

Baha'i Report AUSTRALIAN

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A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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Pacific beat a hit

A Sydney-based music group with Pacific roots is making a splash around the world.

Known as "Mana", which means "the almighty" or "the powerful" in most Polynesian languages, the group had its origins in a Bahá'í class or "study circle" attended by its members in 2001. Using materials originally compiled by the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, study circle participants reflect and share their understandings on passages from the Bahá'í Scriptures on a range of themes.

The group members hit upon the idea of putting the quotations they were studying to original music, to assist in memorising them. The concept proved so popular that their first album, "Reflections on the Life of the Spirit", is now being used around the globe in countries as diverse as Uganda, Malaysia and the United States.

The members of Mana trace their roots back to Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands, although they are now living in the western Sydney suburbs of Bankstown and Parramatta. Their Polynesian origins are evident in the group's costumes and music, which is a fusion of traditional Polynesian sounds and instruments with modern pop. Aged between 14 and 20, most members of the group are still attending high school.

The Bahá'í Faith encourages the arts, stating that they have great power to move the spirit and awaken the hearts. Music is described in the Bahá'í Writings as a "ladder" for the soul, "a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high".

"We believe we have been given a gift from God that allows us to serve humanity in a unique way", explained Tara Tumupu, who composes all the group's music. "Through Mana we are able to contribute to the betterment of the world by utilising our God-given talents", she said.

Mana's second album, "Arising to Serve", also based on quotations from the Bahá'í Writings, was completed in time for the group to perform at the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Bahá'í Faith in Samoa in September last year. Their trip to Samoa marked the launch of their albums into the communities of the Pacific. They met an enthusiastic response, with their first music video aired on national television in Western Samoa and New Zealand.

More recently their song "In the Highest Prayer" was featured on the Radio National program, The Rhythm Divine.

Mana has performed at schools, multicultural functions and arts festivals across Australia. Now the group is back in the studio, working on their third album.



Tasmanian Bahá'í honoured



Pym Trueman

A member of the Tasmanian Bahá'í community has been included in the inaugural Tasmanian Honour Roll of Women.

Pym Trueman was awarded for service to the community, recognising her volunteer services to a range of community organisations working towards peace, human rights, reconciliation, advancement of women and inter-faith relations.

Now in her eightieth year, she continues to serve as Information Officer for the United Nations Association for Tasmania, and is a life member of the UN Association of Australia.

Despite her official "retirement" several years ago, Mrs Trueman remains an active member of groups ranging from Achieving Reconciliation Tasmania to the National Council of Women Tasmania, Women's

International League for Peace and Freedom, and Multicultural Council of Tasmania. She is also an active member of the Bahá'í community of Kingborough, serving as a member of its local governing body.

"I don't want to be so involved but keep getting drawn into things", she says.

The Honour Roll was established by Women Tasmania to honour Tasmanian women who have made an outstanding contribution to the State.

Commenting on the inaugural members, the Minister for Women, the Hon Paula Wriedt, observed: "Each of these women has had a positive and lasting impact on others ... these stories are a testimony to the strength that resides within women and enables them to achieve extraordinary things".

Spiritual perspective on development

Some 180 members of Bahá'í societies from university campuses across Australia came together at the Australian National University in Canberra in July for the annual Bahá'í Societies Congress.

The theme of this year's congress was "Synergy: Spirituality and Sustainable Development". The purpose was to explore the underlying spiritual dimension of contemporary crises in environment, governance, international development and education.

Keynote speaker Lillian Holt, who is a Vice Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Melbourne, inspired her young audience to focus on the potential of each person to contribute to the transformation of society.

Sceptical of old models of leadership, Ms Holt, who is a renowned Indigenous educator and public speaker, articulated a new vision that put the focus first and foremost on changing ourselves before trying to change the world. Capacity-building and discovering the potential within people and communities would follow from this.

The congress also featured several other keynote speakers, a series of diverse workshops, and sessions for planning future activities of Bahá'í university societies.

"It was very exciting to see such a large group of enthusiastic youth actively engaging in this very important theme", said congress participant Colin Bailey, a student of International Relations and Law at the Australian National University.

"Rethinking development from a spiritual perspective is vital for us and future generations," he said.

Bahá'í societies at universities across Australia have members from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, and from different academic fields. The societies focus on promoting Bahá'í principles on campus such as the oneness of humankind and the advancement of women.

Lillian Holt



Bahá'í Societies Congress participants



Services for peace, refugees, reconciliation

The Bahá'í House of Worship, overlooking Sydney's northern beaches, has welcomed a number of special guests in recent months.

On 20 September, Anne Lanyon, the Coordinator of the Columban Centre for Peace Ecology and Justice, addressed guests attending a special service to mark the International Day of Peace.

She reflected on the "Christians and Muslims Growing Peace in Local Areas" forums, a series of grassroots events that bring together Christian and Muslim speakers to reflect on peace and active non-violence from the perspective of each faith tradition.

Noting that "non-violence is not passive, it is active", Ms Lanyon described the forums, which are an on-going collaboration between the Columban Centre and Affinity Intercultural Foundation, as "pre-emptive action for peace". Audience members can take home a booklet outlining practical ideas for action, such as exchange visits between places of worship, and acknowledging each others' religious feast days.

A special service was also held to mark World Refugee Day on 19 June. For this occasion the guest speaker was David Bitel, President of the Refugee Council of Australia. In a moving personal presentation, he recounted the life of his grandmother, Betsy Freeman, who had fled from the persecution of Jews in Tsarist

Russia in the 1890s, only to live in abject poverty in the slums of London.

Mr Bitel called for refugees to be treated "with dignity and respect", for refugee policies to be guided by "morality and compassion", and for the root causes that lead to the creation of refugee flows to be eliminated.

Earlier in the year, a special service to mark National Reconciliation Week was preceded by a talk by Deborah Ruiz Wall OAM, member of the Executive Board of the NSW Reconciliation Council.

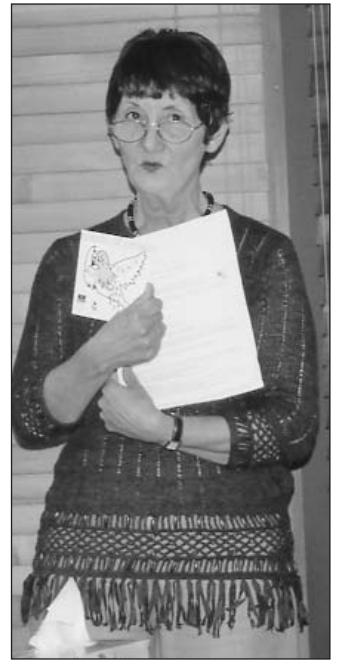
In her talk, she described her personal journey in support of reconciliation since she arrived in Australia from the Philippines in the 1970s.

She called for a greater openness to recognising and acknowledging Australia's inclusive history, including our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage.

"Only then can we begin to evolve a shared vision of our future as a wholesome Australian community", she said.

All presentations were followed by services in the House of Worship which featured readings from the scriptures of the world's religions.

A special service will also be held to mark Human Rights Day on 11 December. Members of the public are warmly invited to attend.



Anne Lanyon speaking at the Bahá'í House of Worship

Scholarship recognises service

Fourth year law student, Sholeh Jones, has been awarded the Ciara Glennon Memorial Law Scholarship at the University of Western Australia.

Established in 1998 following the tragic murder of young lawyer Ciara Glennon, the scholarship perpetuates her spirit of community service by recognising contribution to the community, a balanced well-rounded approach to life, and a genuine concern for others, in addition to academic achievement.

UWA Acting Vice-Chancellor, Professor Margaret Seares, said Ms Jones' volunteer work for the broader community, which included a Bahá'í "youth year of service" in

Vanuatu and Western Samoa, set an inspiring example.

"In a very practical way, Sholeh has demonstrated just how, as individuals, we can all make a difference to the society we live in by participating in voluntary activities that complement other aspects of our daily lives", Professor Seares said.

"I am sure that Ciara, watching now, is honoured that in some small way her memory lives on in you", added Ciara's sister, Dr Denise Glennon.

Ms Jones hopes to undertake a Masters in Native Title and Indigenous Rights following completion of her degree.

Sholeh Jones



Working for multiculturalism



Can people from different cultures, races and religions live together harmoniously? In the light of ongoing terrorist threats and attacks, the policy of multiculturalism is coming under question, in Australia as well as overseas.

The Bahá'í community considers the infinite diversity of humanity to be a reflection of the bounty and perfection of Creation, and has been a long-standing supporter of multiculturalism in Australia. Learning to live with others who are different from ourselves is part of being human. But community harmony requires constant work. Even seemingly harmonious societies can rapidly unravel when placed under pressure.

Australian multiculturalism is founded on worthy principles, as outlined in the 2003 policy statement, "Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity": responsibilities of all, respect for each person, fairness for each person, and benefits for all. Continual effort needs to be made to promote these principles and put them into practice - in the media, in our schools, our places of worship, and everywhere else where people come together.

But for diversity to result in harmony rather than division, there needs to be an underlying source of unity and social cohesion. Otherwise, our differences can become a basis for new forms of separation and superiority. If multiculturalism is based on the assumption that society is unalterably divided, a virtually impermeable "community of communities", then it risks reinforcing old barriers and insularities, rather than assisting in the building of a new community that is genuinely united in its diversity.

*Shidan Toloui-Wallace
with participants in the
Hand in Hand program*



To Bahá'ís, the foundational principle of all social interaction is the oneness of humanity: that there is only one human race, a single people inhabiting the planet Earth, one human family created from one same substance and bound together in a common destiny. This recognition provides a strong motivation for grassroots initiatives that bring together people of all backgrounds on the basis of unity.

Promoting oneness "hand in hand"

One such program, developed and implemented with the support of the Bahá'í community of Brisbane, is helping young immigrants and refugees to feel at home in Australia.

Based on the underlying theme of "unity in diversity", the Hand in Hand project consists of a five- or ten-week program of weekly classes focussing on the universal human values of kindness, respect, unity and community service. The classes feature group discussion, interactive games and conflict resolution exercises.

"The aim is to give students practical skills to promote harmony, overcome conflict and build bridges between groups in the community", explained teacher-aide Shidan Toloui-Wallace, who developed and runs the program.

"The classes are also an opportunity for the students to discuss their shared experiences and challenges in adapting to life in Australia, including approaches to overcoming racism and cultural differences", she said.

Classroom teachers describe the program as empowering. "The Hand in Hand Project has been good for the students", commented Milpera State High School teacher Ann Darwall. "They become very involved personally, at a deep level, with the program".

"Students gained a better understanding of the culturally diverse nature of the classroom and acceptance of others," observed Irena Zdral, a classroom teacher at the school.

In its first year of operation in 2004, Hand in Hand reached 130 students who originated from 29 different countries. Now in its second year, the program is supported by grants from Multicultural Affairs Queensland. The Bahá'í community believes it is grassroots programs like Hand in Hand that knit our society together.

New website launched

A new official website has been launched by the Bahá'í International Community to provide an introduction to the Bahá'í Faith for general inquirers, researchers and journalists.

Titled "The Bahá'ís", the site is also a portal to a family of official international websites including the Bahá'í World News Service; One



Country, a news and features magazine; the Bahá'í reference library, an online source of the Bahá'í sacred writings; and the Bahá'í Statement Library, an archive of statements by the Bahá'í International Community.

"The Bahá'ís" can be found at www.bahai.org.

Materialism a cause of imbalance

The issue of imbalance between work and family is a symptom of excessive materialism in Australian society, according to a submission by the Australian Bahá'í Community to the Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family.

While acknowledging the need to assist families in balancing work and family responsibilities, the submission argues that "the current challenge of imbalance between family and work can be seen as partly symptomatic of an excessive materialism in Australian society and a self-centredness that inhibits our ability to work together as a community".

"The desire to consume at ever-increasing levels, and indeed the seeking of meaning in possession of material goods, creates imbalances between work and family", the submission states.

"Many families feel they have no choice but to devote more time and energy to the workplace in order to attain lifestyles that are seen as desirable if not essential in our society, but which - when seen by world standards - are exceedingly opulent".

Childcare only part of the solution

While the need to overcome excessive materialism lies at the heart of the issue, the submission also recognises that families are under great pressure in today's world, and require real assistance. Based on the view that the family is the most suitable place for children to grow and form their values, "provision of childcare will ... only ever be part of the solution", it states.

The submission calls on the government to direct attention to a range of other measures to assist parents to devote appropriate time and

energy to rearing children, including "readjusting work schedules, job sharing, reducing the hours of work outside the home, extended maternity or paternity leaves, and the like".

Underlying such changes must be an attitudinal change on the part of employers, service providers and others, "to create greater recognition of the contribution made to society by families in rearing children".

Equality as the foundation

The issues of balancing work and family cannot be addressed fully without tackling the challenge of establishing equality between women and men, both in the family and in the workplace, according to the submission.

"The principle of equality has profound implications for the definition of the roles of both women and men and impinges on all aspects of human relations", it says.

The submission highlights a number of practical measures to assist with building relationships of equality in families. It calls for families to be supported in developing consultative based decision-making models, and offers the examples of the "Marriage of Equals" workshop/retreat and the "Spiritual Parenting Program", both conducted by the Bahá'í community, as means for achieving this.

The submission describes balancing work and family responsibilities as an "increasing challenge" for many Australian families. A wide range of assistance measures are required to meet this challenge, "not just focussed on the immediately identifiable issues around employment but also addressing the underlying causes of imbalance", the submission concludes.

Inter-faith work encouraged



Women of many faiths gathered at NSW Government House on 14 April at an official reception to celebrate the Women's Interfaith Network

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia has encouraged Bahá'í communities around the country to maintain and expand their contribution to the inter-faith movement.

In a letter addressed to the 200 local administrative bodies or "Local Spiritual Assemblies" across the country, the Bahá'í Faith's national governing body described inter-faith work as "important", encouraging them to continue to progress it "in a systematic and sustained manner".

The number and scope of inter-faith activities has increased markedly in Australia in recent years. In addition to formal dialogues between the leaders of the different religions, the movement has blossomed to include a growing number of local inter-faith networks, public conferences and seminars, women's inter-faith networks, youth exchanges, and home-based "encounter" programs between the followers of different faiths.

The Bahá'í community has been a long-standing supporter of inter-faith projects in Australia, a contribution noted in the recent report "Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia".

The Bahá'í Writings exhort members of the Faith to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship". Underlying this injunction is the fundamental Bahá'í belief in the divine origin of all the major religions, which are believed to express the progressive revelation of God's guidance to humanity over the centuries.

Distinctive approach

The distinctive Bahá'í approach to inter-faith dialogue was outlined in an address to the groundbreaking Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace held at the United Nations in June. Sponsored by a tripartite group that included governments, UN agencies, and civil society organisations, it was the first time that such a group had convened a substantive inter-faith event at the UN.

In her presentation to the conference, Bahá'í representative Bani Dugal called for "a fundamental change in the way that believers of different religions relate to one another".

"The remedy for the repeated crises plaguing our communities today is to centre our efforts and frank deliberations on that which we hold in common rather than that which sets us apart.

"It is this essential unity of religion, across the tremendous diversity of history, culture, tradition, philosophy and practice, that should now become the operating principle of religious discourse", she said.

Ms Dugal also urged governments everywhere to observe the right for individuals to freely adopt and change their religious beliefs, and called for full participation of women alongside men in laying the foundation for inter-faith understanding and sustainable peace.

Building bridges at the grassroots

While expressions of solidarity between the leaders of the religions are essential, Bahá'ís believe they must be matched by actions by their grassroots followers to reach out to those of other religions.

Chris Jones, the Bahá'í Chaplain at Sydney's Macquarie University, observes that religious prejudice can only be overcome by the building of authentic personal relations between people of differing faiths.

"They are not 'others' who live far away in a foreign land", he points out. "They are often our neighbours or the school friends of our own children."

"It is only when a vision of other faith traditions as part of our own family takes hold that true principles of interdependence necessary for world peace will occur", he said.

Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community, Bani Dugal, addresses the Interfaith Cooperation for Peace conference at the UN



Radio makes waves in the Torres Strait

A weekly program on Thursday Island community radio station 4MW is reaching Bahá'ís scattered across the more than 100 islands of the Torres Strait. In addition to providing members of the Bahá'í community with a familiar voice every Thursday morning, the program is also building bridges of understanding in this predominantly Christian community.

Titled "Baha-Bi-Buiya", which means "Light-Light-Light" in Arabic and the two main dialects of the Torres Strait, the program has been hosted by local Bahá'ís Janelle Gebadi and Margaret Gabey, with the support of back-up presenter Ina Aiputa, for more than a year. Using a talkback format, the program functions as an on-air "study circle", based on an approach to learning adopted by Bahá'í communities around the world.

In a study circle, participants read through selected passages from the Bahá'í Writings together, and share their understanding with the guidance of a facilitator. In the case of "Baha-Bi-Buiya", the passages are read by the presenters, and discussion is opened up to the audience.

With almost 85% of Torres Strait residents listening to 4MW - and an audience extending as far as the southern tip of Papua New Guinea - this can make for lively discussion.

"Earlier when the show started hardly anyone asked questions", acknowledged Ms Gebadi. "But now people are asking so much question ... to me it's looking good for people [to] find it interesting".

Gosford celebrates anniversary

The Bahá'í community of Gosford, NSW celebrated the 25th anniversary of its local governing body, the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Gosford, in April.

Speaking at the festivities, the State Member for Gosford, Chris Hartcher MP, said:

"Over the last 25 years, the Bahá'í community on the Central Coast has established itself as an important and respected group.

"The Bahá'ís have made a unique contribution to the Central Coast through their strong



Janelle Gebadi (left) and Ina Aiputa present their weekly radio program

"Each week we try and make people understand or aware of the Bahá'í Faith because sometimes people misunderstand the Faith", she said.

"The benefits to our community have been many", added Joanne Thompson, who has lived on Thursday Island since 2001.

"It is helping to break down the barriers for a predominantly Christian community.

"In the beginning there was open hostility to the program. Taxi-drivers at the rank outside the radio station would shake their fists at the presenters when they left the building.

"But now more and more people are starting to ask questions ... more people are turning up to our functions".

"I am staggered at the content, the nurturing and the courage that these magnificent ladies do over the airwaves", she said.

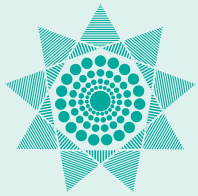
commitment to international goodwill and their support of the ideals of the United Nations.

"I have been honoured to be associated with them".

Attended by about 80 people, including three members of the first Assembly, the celebrations concluded with an energetic bush dance.

Founding members Thelma Palmer, Monirollah and Rezvanieh Vedaahaghi cut the cake at the Gosford celebrations





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Right to education denied

Members of the Bahá'í community of Iran, who constitute that country's largest non-Muslim religious minority, have once again been denied access to higher education.

Despite a commitment by the Iranian government that university applicants would no longer be required to state their religion, Bahá'í students who sat for this year's national university entrance examination found that their religion was registered as "Islam". Appeals to correct this information went unanswered, with the result that students could only enter university if they pretended to be Muslims. Bahá'ís will not deny their Faith as a matter of principle.

UN reform urged

A representative of the Bahá'í International Community addressed historic hearings on reform of the United Nations, conducted between the UN General Assembly and non-governmental organisations in June.

Roberto Eghrari, who is from Brazil, put forward the Bahá'í position at a session chaired by the president of the UN General Assembly, Jean Ping.

Mr Eghrari said that advancement of the role of women is an essential element in strengthening the effectiveness of the United Nations.

In a series of recommendations, Mr Eghrari argued that the Human Rights Commission should be greatly strengthened by creating a standing Human Rights Council, and that mechanisms for funding the United Nations should be strengthened, beyond voluntary contributions.

The capacities and diverse experiences of civil society must be included in all aspects of UN

Fiji celebrates

The Fijian Bahá'í community recently marked its 80th anniversary with celebrations rich in music and dance. The celebrations acknowledged the services of Australian Irene Jackson Williams, who moved to Fiji in 1954 and played an important role in the development of the community.

Bahá'ís have been systematically barred from Iranian universities and colleges since the 1979 revolution, as part of a government strategy aimed at slowly suffocating the 300,000-strong religious community.

The ongoing persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran has included executions, wrongful imprisonment, arbitrary arrest and detention, confiscation of property, destruction of holy sites, and severe restrictions on freedom of religious practice and worship.

Further information can be obtained from <http://denial.bahai.org> and the website of the Australian Bahá'í Community at www.bahai.org.au.

work, from decision making to on-the-ground implementation, he said.

Mr Eghrari said the guiding principle that must now animate reform "is the oneness of humanity, a spiritual principle that underpins the very nature of human reality."

The Bahá'í International Community was among some 200 international civil society organisations invited to participate in the series of interactive hearings, held in advance of September's Millennium Plus Five Summit of world leaders. The hearings covered four main themes: human rights, poverty elimination, peace and security, and United Nations reform.

In Australia, a representative of the Bahá'í Community participated in the public hearing on reform of the UN Commission on Human Rights conducted by the Human Rights Subcommittee of the joint standing committee of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade at Parliament House in Canberra in August.

