

The U.S. Bahá'í community began to promote racial and gender equality in the early 20th century. Their message melded easily with the civil rights movement of the 1960s and has stood out in its promotion of King's message and volunteerism in related events.

In San Antonio, the Bahá'í community began to attend the yearly march in 1990. Three years later, John Abdo, a Bahá'í leader, joined the MLK Commission's interfaith service committee.

The commission, supported by the city of San Antonio and community donations, oversees various subcommittees that support events, fundraising and other aspects of the citywide celebration.

He was among three Bahá'ís to serve on the interfaith committee in the 1990s. At times, organizing the service was challenging, given the various religious faiths disagreeing on format. Occasionally, Abdo faced opposition as Christian ministers were leery of a Bahá'í's input, said Bishop David Copeland, MLK Commissioner.

The late Rev. Claude Black, regarded as the city's most influential civil rights leader, defended Abdo and cleared barriers for him and Bahá'í members to contribute, Copeland said.

“I personally may not agree with all their theology, but I certainly endorse their message that all humanity is worthy of uplifting,” Copeland said. “I think it would have been somewhat anti-Martin Luther King to say to any particular group that you're not acceptable because you're not Christian.... I would encourage others to be as active as the Bahá'í (community).”

As a result, the interfaith committee has been able to produce a worship service where all religions are respected and showcased without forcing beliefs on one another, Copeland said.

The interfaith committee once faced the possibility of having to be shut down early in the term of his involvement, Abdo said. Former MLK commissioner, the late Thurman Walker, stepped in to keep it viable and direct it to continue organizing an interfaith service.

Ultimately, Abdo was named its chair, a role he has cherished as a way to practice his faith's central belief in racial, religious and gender equality. He said he relies on a Bahá'í-inspired approach to decision-making called “consultation.”

“I try to communicate and seek the truth without using power or coercion,” he said. “We all have different gifts. Unity doesn't mean uniformity. But I also believe we're all one. As the chair, I've always felt you should not let any one person dominate a committee. I really like to get everyone's opinion and offer my own, but I don't override anyone,” he said. “We really try to come to an agreement.”

The Bahá'í approach to resolving conflicts has brought about a culture of consensus, a contribution the other faiths involved in the MLK interfaith

service appreciate, said Dick Cheatham, a retired United Methodist minister and member of Abdo's committee.

This year's service will include Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Sikh and Hindu representatives.

Bahá'í followers “look for the unity, not the division,” he said. “Very intentionally at the interfaith services, each religion has the opportunity to present itself and showcase itself properly. They understand that everyone is a child of God, and that just radiates through their faith. The people live it.”

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— Baha'is have outsized MLK presence (Used by permission of the curator)