Community, Baha'i

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Community, Bahá'í. Bahá'ís use the term "community" in both a symbolic and concrete sense. The symbolic usage refers to the general body of believers, locally, nationally or globally, as in the "Bahá'í community of Swaziland, the "Bahá'í International Community," and the "Community of the Most Great Name." This article covers the concrete use of the term, with particular emphasis on the local community. The individual entries on countries cover the historical development, social features, and scholarly studies of respective national Bahá'í communities.

1. Membership, Spiritual Foundations, and Purpose. A Bahá'í community consists of children, youth and adults. Any individual who accepts the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh may apply for membership. Once the local or the national spiritual assembly, under whose jurisdiction the Bahá'í resides, accepts the application the new member is registered. No rituals govern entry into the Bahá'í community.

Bahá'í communities are the collective, practical, everyday expression of the Bahá'í Faith. In the Bahá'í view, the spiritual and social arrangements of a Bahá'í community are such that they can both transform society and the individual. Bahá'ís see Bahá'í communities as testing-grounds for the development of spiritual qualities. For example, the participation of members from various backgrounds offers one the opportunity to assess his or her own efforts in the elimination of prejudice and to practise tolerance, compassion and fellowship, although some communities living with diversity may, at first, undergo a "diminished intimacy in the social relationships" (Hollinger, 1992: XXviii), leading to more formal relationships as a means of dealing with social discomfort. Nevertheless, every community passes through similar tests as a dimension of its growing pains (LoG: 491). In the end, though, the "vigor, unity, and discipline of the Bahá'í community" should stand in contrast to an ailing society (WoG: 79).

A Bahá'í community must strive for developing bonds of affection among its members, relying on "those mighty forces of love and strength and harmony" generated by the Bahá'í Faith (PBA: 16). The historical and social circumstances that a Bahá'í community finds itself in often determines the degree to which such a goal can be achieved. For example, it may quite common to find a community characterized by a high level of commitment, but "rather minimal bonds of reciprocal obligations" among its members when there is only little development of communal devotional activity (Hollinger, 1992: xxix). It seems that in a small community much attention must be given by all its members to such primary activities as meetings of the spiritual assembly, Nineteen-Day Feasts, that little consideration can be given to other matters (Hollinger, 1992: xxix). With increasing size of the Bahá'í community activities tend to multiply so that other facets are recognized and developed. Organized Bahá'í activities are intended to foster harmony among the believers and to promote the expansion and consolidation of the community. Ways by which a spiritual assembly realizes these goals include the arrangement of Nineteen-Day Feasts, Holy Day observances and other social and educational activities in the community, the promotion of the well-being of youth and children, and humanitarian endeavours, both inside and outside the Bahá'í community. If one takes the percentage of members' making financial contributions as an indicator of commitment, members of larger communities tend to be less committed.

Bahá'í community life also allows for the development and maturation of the Administrative Order (q.v.) foreshadowed by Bahá'u'lláh. Elected Bahá'í institutions evolve when individual members of the community cherish, nurture, love, assist, obey, and pray for them (UHJ, Naw-Rúz 1974). Through time and experience, these institutions will resemble more closely the "majestic institutions ordained by Bahá'u'lláh in His Writings" (UHJ, 30 July 1972).

2. Organizational Dimensions. The area of jurisdiction of a local Bahá'í community usually matches civil or municipal boundaries. An exception to this may occur where a physical barrier such as a mountain makes direct contact between different parts of a civic community unduly difficult. A spiritual assembly is formed to administer the affairs of the community whenever there are nine or more adult members (currently defined at 21 years of age). When there are only nine adults the assembly is formed by a joint declaration of those nine believers. When there are more than nine adults, all are eligible to vote and be voted for in the election of the assembly, using a secret ballot, without campaigning, or electioneering. Assemblies are formed annually on April 21, the first day of Ridván (q.v.).

The Nineteen-Day Feast (q.v.) is the principal, regular meeting of a local Bahá'í community and is "an arena of democracy at the very root of society, where the Local Spiritual Assembly and the members of the community meet on common ground" ("Stirring of the Spirit", 3). Organized by the Spiritual Assembly every nineteen days and generally held on the first day of

each Bahá'í month the Feast (q.v.) is "intended to promote unity, ensure progress, and foster joy" (ibid., 1). The Feast consists of three parts: the devotional, the administrative and the social. In the administrative portion, the believers can make suggestions to the spiritual assembly, and the latter provides reports and other matters that require the involvement of believers.

A local Bahá'í fund, supported by voluntary donations accepted from Bahá'ís only, provides the material means by which a community undertakes its various activities. An assembly may also appoint committees, drawn from its own and/or the general community membership, to assist in carrying out its various tasks.

3. Identity and Social Boundaries. Whenever sustained, on-going interaction occurs, members develop an identity distinct from the wider society. Taking a historical perspective, one notes that Bahá'í communities are increasingly shaping the identity of individuals as Bahá'ís. As a consequence, boundaries between the Bahá'í community and the larger society are becoming more pronounced.

In the western world, entry into the community was rather "soft" during the first decades of the 20th century; individuals would regard themselves as Bahá'ís through long-standing association, rather than through an explicit declaration of belief. One could hardly expect to see the development of a sharply contrasting Bahá'í identity (cf. Hollinger, 1992: viii). The smallness of Bahá'í communities and fluctuating memberships (30-50 members (Hollinger, 1992: xi)) also contributed initially to a weak identity, immersed as they were in a sea of Christianity. It was not uncommon for Bahá'ís during thie time to retain church membership.

It stands to reason that early Bahá'í communities had few, if any, boundary markers. Virtually anyone could attend a Bahá'í meeting. Bahá'í community life was more a question of private beliefs than a collective expression of such beliefs. The formative stage of Bahá'í administration (since 1921) resulted in a strengthening of Bahá'í identity in communities creating more definite social boundaries. Such markers include Nineteen-Day Feasts, the Bahá'í Fund, an explicit enrollment procedure, the shaping of spiritual assemblies as the nucleus of authority and activity, and control over Bahá'í publications. To some, even the use of specific terminology (e.g. "the Faith" "fireside," "the Fund"), often derived from Bahá'í scripture, is enough to mark the social boundaries of contemporary Bahá'í communities. Moreover, the legal incorporation of Bahá'í communities strengthened the social boundaries with legal statutes.

4. Resolving Conflict. Whenever people work together disagreements may arise, and since unresolved tension will undermine harmony, every human community must learn constructive ways of recognizing and resolving problems. For Bahá'ís, there are several avenues to alleviating such tensions. First, the parties should put the past behind them ("Living

the Life": 33) and look to the future. Second, since some difficult problems may be due to the frailty of human nature (ibid.: 33), magnanimity and generosity of spirit are called for. Third, individuals can put themselves in the path of service to overcome vexing difficulties (ibid.: 36). Fourth, consultation (q.v.) is used to resolve such conflict. In the Bahá'í perspective, "[t]here are spiritual principles...by which solutions can be found for every social problem" ("Promise of World Peace": 13). Therefore, the goal of Bahá'í consultation is to "seek to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them." In addition to resolving problems, consultation is applied to the decision-making process. This consultative process is applicable at all levels of human interaction, whether individual or collective.

If, in the Bahá'í community, a dispute between individuals cannot be resolved, the concerned parties may ask the local spiritual assembly for its assistance. In matters that directly affect the Bahá'í community the spiritual assembly is duty-bound to intervene. Once an assembly has reached any decision, individual members of the assembly or community should not criticize or undermine it. However, any individual has the right "to appeal from any Assembly decision which he [or she] conscientiously feels is unjust or detrimental to the best interests of the community" ("Individual Rights and Freedoms," 10). The appeal process involves asking the assembly to reconsider its decision and may even result in appeals to the higher levels of the administration: the national spiritual assembly, and finally the Universal House of Justice whose decision is binding.

In the case of individual violation of Bahá'í standards which disrupt community life, an individual may--after a process involving fair and equitable hearings and confidentiality--be deprived by the National Spiritual Assembly of his or her administrative rights. Under these circumstances, the individual is not allowed to make financial contribution to the Bahá'í community, nor to participate in the administrative affairs of the Bahá'í community, such as the electoral process and Nineteen-Day Feasts. Evidence of remorse is sufficient to restore administrative rights.

In cases involving opposition or non-acceptance of Bahá'í authority, only the Universal House of Justice can decide on whether or not to declare someone a "Covenant-breaker" (q.v.). This decision is arrived at after a thorough examination of all facts on hand. Covenant-breakers are expelled from the Bahá'í community and are no longer considered Bahá'ís.

5. Current Challenges of Bahá'í Community Life.

Challenges to the development of Bahá'í community life originate from several sources. Foremost of these are (a) culture, (b) an inadequate understanding by members of the purposes and principles that govern the functioning of Bahá'í communities, (c) the increasingly wider diversity of Bahá'í communities, and (d) their increasing size and number.

(a) Culture. While affirming the spiritual basis of all human

cultures, some Bahá'í practices and social arrangements can run counter to cultural and historical traditions. Backbiting, dishonesty, gender inequalities and prejudice of all kinds are examples of those traditions that are deeply-ingrained in many societies, but expressly forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís must consciously struggle to eradicate such "cultural disabilities" (UHJ to NSA Canada, 19 March 1975) from their personal and community lives, while being patient with oneself and others.

Cultural practices also determine attitudes about the role of the individual within the collective framework. Some cultures attach great importance to individual initiative while others stress the need for collective action. As an example, some Bahá'í communities may regard the primacy of the individual in taking action, while others see the collectivity taking a more active part in defining community action. While it seems, in the Bahá'í view, that it is "the individual...on whom...depends the fate of the entire community" (LoG: 68), considerable weight is also attached to "universal participation" and the authority of the spiritual assembly in directing the course of community affairs.

Although the Bahá'í Writings indicate that consultation can be a "panacea" for the solution of human problems, hierarchical or patriarchal decision-making processes are still the cultural norm in many parts of the world. The challenge for Bahá'ís, therefore, is to evolve new cultural norms based on an increasingly more mature understanding of the spiritual principles upon which they will build a truly united community.

(b) Inadequate understanding of Bahá'í administrative order. Arriving at an understanding of how the various parts of Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order relate to each other, is another challenge that faces individuals in their private and collective lives. One notes, for example, how the degree of collaboration between the elected institutions of the Bahá'í Faith and the "learned" can be culturally conditioned. In areas of the world which have undergone a thorough process of secularization, there might be a reluctance to consider the advice of "learned," unjustly perceived as religious leaders in the traditional sense of the word. By contrast, in areas which have continued to rely heavily on clerical leaders, more weight may be accorded to individual Bahá'ís, rather than the spiritual assembly.

It is clear from the Bahá'í Writings that Bahá'u'lláh revealed a system of laws and institutions that vested authority in democratically elected assemblies and made provision for individuals to perform an educational and inspirational role without establishing a clerical elite (Bahá'u'lláh, 51-52). What is needed is the recognition of a mutuality of benefits and a spirit of cooperation among both "arms" of organized Bahá'í life.

(c) Increasing diversity of Bahá'í communities.

Diversity affects a Bahá'í community in both external and

internal ways. When a Bahá'í community exhibits diversity vis-a-vis the larger society, the community may meet opposition or receive attention from authorities. Hollinger (1992: xxviii), for example, indicates several instances where the Ku Klux Kan objected to Bahá'í interracial meetings.

Variations also exist by virtue of historical, societal, or demographic factors. Bahá'í communities will be at different evolutionary stages. The rhythms of life in an African village, a small Pacific island, a twentieth-century metropolis, or a North-American farming community differ one from another. Bahá'í communities reflect the differences in those environments. At one end, a rural culture may make it relatively simple for the Bahá'ís to integrate their economic, educational and social concerns with those of the Bahá'í community. At the other end, the current expression of Bahá'í community life in an urban setting may, in some cases, only consist of gathering for the Nineteen-Day Feast and other Holy Day observances, and these communities may exhibit more the characteristics of "`voluntary association' popular with the urban middle class" (Hollinger, 1992: xi). Moreover, it is not uncommon for Bahá'í community activities to reflect the rhythm or character of the wider religious society. For example, some Western Bahá'í communities emulate Christian denominational life, by holding Sunday meetings (Hollinger, 1992: xii), and conceptualize Bahá'í communities very much like a parish or church.

At this juncture, there are, as yet, no communities that claim to embody all the desired elements of Bahá'í community structure and dynamics. Some scholarly accounts suggest that only when Bahá'í communities become increasingly aware of the disparity between the traditional and Bahá'í approaches that communities can start to reflect the Bahá'í ideals of community life. It is already clear, in the Bahá'í experience, that a diverse population within a community offers more challenges than a homogeneous one. But through such challenges, diversity offers the best hope for community development, ensuring the dynamic vitality and the continued maturation of the Bahá'í community.

A special case of diversification of Bahá'í communities relates to the recent influx of Iranian Bahá'ís (after 1979) into Western Bahá'í communities, profoundly altering their social makeup. The challenge facing these communities consists of integrating the two distinctive approaches insofar as some Bahá'í administrative and social practices are concerned, as well as the development of subcultures within the community. As a consequence, communities regularly hold cultural and language courses, deepenings, or workshops as a means of overcoming differences.

(d) Increasing size and number of Bahá'í Communities

However variable the size of Bahá'í communities around the globe (from an average of 15 in North America to several thousands in the

so-called developing countries), communities are growing in size. As a result, their activities have become more visible and specialized, extending into areas of personal development and social and economic development projects. As Hollinger notes (1992: xxxv), it is not yet clear what impact these activities have on local communities, although they do results in fostering "greater social cohesion in the Bahá'í population at an international level."

As the number of Bahá'í communities increases, it is necessary to develop systems of collaboration for issues where jurisdictions overlap. For example, in parts of the world where the number of communities are closely situated to each other, Bahá'ís have had to develop collaboration in terms of relationships with the media, the maintainance of children's classes serving several communities at once, and the fostering of cordial relations with authorities.

6. Future Dimensions. There are an increasing number of instances where the whole population in a civil area has accepted the Bahá'í Faith. They must still function according to civil laws of the land and may have to elect a secular village council as well as a Bahá'í spiritual assembly. Under such circumstances, there might be initial problems in aligning the Bahá'í approach to such matters as elections for the assembly and the local village council.

As the pattern of Bahá'í community life becomes more distinctive and reflective of the goal of "unity in diversity," it will increase its involvement in many areas of societal life. Already there have been instances where members of the community at large have approached the local Bahá'ís for assistance in the resolution of disputes or for the provision of social and humanitarian services.

The Bahá'í Writings attach great importance to the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, involving the Bahá'í house of worship. The term which embraces a whole complex of institutions. With the House of Worship at its centre, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár will include an orphanage, a university, a hospital, and a hospice for travellers. It is envisaged that eventually each community will have its own Mashriqu'l-Adhkár.

In general, Bahá'í communities are called upon to become "renowned" for their demonstration of unity (UHJ, Nawruz 1974), their ability to "diffuse within their own countries the spirit of love and social unity" (UHJ, Ridvan 1986), their ability to adapt to change and to maintain a "unity in diversity of actions" to allow for the participation of a wider range of individuals (UHJ, Ridvan 1990), and their reflection of a pattern of life that "will offer hope to the disillusioned members of society," (UHJ, Ridvan 1990).

7. Studies on Bahá'í Communities. There exists very few scholarly examinations of Bahá'í community life. There is a dearth of such studies on non-urban and non-Western Bahá'í communities. Hollinger (1992) provides a state-of-the-art overview of this scholarship. Particularly noteworthy are historical studies of Chicago

(Perry, 1986), Kenosha in Wisconsin (Dahl in Hollinger, 1992; Collins in Momen, 1982), Baltimore in Maryland (Clark in Hollinger, 1992), Sacramento in California (Caton in Hollinger, 1992), and Saint John in New Brunswick (Canada) (van den Hoonaard in Hollinger, 1992). Studies of more contemporary Bahá'í communities include those of Houston in Texas (Archer, 1980), rural Southern United States (Kahn, 1977), and Malwa in India (Garlington, 1975; Garrigues, 1975). Specific aspects of Bahá'í community life, such as recruitment (Ebaugh and Vaughn, 1984; Wyman, 1985), fund-raising activities (Warburg, 1993), socialization (Bartlett, 1984), worldviews (van den Hoonaard, 1984), and interaction (Nerenberg, 1985) have also been explored. There is a more recent trend to examine the Iranian dimensions of Western Bahá'í communities, such as in Italy (e.g. Saint-Blancat, 1989) and Los Angeles. Berger's study (1954) was a notably early comparative study of the New York and Persian Bahá'í communities. Non-scholarly works, such as Jewett's study (1984) of community life also provide valuable insights.

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