



rigorous attention to Bahá'u'lláh's standard for racial unity, and insufficient teaching work among American Indians as the NSA's other cares.

In the "plans" section of his talk, the Secretary General spoke about Vision in Action (the NSA's version for the US of the UHJ's Three-Year Plan); about a plan for decentralization which calls upon the local communities to take on more responsibility and the NSA to focus more exclusively on matters of national policy and strategy, but which has been currently shelved for lack of funds for implementation; about an electronic network designed to link the Counselors, ABMs and LSAs with the NSA; and about the establishment of an Office of Spiritual Assembly Development at the National Center.

He also addressed the financial disparities left over from the World Congress, saying that to date all but \$240,000 of the amount due by the friends has been collected, and that all monies received from airlines and attendees "are forwarded to the World Center."

In conclusion, Henderson spoke at length about the NSA's response to the UHJ's May 19th letter, which he said "had a profound effect on the thinking of the NSA," and called "the most revolutionary communication from the World Center since the Peace Statement and before that the Advent of Divine Justice." In response to the letter, he said the NSA had conducted a series of meetings with the Counselors, dissolved its internal Executive Committee, whose "existence was divisive," restructured its agenda to focus on issues of national policy and strategy, moved to change the format of the annual report and the Convention, and held deepenings for National Center staff on the issues raised by the letter.

Secretary for External Affairs Firuz Khazemzadeh then reported on the work of the External Affairs office, beginning by saying that the Bahá'í community in the US is "committed to human rights," and by detailing the many ways the EA office pursues "deeper involvement in the pressing issues facing humanity." He reported on an exhibit to be mounted by the NSA's EA office in the Cannon House Rotunda in Washington, DC, beginning on May 3rd. The unusual exhibit, requested by Mrs. Tom Lantos, the wife of one of the strongest supporters of the Iranian Bahá'ís in the US House of Representatives, will focus around the theme of "The Defense of Religious Liberty." (also its title) Recently cleared by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's office, the exhibit will feature photographs of martyred Bahá'ís, of Bahá'í groups and communities in areas other than Iran, of Thomas Jefferson and of Gingrich himself with two local Georgia Bahá'ís. Jefferson's words, from the First Amendment to the US Constitution and other documents, will also be included.

Finally in the evening, NSA Treasurer William Davis spoke about the

National Fund, describing record levels of contributions, projected to be seven percent (7%) higher than last year in all fund categories. However, he said that actual National Fund totals declined in the face of an increasing percentage dedicated to the Arc. Davis cited several troubling factors facing the fund, including extreme seasonal fluctuations, a debt of \$9.6 million, and a cash and contribution flow shortfall pattern which he said "cannot hold the center, with our continued cohesion a major problem."

The annual report also contains other vital statistics, including the enrollment and withdrawal figures for the year and the progress to date on the numerical goals of the Three Year Plan. Enrollments totalled 1,383 adults and 417 youth, and 402 people withdrew from membership, with 41 being reinstated after withdrawing. 238 Bahá'ís left the US for international pioneering posts. One numerical goal -- raising 3,000 travel teachers and 500 homefront pioneers -- has already been met, but the goal of 142 new LSAs in communities of more than 50,000 people has only reached a total of five new LSAs.

The opening session drew to a close at 10:30 pm, with no time left for consultation. More gospel music filled the air as all attendees rose to sing together.

Day Two -- US National Bahá'í Convention -- April 28, 1995

Chicago--The second day of the 86th US National Bahá'í Convention opened with a reading of the Ridvan Message from the Universal House of Justice. (previously posted on Talisman, so not repeated here) Immediately following the reading, NSA Treasurer William Davis and Secretary-General Robert C. Henderson made a presentation on "The National Fund Challenge: Preserving the Lifeblood." Davis and Henderson stated that the National Bahá'í Fund stands in jeopardy in the coming nine months, because of decreasing National Fund contributions in the face of increasing Arc contributions, slumping patterns of giving in the summer months, and the inability of the NSA to borrow more funds because of their more than \$9 million debt. Davis made a frank and forthright appeal to the American Bahá'í Community to change their patterns of giving to provide the NSA with a regular and consistent stream of contributions throughout the year.

Consultation followed. Many suggestions from the delegates came forward, most on ways the NSA might consider fund-raising or saving on expenses. One delegate then asked about the income of NSA members and other employees of the Faith, inquiring as to whether some families earned large incomes from the Fund, and asking whether or not the Universal House of Justice could be consulted about what the delegate perceived as a widespread national concern over executive compensation. William Davis then replied, saying that the NSA reviews the financial needs of full-time executive employees annually, and

that the UHJ is then apprised of the arrangements. Davis then expounded on the differences between the checks and balances in the "old world" US system, saying that lack of trust is endemic to it. He then questioned the faith in the Covenant of those who would mistrust the NSA, while saying that the question itself was a legitimate one.

Many delegates then spoke in defense of the NSA's salary practices, many implying that those who work for the Faith are drastically undercompensated.

Henderson also commented, saying that the National Center operates with a skeletal staff, who have had no raises in 8 years. "We have to get off the critical list of financial insolvency," he said.

Another delegate then described the almost one quarter of American Local Assemblies who do not contribute to the national fund as a "problem of firmness in the Covenant of LSAs." This led to much consultation, some of it emotional, on whether the NSA should take actions or even sanction such LSAs. One delegate said "Consultation should not be used to intimidate," referring to the repeated remarks from delegates condemning those who would question policies of the elected institutions.

Counsellor William Roberts then added that consultation on the fund could be productive, but short-term fixes should not take the place of long-term thinking on the issue.

As the afternoon session began, Counsellor Stephen Birkland commented on the openness and frankness of the morning's consultation, and cited such communication as evidence of increasing maturation of the believers and of the consultation process. He urged those with questions of policy to readily and honestly ask them, saying that the national convention was the proper forum for such inquiries.

Then Native American delegate Ferris Paisano made a special presentation, reading in a slow cadence the names of the first all-Indian LSA, first established in 1948, and then a list of names of the first believers from many different Indian nations. He cited the first Native American believer -- Marion Steffes, from the Oneida Nation, and moved the audience by saying "We must remember the people whose shoulders we rode in on -- especially the pioneers whose bodies are buried on our land."

The National Teaching Committee then presented a slide program, narrated by Ken Bowers, designed to show the progress of the teaching goals of the 3-Year Plan. Bowers said that several goals had been met, but that that very slow growth patterns of growth over the past 15 years hampered the forward progress of the Faith in the US. He did note a small increase in the number of Local Assemblies this past year, reversing a six-year slide in total numbers. He urged Bahá'ís to

remember that we have "an active Bahá'í community," but also said that "We're concerned that we see a much too conservative approach to teaching ethnic minorities on the part of many LSAs." He cited one unnamed Assembly, who deigned to teach minorities, instead saying that they planned to focus on teaching "people of capacity," and garnered much applause when he stated that "People of capacity are not just white people, you know."

Consultation on teaching then ensued. Many anecdotal teaching stories came forth from the delegates, but some new proposals also emerged: a suggestion for a "Habitat for Humanity"-style Bahá'í project for building local Bahá'í Centers, which generated much comment and support; a recommendation for a statement from the NSA on the subject of "America's Mission and Role in World History," which passed overwhelmingly; a suggestion for a more intensified focus on Indian teaching; and suggestions to hold "spiritual meetings" designed to provide a spiritual atmosphere for seekers as an alternative to discussion-heavy meetings and firesides.

Friday night's program kicked off with more music and a short Ninth Day of Ridvan program, followed by more consultation. Some of the delegates persisted in urging those assembled to be more faithful, more spiritual and more active, but others wanted to discuss matters with a larger national policy scope. Delegates raised the question of the May 19th, 1994 letter from the UHJ to the US NSA, but were told that directed consultation on that matter and the NSA's response to its challenges had been scheduled for Saturday morning, during the closed session after the actual balloting. While some delegates wanted to discuss the matter with the audience present, the Chair strongly requested delegates to hold their comments until Saturday morning, and they did so.

The evening session closed with a report from a task force that recently uncovered, with the help of a local historical society, records of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the home of American political figure William Jennings Bryan and of a prayer 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed for Bryan and his wife and family. The short prayer closed the session at 10:15 pm.

As the session closed, 165 of 171 delegates were in attendance, the highest figure in several years. However, attendance, expected to reach 1500-1800, was approximately 800 delegates and visitors.

Day Three -- US National Bahá'í Convention -- April 29, 1995

Chicago--Balloting for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States occurred here today, with the same National Spiritual Assembly re-elected. The tally:

Dorothy Nelson 127 votes

William E. Davis 124

Robert C. Henderson 114

Firuz Khazemzadeh 93

Patricia Locke 83

James Nelson 77

Juana Conrad 70

Jack McCants 65

Alberta Deas 54

Delegates present and voting: 166

Delegates voting by mail: 3

Total delegate vote count: 169

Total number of delegates: 171

Invalid Ballots: 1

Total number of persons

voted for (spread): 259

Saturday morning of the National Convention, traditionally reserved for voting and closed consultation among delegates, was held back this year for discussion of the May 19th, 1994 letter of the Universal House of Justice and its implications. Consultation began when a delegate asked what the UHJ was referring to in their letter when they commented on the appearance of disunity within the Assembly. James Nelson answered, saying that the House's comment produced "something between acute concern and high anxiety" for the NSA, but that the members of the NSA did not know what the House meant. He added that the UHJ letter answered many unspoken questions, however.

Counsellor Wilma Ellis then pointed out that the May 19th letter referred only to the "appearance" of disunity and ownership, not the actual condition. Juana Conrad then bluntly asked the assembled delegates about what the Bahá'í rank and file had been telling Counsellors and the Universal House of Justice that might lead them to this conclusion.

Robert Henderson then made an impassioned speech, saying that responding to the UHJ letter was not an easy thing to do. He cited the difficulties of battling the community's "perceptions" of the NSA; said that having to lay off more than 200 Bahá'ís in the past eight years was intensely unsettling; and commented that "nobody ran for this office, and there is no university of Bahá'í administration -- we are all practicing."

The delegates then offered the NSA members their expressions of love and support. Several delegates later characterized the morning's discussion

as very cordial and candid. Other delegates expressed a variety of opinions:

"They (the NSA) seemed so beleaguered, but the meeting was very candid, very good."

"On a scale of good, better, best -- better. People have been really encouraged to speak out, praised for it instead of crushed, all the detailed financial documents are available upstairs. They've never done that before. We'll see how it comes out in a few weeks, though, when (Universal House of Justice member) Ali Nakhjavani comes to town."

"It was like throwing rocks at wounded deer, so hardly anyone said a thing. Not much clash at all, which for some people was good, but for others was not."

"The NSA looked extremely shell-shocked and unhappy, expecting to be lambasted. I wonder how my Assembly would feel if they got such a letter."

"The letter from the House was really about the perceptions of the community, and so was addressed to us all, not just the NSA."

"Chastened and chastised, the NSA acquitted themselves well this morning. I think we are on our way to increasing trust."

"No one loves this Assembly more than me, but we need to see more openness and candor than I saw this morning -- what I saw was defensiveness."

[Note: Comments for this section based on interviews with 12 delegates who attended the closed session. Quotes unattributed to protect confidentiality.]

On Saturday afternoon, the first recommendation, citing fear among delegates about speaking honestly and thus appearing disloyal, suggested that the NSA consider setting aside more closed session time. Removing the visitor audience for longer sessions, the delegate suggested, would have the effect of reducing the need for those delegates who speak "to appear more fervid than the next, as if playing to a crowd." The motion, after much discussion, failed.

Then a long period of consultation on the subject of Robert's Rules of Order (used faithfully at National Convention) ensued. Many delegates spoke against their use, suggesting that they were the product of a Eurocentric cultural bias, that they cut off quality consultation when delegates from more deliberative cultures like Native Americans were still preparing their contributions, and that they stifled an atmosphere of spiritual exchange. While the motion to stop using them failed, the Chair welcomed suggestions from delegates and believers at large for improving the quality of consultation at the Convention.

Robert Henderson rose to speak and expressed frustration at the level of

the delegate's input on the written reports prepared in advance by the NSA and on the Ridvan Message, as well. "I'm concerned that there is very little reference to the issues raised in the NSA reports," he commented.

Delegate Joe Galata then arose and stirred the convention with his story of being unable to find joy and the mention of God in Bahá'í meetings any longer, and therefore seeking those things in his Gypsy heritage and their joyous celebrations and worship. "I had to go back to my culture to find joy, because I wanted to worship God, not rehabilitate all our fellow Bahá'ís and go to meetings where God never came up except in the opening prayer. We need the NSA to inspire us and lift us up." Galata's plea for increased spirit galvanized many delegates, and the consultation briefly rallied.

Dorothy Nelson, in response to a question from the floor about the NSA plan to decentralize the community and turn over more of the responsibility for administration to the Local Assemblies, said that LSAs may soon be asked to keep their own membership and records files; retain and file their own records of all types; and decide on such matters as the removal of administrative rights of individual believers. This decentralization plan has been prepared with much thought and input, she said, but was currently on hold because of the \$500,000 required to implement it.

At 1:00 pm, Treasurer Bill Davis reported more than \$35,000 in contributions received during the convention, with an additional \$17,000 in pledges.

The evening session introduced the newly-reelected National Spiritual Assembly, and then segued into a report on the Huquq'u'llah from Trustee Dariush Hahgigi, who showed an excerpt of a new film on the Huquq featuring Hands of the Cause Furutan and Varqa.

The new Bahá'í newsreel was then shown, focusing on the Louis Gregory Institute and WLGI Radio Bahá'í in South Carolina. Chair Nelson then called all participants in the newsreel to the stage, and standing ovations resulted. The session drew to a spirited close with the Bahá'í Gospel Singers.

Day Four -- US National Bahá'í Convention -- April 30, 1995

Chicago--The 86th US National Bahá'í Convention drew to a close here today. Characterized by a spirit of loving fellowship among the attendees, uplifted by gospel music, prayers and special presentations, and yet marked by tensions over leadership questions raised by the Universal House of Justice letter of May 19, 1994 to the US NSA, the convention re-elected all nine incumbent National Spiritual Assembly members.

The final half-day of consultation attempted to focus on the subject of "Applying the Guardian's Directives to the issue of Race

Unity." The morning witnessed several new topics of discussion, closing presentations by all three Continental Counsellors present, and a rousing gospel finish. Among the topics raised for consultation by the delegates:

-Much serious discussion ensued on a recommendation that the NSA consider establishing a self-supporting non-profit corporation to provide and offer diversity training to companies. The recommendation carried.

-An African-American delegate made a strong suggestion that we make it a policy to divorce all "race unity" activities from their traditional connections to the African-American Bahá'ís. She noted that race unity could more properly be cast as a predominantly white concern, and said that racial harmony as the only teaching approach to African-Americans inevitably insulted them, assuming as it does that the sole significant concern of the African-American community is racial in nature.

-One delegate suggested that the Bahá'í community resume race amity conferences, of the type that were held in the twenties, and take back the leadership of the race unity issue in the US. Others added that with the social focus in the country shifting to concerns like affirmative action and California's Proposition 187, the time was ripe for significant Bahá'í leadership on the issue.

-Persians should be invited to share more in consultation, one person strongly suggested, because their cultural barriers and natural shyness made them refrain from doing so. The Bahá'í community needs, the speaker said, to encourage both Persians and Native Americans to contribute more to our deliberations

-Along those same lines, one female delegate stated that the largest percentage of speakers seemed to be male. While the delegate spoke, Chair Dorothy Nelson counted the delegate participants on the list, and announced that:

of 120 male delegates, 68 had spoken

of 51 female delegates, 33 had spoken.

Judge Nelson concluded that a greater percentage of the women delegates had spoken, but that of course their total number was certainly smaller.

-One delegate raised the issue of the review of songs, and Robert C. Henderson replied that the Special Materials Review Committee had recently been done away with, along with the requirement of review for anything other than Bahá'í literature. He pointed out that the American Bahá'í would carry an education and deepening series on these issues.

-And finally, the last delegate to speak raised the issue of intermarriage between Persian and African American Bahá'ís, saying that the community needs an enormous campaign of education in this area, as some parents were unwilling to give their sons and daughters consent because of race. The delegate emphasized that the family should not stand in the way of the youth, who had obviously learned the principle of the oneness of humanity better than their parents.

One significant subject occupied the focus of much of the off-the-floor discussion among both delegates and visitors -- the seeming alienation of some of the Persian community from the American Bahá'í mainstream. Saturday night's music presentation of both gospel music and the Chicago Youth Workshop's rap music and hip-hop dance routines disturbed some of the more traditional Bahá'ís, according to many, who find it difficult associating a spirit of reverence with such styles. Others suggested that deep cultural divides between non-English speaking Persians and minority American groups were widening as the American Bahá'í community developed more programs and presentations specifically influenced and even driven by American popular culture.

Treasurer William Davis announced that the convention had raised \$127,747 in contributions and \$17,000 in pledges for the National Fund, and \$39,325 in contributions and \$37,000 in pledges for the Arc Fund.

In her closing remarks, Chair Nelson indicated that the NSA wanted as much input as possible from the delegates and the believers at large, and reading the National Center's telephone number to the crowd, urged everyone to call or write with suggestions for the better functioning of the administration and the community. [Bahá'í National Center: 1-708-869-9039]

In his summary, Counsellor William Roberts emphasized women's empowerment, saying that Bahá'í men "have a lot to learn from women." He then compared `Abdu'l-Bahá's wedding, unique for its sense of unity and spiritual harmony, to the relationship that should obtain between the believers and the National Spiritual Assembly.

Counsellor Stephen Birkland summed up by congratulating delegates on the refinement of their consultation skills and the high level of the issues the delegates raised. He said it heartened him to hear the deep interest in these important matters of the Cause from the floor, and encouraged the Bahá'ís to continue offering constructive dialogue.

In her summation, Counsellor Wilma Ellis thanked the Institution of the Learned, especially the Auxiliary Board, for their support of

the NSA during this difficult time. She suggested that it was important that the Bahá'ís in the US community refrain from complaining and backbiting to Universal House of Justice Member Ali Nahkjavani during his upcoming visit, saying that we should not let him take back all of our concerns to Haifa. Yes, there are problems, she noted, but we need to unite and try to solve them.

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