

AUSTRALIAN Bahá'í Report

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A newsletter
of the
Australian
Bahá'í
community

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Indigenous knowledge recognised

An international conference titled "Indigenous Knowledge and Bioprospecting", held from 21-24 April at Macquarie University in Sydney, attracted more than 150 participants from around the world.

Sponsored jointly by the Association for Bahá'í Studies and the University's Centre for Environmental Law and Department of Indigenous Studies, along with five other university departments and centres, the conference was called to mark the close of the United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Peoples and to contribute towards social and economic development and the protection of the environment.

"Bioprospecting" is the process by which the knowledge of Indigenous people about their environment is "mined" in order to develop new resources and commercially valuable products. Bioprospecting is increasing around the world in the search for cures for diseases such as HIV/AIDS and cancer. But it carries with it the risk of Indigenous communities being bypassed in the race for scientific and commercial progress, with their rights and traditional ways of life being irreparably damaged.

The conference brought together people from a variety of disciplines - law, history, science, economics and education - who shared their particular perspectives on this increasingly important issue.

Speakers and participants from Australia, the US and Nagaland, India



Students from Macquarie University shared some traditional dances

The conference was opened by a traditional Aboriginal smoking ceremony, symbolising purification. Participants were welcomed by a representative of the Darug people, on whose traditional lands it was held. Indigenous member of the NSW Parliament, Linda Burney, gave the opening address in which she pointed out that Aboriginal culture is the oldest-surviving culture on earth - a precious gift to the world.

Henrietta Marrie, formerly of the UN Environment Programme Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, reported on recent developments in the global arena. The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture has been signed by 77 countries. The Treaty is regarded as a landmark, placing traditional farmers on the same level as modern ones, thus protecting indigenous knowledge as well as farmers' rights. Conference organiser, Chris Jones, referred to the need for new social, legal and political relationships based on justice. "We are all part of one human family, while we recognise the value and beauty of diversity", he said. "This perspective of 'one family' needs to be applied to the issue of bioprospecting. While relationships between people are unequal, you cannot have a productive outcome".

During the conference, an important workshop was held to launch a twelve-month project to revise university ethics guidelines relating to biodiversity research and benefit sharing with Indigenous peoples. Macquarie University has committed \$90,000 to this project.

National body elected



Dr Golshah Naghdy

The members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia for the current year were elected at the Bahá'í National Convention held in Sydney from 29 April to 2 May.

The National Assembly is the governing body of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia. Its nine members are elected by 95 regional delegates selected by local Bahá'ís around the country. Nominations and electioneering are strictly forbidden in the voting process, in which every adult Bahá'í residing in Australia is eligible for election.

This year the Assembly welcomed a new member: Dr Golshah Naghdy, who is an Associate Professor in the School of Electrical, Computer and Telecommunication Engineering at the University of Wollongong. Dr Naghdy is also the Director of Education

for Peace, a residential and distance-education program for young people that has been running at the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning in New South Wales for more than ten years.

Dr Naghdy replaces outgoing member Dr John Davidson. Dr Davidson was first elected to the National Assembly in 1966, and had served continuously as a member since 1982. Moving tributes were paid at the Convention to this extraordinarily long period of service.

The other members of the National Assembly, unchanged from the previous year, are: Dr Eric Kingston, Mrs Fiona McDonald, Professor Fariborz Moshirian, Ms Kath Podger, Dr Vahid Saberi, Professor Bijan Samali, Dr Marjorie Tidman, and Mr John Walker. Mr Walker continues in the position of National Secretary.

World religion day

More than 150 people attended a multi-faith service at Hobart Town Hall on 18 January to mark World Religion Day. The service was organised by the Bahá'í community of Kingborough.

Bahá'í representative Gill Ta'eed welcomes guests to the World Religion Day service



Part of Tasmania's bicentenary commemorations, the service was held to celebrate the diversity of faiths that have come to Tasmania during the past 200 years. Representatives from all religions offered prayers and scriptural readings on the theme "Love your neighbour".

The program included prayers by representatives of the Anglican Church, Catholic Church, Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress church, and the Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Bahá'í communities.

Preceded by a traditional welcome to land, it also featured dance, musical performance and meditation.

World Religion Day was inaugurated internationally by the Bahá'í community in 1950.

Good neighbours rewarded

National Harmony Day saw the celebration of the inaugural Good Neighbour Awards in Western Australia.

Recognising individuals who practise and promote cultural, racial and religious unity in their local communities, the awards are organised by the Bahá'í community of Western Australia.

Nominations came from all over the state. The winners were Barbara and Eino Saarilammi, Eve Bryason, Sophia Mclay, Sally Herzfeld, Mieke Dixon, and Francesca Lawrence.

In nominating her mother, Francesca Lawrence, for the award, Mary Anne Lawrence described her dedicated voluntary work to help refugee families start a new life in Australia. "She is to be seen at all hours in a battered Ute stacked high with donated goods", she wrote, "giving them out and having endless cups of tea and conversation".

Barbara and Eino Saarilammi were also nominated for their assistance to refugees. Barbara, a piano teacher, teaches needy children free of charge. The couple were described by their nominator, Behnoosh Vahdat, as "the type of people who make one hopeful about the future of humanity".

The stories collected from the successful nominations have been distributed to local councils and newspapers, where it is envisaged that they will be used as a resource to increase awareness of grassroots successes in promoting harmony.



Good Neighbour Award recipients at the award ceremony

Harmony Day celebrated

The Good Neighbour Awards were one of a range of activities organised by Bahá'í communities around Australia to mark Harmony Day.

In Unley, South Australia, a multicultural talent night and festivities saw the sharing of music, dance, arts and crafts.

The Bahá'í Education class at Shorncliffe State School in Queensland invited teachers, parents, friends and community members to participate in an interfaith devotional program where the theme was "Harmony in Australia". The Bahá'í community of Pine Rivers, Queensland, held a tree-planting ceremony and interfaith prayer program at the Pine Rivers Millennium Peace Garden.

Harmony Day falls on the same day that Bahá'ís, Persians, Parsees, Afghans and Kurds celebrate new year, March 21.

Footballer shows his musical side

Rising AFL footballer, Luke McPharlin, is achieving some goals off the footy field.

His band, "Calling Waiting Searching", has released its second CD of acoustic music, much of it written by the 22-year-old, who plays centre half-back for the Fremantle Dockers.

McPharlin describes the music as an acoustic and melodic experience, and says the songs have positive contemporary themes. Some are inspired by the Bahá'í Faith, as McPharlin and some other band members are Bahá'ís.

"Remnants" is about the Bali tragedy and how humanity must find a way to peace. McPharlin wrote it after being in Bali two years ago, just before the Sari Club bombing.

"Rise" is about the importance of unity, self-belief and not letting fear paralyse you.

The CD, titled "Return", is available from the Fremantle Football Club or from Hidden Words Bahá'í Books and Information in Melbourne (03-9815 2020).

Luke McPharlin



Children are the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future

Protecting children

The Australian Bahá'í community has adopted a new national policy for the protection of children. As of 1 June, all people placed in a position of responsibility for children on behalf of the Bahá'í community are required to undergo an approval process.

The procedure includes a compulsory police check and a reference from their local Bahá'í governing body. They are also required to attend a course that covers the meaning and signs of child abuse, and how to respond to disclosures of abuse.

Once they have satisfactorily completed the approval process, they are issued with an accreditation card that is valid for two years.

This procedure applies not only to teachers of formal Bahá'í children's classes, who have been subject to similar requirements for some time, but also to those who supervise or care for children in less formal settings, such as helping with children in conjunction with community events.

Compulsory reporting

The policy also outlines principles and procedures to be followed in cases where child

abuse is suspected or reported. It requires all cases where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that a child has been abused, or is at risk of abuse, to be reported to the civil authorities.

"The Australian Bahá'í community has voluntarily adopted this policy after observing how other religions have grappled with this disturbing problem", said John Walker, Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia.

"We are making every effort to minimise the risk of abuse and provide the best possible protection for our children and those placed in our care".

The new policy is titled "Our most precious treasure", a name derived from the following statement by the Universal House of Justice, the world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith: "Children are the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future. They bear the seeds of the character of future society which is largely shaped by what the adults constituting the community do or fail to do with respect to children".

Human rights dialogue assessed

The Australian Bahá'í community has recently made a submission to the inquiry into Australia's human rights dialogue process conducted by the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

"The Australian Bahá'í Community supports human rights dialogue as a tool through which progress in promoting the protection of human rights abroad can be achieved", the submission says. "In our view, however, dialogue should only ever be regarded as one instrument for advancing human rights and other mechanisms, such as international monitoring through United Nations bodies, should continue to be vigorously pursued".

Drawing on the community's knowledge and experience of the human rights situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran, the submission proposed a number of measures to improve outcomes

from human rights dialogues.

These measures include parliamentary participation and oversight of the dialogue process, involvement of non-government organisations, increasing the expectations placed on participating agencies, and establishing measures for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the progress of the dialogues in improving human rights outcomes.

The Australian Baha'i community was also one of 30 organisations that endorsed a joint NGO statement to the inquiry on the human rights dialogue process.

A copy of the submission can be found on the Committee's website at <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jfa/dt/hrdialogue/subs.htm>

Youth: Agents of Change

Young people from across Queensland came together at the annual "Youth: Agents of Change" residential program held in Townsville from 5-11 July.

Open to all young people between 13 and 18 years of age, this year's program took the theme "Racial, cultural and religious harmony". Fifty participants enjoyed the week-long program that incorporated participatory group learning on themes derived from core Bahá'í principles such as the elimination of racial prejudice, oneness of humanity, gender equality and economic justice.

"The program aims to help youth to achieve their best and commit their life to the betterment of the world", explained program coordinator Farvardin Daliri.

"We also wanted to help the youth, particularly in the remote regions, to socialise with youth from other parts of Australia and form bonds of friendship and networking to be able to defeat isolation", he added.

Visual and performing arts such as sculpture, dance, and oil and acrylic painting were interwoven in the program, both as teaching tools, and as a means for the expression of ideas. The program was held under the auspices of the state Bahá'í youth committee of Queensland.

The program culminated on the final night in a two hour concert called "Cultural Harmonic" at Townsville Riverside Convention Centre. Attended by an audience of 200, it was opened by the Hon Mike Reynolds, Queensland Minister for Child Safety. This aspect of the program received a \$3000 grant from Multicultural Affairs Queensland, which was used to purchase equipment for staging the concert.

"Youth: Agents of Change" participants are required to develop a practical service project to be implemented in their home community during the year. This year's service projects range from assisting in children's classes to starting youth dance workshops with a positive message.



Sharing circles



Nicole Subhani with Rainbow Bear

As a first-time mother, Annette Subhani wanted to find a way to nurture the character and spirituality of her three-year-old daughter, Nicole. She tried the local community playgroups but felt there was still something missing. So Annette decided to draw on her training and experience as a primary school teacher, coupled with her spiritual beliefs as a member of the Bahá'í Faith, to develop her own alternative.

Three years down the track, the result is "Sharing Circles", a unique blend of fun, creative play and spirituality that Annette runs for local preschoolers in her own home in Melbourne every Monday afternoon. It is one of a growing number of Bahá'í-inspired playgroups springing up around the country.

"Sharing Circles is essentially a character development program", says Annette. "We have a range of formal and informal activities that include singing, dancing, games, stories, craft and service activities.

"Through them all, the children learn about who they are, about the world around them, and about the building blocks of character - virtues".

Annette says her philosophy of education is based on the following quotation from the Bahá'í Writings: "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom".

Positive response

The program has received a very positive response from other children and parents, who come from all cultural and religious backgrounds. Apart from Nicole, only one other child attending is a Bahá'í.

"All the parents like to see their children interact with other children in a structured way, build their self confidence, and learn what it means to be a member of the human family", Annette explained.

"Sharing Circles is now part of the weekly routine of the families. Even the older siblings, and children who have graduated from the program to start school, return during the holidays".

One component of the program is the selection of a different virtue - such as caring, friendliness, patience, helpfulness and creativity - as a theme every three or four weeks. The children are encouraged to share how they have practised the virtue during the week.

Annette has developed many of the program resources herself, after discovering there was a lack of suitable teaching materials for this age group. One popular resource is "Rainbow Bear", who attends the sessions and travels home with one of the children every week, to experience life in their home and help reinforce the lessons learned.

Annette herself has been so inspired by the success of Sharing Circles that she has returned to formal study to gain a Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Teaching, with the hope of extending and expanding the program in 2005.

"Reflecting more broadly on the times we live in, I believe strongly that more and more needs to be done for children 0-5 years of age", she said.

"We need to see education in a new light and be focused on the development of children who see and understand themselves as world citizens".

Further information about Sharing Circles can be found on the website www.sharingcircles.com.

Bahá'í sculptor, Farvardin Daliri, has completed a 60-metre long giant carpet snake, which now rises protectively over a traditional burial site in Plantation Park, Ayr, south of Townsville. The "Kabalamunda" snake is the totem of the Juru people, covered by the Gudjuda Reference Group, within Birra Gubba nation.

[picture courtesy of the Townsville Bulletin]



Values education supported

The Australian Bahá'í Community has welcomed the release of the Draft National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools, describing it as "a major step in developing more holistic educational paradigms, compatible with human nature".

The Framework was released by the Federal Department of Education, Science and Training for public consultation as a result of the national Values Education Study commissioned in 2002.

A submission by the Bahá'í community highlights three key elements of the Framework: its goal of teaching values across all key learning areas; its recognition of the importance of a strong partnership between parents and schools in developing a values education program; and its acknowledgement of the diversity of schools in Australia.

Common foundation

While supporting the concept of individual school communities consulting and determining the content of their own values education programs, the submission argues that a common foundation is required.

"In an increasingly interdependent world, the guiding principle of the Framework should be that while each person is unique, all belong to one human family", it says.

"The acceptance of the oneness of humanity and the idea that the diverse people of the world can work together in harmony leads to the promotion of values that enrich society, for example, social justice, tolerance, respect for human rights and an appreciation of the richness of our diverse cultures".

The age of pre-adolescence, say 11 or 12 years of age, is particularly emphasised in the submission as a "window of idealism" when students are increasingly able to think at an abstract level, to reflect on alternative values, and to consider their impact upon society. Educators should capitalise on this stage, it suggests, "inspiring youth with a vision of their own potential and capacity to make a positive difference in the world in whatever sphere of influence they attain".

The submission points to the importance of

both parents and school staff as role models and mentors, acknowledging that while schools can play a significant role in shaping the child's values, the first source of values education is the family. Sustained reinforcement at home is vital to the success of any values education program, it says.

Experience offered

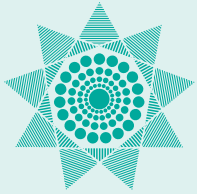
The submission notes that the Australian Bahá'í community has been developing and facilitating values education programs for many years, and offers the community's own experience for study. Such programs are inspired by the Bahá'í belief that human beings are inherently noble, and that true education should equip them to fulfil the purpose of life, which is "to cultivate such attributes, skills, virtues and qualities as will enable them to contribute their share to the building of an ever-advancing civilization".

Examples of Bahá'í values education programs include the Bahá'í Education in State Schools program, Education for Peace, and Bahá'í playgroups.

Bahá'í Education in State Schools began more than 20 years ago, and is now available through special religious education classes in over 250 government schools in many regions of Australia.

Education for Peace has been offered for over ten years through an out-of-school program and is now running as a pilot project in some high schools, the submission says. It also cites the example of Bahá'í playgroups teaching the practice of positive values to children below school age.

The submission concludes: "Fundamental human values such as rectitude of conduct, trustworthiness, honesty and service to the community are not the exclusive possession of any particular religion or set of beliefs, but are the moral foundation for all societies everywhere... The Australian Bahá'í Community is convinced that education in such values is an essential element for the foundation of peace and well-being in the world."



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Iran

Government authorities in Iran have destroyed a Bahá'í holy site.

The gravesite of Quddus, a prominent figure in early Bahá'í history, has been razed to the ground, despite protests from Bahá'ís at the local, national, and international levels.

The house-like structure marked the resting place of Mulla Muhammad-Ali Barfurushi, known as Quddus (The Most Holy). Quddus was the foremost disciple of the Báb, the forerunner to Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

"The destruction and desecration of this holy place were carried out with the knowledge of the national government to which appeals had been made beforehand", said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

"This act represents yet another example of the ongoing persecution against Iran's 300,000 member Bahá'í community, utterly contradicting the government's claim that the human rights situation in Iran is improving", said Ms Dugal.

Bahá'ís in Iran continue to suffer the systematic violation of their civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. They are subject to arbitrary arrest, short-term detention, and persistent harassment, intimidation and discrimination.

[Bahá'í World News Service]

United Nations, New York

Recognition of "the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality" was one of the two main themes at the 48th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), held from 1-12 March.

The other main theme concerned women's equal participation in conflict prevention and peace-building.

In resolutions adopted at the end of the meeting, governments emphasised the key role of men in supporting women's advancement. The Commission "recognizes that everyone benefits from gender equality ... and emphasizes, therefore, that men and boys, through taking responsibility themselves and working jointly in partnership with women and girls, are essential

to achieving the goals of gender equality, development, and peace", it said.

The Bahá'í community has been advocating the importance of involving men in the process of women's advancement. In Australia this is reflected in the membership of the Bahá'í Office for Equality, which includes men as well as women.

In its statement to CSW, the Bahá'í International Community said: "The full development of men and boys is inextricably linked to the advancement of women. A society characterized by gender equality serves the interests of both sexes".

The Australian Bahá'í community was represented at CSW by South Australian Bahá'í, Katina Jones.

Maryland, United States

Professor Suheil Bushrui, who holds the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, has received a prestigious award in recognition of his "exceptional service to interfaith understanding".



The Juliet Hollister Award from the New York-based Temple of Understanding, a global interfaith organisation, has previously been bestowed on such figures as Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama. Professor Bushrui is one of three recipients this year.

As holder of the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace for the past decade, Professor Bushrui has organised conferences promoting international and interfaith dialogue.

Born in Nazareth to a Bahá'í family of Arab background, Professor Bushrui is a world authority on the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran, as well as being an expert in Anglo-Irish literature. His capacity to straddle the gulf between his own cultural heritage and the English literary tradition encapsulates the themes of his life's work: the commonality of all religions and the essential oneness of the human family.

[Bahá'í World News Service]