

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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Governor opens Sydney Bahá'í Centre

The Governor of New South Wales, Professor Marie Bashir, officially opened a new Sydney Bahá'í Centre on 17 October 2003.

Located in Silverwater in the city's west, the centre will be used for spiritual education, devotional meetings, conferences and cultural activities. It also houses the offices of the Bahá'í Council for New South Wales and ACT.

Professor Bashir described the Bahá'ís as an "admirable community" who aspire to work assiduously to bring peace, prosperity and advancement to individuals and communities, promoting universal education and equality of men and women.

Reflecting on the problems facing the world today, the Governor observed that "the philosophy and soaring ideals of Bahá'í are needed more than ever, to reach out across the lines which divide, which create barriers between religions whose commonalities are greater than their differences".

"Bahá'í offers a way forward, with its genuine inclusiveness and unflagging optimism", she said.

"The wonderful concepts of the Bahá'í principles are worthy of expression across the airwaves of the world every day".

Traditional welcome

The Governor's remarks followed a welcome to the land by Darug tribal elder Mrs Edna Watson and her granddaughter, Crystal.

A message of congratulations from NSW Premier Bob Carr was conveyed by his representative, Auburn State MP Barbara Perry. She praised the Bahá'ís for their promotion of human rights, Aboriginal reconciliation, moral education, global prosperity and the advancement of women.

The opening ceremony also featured a performance on the santour by Mr Jamal Fanaian and dance performance by the Bahá'í Pacific Islander Cultural Group.



According to the Bahá'í Council for NSW and ACT, its vision for the building is of "a centre of excellence for spiritual and moral education, where all people of good will may explore together a common spiritual heritage, and where we may discover ways to build bridges of faith and understanding across the racial, ethnic and religious barriers which still stand in our society".

Its facilities will be available to the whole community.

The Sydney Bahá'í Centre is located at 107 Derby Street, Silverwater.

The Baha'í Council can be contacted on (02) 9748 1297 or email secretariat@nsw.bahai.org.au

Conference on Indigenous knowledge



Conference logo painted by John Hunter

A conference on "Indigenous Knowledge and Bioprospecting" will be held at Macquarie University in Sydney from 21-24 April 2004.

Indigenous knowledge and culture has an important place in the development of world civilisation that has often been underestimated. For example, it is estimated that approximately 25% of the world's pharmaceutical products have a significant degree of origin in Indigenous communities.

Marking the close of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, this conference will bring together Indigenous people, scientists and lawmakers to consult about a wide range of issues including intellectual property rights, preserving and resurrecting cultural knowledge, engagement between western scientific methodology and Indigenous knowledge systems, and the

inextricable link between Indigenous culture and biodiversity.

The conference is being co-hosted by the Association for Bahá'í Studies and several university centres and departments, including the Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies, Centre for Environmental Law, Department of Health and Chiropractic, Centre for Biodiversity and Bioresources, Biology Department, and Chemistry Department.

The conference will also feature a parallel children's conference on "Celebrating Indigenous knowledge".

Further information can be obtained from the conference website at http://laurel.ocs.mq.edu.au/~cjone005/index_conference.htm

Faiths unite for peace in Darwin



About 130 people attended an interfaith service held at Parliament House in Darwin to celebrate United Nations Day on 23 October 2003.

The service was opened by then Administrator of the Northern Territory, Mr John Anictomatis. He commended the celebration of diversity in the community, noting that from diversity

comes strength, and from that strength comes peace in the world.

Cherry Cubillo began the service warmly by welcoming all participants to the traditional lands of the Larrakia peoples.

Capturing the religious diversity of Darwin, the service included presentations by the Catholic Church, Uniting Church, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Northern Territory Council of Churches, St Vincent de Paul Society, the Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic Societies of the Northern Territory, the Sai Group and the Bahá'í Faith.

The Anti-Discrimination Commission, the Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory, Amnesty International and Dr Juan Federer, Visiting Fellow at Charles Darwin University, were among the other presenters.

Organised by the Bahá'í community of Darwin, the interfaith service has been held annually for more than ten years as a forum for religious communities in Darwin and the public to come together to share prayers and readings, and to offer messages of peace and goodwill.



Bahá'í Centre for Hobart approved

The plans for a new Tasmanian Bahá'í Centre of Learning have been approved by the Hobart City Council.

The development will feature a central, domed 300-seat auditorium, meeting rooms, classrooms and office facilities, all set in landscaped gardens. The dome will incorporate a star design that will light up at night and be visible on the city skyline.

Alderman Eva Ruzicka, chair of the Council's development and environmental services committee, praised the development as a departure from the bulk standard "cookie cutter" designs.

The Centre will be built on a prime city block next to the ABC broadcasting centre at the gateway to Hobart. It is located at the corner of Brooker Avenue and the Tasman Highway.

It will achieve a new benchmark in sustainable and energy-efficient design, with passive solar heating and solar power, and rainwater storage for maintenance of the gardens.

A gift to the city

Representatives of Tasmania's Bahá'í community described the development as a "gift" for the city. While the facilities will be used and managed by the Bahá'í community,



they will also be made available to community groups at a non-commercial fee.

The development is being funded by the Naveed Foundation, a non-profit foundation established in the memory of Hobart Bahá'í mother and son Soheila and Naveed Mirkazemi, who died in a horrific car accident in 2000.

Construction is expected to begin early in 2004 and to take about 12 months.

Further information and project updates can be found on the website of the Naveed Foundation at www.naveedfoundation.com

Memorial dedicated

A sandstone boulder sculpted in the shape of an unfolding rose has been dedicated as a permanent memorial to Shahab Kargarian, a Bahá'í teenager who was shot and killed by armed robbers at Sydney's Greenwich Point in October 2000.

The sculpture, which is now permanently located in Greenwich's Shell Park, the site of the shooting, is inscribed with a text from Bahá'í Scripture: "O Friend! In the garden of thy heart plant naught but the rose of love". It was chosen by Shahab's family to reflect their faith and hopes for the future.

Speaking at the dedication, the Mayor of Lane Cove, John May, said: "It's a fitting tribute to Shahab, and I hope the people of Greenwich will pass by it and remember him".



Study circles overcome isolation



Study circle participants at a rare face-to-face meeting demonstrate their telephone technique.

After a few years living in Katherine in the Northern Territory, Sue and David Podger were feeling the isolation experienced by many rural Bahá'ís. Apart from friends in Katherine, the nearest Bahá'ís were either 300 kilometres north in Darwin, or 1200 kilometres south in Alice Springs.

It was their friend, Maxien Bradley of Mt Isa, who thought of bringing a group of remote Bahá'ís together in a regular telephone study circle, with members connecting up once a week in a phone "daisy chain", an inexpensive means of telephone conferencing.

Study circles are an innovative approach to learning that can be found in Bahá'í communities throughout the world. Adopting a model originally developed by the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, South America, members come together to discuss a series of Scriptural extracts on a given theme, such as prayer and meditation, or life and death. But the idea of holding one on the telephone, linking participants separated by vast distances, was unique.

As the tutor of the study circle, Sue's main role was to keep the participants, who lived

in Mt Isa, Warwick, Longreach, Eumundi and Brisbane, focused on the material being discussed. It was very different from the traditional role of a religious instructor.

"Outback people are very independent and they need to learn by discovering things for themselves. I just have to keep them more or less on track", she explains.

"They love to sing or play a musical instrument, tell a story or recite a poem to illustrate the point they are making, so it can get quite lively. Also, I share their experience of coping with the difficulties of isolation and this is a bond that connects us."

The first study circle proved so successful that Sue now runs a second one, with members in Weipa, Collarenebri, Lightning Ridge and Finnegan's Creek, Forsayth.

Catalyst for service

Experience elsewhere has shown that study circles can create a new dynamic within the community.

Having experienced the participatory learning style of the courses, the members gradually take on a stronger commitment to

apply the knowledge and skills they are gaining to the work of the Bahá'í community. Members of the same study circle will often participate in service activities together.

The same has proven to be true with the telephone study circles, despite the sometimes huge distances separating the participants. When the Bahá'í community of Tom Price, in northern Western Australia, included a telephone member from Bridgetown, south of Perth, in their study circle, the bond became so strong that the Tom Price participants visited her en masse, making a 5000 kilometre round trip to help paint a town mural as a community project.

"Because the discussion touches on the more serious aspects of life, the participants get to know each other at a deep level", Sue explains.

"The very happy result is that they find much to love and respect in the stories and lives of their fellow participants.

"Mutual affection and solidarity builds up strongly, even though the only contact is via the human voice", she says. "Real communities can be built on this foundation, even (maybe especially) if they are virtual ones".

It is hoped that the telephone study circles can now extend into the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Hidden Words unveiled

Melbourne's popular Hidden Words - Bahá'í Books and Information Centre has re-opened in new premises at 351 Burwood Road, Hawthorn, opposite Hawthorn Town Hall.

Hidden Words offers Victoria's largest range of introductory material and Sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith. Visitors are welcome to browse through books on topics including personal and spiritual growth, comparative religion, children's education, family and relationships.

Hidden Words also provides a venue for a range of other activities, including a 30-minute Tranquillity Zone held every Sunday at 11.00 am. The Tranquillity Zone features music and readings from the Scriptures of the world's religions. Information sessions and study circles are also offered periodically.

The centre takes its name from The Hidden Words, a sacred text revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet of the Bahá'í Faith. It comprises 150 brief inspirational counsels and admonitions for spiritual life and growth, and is the source for many well-known Bahá'í sayings.

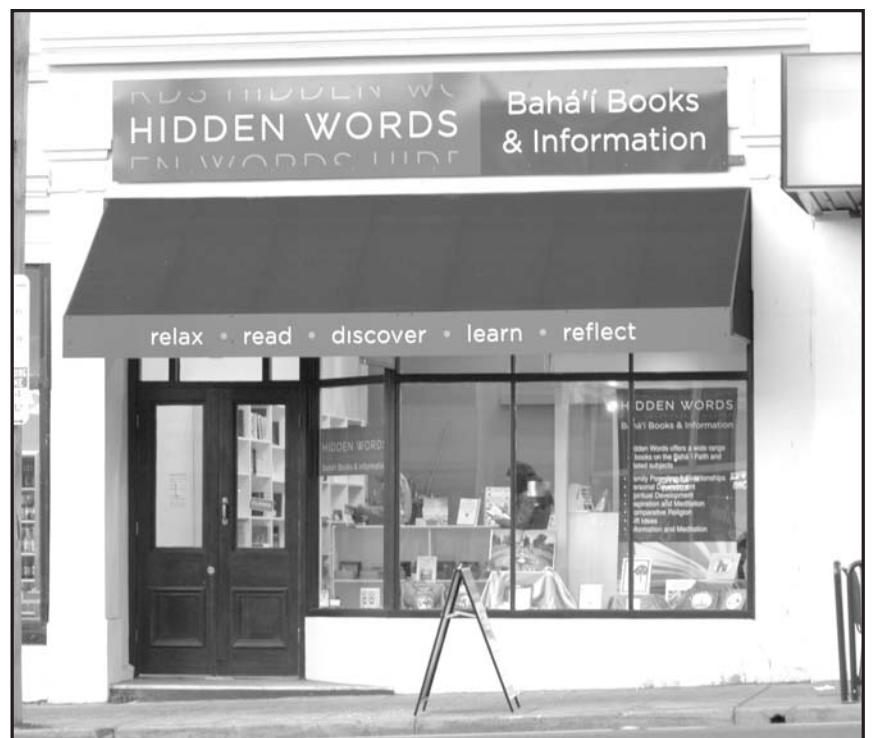
Hidden Words is open from Monday to Friday between 10.00 am and 6.00 pm, and on Saturday from 10.00 am to 4.00 pm.

Telephone (03) 9815 2020

O Son of Spirit!

My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting

The Hidden Words



Partnership for equality



Participants in "Equal Wings" gender equality workshop in Melbourne

Men and boys have a critical role to play in the establishment of gender equality, and this role requires far greater attention and action.

This is the view expressed by the Australian Bahá'í Community Office for Equality in its October 2003 submission for the Commission on the Status of Women 48th Session on the role of men and boys in gender equality.

Men have an "inescapable duty" to promote gender equality, which the submission describes as "a vital... spiritual and social principle, essential to human progress and the transformation of society".

More men can be engaged to work in this area by increasing their understanding of the benefits that gender equality will bring to them specifically, as well as to the world as a whole, the submission argues.

Importance of partnership

The submission emphasises the importance of increasing awareness and understanding of the concept of partnership between men and women, both as an approach to achieving gender equality as well as an end result of such equality. "Transformed partnership" should replace an adversarial approach to the resolution of equality, it says.

The Office offers itself as an example of an agency through which men are involved in promoting gender equality.

It is made up of a small national coordinating committee with male and female membership, supported by a network comprising at least one male and one female representative in each state and territory. While the women and men of the Office are able to convene and meet separately to address sensitive issues of concern, the majority of the Office's work is undertaken in partnership between women and men.

Although still in its infancy, the submission says, this model is showing initial signs of success as a means of engaging men in the achievement of gender equality.

Role of religious leaders

The submission argues that religious leaders, who are predominantly men, have a special responsibility to work in this area. It calls on

them to "reaffirm those spiritual principles that bring unity and take a stronger role in opposing those aspects of religious fundamentalism that have contributed to the subordination of women".

It also argues that the potential for the media to address gender equality has gone largely untapped.

Women and peace

Partnership is also a key theme of a further submission by the Office for Equality on the topic of women and the peace process.

"Members of the Bahá'í Faith... are united in the view that men and women everywhere must begin to forge a new and equal partnership", the submission states. "This is not only a matter of justice but the key to the realisation of the age-old dream of universal peace and prosperity".

Quoting from The Promise of World Peace, a statement issued by the world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith in 1986, the submission points out that "only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge".

The submission cites certain qualities in which women are strong, such as the capacity to link intuition to the other rational processes, and facility with networking and cooperation, as being of increasing importance to peace-building at a time when conquest and aggression are no longer viewed as legitimate means of problem-solving. "The inclusion of women directly affects the pace and success of the peace-building process", it argues.

Trafficking in women "a confronting injustice"

The Office for Equality has also made a submission to the Inquiry into Trafficking in Women - Sexual Servitude held by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Crime Commission.

The submission describes the trafficking of women for the purposes of prostitution as one of the most confronting injustices suffered by women. It advocates a holistic approach

whereby the specific actions required to address trafficking of women, and provide support for its victims, are complemented by strategies that address its root causes by promoting the equality of women and men and protection of all human rights.

The full text of these and other statements by the Australian Bahá'í community can be found on the national Bahá'í website at www.bahai.org.au under "Publications".

Dubbo celebrates diversity

Over 600 Dubbo residents filled the city's largest venue to capacity in celebration of cultural diversity at the NSW regional centre's tenth annual multicultural evening in September 2003.

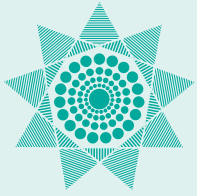
They were treated to a night of high quality entertainment, ranging from a Wiradjuri Aboriginal dance to performances by the Dubbo Ballet Studio, Philippino lion dancing, Persian classical music, and Indian, Irish and Fijian dancing. The majority of the performers were from Dubbo itself, but some travelled from as far as Sydney and Brisbane to volunteer their services for the night.

A team of sixty volunteers worked tirelessly to provide a two-course multicultural dinner and hospitality to those attending.

Diane Riley-McNaboe gave the welcome to country on behalf of the Wiradjuri people. Paula Masselos, a commissioner for the Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW, travelled from Sydney to open the event. The mayor, members of state and federal parliaments and many councillors also showed their support by attending the night.

The Bahá'í community of Dubbo has been organising this annual event for a decade as a service to the community. Key to its success have been the encouragement of the Dubbo City Council, the Community Relations Commission and the Dubbo Reconciliation Committee. The media and businesses of Dubbo have also shown substantial support for the evening.





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*For more information on the
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Community

International news

Pacific anniversaries celebrated

Bahá'í communities in several Pacific island states have celebrated their 50th anniversaries in recent months.

In October, hundreds of Bahá'ís took part in a jubilee parade along the main streets of Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, carrying banners proclaiming principles of their Faith such as the oneness of humanity.

The parade was welcomed before a 500-strong audience by the chairman of the National Council of Chiefs, Chief Paul Tahí, who praised the Bahá'í community for its contributions to the country, especially in education and health promotion.

Bahá'ís first provided education in Vanuatu in 1954, and today the community operates the Rowhani school on the island of Santo, catering for kindergarten and primary students from all religious backgrounds.

Jubilee celebrations also took place in October in the Cook Islands, where Bahá'ís operate a primary and intermediate school, Te Uki O, and in November in the Eastern Caroline Islands, where they run the Bahá'í-inspired Independent School of Pohnpei.

The Bahá'í communities in several other Pacific countries will celebrate similar milestones in 2004, including Tonga, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Samoa.

Links with Australia

The celebrations featured a number of Australian connections. The first Bahá'í to live in Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides) was a schoolteacher from South Australia, Mrs Bertha Dobbins, who established the Nur primary school in Port Vila in 1954. One of the founders of the Bahá'í community in the Cook Islands was Australian Dulcie Dive, who arrived in the country in 1954.

Today the Naveed Foundation, a Bahá'í-inspired foundation based in Hobart, perpetuates this historic connection by supporting Bahá'í social and economic development projects throughout the Pacific.

Funding has recently been provided to a character development project for school children in Fiji; scholarships to enable students from remote and disadvantaged areas of Papua New Guinea to attend a primary teacher training college; and construction of new school buildings for the Ocean of Light International School in Tonga and the Rowhani School in Vanuatu.



Traditional dancers from Vanuatu's Tongoa island starting the jubilee parade in Port Vila



Bertha Dobbins with Vanuatu Bahá'ís



Tiana Griffin, left, and Ella Uritaua at the anniversary in the Cook Islands



Dulcie Dive