

Baha'i Faith and Peace Education

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"World peace is not only possible but inevitable. It is the next stage in the evolution of this planet."

The Promise of World Peace: A Baha'i Statement on Peace (Universal House of Justice, 1986)

INTRODUCTION

World unity and world peace are the goals of the Baha'i Faith. Baha'is believe that humanity is currently living at a demarcation line between the last throes of an epoch marked by violent conflict and war and the early dawning of a golden era where humanity as a whole will commit itself to the common project of learning to live together in peace. Baha'is believe this process of individual and societal transformation is occurring through the dual forces of both cataclysmic events and the practical efforts of individuals and groups inspired by spiritual principles.

Baha'is would say that progress towards this ideal is hampered due to a number of foundationally spiritual root problems that have to be addressed before real changes to attitude and behavior can take place. According to the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Baha'i Faith (1988), war can be traced to prejudice, the oppression of women, inordinate extremes of wealth and poverty, excessive nationalism, religious strife, education that reinforces violence and negates the spiritual nature of humanity, and paralysis of will.

The Baha'i Faith appeals to humanity to accept its essential oneness and work towards the realization of global peace through grassroots local and international collaborative activity based on principles of "unity in diversity, equity, justice, gender equality, moral leadership and freedom of thought" (BIC #05-0402, 2005, p. 2). Other Baha'i principles deemed indispensable for a peaceful world include a universal standard for human rights and human responsibilities, economic justice and cooperation to regulate inordinate disparities between rich and poor, universally accessible education that includes human, material and spiritual components and stresses the harmony between science and religion, and the adoption of a universal auxiliary language and script taught in addition to mother tongue literacy for the purposes of international communication.

PEACE EDUCATION INITIATIVES

Peace education in the Baha'i Faith can be found in international, national, regional and local initiatives. More than a century ago Baha'u'llah, Founder of the Baha'i Faith, wrote of the importance of a collective security based system of international governance; necessary for laying the foundations for lasting peace. Towards this goal, the Baha'i International Community has a longstanding working partnership with the United Nations and supports many of its goals and projects including the UN Charter, UN decades, years and days. Baha'i representatives were present at the founding of the United Nations in 1945 in San Francisco, and in 1948 the Baha'i International Community was recognized by the United Nations as an international non-governmental organization. It was granted consultative status in 1970 with ECOSOC and in 1976 with UNICEF, serving today in both paid and volunteer positions with UN offices in New York, Geneva, Addis Ababa, Santiago, Bangkok, Nairobi, Rome and Vienna (Baha'i Topics: An information resource of the BIC, 2006). Between 1998-2001 alone, the IBC attended over 170 UN-sponsored meetings, contributed 40 statements and position papers and 11 joint statements, and both initiated and supported hundreds of development projects around the world in the following areas: the advancement of women, the environment, sustainable development and

global prosperity, human rights, health, literacy, HIV/AIDS education, the prevention of drug abuse, anti-racism, the rights of the child, youth leadership and religious tolerance (BIC #01-0601, 2002).

Specific to peace education, one internationally recognized Baha'i initiative may serve to illustrate the practical application of Baha'i peace principles: City Montessori School in Lucknow, Northern India, was awarded the UNESCO 2002 Prize for Peace Education. Based on the Baha'i teachings of oneness of God, oneness of religion and oneness of humanity, it was founded in 1959 with 5 students, and has since grown to 30 campuses and 30,000 local students from kindergarten to college level. It provides students, most of whom are not adherents of the Baha'i Faith, with skills to face the complex problems of today's world. This is accomplished primarily through teaching and practicing morals and values, opening students' minds to other cultures and religions, and engaging them in community consultation and service initiatives.

Other noteworthy Baha'i peace education examples are:

- The *International Education for Peace Foundation* in Bosnia-Herzegovina that continues to bring peace education school-based community development to war-ravaged areas in Eastern Europe (Education for Peace Newsletter, 2003).
- The *Youth Can Move the World Project* (Varqa Foundation collaborating with Guyanese NGOs) in Guyana, where youth peer trainers have continued for over 10 years to form hundreds of local youth groups working to prevent alcohol and drug abuse, suicide, HIV/AIDS and domestic violence (One Country online newsletter of the BIC, 2005).
- The work of *Centre d'apprentissage et de formation pour la transformation* (CAFT) in Haiti to a) eliminate corporeal punishment in over 70 schools in Haiti while teaching virtues leadership, participatory learning pedagogy and democratic classroom management to administrators and teachers (YELE project report, 2006), b) partner with UNICEF/Haiti Ministry of Education in the "Promoting a culture of peace and democratic competencies in the classroom" initiative, and c) train peer educators to teach street children non-violence and conflict resolution (Gershuny, 2007).
- Australia's National Baha'i *Peace Pak* program and curriculum of spiritual education classes offered in 150 schools. Peace Pak teaches basic Baha'i principles, peace studies, world religions, prayer and meditation, and promotes sharing of diverse cultural traditions for large numbers of non-Baha'i children in the Australian public schools (Podger, 2004).

Baha'i peace education initiatives are for the most part outward-oriented, meaning they are conceived to serve the general public in a wide variety of cultural and socio-economic contexts and intended to educate all of humanity for peace. A BIC statement reporting community development activities in Cameroon and Zambia (1996) emphasizes, "Baha'is are committed to improving the collective life of everyone on the planet" (p. 1).

A scholarly achievement of note is the inauguration of the Baha'i Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, USA in 1995, responsible for creating a course for Honors students entitled "The Spiritual Heritage of the Human Race." This course examines world religions from the perspective of their common heritage, in pursuit of a global spiritual ethic. The Baha'i Chair established a global network for scholarship on peace and conflict resolution, and continues to promote diversity and intercultural understanding, the advancement of women, and excellence in teaching. At the 10th annual lecture (University of Maryland, 2004), Chancellor Kirwan stated: "What the Baha'i Chair is all about, is the elevation of the common good. It seeks this higher ground by focusing not on what divides people, but rather on what unites them...we must ensure that throughout their higher education journey, our students travel with an open mind while exposed to the widest variety of ethical, spiritual and philosophical thought (p.5)".

TYPES OF PEACE EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

Baha'i peace education falls into four overarching areas of activity:

- 1) Long-term initiatives (External Affairs): These are central to Baha'i principles and frequently undertaken in collaboration with sympathetic wider community agencies and institutions. These fall under the general headings of:
 - o the advancement of women
 - o the environment, sustainable development and global prosperity
 - o human rights

- 2) Interfaith initiatives and collaborations: Baha'is contribute to peace through involvement in interfaith activities and dialogue to encourage religious tolerance, freedom of belief and elimination of religious prejudice. One example is the efforts of the Baha'i community in Tanzania to hold a day for all religions to pray for peace on November 9, 2005. Illustrating the importance of interfaith relationships to reach common goals, spokesperson Mitra Sabet stated, "We work hand-in-hand with other religious organizations in many areas, for example poverty reduction and in HIV programs" (Baha'i World News Service, November 9, 2005).

- 3) Integrated into the Faith's ongoing community development, and central to the expansion and consolidation of the Faith: Referred to as the Core Activities of the Baha'i community, they constitute a four-fold process of community development for peace involving small community study circles, devotional gatherings, neighborhood moral and spiritual education classes for children, and gatherings for youth. Learning is facilitated by local community members who complete tutor training programs and subsequently engage the wider community in creative, culturally appropriate applications of development activities. They are described in more detail in Table 1. The Core Activity initiative began in Colombia some 20 years ago and has since spread to over 100 countries in all four continents. Local, regional, national and international statistics and anecdotal summaries on the progress of the Core Activities are gathered every three months from all Baha'i communities around the world. From the local to the international level, statistics and lessons learned are analyzed and used for increased understanding, to stimulate areas of promising growth and to encourage local human resource development. Anecdotal data is compiled thematically into regular international circulars informing the Baha'i community around the world about progress made towards community development for a peaceful world.

- 4) Individual, scholarly, professional and community responses to both Baha'i guidance and perceived community needs, external affairs goals or innovative applications of the Core Activities. The *One Country* multilingual online newsletter of the BIC provides news of these activities around the world. Baha'i scholarly pursuits are encouraged by *Associations for Baha'i Studies* in all continents. Research results are disseminated through Association for Baha'i Studies academic journals published in various languages and through annual conferences providing a context for academic exchange on the intersections between spirituality, human rights, community development and scholarship.

Each of these four themes operates in local, regional, national and international settings. They involve a unique blend of structure and agency balancing guidance from Baha'i Sacred Texts, administration and mentorship from Baha'i Institutions who regularly seek dialogue and feedback

opportunities to inform decision making, and individual initiatives that are encouraged and supported by the Institutions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Baha'i commitment to peace education can be observed from its very inception, to its ongoing work with the United Nations, to specific initiatives that address peace-related issues around the world, to the Core Activities spiritual community development plan. The Baha'i Faith promotes individual and societal transformation based on study and application of spiritual and moral principle. Baha'is work to learn, apply and teach others the building blocks for a peaceful society. Their activities are based on principles enunciated by Baha'u'llah as early as 1844, and informed by the conviction that humanity was meant to live in peace. Through unity in diversity, justice, equity, freedom of thought, gender equality, universal education, elimination of all forms of prejudice and reduction of extremes of wealth and poverty, Baha'is believe that humanity will achieve its spiritual destiny and rise up to accept responsibility for its ongoing transformation.

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Table 1: Core Activities

Activity	Goal
Ruhī Study Circles	To build communities of learning composed of Baha'is and their friends, colleagues and associates, that promote individual and collective spiritual transformation through study and practical application of thematically grouped sacred texts. Two of the seven units of study are devoted to the spiritual education of children and youth, an understanding of their spiritual destiny in the processes of peace building, and encouragement of all youth and adults in the community to mentor, teach and value children.

Neighborhood children's classes	To engage Baha'i and non-Baha'i children and their parents in moral and spiritual transformation and competency development through service learning.
Junior youth gatherings	To engage adolescents of all or no religious affiliation, between the ages of 11-14, in peer clusters of positive influence and mutual support. Junior youth animators are frequently young adults who work creatively to address issues of identity, moral leadership and build skill in contributing towards solving local problems. The young adults also serve the function of role models for the younger teens and provide them with alternatives to risky behaviors while developing confidence and leadership capacity.
Devotional gatherings	Devotional gatherings. Goal: To provide neighborhood forums for people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs, to say prayers together, read from sacred writings and discuss spiritual themes in a collaborative and artistic manner.