

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter
of the
Australian
Bahá'í
community

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Walking the path of reconciliation together

Reconciliation is a journey on which we should all travel as friends, according to Priscilla Orchid-Wightman, a Yulaaray-Gameroi woman from Lismore in northern New South Wales.

Despite suffering the trauma of being removed permanently from her parents by the authorities at the age of two, Ms Orchid-Wightman said that she has forgiven those responsible "because you have to forgive to grow".

"But I never forget the struggle we have gone through," she said.

Ms Orchid-Wightman never saw her parents again following her removal. By the time she traced her family as an adult, they had already passed away.

Ms Orchid-Wightman said that after the apology of the Federal Parliament to the Stolen Generations in February, she felt a weight had been lifted from her.

"For me it meant a beginning, a first step," she said of the apology, which she witnessed from the public gallery of Parliament House.

"I felt the presence of my parents and the generations before, and I went away feeling a lot lighter," she said.

Service for reconciliation

Ms Orchid-Wightman was speaking at a reception prior to the annual service for reconciliation at Sydney's Bahá'í House of Worship on 2 June, 2008.

Her son Richard, 13, read the initial prayer in the service. The service program included readings from the Scriptures of the world's major religions.

Ms Orchid-Wightman's brother, Jeffrey Samuels, artist and co-founder of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative in Leichhardt, also accompanied her and spoke about the traumatic history of Aboriginal Australians.

The reception also included a presentation by Judith Light, who has been coordinator of Lismore People for Reconciliation for the past 10 years.



Left to right: Priscilla Orchid-Wightman, Jeffrey Samuels, Judith Light and Uncle Max Eulo

"The reconciliation struggle comes down to our one-on-one personal relationships," Ms Light said.

"It's about standing with our brothers and sisters and validating the truth," she said.

"Truth has to come out, and there can be no healing until that happens."

Quoting from the Bahá'í Writings, Ms Light said she believes all people are "leaves of one tree, flowers in one garden, and drops in one ocean."

"Racism raises its head the moment we talk about 'they' and create an other," said Ms Light, who is a Bahá'í.

"Reconciliation is not something that will happen through an institutional arrangement. The core of reconciliation is friendship and love," she said.

Ms Light cited Lismore's Voices Together Choir, which she coordinates, as an example of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people coming together in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.

She said the choir had sung at 53 events since it was formed in 2000. This year it will lead the Lismore Lantern Parade on 21 June.

Following the service, Budjedi elder Uncle Max Eulo performed a traditional smoke ceremony as a blessing for the Temple grounds.

Bahá'í New Year



Bahá'ís around Australia celebrated the Bahá'í New Year festival on 21 March.

Known as Naw Ruz ("New Day"), the festival comes at the end of a 19-day fast in which adult Bahá'ís abstain from food and drink between sunrise and sunset.

The fast is a reminder of the need for individuals to be detached from their material desires.

Gold Coast Bahá'ís marked the New Year with a musical celebration and dinner.

The performers included Chinese, Colombian, Indian, Indigenous, and Pacific Islander groups as well as a professional pop singer.

Held in the Gold Coast International Hotel, the event was one of many multicultural celebrations held in Bahá'í communities throughout Australia and the world.

Naw Ruz is the first day of the first of 19 months in the Bahá'í calendar.

The ancient Persian Naw Ruz festival occurs on the same day.

The Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, issued the following message to the Australian Bahá'í Community to mark Bahá'í New Year.

It gives me great pleasure to provide my best wishes to the Australian Bahá'í Community and to all those celebrating Bahá'í New Year (Naw Ruz).

Bahá'í followers come from all cultural backgrounds and there are some 400 communities across Australia which highlights the very best aspects of our diverse and tolerant society. As the community marks the incoming year, I hope that it will be a prosperous time for all: a time for new beginnings, great joy and celebration and also a time for family and friends.

The commitment of all Australians to a nation united by tolerance, mutual respect and care for others continues to support and strengthen this country. The contribution of the Australian Bahá'í community to these principles is greatly appreciated.

I send my best wishes to all those celebrating Naw Ruz and hope for peace and prosperity in the New Year.

*The Honourable Kevin Rudd MP
Prime Minister of Australia*

Promoting sustainable development



Maryam Bell

The experience of living and working in such diverse countries as Cambodia, Israel, Madagascar and Vanuatu has equipped Maryam Bell for her new role promoting the Bahá'í approach to sustainable development and global prosperity.

Ms Bell has been appointed as a new Government Relations Officer for the Australian Bahá'í Community.

Based at the Bahá'í Centre in Canberra, her part-time role will involve working with government and non-government organisations to promote approaches that place building the full human capacity of individuals at the centre of the development process.

In 2004, Ms Bell worked in Cambodia as an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development under the auspices of AusAid.

She has also undertaken community development work in Madagascar, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Israel, where she served for four

years as a volunteer at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa.

More recently Ms Bell has observed the development of policy at the international level, working from 2006-2008 as the Aide to the Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations in New York.

"Working together with people in many parts of the world and in diverse situations has convinced me that the oneness of humanity must be at the core of pursuing development and that human empowerment is key to global prosperity," Ms Bell said.

"Our future is common and interconnected, and we can each be a source of social good.

"I think we have both an imperative and an opportunity to contribute positively to the betterment of the world," she said.

Ms Bell can be contacted on (02) 6287 2028 or email maryam.bell@bnc.bahai.org.au.

Delegates elect governing body

Bahá'ís from throughout Australia elected their national governing council at the Bahá'í National Convention held in Sydney in May.

More than 90 delegates from throughout Australia cast their secret ballots in the annual election of the nine-member National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia.

The election, like all Bahá'í ballots, involved no nominations or campaigning. All Australian adult Bahá'ís, women and men, were eligible for election.

Those elected to the National Spiritual Assembly are: Ms Arini Beaumaris, Mrs Fiona McDonald, Professor Fariborz Moshirian, Dr Golshah Naghdy, Ms Kath Podger, Dr Vahid Saberi, Professor Bijan Samali, Ms Tessa Scrine, and Mr John Walker.

Eight of the nine members served on the previous National Spiritual Assembly. The new member is Ms Beaumaris, an educator from the Gold Coast.

The office-bearers of the National Assembly remain the same. Dr Golshah Naghdy is the Chairperson, Mr John Walker is the Secretary, and Professor Bijan Samali is the Treasurer.

The convention paid tribute to the "outstanding and devoted service" of Dr Marjorie Tidman who had resigned due to ill health after being a

member of the National Spiritual Assembly since she was first elected in 1996.

Plenary sessions focussed on the current systematic, grassroots process of community-building - focused on training, learning and service - that is being carried out by the Bahá'ís of Australia.

There was discussion on the four core activities of children's classes, devotional meetings, study circles, and programs for young teens.

International Convention

The convention also received a report from members of the National Spiritual Assembly who participated as delegates to the international convention at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel from 29 April to 2 May.

Golshah Naghdy said the event was one of "physical and spiritual beauty blended with love, dignity, order, gracious simplicity and reverence".

"People came from every corner of the planet with a unified vision, aspirations and goals," Dr Naghdy said.



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

Holiest festival celebrated

The most holy festival of the Bahá'í Faith received significant media attention this year, being the subject of two programs on ABC Radio National.

"The Spirit of Things" recorded a program about the festival of Ridvan at Sydney's Bahá'í House of Worship in April.

Presenter Rachael Kohn interviewed the National Secretary of the Australian Bahá'í Community, Mr John Walker, about the festival, which marks the 12-day period in which Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, first announced His mission to His followers in the Garden of Ridvan in Baghdad.

Sydney Bahá'í Carmen Lalezari spoke about her experience celebrating the Ridvan festival with Bahá'í communities in Iran, the United

States, the Cook Islands and Australia.

The program also reported on the Sikh new year festival of Vaisakhi.

An episode of "The Rhythm Divine", a sacred music program broadcast in the same week, also focussed on the Bahá'í and Sikh faiths.

Bahá'ís around Australia marked the Ridvan festival with gatherings for prayer and celebration.

For example in Whittlesea, Melbourne, more than 100 guests attended the Bahá'í community's annual Ridvan celebration at Mill Park Library.

A rose was presented to each guest, recalling the roses that bloomed in the Garden of Ridvan at the time of Bahá'u'lláh.



Carmen Lalezari and John Walker spoke to "The Spirit of Things" about the Festival of Ridvan.

Picture supplied by ABC Library Sales

Ideas for the future

*The persistence
of extreme
poverty and
extreme wealth
is a product
of a poverty of
the spirit...*

*The eradication
of poverty will
require a
fundamental
paradigm shift...
to allow
a new sense
of global
solidarity and
responsibility
to emerge*

The Australian Bahá'í Community made submissions to the Australia 2020 Summit held in Canberra in April, addressing six of the Summit's key themes.

Investing in education

In its submission on "The productivity agenda", the Community said investment in education was the key to our well-being and prosperity.

It called for a comprehensive approach to education "geared towards shaping not just good workers, but exemplary world citizens".

Noting the decline in the perceived value of teaching as a profession around the world, the submission advocated a broad-based community education program to restore teaching to its rightful status.

World citizenship

On the theme of "Population, sustainability, climate change and water", the Bahá'í Community proposed a program of education on the global ethic of world citizenship.

It said the financial, technical, human and moral resources required to tackle climate change would only be released when peoples and governments accept a shared and connected sense of responsibility for the fate of the planet and the well-being of the entire human family.

Equality

In relation to "Strengthening communities and supporting working families", the Bahá'í Community said that particular attention should be directed to measures that help parents to devote time and energy to raising their children.

The issues associated with balancing work and family responsibilities could not be fully addressed without tackling the challenge of equality between women and men, the Community said.

"To be effectively addressed, this challenge must no longer be seen as a 'women's issue,' but as a human issue with profound ramifications in our families and our workplaces," it said.

Addressing racism

In its submission on "Options for the future of Indigenous Australia", the Bahá'í Community identified racism as the most fundamental barrier that had continued to retard full national reconciliation.

It advocated a national program of education, emphasising the oneness of humanity, tolerance, appreciation for cultures other than one's own, and respect for differences.

The Community also said that particular attention must be paid to the individual right to gainful employment.

"Meaningful work is valuable not only for the financial reward that it brings, but because it is a basic need of the human soul, as important to the proper development of the individual as food and shelter are to the body," it said.

Ending partisanship

Addressing the theme of "The future of Australian governance", the Bahá'í Community expressed grave concern at "the ideology of partisanship" that had become "mired in cynicism, apathy and corruption".

It advocated the adoption of electoral procedures that would gradually set aside partisanship in favour of an emphasis on the personal capacity and integrity of individual candidates.

Global solidarity

On the theme of "Australia's future in the region and the world", the Bahá'í Community pointed to the increasingly apparent interconnectedness of development, security and human rights on a global scale.

It said the increasing disparity between rich and poor and the rising tide of religious extremism were key threats to security, peace and stability.

Both were products of "a poverty of the spirit" that could only be redressed by a fundamental paradigm shift on the part of nations and individuals to allow a new sense of global solidarity and responsibility to emerge, the Community said.

Submissions to the Summit are available on its Web site at www.australia2020.gov.au.

Australian Bahá'ís represented at UN

Melbourne Bahá'í Azita Sobhani represented the Australian Bahá'í Community at the 52nd session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York from 25 February-7 March 2008.

It was the second year Ms Sobhani had attended the Commission. This year the Bahá'í delegation included some 40 individuals from more than 15 countries.

The priority theme of the Commission was financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

"This year's theme was subtle but very challenging," said Ms Sobhani.

"It really brought home how deeply our institutions need to change in order to foster true equality between women and men," she said.

Since returning to Australia, Ms Sobhani has been active in sharing her experiences from the Commission and promoting its aims.

In April, Ms Sobhani was one of three Bahá'í participants in a national roundtable to discuss the outcomes of the Commission.

The roundtable was attended by government officials, academics and representatives of non-government organisations (NGOs), most of whom had attended the Commission. It was held at the Bahá'í Centre in Canberra.

The roundtable identified key priorities for action and strategies for the Australian women's sector to follow up the Commission.

At its conclusion, the NGOs decided to conduct a collective case study based on social inclusion policy to take forward key issues raised in the Commission's agreed conclusions.

Ms Sobhani also participated in a panel discussion hosted by the Victorian Office of the Australian Bahá'í Community on 29 May in the Melbourne City Library.

Professor Margaret Alston, an NGO Representative on the Australian Government delegation to the Commission, and Carole Shaw, a representative of the International Women's Development Agency and Asia Pacific Women's Watch, also participated in the panel.



Azita Sobhani (right) at the CSW roundtable with Ros Strong, President of UNIFEM Australia (left), and Leonie Ruth Ackland, UNIFEM Australia delegate to the CSW (centre)]

More than an equal

A 97-year-old World Masters swimming champion affirmed her belief in the equality of women and men when she addressed a reception in the grounds of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney.

"Bahá'ís come from all backgrounds, but we all believe in the equality of men and women," Margo Bates OAM told a capacity audience attending a reception on 9 March to mark International Women's Day.

But Mrs Bates has proven more than equal for her competitors when it comes to races in the swimming pool.

She is the current holder of 15 national swimming records and one world record. In 2007 she became the first woman in the 95-99 year-old age group to swim 200 metres backstroke in an Australian competition.

A member of the Bahá'í Faith for nearly 50 years, Mrs Bates attributed her remarkable

achievements to the power of the mind, which she described as "the greatest power of all".

"You have the power of the mind to be what you want to be," she told the capacity audience.

"Anyone could do what I have done."

Mrs Bates, who lives in Adelaide, said she first dipped her toe in a swimming pool at the age of 87.

Since then she has set 14 world records and won 181 gold medals.

Mrs Bates said that mental and physical activity was the secret to her longevity and health.

"I could have one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel," she said.

"But if someone says shall we go out, I go."



Masters swimming champion Margo Bates

News service now on email



Fariborz Rameshfar from Atherton was recently profiled by the Australian Bahá'í News Service

It's now possible to receive news stories about the Australian Bahá'í Community direct to your in-box.

The Australian Bahá'í News Service publishes regular on-line articles and profiles reflecting the activities and concerns of Australian Bahá'ís. The service appears on the home page of the national Bahá'í Web site, www.bahai.org.au.

Readers can now subscribe to receive news stories by email at the same time as they are posted on-line.

Recent stories have covered the participation of Australian Bahá'ís in the International Bahá'í Convention, the Bahá'í fasting month and New Year, a profile of a Bahá'í living in Atherton in far north Queensland, and latest reports of the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.

To subscribe, please visit www.bahai.org.au/subscribe

Awards for promoting harmony



Nasser Sedghi receives his award from Barbara Perry, NSW Minister Assisting the Premier on Citizenship

Three Bahá'ís have received government awards for their work promoting multicultural understanding and harmony.

Aiden Mitchell and Joseph Gordon of Palmerston, Northern Territory, were among the four recipients of the 2008 Charles See Kee Awards, the premier multicultural awards in the Territory.

The awards recognise individuals, organisations and initiatives that have made an outstanding contribution to advancing multiculturalism and counteracting racism in the Territory.

Mr Mitchell, 18, was the winner of the individual (under 25) category for his participation in a broad range of community events and activities as well as his community service work.

Mr Gordon received the award for the Initiative category. He was the coordinator of the "Harmony Wall" project in which hundreds of volunteers created a large mural depicting the life and spirit of the city of Palmerston.

"The NT Government established the Charles See Kee Awards to recognise the tireless efforts by people in our community to promote harmony," said Matthew Bonson, NT Minister Assisting the Chief Minister on Multicultural Affairs, who presented the awards at the NT Parliament House in Darwin to mark Harmony Day.

Unity in diversity

Meanwhile in New South Wales, Dubbo Bahá'í Nasser Sedghi received the annual Community Service Award presented by the Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW.

Mr Sedghi is well known as a driving force behind Dubbo's annual Multicultural Festival. He was selected from more than 150 nominees across the State.

Speaking at the award ceremony held at the NSW Parliament House in March, Mr Sedghi said: "I am very grateful to the Dubbo Bahá'í Community for its continuous support and assistance.

"I sincerely dedicate and share this award with the people of Dubbo for their support and tolerance, and the opportunity given to me to work towards promotion of a harmonious community and unity in diversity," he said.



Aiden Mitchell (second from left) and Joseph Gordon (third from left) with fellow award recipients Kenneth Kadigamar (left) and Imam Adama Konda (right)

Choir creates musical and spiritual harmony

The New Era Bahá'í choir contributed to the interfaith atmosphere when it performed at an event in Perth celebrating the birthday of Buddha in April.

Comprised of people from various backgrounds and ages, New Era performed songs that reached out to the more noble sentiments of the audience.

When the choir's founder and musical director Greg Parker introduced *My Sweet Lord*, he described the song as one "written by a Hindu (George Harrison) and sung by a Bahá'í choir at a Buddhist celebration."

The 1000-strong audience of people of many faiths and denominations later took up Mr Parker's invitation to join with the choir in singing *All You Need is Love*.



The New Era Bahá'í choir performing at the celebration of the birthday of Buddha

The annual festival is the biggest event on the calendar for the Buddhist community in Perth and is popular with the wider community.

The organizers, the Buddha Light International Association and the Fo Guang Shan Temple of Western Australia, invited the Bahá'ís to participate in the event.

Tranquillity Zone proves popular

By candlelight, Cyndi Lauper exhorted the gathering to show their true colours. Then, as a Bach concerto played, words from the Bible were read: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."

Later, a Mozart concerto serenely accompanied words of Bahá'u'lláh: "As the sun is to the body of a man so is the Sun of Truth to his soul."

The occasion was the monthly Tranquillity Zone at the home of Keith and Fiona McDonald in East Fremantle, Western Australia. Sixteen people sat in the living room for the half-hour devotional program of sacred readings, mixed with quotations from contemporary thinkers. Music and candles added to the spiritual atmosphere, and refreshments were served afterwards.

Each month the readings are on a different theme. So far this year the McDonalds have chosen love, friendship and beauty as themes. In May the theme was truth.

"Many people claim to have found the truth, in other words to have found God," said Mr McDonald. "Others claim there's more than one truth, and as many again reject the idea of truth altogether.

"As Bahá'ís we believe it is the same truth that animates Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and the other world religions."

The readings always generate discussion afterwards, and everyone is given a copy of the readings to keep.

"We've been holding monthly Tranquillity Zones for six years now," Mrs McDonald said.

"Strong friendships have formed through these events and every month we get up to 20 people crowded into our living room."

The McDonalds promote the Tranquillity Zones among their friends by word of mouth or by email.

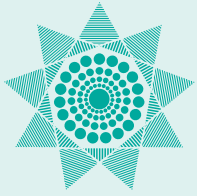
"People find these Tranquillity Zones both relaxing and stimulating," Mrs McDonald said.

"Friends often comment on how much they enjoy them. One told us that we are providing a wonderful service and he looks forward to the event every month."

Bahá'í Tranquillity Zones, also known as devotional gatherings or "Soul Food", are held in all parts of the country. Further information can be obtained from the national Bahá'í Web site www.bahai.org.au.



Fiona McDonald (right) with guests at the Tranquillity Zone



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Arrests in Iran

Seven Bahá'í leaders have been arrested and are being held incommunicado in Iran.

Six of the seven members of the national-level group that helped see to the minimum needs of Bahá'ís in Iran were arbitrarily arrested in Tehran following searches of their homes in the early hours of 14 May, 2008. The seventh member has been in detention since early March.

As of early June, the families of those arrested had not seen them, and it was not known where they were being held.

The Bahá'í Faith is the biggest religious minority in Iran, where its followers have been systematically persecuted since the revolution of 1979.

The early-morning raids were ominously similar to events in the 1980s when scores of Iranian Bahá'í leaders were summarily rounded up and killed.

A statement by the Australian Government expressing its concern at the arrests has been welcomed by the Australian Bahá'í Community.

The statement said that the Government had raised its concerns about the treatment of the Iranian Bahá'ís with the Iranian Government and would "monitor the situation closely".

"We are very concerned by news that six Baha'í leaders were arrested in Iran on 14 May 2008 and that the seventh member of the group,

Mrs. Mahvash Sabit, has been in the custody of the Ministry of Intelligence since 5 March 2008," a spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said in the statement.

"We are deeply concerned by the continuing discrimination and harassment of the Iranian Baha'is on the grounds of their religion - all persons have the right to adopt and practise a religion of their own choice," the spokesperson said.

A spokesperson for the Australian Bahá'í Community, Tessa Scrine, said it greatly appreciated Australia's ongoing efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief and to encourage Iran to abide by its international human rights obligations.



The seven Bahá'í leaders arrested in Iran
Standing: Fariba Kamalabadi, Vahid Tizfahm, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, and Mahvash Sabet.
Seated: Behrouz Tavakkoli and Saeid Rezaie

Convention held in Vietnam

The Vietnamese Bahá'í community has held the first national Bahá'í convention in Vietnam since unification of the country in 1975.

The event was held in March 2008 with the approval of the Government of Vietnam, which sent representatives to observe the occasion. Other officials from central, provincial and district governments were also present.

The highlight of the convention was the election of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Vietnam.

For the Bahá'ís of Vietnam, restoration of their National Spiritual Assembly is a key achievement in the process to gain official

recognition. A major step was taken a year ago when authorities issued a certificate recognizing Bahá'í activities.

A Sydney Bahá'í has family links to the new National Assembly of Vietnam.

Tahirih Hong Le is the daughter of Loc Le, who was elected in March as one of the nine members of the governing body.

In the 1960s and until 1975, Mr Le served terms as chairman and secretary of the National Assembly.

A finance manager with a Sydney firm, Mrs Le visited her parents in Vietnam recently and shared in the excitement of the milestone reached.