia.

"It was a wonderful demonstration of the unity of faiths in action".



Bahá'í volunteer Ladan Wise at the Commonwealth Games Religious Services Centre

Devotional gatherings relieve student stress

Bahá'í-style devotional gatherings have proven effective in helping relieve stress among students at Balwyn High, a state school in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne.

The gatherings were originally suggested by Pari Khoshmashrab, a parent of students at the school, in response to efforts by members of the teaching staff to find ways to alleviate high levels of stress among senior students. They have been held regularly for the past three years.

While the weekly "Soul Food" sessions are open to all students, experience has shown that senior students gain the most benefit.

A quiet place

Soul Food features a wide range of spiritual readings and music, in a beautiful candle-lit setting.

"It is a great place to get away from it all", said one of the regular student participants, Tara Massoud. "It's important especially in VCE [the Victorian year 12] to find the quiet place in yourself, away from the stress".

"The ambience is really amazing", said another regular, Helen Lambroglou. "Everything is so calm and relaxing, allowing you to be in your own place".

The readings for the program are taken from many sources, including the Torah, New Testament, Qur'an, Buddhist scriptures, and the

Bahá'í writings. Soft instrumental music may alternate with bird sounds, ocean and jungle echoes.

The school's chaplain, Jim Vaughn, has been very supportive of the program, expressing his appreciation in an open letter.

"Each week they have offered a quality service that has been enjoyed and appreciated by those who have participated", he wrote.

Based on the experience gained at Balwyn High, a similar initiative is now taking place at nearby Viewbank Secondary College.

Students meditate at a Soul Food lunchtime gathering



Publisher breaks new ground



Tahirih Bazyar with her daughter, Adia

Like many new parents, Tahirih Bazyar often lamented the lack of good quality books that presented spiritual teachings in a way that was appropriate and appealing to young children.

Unlike most of us, however, she has gone on to do something about it.

The result is Adia Publications, a small Brisbane-based publisher specializing in books on spirituality for children of all faith traditions, as well as books on the Bahá'í Faith for children and youth.

Ms Bazyar, a trained primary school teacher and mother of two, conceptualizes and writes most of the books herself, working with illustrators to ensure that the resulting publications are visually attractive to young readers and pre-readers.

"We try to make our books positive and uplifting", she said. "The content has to be relevant to the lives and experiences of children so that they can relate to the story".

"Where possible, we aim to be inclusive of all faiths and religious backgrounds. At the same time, our books try to entice children to think about their true purpose in life, which is spiritual, not just material".

Adia's list of publications is expanding at the rate of several new titles each year. They range from

picture story books introducing the concept of God, to introductory books about the Bahá'í Faith suitable for the classroom, to "Prayers for Peacemakers", a small children's prayer book, illustrated by children, containing short prayers from a number of religious traditions.

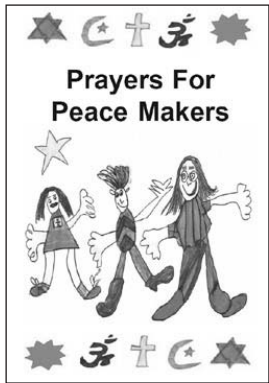
Her books have quickly become popular among teachers of Bahá'í children's classes, where they are helping to meet the growing need for a diverse range of age-appropriate materials.

A distinctive feature of Adia Publications (the business is named after Ms Bazyar's daughter) is its commitment to reinvest a portion of its profits into the production of low-cost translations for the Pacific region, especially Tongan, Samoan, and Papua New Guinea pidgin.

"My experience teaching at the Ocean of Light International Schools in Tonga made me realize that many Pacific people don't have access, in their own languages, to the kind of resources that we in Australia take for granted", said Ms Bazyar.

"Australia is a country rich in resources and opportunities, and we should reach out to our neighbours in the Pacific and help them in whatever way we can".

Adia Publications can be found on-line at www.adiapublications.com



Bahá'í-inspired pre-school flourishes

The Olinga Montessori Education Centre, a Bahá'í-inspired pre-school in Perth, has entered its third year of operation.

Located at Beechboro, a north eastern suburb of Perth, the Centre adopts the Montessori approach to early childhood education, which it considers to be consistent with Bahá'í principles.

"The program is underpinned by a strong emphasis on encouraging virtues in the children such as courtesy, generosity, respect and truthfulness", explained principal Mashid Jones.

"A virtues-based activity is planned on a daily basis, using drama, story, games or craft, in order to reinforce the children's understanding and practice of the virtues".

The Centre is now registered with the WA Department of Education and Training as a pre-compulsory school, enabling it to offer kindergarten and pre-primary programs.

"We are reassured by the enthusiasm of the parents, who bring their children from long distances, and ask when the Centre will be able to offer their children primary education", said Ms Jones.

The Centre is a project of the Olinga Academy for Rural Development, a non-profit organisation formed by a group of West Australian Bahá'ís, which aims to promote social and economic development through the provision of educational programs and development projects.



Staff members Karen Yazdani, Rachel Parker-Roohi and Rawhia Yazdani at the Olinga Montessori Education Centre

Promoting harmony

Bahá'í communities in all parts of Australia engaged in activities to promote understanding and harmony on National Harmony Day on 21 March.

Since Harmony Day falls on Naw Ruz, celebrated by Bahá'ís as the New Year, Bahá'ís in many areas have come up with innovative ways to combine the two occasions.

Interfaith celebration

In Perth, the Bahá'í community of Western Australia hosted a Harmony Day Interfaith Celebration and award ceremony in the ballroom of Government House. Following a traditional welcome by Dr Noel Nannup, an Elder of the Nyoongar community, the program brought together speakers from the Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim communities.

Each religious community had been invited to nominate three people who had served their community and the wider community with distinction in the respective categories of Youth, General Humanitarian, and Service. The awards recognised individuals whose work had helped to create harmony and unity within and between communities.

Members of the Darwin and Palmerston Bahá'í communities marked Naw Ruz and Harmony Day with a Bahá'í Expo held at the Darwin Entertainment Centre's Exhibition Gallery on 21 March.

Featuring posters, banners, artworks, literature and DVDs collected from around Australia and overseas, the one-day Expo was visited by two classes of high school students, as well as other invited guests and passers-by.

The Bahá'í community of Pine Rivers, in Southern Queensland, marked Harmony Day with its sixth annual multi-faith prayer service, held at the Millennium Peace Garden. The service included Anglican, Bahá'í, Catholic, Muslim, and Zoroastrian readers. Following the service, students from six local schools were presented with "Peace Ambassador" certificates, acknowledging their role as peace-builders in their school communities.

In Newcastle, New South Wales, Bahá'í representatives participated in a multi-faith gathering in celebration of the autumnal

Equinox and Harmony Day on 18 March. Hosted at Nobbys Lighthouse by the Multifaith Association of Newcastle and the Hunter Region, this annual function draws on the conjunction of many religious festivals throughout the world with the Equinox.

Members of the Bahá'í community of the ACT joined representatives of other organisations to launch the University of Canberra Annual Harmony Festival with a program of music, dance, prayer, talks and displays on the theme "many flowers, one garden". The ACT Bahá'í community was presented with a Harmony Day award for "modelling the values of harmony in their own activities as well as giving support and encouragement to University of Canberra Harmony."

An evening of celebration for Harmony Day was hosted by the Bahá'í community of Unley, South Australia, on 25 March with the support of a grant from the Unley City Council. More than one hundred guests enjoyed an evening featuring Australian folk music, Chinese, Greek and Aboriginal dance, displays, food and other cultural performances.

Prime Minister's Naw Ruz message

The Prime Minister, John Howard, conveyed a message to the Bahá'í community for Naw Ruz 2006. The message reads:

It gives me great pleasure to provide a message on the occasion of the Bahá'í New Year (Naw Ruz) in 2006.

The beginning of a new year is a time for us to take stock of the things that are important to us and to look forward to the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Through social, educational and spiritual initiatives, the Bahá'í community in Australia demonstrates the great value of a community which works together to promote the well-being of its own members and also reaches out to promote understanding in the wider community. The Bahá'í community in Australia is strong and vibrant and is an important part of our diverse society.

The Australian Government is firmly committed to a modern and diverse Australia in which all people have the freedom to express and share their religious beliefs and to be active and equal participants in our society.

I send my best wishes to everyone participating in the celebrations during Naw Ruz. John Howard



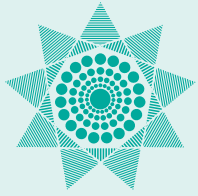
Rabbi DYA Freilich, Chief Rabbi of the Perth Hebrew Congregation, accepts an award on behalf of Dr Norm Hoffman at the Harmony Day Interfaith Celebration



Darwin school students visit the Bahá'í Expo



Canberra Bahá'ís Nabet Sedghi, Shephalie Williams and John Bruha receive Harmony Day awards



is a newsletter
published by the
Australian Bahá'í
community.

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Upholding freedom of religion

The right to freedom of religion or belief is "one of the most contested and pressing human rights of our time".

This is the view of a new statement issued by the Bahá'í International Community, titled "Freedom to Believe: Upholding the Standard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights".

Published on the eve of the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, the statement points out that the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion was enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

"The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to change them is central to human development as it makes possible the individual's search for meaning", the statement says. But widespread violations of this right, most often targeting women and minorities, continue.

The statement identifies four critical yet neglected issues: the right to change one's religion or beliefs; the right to share one's beliefs with others; the responsibilities of the international community and national governments towards marginalised religious minorities; and the responsibilities of religious leaders to promote and protect the right to freedom of religion or belief.

It offers a series of recommendations to the United Nations, stemming from the unequivocal affirmation of an individual's right to change his or her religion under international law. The recommendations include the publication of an annual world report assessing the state of freedom of religion throughout the world; the adoption of measures to address religious extremism; and strengthening of the role of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion.

Religious leaders must accept responsibility

The statement acknowledges that governments, as the signatories to the Universal Declaration, bear primary responsibility to ensure that their citizens can enjoy this fundamental right. This should include forceful sanction and condemnation for those who incite violence,

extremism or hostility in the name of religion, and the peaceful accommodation and embrace of religious and cultural pluralism.

But the religious leaders of the world must also accept responsibility for upholding the principles of freedom of religion or belief, the statement says.

"In a world harassed by violence and conflict in the name of religion, leaders of religious communities bear tremendous responsibility for guiding their followers towards a peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding with those who think and believe differently", it says.

"The role of religious leaders as partners - in word and deed - in the creation of a culture of respect for human dignity and freedom of conscience, religion, or belief cannot be overstated".

The statement calls upon every person of faith to examine his or her scriptures for spiritual principles that will help to answer the difficult challenges facing the world today. It describes this process as a "common undertaking, based on an understanding of the inherent dignity, reason and conscience of every human being", in which individuals must be accorded the freedom to search for truth.

"The human mind, endowed with reason and conscience, must be free to search for truth and to believe", the statement concludes.

The full text of the statement can be found online at www.bic-un.bahai.org



Students and staff representing Indigenous, Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and Sikh faiths came together for the launch of the inaugural Inter-faith Calendar for the University of Western Australia in March.