

FACT Case Studies of Congregations Engaging Young Adults **Houston Bahá'í Center**

By Michael McMullen

Young adults in the Baha'i faith must deal with the challenge of how to serve humanity in a religion with no clergy. A visitor walking into the lobby of the Houston Bahá'í Center is immediately greeted by friendly faces and the invitation to look at the historical display about the Bahá'í Faith in a room off the lobby, or join worshipers in the basement for coffee/tea and breakfast before the main Sunday morning worship service. The historical display provides information about the origins of the Bahá'í Faith in mid-19th century Iran, as well as communicating the principles of the religion established by Baha'u'llah, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í community in 1864: the equality of men and women, the unity of all humanity, and the development of world peace through global governance, resulting in the establishment of the Kingdom of God through Bahá'í teachings and administration.

When visitors descend to the basement in the old, converted office building in mid-town Houston, they come upon a coffee-house set up with pastries, fruit, Persian tea in a Samovar, and coffee on a table against the back wall. Some younger kids are playing table-tennis, while young and old sit chatting around small, round tables before the worship program. There are a mix of whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and a significant number of Persians. There are many young adults in attendance, but also elderly Bahá'ís, some of whom are Persians refugees to the US tell and can tell stories about their escape from the attempted genocide committed by the Shi'ite Muslim authorities in Iran, or recount the ongoing persecutions of the Bahá'í minority in Iran.

At 10 am, everyone is invited to go upstairs to the main hall for the morning's devotional program, prepared by the young adult members of the Houston Bahá'í community. Sanjay, an Indian/Hindu convert to the Bahá'í Faith, welcomes everyone to the Bahá'í center as chair of the nine-member Local Spiritual Assembly, and Nabil, one of the Persian-American young adults, begins the recorded music.

In the Bahá'í Faith, there are no clergy since Baha'u'llah has forbidden them, so Sanjay's role is not as a clergy member, but comes from being on the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Houston Bahá'í community. Bahá'ís are counseled in their scripture to elect every year a nine-member assembly to govern the affairs of the local community; a similar process occurs at the National and International Levels of Bahá'í Administration.

The music of several young Bahá'í singers/composers is introduced via Youtube (for example, Luke Slott, Andy Grammar, Karim Rushdy or Nabil Moghaddam), but sometimes there is also live music by hip-hop or rock-inspired Bahá'í singers.

Interspersed between the music are prayers read or chanted (in Farsi) by high school youth. After about 30-45 minutes of prayers and singing, Sanjay introduces the speaker for the morning.

The speaker at the Sunday morning devotionals is usually a knowledgeable Bahá'ís who gives a 45-minute lecture on Bahá'í history, spirituality, the importance for Bahá'ís to teach their faith and communicate the religion of Baha'u'llah to the masses who have not yet heard about Baha'u'llah being the return of Christ. Over half the weekly devotional speakers are young adults.

Children's Class Teachers

While the devotional is going on in the main floor assembly hall, upstairs, Bahá'í "Sunday School" is taking place. Children's classes for ages preschool through 12th grade are held in individual classrooms, nearly all of them taught by young adults. Bahá'ís strongly emphasize the education of children, and one way this manifests itself is for Bahá'í communities to provide children's classes.

At the younger level classes, ages 5-10, Bahá'í education focuses on learning the basics of Bahá'í history, who the "Central Figures" of the Bahá'í Faith are, and basics of Bahá'í spiritual values, such as the unity of religion, the oneness of God, and the unity of humanity and working to develop a world without racial, gender or national prejudice.

In Bahá'ís history, the Faith begins with Ali-Muhammad, a Persian merchant born in 1817 who fulfills Shi'ite prophesy as being the return of the 12th Imam. Bahá'í theology states that the role of the return of the 12th Imam is to herald the coming of a prophet of global religious significance, who Bahá'ís believe to be the prophet-founder of their Faith, Baha'u'llah. As such, Bahá'ís believe that because the one God is the author of all the world's major faith traditions revealed at different historical times, Baha'u'llah is not only the return of Christ, but also the promised one of Islam, the Messiah anticipated by the Jews, the reincarnation of Krishna, and the 5th avatar of Buddha. After Baha'u'llah's death in 1892, the Bahá'í Faith was led by 'Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah, from 1892-1921, and then by Shoghi Effendi, the great-grandson of Baha'u'llah, from 1921-1957. Shortly after Shoghi Effendi's death, the Bahá'ís of the world elected their first nine-person Universal House of Justice (UHJ). Given that there are no clergy allowed in the Bahá'í Faith, the UHJ collectively is the highest authority in the Bahá'í world.

Higher grade levels learn more specifics about other religions such as Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which Bahá'ís consider to be all part of the "progressive revelation" of Prophets from God. Bahá'í classes for children ages 12-15 also focus on learning the basics of Bahá'í Administration. Young adults teach kids about the basics of Bahá'í

governance, elections, and the intricacies of both the elected and appointed positions of the Bahá'í structure.

For kids 16-18 years old, the young adult teachers focus on issues that most impact not only high school kids, but also young adult Bahá'ís. For example, Bahá'ís are not allowed to drink alcohol or take drugs, engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage or engage in backbiting. Bahá'í young adults therefore lead their peers in tough discussions about how to live “the Bahá'í life” of chastity and no mind-altering substances. Bahá'í young adults, like the high school-age students they teach, are challenged to live up to the high standards of Bahá'í morality, especially prohibitions against alcohol and premarital sex. Thus, for young adult Bahá'ís, working as youth teachers serves two main functions: (1) planning lessons for the 100 or so Bahá'í children who come to Sunday Bahá'í School reinforces their identity as Bahá'í teachers, an important aspect of the Bahá'í Faith where teaching a relatively unknown religion takes on great spiritual significance and is given high status; and (2) it allows young adult Bahá'ís a chance to serve in a high-visibility role in a faith with no clergy.

Bahá'í young adults make up about 16.5 percent of the 600-person Houston Bahá'í community. However, they comprise only about 9 percent of Local Spiritual Assembly members, 28 percent of those attending regular “deepenings” (what in Bahá'í-language would be considered “Bible studies”), and 21 percent of the membership on local committees.

Junior Youth Mentors

Another role for young adults in the Bahá'í Faith is to act as mentors to Junior Youth. In the Bahá'í Faith, 11-14-year olds are considered junior youth, and 15-30-year-olds are youth. This cutoff is different than some other groups, because Bahá'í law considers 15 to be the age of consent for young people to officially join Bahá'í membership rolls. With no clergy, Bahá'í leadership is selected by election, and the age at which Bahá'ís can officially enroll and get a Bahá'í number to vote in Bahá'í elections, give to Bahá'í funds, is age 15. This is also the age when they are required to follow the obligatory laws of prayer and fasting.

Nearly all junior youth leaders are young adults. Meetings with 11-14-year-olds are held in young adults' homes. There is a special curriculum that young adult leaders are required to complete in order to be junior youth mentors. This curriculum was developed by the Columbian Bahá'í community, and is now referred to as the Ruhi Course Sequence throughout the Bahá'í world. Junior youth meetings involve completing lessons from a junior youth curriculum developed by the National Spiritual Assembly of the US, learning about responsibilities of junior youth to teach their friends about the Bahá'í Faith, and then having a meal together. At the end of all of the lessons, young adults lead

the junior youth in some type of service project, such as a beach clean-up, bagging food for distribution to needy seniors, or visiting a nursing home.

One young adult I interviewed who is deeply involved in the Training Institute process said, “The courses designed by the National Assembly are helping empower junior youth. It is helping them understand they should develop a life of service, not just to other Bahá’ís, but to all young people—in their neighborhoods and communities.” He emphasized that given the deteriorating condition of society, he is pushing young Bahá’ís to think about how they can make a positive change in the world.

Another young adult woman I interviewed said that the National Spiritual Assembly of the US has given more focus in the last five years to supporting youth and enhancing their spiritual education. She said “the goal is not only to help them lead a life of service to humanity, but to also have the human resources to grow up to be members of the Local Spiritual Assemblies and to be Assistants to Auxiliary Board members.” She went on to say that when one goes to a Unit Convention (part of the process to elect the National Spiritual Assembly), everyone in attendance is over 50 years old, and most LSA members are older too. However, the “youth are the ones who are empowered to serve Baha’u’llah and their fellow human beings, who will be the ones who effectively teach the Bahá’í message, and who will win the goals of the current 5-Year Plan.”

Auxiliary Board members are an appointed branch of the Bahá’í Administrative Order that act as consultants to the LSAs and NSAs to spread the Bahá’í message. At the global level, the Universal House of Justice develops “Plans” for the growth and development of the Bahá’í world community that gets filtered down to the National Spiritual Assemblies and then to the local level. The Bahá’í world is currently carrying out their teaching work via the “5-Year Plan.”

Messages from Bahá’í leaders about the importance of young adults being the role models for youth and junior youth can be seen in the following statement: “By instilling in the junior youth a keen sense of purpose, the programme has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to transform young people, increase their commitment to spiritual and material education, empower them to undertake social action for the improvement of their communities, resist the destructive and prejudicial forces within their societies, and contribute to the construction of a better world.” (“Insights from the Frontiers of Learning,” by the International Teaching Centre, Bahá’í World Center, Haifa, Israel. April 2013, p. 4.)

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights some of the important roles performed in the Houston Bahá'í community by young adult Bahá'ís. As can be seen, although Bahá'ís have no official clergy, there are leadership roles, and young adults serve as worship leaders, children's classes teachers, and as junior youth mentors.

Bahá'í young adults make up about 16.5 percent of the 600-person Houston Bahá'í community. However, they comprise only about 9 percent of Local Spiritual Assembly members. Thus, while young adults are relatively under-represented in positions of "official power" in Bahá'í ecclesiastical governance (members of the LSA or Assistants to Auxiliary Board Members), they occupy positions of status as educators and tutors of youth, which is becoming a more important goal in the last several "Plans" of Bahá'í growth and development. Most children's class teachers and nearly all junior youth tutors are young adults.

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