



# In Service to the Common Good



The American Bahá'í Community's  
Commitment to Social Change

The Bahá'í commitment to social change is an expression of faith in action.

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*In Service to the Common Good* is a first attempt to tell the story of the continuing efforts of American Bahá'ís to translate into action the ideals central to their Faith—ideals that are not only fully in consonance with the noble promises on which the American nation was founded, but which may fairly be said to represent their highest and finest expression. The principal function of religion—so Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, teaches—is to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. Thus, for Bahá'ís, spirituality is not to be sought in a retreat from the world's travails but, rather, in an active engagement with them.

Bahá'ís are challenged to apply the principles and teachings of their Faith to the practical problems of society. In America, their task is to demonstrate by their deeds that this newest expression of the “changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future” provides fresh and effective answers to the many questions that agitate the life of the nation in these early days of the 21st century.

The commitment of Bahá'ís goes well beyond theory. The profiles selected for these pages by our Office of Development Research represent a small sample of the many instances—more than 400 reported in 2003—of “faith in action” in which Bahá'ís are engaged today. There are many more examples; there is much more that could be said about these few. The constraints of time and resources combined to limit the scope of the present document to a preliminary and partial exploration of what is a much larger subject.

Bahá'ís are active on many fronts and, significantly, they are not alone: each profile included here shows a community actively working with like-minded people to improve the lives of every sector of society, and particularly those who labor under burdens of racism, prejudice, economic deprivation or physical disadvantage. Through consultation and participatory learning, Bahá'ís and their partners in action are making modest but real progress.

It is our hope that these examples will convey to the reader a sense of the breadth of the activities currently under way with a view to social change. The voice that narrates each chapter is distinct: each of the volunteers who carried out the research responded in different

ways to their assigned projects. The initiatives of which these volunteers write are offered not as models, but as lessons that are being learned. We further hope that young readers will find their imagination sparked, and that older readers and development practitioners will find new information, perhaps a new angle for thinking about their own efforts.

It would be easy to discount the initiatives described here because they are relatively limited in scope or because they are still quite new. That would be a mistake. There is no accurate way to assess the power that is released when people of goodwill are united in the pursuit of a noble goal and are alive to its spiritual significance.

Our heartfelt thanks go to the many individuals who labor in all these programs, for what they do and for their assistance in telling this story. We thank the volunteers who carried out the research that went into the production of this document—the phone calls, letters and emails, the surveys and consultations they so tirelessly contributed. And we thank God for His guidance and assistance in the most important work: offering, as a community of faith, our contribution toward the realization of our nation's high destiny.



NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY  
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

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# In Service to the Common Good



*"...is there any deed in the world that would be nobler than service to the common good?" — 'Abdu'l-Bahá*

Profound forces of change are reshaping the American social fabric. Rapidly shifting cultural, economic and moral boundaries are altering the very nature and structure of social reality. Such changes demand a new frame of reference in addressing societal challenges and needs. Emerging opportunities as well as vulnerabilities call for innovative models of social interchange, collaboration and organization. As the American nation adapts to a radically different global context, the noble ideals of equality, liberty and justice that animated its founding must find expression in new forms of social learning and development.

Since its inception more than a century ago, the American Bahá'í Community has worked to break down longstanding barriers of prejudice and create modes of living founded on trust, reciprocity and an abiding concern for others. By focusing on open and inclusive consultative decision making, participatory learning and sustainable grassroots activity, Bahá'ís are striving to awaken and develop capacities that give rise to cooperative patterns of social interaction, to "unity in diversity."

Convinced that "unity is a phenomenon of creative power," a power that illuminates and advances all forms of social endeavor, Bahá'ís are committed to revitalizing the fundamental bonds that define human relationships: between individuals, between human society and the natural world, between the individual and the community, and between citizens and their governing institutions.

Inherent to such a vision of social existence is that every human being is endowed with an innate nobility and worth derived from an essential spiritual nature. For Bahá'ís, the entire enterprise of civilized life is a spiritual process involving the progressive development of humanity's moral and creative capacities.



*Collecting food in Eugene, Oregon.*

Meaningful social transformation thus flows from spiritual awareness. A social order that ensures the well-being of all members of the American nation will not come about through the application of political prescriptions or technical recipes alone, however ingenious they may be. Constructive, enduring social change can only come from achieving coherence among the spiritual, moral and practical aspects of daily life. In short, both virtues and methods are required to meet objectives of social betterment.

From this perspective, the Bahá'í commitment to social change is an expression of faith in action. Whether operating at the level of ideas in contributing to public discourse or in developing novel on-the-ground approaches to social issues that draw upon both spiritual and material resources, Bahá'í social change initiatives are concerned with those cardinal principles and processes that open peaceful pathways of human advancement. Through the systematic application of concepts and models found in the Bahá'í teachings, individuals, communities and institutions are endeavoring to tap those forces of human motivation and identity that can release individual potential and promote the collective good.

Any attempt to develop a new framework for social advancement must be multidimensional, addressing basic questions of conception and vision, precepts of purpose and action and methodologies of implementation. What follows here is a snapshot of the rich array of ideas, values and concrete strategies being applied by the American Bahá'í Community in its efforts to foster "an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced."

### **A New Framework for Social Advancement**

In communities across the United States, patterns of fellowship, knowledge-building and collaboration among diverse individuals and groups are creating a

distinctive culture of social learning. Bahá'í undertakings in the arena of social change encompass a remarkably broad range of issues and needs: race amity and equality, the advancement of women, literacy and vocational training, human rights, environmental stewardship, the moral education of children, new

**A just social polity will emerge only when human relations and social arrangements are infused with spiritual intent.**

modalities of good governance, youth mentoring, the cultivation of the arts, conflict resolution and mediation, the strengthening of marital relationships and parenting skills, ethics in business, religious freedom, the promotion of scholarship, microenterprise, interfaith dialogue, the provision of health services and systematic programs of human resource development at the local level. These activities vary from simple grassroots projects to major public policy initiatives. Many of them involve substantive partnerships with like-minded organizations. And all such efforts, regardless of their scope or degree of sophistication, are informed by an overarching spiritual vision enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh: "to revive the world, to ennoble its life, and regenerate its peoples."

In light of ongoing social turmoil and the upheavals of the last century, it is simply no longer possible to maintain the belief that human well-being can arise from a strictly materialistic conception of life. The persistence of widespread human deprivation and despair speaks to the shortcomings of prevailing social theories and policies. Fresh approaches are required. For Bahá'ís, a just social polity will emerge only when human relations and social arrangements are infused with spiritual intent, an intent characterized by an all-embracing equity, unconditional love and an ethos of service. Addressing practical challenges with spiritual understanding is no easy task. But it is to this goal that Bahá'ís are firmly committed. Through

recognition of the centrality of spiritual values and the deeds they inspire, “Minds, hearts and all human forces are reformed, perfections are quickened, sciences, discoveries and investigations are stimulated afresh, and everything appertaining to the virtues of the human world is revitalized.”

The challenges of social development and integration are immensely complex. Over the past several decades, theorists, practitioners and policymakers

that promote learning about social and economic advancement. A community, or even a society, advances by gradually improving its capacity to define, analyze and meet its own needs. It is a process of action, reflection and adjustment that aims to bring about consistent patterns of change by drawing on sources of knowledge that not only enhance material welfare but that also deepen human solidarity.

## Improvement in the ability of participants to consult is a primary measure of success in any Bahá’í project.

have gradually expanded their understanding of the many interacting factors underlying social and economic progress. This evolution in development thought can be seen in the shift in focus from capital-intensive programs aimed at building a society’s physical infrastructure, to programs designed to reduce poverty directly, to initiatives emphasizing local community empowerment. At present, the development field is placing emphasis on those factors that undergird political and economic stability—the customs, institutions and procedures which give rise to social cohesion. A great breadth and depth of ideas now underpin development activity. Yet, until real improvements occur in the material conditions of the majority of the earth’s population, serious questions will remain concerning contemporary development strategies.

In the Bahá’í view, fostering constructive personal, community and institutional change is intimately linked to raising human capacity. Human beings are not regarded as a source of endless problems, but rather as rich in potential, capable of transforming their individual and collective circumstances. True capacity-building involves equipping people with tools that allow them to effectively address the complex social realities they face. This entails the development of concepts, skills, attitudes and qualities

It is evident then that the critical process of building human capacity must be holistic—technical, economic, cultural, social, moral and spiritual. In this respect, the Bahá’í community has focused on understanding how the powers

of the human spirit, in conjunction with the methods of science, can be channeled in original and productive ways.

A unique set of tenets and practices thus characterizes the Bahá’í approach to social transformation:

**1 Consultation:** If individuals and communities are to become the principal actors in promoting their physical, spiritual and social well-being, they must develop the capacity to consult and act in a unified manner. A vital indicator of social progress is the extent to which inclusive and cooperative methods of decision-making are used at all levels of society. A process of collective decision-making and action, devoid of adversarial posturing while dispassionate and democratic in spirit, is an indispensable feature of every Bahá’í undertaking. Underpinning this process of consultation is a commitment to discover and apply truth in every aspect of life. “In all things it is necessary to consult,” is Bahá’u’lláh’s counsel. “No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation.”

Improvement in the ability of participants to consult is therefore a primary measure of success in any Bahá’í project. Vision-setting and all subsequent stages of project conceptualization, planning, implementation





*"Spring Bud" girls in China. ~ Women for International Peace and Arbitration*

and evaluation employ consultative methods. The use of such methods can lead to innovative solutions to community problems; they can result in greater fairness in the distribution of community resources; and they tend to involve and uplift those who have historically been excluded from decision-making, such as women and minorities. Experience has shown that consultation enables communities to sustain and modify social development initiatives, contributing, thereby, to self-sufficiency and a higher quality of life. The ability of people to come together in new forms of participation and interaction is, in some respects, a more important outcome than the specific goals of a project itself. For this reason, consultation is an essential instrument of social advancement.

2

**Participatory Learning:** Positive change in society directly springs from the generation, application and diffusion of knowledge. By recognizing that knowledge has both material and

spiritual dimensions, the forces of reason and faith can work in concert to erect peaceful and progressive models of social life. Knowledge, then, can refer to skills, ideas, methodologies, qualities, or values. By linking such an integrated notion of knowledge-building with action, a systematic process of learning about social transformation can begin to emerge. Consequently, the Bahá'í community is dedicated to creating a culture of learning.

A distinguishing characteristic of many Bahá'í social initiatives is a focus on participatory learning. Promoting collective learning and organizational capacity-building ensures the sustainability of projects. Only if individuals and communities become agents of their own well-being, real participants in shaping their social reality, will genuine transformation ensue. Hence, participation in social projects must be substantive and creative, allowing people themselves the opportunity to gain knowledge and put it into practice. If, in fact, a group or community is generating and applying knowledge—knowledge that draws on both rational inquiry and spiritual insights—it will be able to progressively develop the technical, moral and social capacities that serve its needs. Every Bahá'í project, regardless of size, can act as a vehicle for learning about social betterment.

3

**Organic Growth:** From a Bahá'í perspective, nothing short of an awakening of the human spirit can imbue a desire for true social change and instill confidence that such change is indeed possible. The energy and will required to elicit and sustain a sense of social purpose is found at the grassroots of community life. Accordingly, social development must be an organic process where the people most affected are directly engaged in identifying and addressing their needs. Successful social initiatives best begin with simple actions at the local community level that gradually grow in complexity. Over time, as a group or community improves its overall capacity to address particular challenges, more sustained projects having an institutional character

can emerge. The ability of a community to take on more complex social issues is a key indicator of real progress. Such an enhanced capacity to decide, plan and act is most directly manifested by a visible improvement in some aspect of life, but can also be found in a more active community voice, in new understandings of what constitutes social well-being, or in the empowerment of individuals and groups within a community to take on greater responsibility for their own affairs. Another important measure of success is the ability of a community to integrate a diverse set of initiatives into one forward movement that benefits all.

Although a focus on grassroots action is critical, this does not preclude outside entities from playing a catalytic role in assisting communities to carry out programs and realize their aspirations. In Bahá'í projects, a balance is struck between using proven, well-conceived training approaches or technical solutions developed elsewhere and allowing local undertakings to unfold in an evolutionary manner. The definition of a project, the details and pace of its implementation, and the ultimate assessment of its efficacy, must be in the hands of participating individuals and institutions.

**4 Moral Development:** Social renewal requires a reordering of the norms and organizational arrangements that the members of society devise, and such a reordering can only occur when the inner lives of individuals are transformed. Establishing a social milieu of peace, prosperity and fairness is ultimately a matter of the heart; it involves a change in basic attitudes and values that can come only come from recognizing the moral and spiritual nature of the challenges that confront us. Creating moral awareness and moral responsibility is a prerequisite to enlightened and just action. Clearly, moral development must become integral to all human endeavor. Human beings, the Bahá'í writings affirm, "must now become imbued with new virtues and powers, new moral standards, new capacities."

All Bahá'í projects seek an integration of moral and material imperatives. This process of raising moral capacity has three principal dimensions: enabling the individual to manifest innate powers in a manner consistent with the ideals of human honor, duty and integrity; fashioning a community environment that blends and amplifies these individual powers through equitable and harmonious forms of collective action; and building institutions that engender trust and use their authority to uplift and encourage all the members of the communities they serve. To attain these goals, specific moral capabilities must be developed so that individuals and institutions can make appropriate moral choices. Toward this end, Bahá'ís have devoted considerable resources to conceiving educational and training methods that cultivate the qualities of dignity, rectitude and optimism that are seen to be the true reflections of the human spirit. In this regard, the moral education of children and the development of ethical leadership skills in elected governing councils have become major areas of focus for the Bahá'í community.



*Bahá'ís of all ages are committed to social change.*



## 5

**Unity, Equality and Justice:** The Bahá'í community in the United States today may well represent the most fully integrated body of people in the nation. It is an achievement that speaks to the power of unity and the healing potencies of equality and justice.

Fostering unity of purpose among individuals and groups, both within and outside the Bahá'í community, is an essential characteristic of all Bahá'í activity. It is a unity that embraces diversity and eschews uniformity. More than creating a culture of tolerance or passive coexistence, the notion of unity in diversity entails vanquishing corrosive divisions along lines of race, creed, class, gender and color, and erecting a dynamic and cooperative social ethos that reflects the oneness of human nature. It is this objective that has animated American Bahá'ís for more than a century.

Unity, however, can only arise when conditions of justice and equality prevail. "The purpose of justice," Bahá'u'lláh explains, "is the appearance of unity among men." True social advancement is made possible when every member of society can trust that they are protected by standards and assured of benefits that apply equally to all. The realization of justice is dependent upon participation by all social actors. It involves evoking a moral consciousness that leads to a reexamination of how opportunities, resources and power are utilized and how human relationships are defined. Justice, therefore, is viewed by Bahá'ís not as an unapproachable ideal but as an evolving capacity that individuals, communities and institutions must continually seek to develop. In their multifaceted and courageous efforts to effect equality among the races and equality between women and men, American Bahá'ís have made singular headway in elaborating the many challenging aspects of this vital capacity.

The Bahá'í commitment to social change, then, can be understood as a direct expression of Bahá'u'lláh's vision that humanity is a single people with a common destiny. It is a worldview that inspires a distinctive and substantive approach to human betterment.

### Creating a New Social Reality

To build a new world requires a recasting of conceptions concerning human nature and society. It calls for conviction in recognizing the underlying goodness of human beings and imagination in creating new ways of being and living. It implies a fresh vision of human purpose and contentment—one that integrates the aspirations of the individual with the needs of the common weal and responds to both the mind and heart. It entails an attitude of service toward all those who enter into one's ambit and a commitment to raise the capacity of all peoples "to the highest reaches of

"Strive thou, that haply thou mayest achieve a deed the fragrance of which shall never fade from the earth."

— Bahá'u'lláh

knowledge and human excellence." It is an undertaking that places primacy on "the oneness and wholeness of human relationships." Above all, it is a task that can be realized only through spiritual understanding and resolve. As Bahá'u'lláh urges: "Strive thou, that haply thou mayest achieve a deed the fragrance of which shall never fade from the earth."

# Social and Economic Development and External Affairs

## *A Framework for Local Bahá'í Communities*



One of the ways the American Bahá'í community strives to contribute to the society of which it is a part is through its external affairs work.

In broad terms, both social and economic development (SED) and external affairs can be seen as social change activities. Both aspire to influence society and improve the condition of humanity by more closely aligning the social, political, economic and cultural patterns of society with the teachings and principles of the Bahá'í Faith. As much as their ultimate goals may converge, however, these two realms of activity are distinct in a number of key respects, including their immediate aims, their target audiences, the actors who carry out the activity and the mechanisms employed (see Table 1). Bahá'í social change efforts in their full range of diversity—whether individual or institutional, whether large or small in scale—will gain in clarity, effectiveness and coherence if the actors involved understand the distinctions between development work and external affairs and apply the principles and guidelines that correspond to each realm of activity.

Table 1.	Social and Economic Development*	External Affairs**
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To increase the capacity of individuals, communities and institutions to generate and apply knowledge.</li> <li>To build spiritually and materially prosperous societies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To defend the Bahá'í Faith.</li> <li>To influence the processes toward world peace.</li> <li>To exert moral leadership.</li> <li>To impart Bahá'í ideas for the advancement of civilization.</li> </ul>
<b>Target Audiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individuals, communities and institutions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Governments.</li> <li>Organizations of civil society.</li> <li>Business and academic circles.</li> <li>General public.</li> </ul>
<b>Actors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individuals or Bahá'í institutions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bahá'í institutions.</li> </ul>
<b>Mechanisms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simple service projects.</li> <li>Sustained projects.</li> <li>Development organizations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diplomatic efforts.</li> <li>Bahá'í representation before UN and government agencies.</li> <li>Advocacy work.</li> <li>Public information.</li> <li>Production of literature.</li> <li>Seminars and workshops.</li> <li>Collaboration with NGO networks and coalitions.</li> </ul>

\* Source: "...for the betterment of the world," Bahá'í International Community, 2002

\*\* Source: Universal House of Justice External Affairs Strategy, October 10, 1994



*Fostering a new spirit in the community. ~ The Gap Project/Health for Humanity*

### **What is External Affairs?**

In 1994, the Universal House of Justice, the supreme administrative body of the Bahá'í world, issued an External Affairs Strategy which defined external affairs as “diplomatic and public information work.... Diplomatic work involves the management of our relations with the United Nations and with governments, while public information involves the management of our relations with the public in general.”

A key principle is that only the institutions of the Faith may carry out external affairs activities—in other words, because the Faith does not have individual leaders or clergy, only the institutions of the Faith are in a position to speak and act on behalf of the entire community of believers. While non-involvement in politics is a core Bahá'í principle, the Faith is clearly being drawn into relations with governments, and its principles and teachings have clear implications for issues of public and social concern. The Universal

House of Justice addressed this issue in a letter to an individual believer dated June 23, 1987:

*In view of the necessity of the Bahá'í community to relate to governments, whether for reasons of defending its persecuted members or of responding to opportunities to be of service, a correct understanding of what is legitimate Bahá'í action in the face of the policy of non-interference with government affairs is bound to be difficult to achieve on the part of individual [Bahá'í] friends. The force of circumstances, operating internally and externally, is pressing the Bahá'í community into certain relationships with governments. Hence, it is important that decisions as to the conduct of such relationships be made by authorized institutions of the Faith and not by individuals. In matters of this kind, given the utter complexity of human affairs with which the Bahá'í community must increasingly cope spiritually and practically, individual judgment is not sufficient.*

*...There may be...situations in which significant questions being considered by a government are so intimately related to fundamental principles of our Faith, and the conditions are such, that the maintenance of strict neutrality on the part of the Bahá'í community would not be in the best interests of either the Faith or society. Awareness of this probability should, however, not cause the friends to go at a tangent and take such sensitive matters into their own hands. In any such situation the National Spiritual Assembly [the national Bahá'í governing body] must weigh carefully the consequences, pro and con, of any contemplated action and carry out its decision, preferably with the foreknowledge and consent of the House of Justice. The friends must learn to appreciate this new situation, to acquiesce to the prerogative of their elected institutions to decide on questions involving or affecting relations with their governments, and evince confidence in the incontrovertible promise of Bahá'u'lláh to protect His community.*

### External Affairs and Social Change

The Universal House of Justice has identified two primary objectives for external affairs activities: To defend the Faith and to “influence the processes toward world peace,” with efforts concentrated on “human rights, the status of women, global prosperity and moral development.” The impact of external affairs on social change should not be viewed through a “cause and effect” lens, but rather as a process of gradually influencing governments and other leaders of society with Bahá'í perspectives and principles. The external affairs work is carried out in collaboration with government agencies, civil society organizations and other partners. The work involves patient and laborious advocacy and education aimed at influencing public policy and legislation in a manner that reflects Bahá'u'lláh's prescriptions for the healing of society.

In the United States, Bahá'ís have had a direct impact on the process of bringing certain issues (such as religious freedom, human rights, the ratification of international treaties, the advancement of women and



*A spirit of openness. ~ Children's Theatre Company*

environmental issues) to the attention of the U.S. government through a diligent and principled approach to their advocacy work. Bahá'í representatives do not count on large and influential constituencies to advance their efforts, but must instead depend on building an unassailable reputation for integrity and trustworthiness.

A case in point is the defense of the Bahá'ís in Iran. Due to the diligence of the National Spiritual Assembly and its Office of External Affairs, the U.S. Congress has passed eight resolutions expressing concern at the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran and, at the time of this writing, is working on the ninth. In 1998, Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, which created an Office of International Religious Freedom at the State Department as well as an independent federal Commission on International Religious Freedom. The Bahá'í case was mentioned in the legislation, and a Bahá'í, Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, served on the Commission from 1999 to 2003. Officials at the Department of State have told U.S. Bahá'í

representatives that the manner in which Bahá'ís have pursued their defense of the Bahá'ís of Iran has often been offered as a model to other religious and human rights organizations that approach the U.S. government with cases of international religious persecution and human rights violations.

One example of the Bahá'í leadership role in areas of social concern is the community's work for the U.S. ratification of several United Nations human rights treaties. For more than a decade, Bahá'í representatives served as the co-chairs of a national working group of more than 100 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) urging the U.S. government to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). On issues of primarily domestic concern the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly has supported legislation which clearly advanced Bahá'í principles, including legislation establishing the Martin Luther King Day Federal Holiday Commission (on which two Bahá'ís have served), legislation calling on the United States to pay its arrears to the UN, the Violence Against Women Act and the Torture Victims Protection Act.

Bahá'ís also make intangible but no less valuable contributions at the process level. By applying the principles of consultation within the coalitions and networks to which they belong, Bahá'í representatives have often played key roles in bringing about unity and consensus among organizations with disparate agendas.

External affairs activities can also have a reflexive impact on the Bahá'ís themselves, by calling attention to issues the Bahá'í community decides it has become capable of addressing on a more substantial level. For example, in recent years, the Bahá'ís' advocacy work on the issue of domestic violence provided an opportunity for internal assessment and stocktaking. As a result, the National Spiritual Assembly directed several offices at the Bahá'í National Center to produce a man-

ual on domestic violence for local Spiritual Assemblies (local Bahá'í governing bodies) and to launch a series of training and other programs designed to increase awareness and commitment to combat domestic violence within the U.S. Bahá'í community.

### Links Between SED and External Affairs

SED is primarily concerned with helping individuals, communities and institutions to acquire greater capacity to advance their own spiritual and material well-being. The actors can be private individuals, Bahá'í-inspired organizations (groups inspired by Bahá'í principles but

**Bahá'í development efforts are concerned with helping individuals, communities and institutions to acquire greater capacity to advance their own spiritual and material well-being.**

not affiliated with a Bahá'í institution), or Bahá'í institutions. On the other hand, external affairs is concerned with influencing the thought and action of governments, civil society organizations, private enterprise and others by "coherently, comprehensively and continually imparting our ideas for the advancement of civilization." While these mandates do overlap in some instances, it is important to keep in mind that external affairs activities are carried out exclusively by the institutions of the Faith.

It is clear that SED projects can have external affairs implications. New forms of social development and economic activity will often have implications for public policy and may lead to advocacy or educational activities targeting public agencies or partner organizations. In pursuing such activities, individual Bahá'ís or Bahá'í-inspired organizations may have contact with government officials, often with the same officials with which Bahá'í institutions are working in an official capacity. SED projects initiated and

sponsored by Bahá'í institutions directly represent the Faith and thus must be closely aligned with its teachings and principles.

Non-institutional SED projects should take great care not to give the impression that they speak or act officially on behalf of the Faith. Non-institutional actors may enjoy greater latitude for action than Bahá'í institutions, and indeed in many cases have had great impact, but this latitude also carries with it a variety of risks. The greatest risk is being drawn into political controversies or struggles and even implicating the Faith in these debates.

As a hypothetical example, let us imagine a Bahá'í-inspired organization working to improve economic opportunities among an indigenous people. In the course of its work, the organization could well be approached by a variety of NGOs advocating indigenous rights, reparations, greater self-determination, and other politically charged agendas. If the Bahá'í-inspired organization lends support to these efforts, even indirectly, and if it becomes known that the project is inspired and run by Bahá'ís, the Faith can become implicated in political controversies with potentially international repercussions.

Another potential pitfall is employing the SED activity as a tool for seeking new members for the Bahá'í community among government or NGO partners. While external affairs activities may have the "collateral outcome" of attracting "capable and receptive souls" to investigate the Faith (External Affairs Strategy, October 10, 1994), the integrity of the effort would be completely compromised were it to be used as a means to achieve religious conversion. A corresponding principle is that SED activities are not used as a channel for material inducements to attract converts to the Faith.

### **SED as a Driver of External Affairs**

The experience and insight that the Bahá'í community has developed through its SED activities has enabled it to engage with increasing effectiveness in the global development discourse. The Bahá'í International Com-

munity has offered this insight through its participation in a series of major international summits and NGO forums, including the 1992 Earth Summit, the World Summit for Social Development, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the 2001 World Conference Against Racism and the World Faiths Development Dialogue. The Bahá'í vision of human development has been shared with governments, civil society organizations and other partners at these forums through such documents as *The Prosperity of Humankind and Valuing Spirituality in Development*.

In 2000, the Bahá'í International Community established a new external affairs agency—the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity—specifically for the purpose of engaging in the global development discourse. The Institute's mandate centers on bringing science and religion together as complementary systems of knowledge that must work in harmony to advance true human prosperity. This effort is described in the External Affairs Strategy as a "conceptual initiative," one that takes a key concept from the Bahá'í teachings and seeks to apply it in the public policy arena by building partnerships and dialogues with civil society and government agencies. The initiative also draws upon the direct experience of the Bahá'í community's SED activities. The Institute sponsored its first colloquium on science, religion and development in New Delhi, India, in November 2000, and is working to convene similar gatherings in other regions of the world.

Between the concrete, project-focused work of the SED practitioner and the more conceptual external affairs initiatives undertaken by the institutions of the Faith, there is a wide range of activity with many points of contact and reciprocal impact. Both SED and external affairs efforts stand to benefit from open lines of consultation and an exchange of information on questions involving public policy, legislation and relationships with actors in the spheres of government and civil society.



# Children's Theatre Company

*New York, NY*



Hailed by NY1 News as “One of New York’s most successful working models of ‘unity in diversity,’” the Children’s Theatre Company (CTC) has garnered national attention for providing a new model for nurturing children’s participation in their own cultural, social and spiritual lives through the performing and visual arts.

Working each year with an average of 150 children and youth between the ages of four and eighteen, and with more than 500 alumni, CTC aims to assist children to be agents for positive change by employing the arts to explore the application of spiritual principles within a diverse, multi-faith community.

The idea for CTC was born following a 1988 international Bahá’í youth conference, where one woman decided she wanted to make her mark by starting a theater arts summer camp for children with a focus on character building and ethical education. A trained actor and a performer in the Los Angeles Bahá’í Youth Workshop, this social entrepreneur set out to develop a long-range plan encouraging artists to devote their extra time to the spiritual education of children.

Today, based in New York City and registered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the CTC integrates Bahá’í principles with an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach: children and parents are viewed as a community’s most valuable assets, endowed with unique strengths, rather than people in need. By emphasizing participants’ strengths, CTC’s goal is to fortify the moral fabric and the self-image of the community it serves.

“CTC is theater *by kids for grown-ups*....We are not trying to make stars out of our children, they are noble and therefore are already stars,” says Mehr Mansuri, CTC’s artistic director. “The children shine in the eyes of their parents, our creative staff and the city of New York. They learn and understand the meaning behind their performances and that is the most important gift.”

## Spiritual Instruction and Practical Application

CTC activities pivot around the spiritual instruction of the young performers and their families through a multidisciplinary program of drama, dance, music and visual arts, which culminates in a performance for the whole community. As a result, says CTC’s co-founder, Roya Movafegh, “people are coming because they are drawn to the spiritual development and education of their children. The process is more important than the results; the performer is more important than the product.”

### Key Themes

- Using the arts
- Developing children’s capacities

### Key Outcomes

- Moral development and participatory learning



For more information, please visit  
[www.childrenstheatercompany.org](http://www.childrenstheatercompany.org)



*Noble moral precepts, internalized through the arts, enrich the lives of children and adults alike.*

It is not enough, however, to provide spiritual instruction without a means for its practical application, according to CTC coordinators. To underscore their curriculum, instead of the customary theater industry standard, where a child performer signs an actor's contract covering their work, CTC asks each child to sign a "character contract." This contract promotes an ethos of open-mindedness, courtesy and kindness to all.

Additionally, the contract encourages each child to use consultation as a tool for resolving issues and discourages backbiting and gossiping. At the end of each season, the CTC awards Outstanding Citizen Medals to all children and especially those who have exhibited spiritual qualities of kindness, punctuality and excellence in service.

Carrying these principles further, CTC begins each session with musical devotions where children and parents sing, read prayers and recite inspirational quotes from the writings of the Bahá'í Faith, other world religions and renowned peacemakers. CTC

also incorporates Bahá'í Core Curriculum study materials into its lesson plans; teachers use these materials to help students internalize the spiritual messages inherent in the Bahá'í writings and then interpret them through art, dance and drama. This process lays the foundation for carefully designed and produced musical and theatrical performances by all the children at public venues.

### **Organization and Funding**

To maintain these programs, CTC has a staff of twenty teaching artists, both paid personnel and volunteers. A board of directors makes decisions on matters of fiscal policy and spiritual continuity. Bahá'ís comprise less than half of

the board of directors and staff serving the organization, while 90 percent of the CTC's students, most of whom are minorities, have other religious affiliations.

CTC also maintains close ties with Bahá'í institutions, which it views as vital sources of advice and support. In addition, a member of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New York City serves as a member of CTC's advisory board.

Obtaining funding has been an evolutionary process. Originally, CTC had a policy of asking parents to pay what they could to support the program. However, over time it was noted that parents provided very little monetary support. As a result, CTC suggested that parents make a donation of \$10 per class hour, which provided more money but still did not meet the program's growing needs.

CTC staff now ask parents to complete a pledge form which asks participants to pledge what they can, and CTC holds them to their pledge. Recognizing the financial constraints of some participants, the pledge program enables parents to substitute service, such as

## Consultation has been key to organizational growth.

helping to set up and break down classroom sets, for a monetary donation.

Currently, half of CTC's income is derived from parents' contributions, the co-directors donate forty percent of costs, while two grants and individual donations make up the remaining ten percent of the budget. Recognizing both its success and the rapid growth of its needs, CTC is applying in 2004 for state funding.

### Consultation

Consultation has been key to organizational growth. It serves as the foundation for the CTC's verbal and paper-based monitoring and evaluation processes. Parents, staff, interns, children and audience members are encouraged to provide feedback on a regular basis through carefully designed evaluation forms.

Additionally, CTC organizes forums twice each season where parents and staff meet to give feedback, address concerns and problem-solve. In an environment where all ideas and concerns are considered valid and given equal weight, staff and parents have found they are able to implement solutions more readily. The bonds of unity and friendship which this approach creates enables CTC to round out its cycle of learning, evaluation, consultation and implementation, thereby sustaining itself as an organically evolving organization able to meet the current and future needs of children and their families.

### Impact

CTC has impacted the lives of its organizers, its staff and the children and parents it serves. One example involves a young student who called another by a racist name. Rather than expelling him from CTC and cutting off his access to the spiritual and social education it provides, the Company "reprimanded" him by

having him create a "think tank" about racism at his school. The resulting activity, "Club Mosaic," now actively dialogues on issues of race unity and diversity.

Parents have also benefited from the Company's programs. One mother, who was reared in a low-income family of all girls, had no plans to attend college. Through her child's activities at CTC she heard about the Bahá'í Faith and learned about the importance of education for all women in society. This new knowledge changed her life. She now attends university and in her master's thesis has quoted the Bahá'í principle of education of women.

Since its inception, the CTC has made numerous appearances on NY1 News, Good Morning America, CNN, Sesame Street and Live with Regis & Kelly. The Company has also participated in special United Nations events and has been involved in production of several TV and radio spots for UNICEF.

CTC plans to replicate its approach in other cities by supporting local initiatives with materials and consultations. There are already five local Children's Theatre chapters across the U.S., three after-school programs in Michigan, Indiana and Oregon and two new chapters in Canada are in the works. CTC is discussing including elements of its programs in Parent University's offerings for youth.

Once a dream in the heart of one woman, the Children's Theatre Company now has a growing place in the hearts of children throughout North America.

# The Bahá'í Institute for Race Unity

*Gaithersburg, MD*



The Bahá'í Institute for Race Unity was launched in 1990 as an educational forum to share Bahá'u'lláh's message of unity and to focus on the disease of racism, which Bahá'ís consider to be America's most challenging issue. The Institute also looks at the ways racism, whether subtle or overt, impacts people of color.

Established by Barbara Talley as an individual initiative, the Institute, which now receives support from the local Spiritual Assembly, the local governing body for the Bahá'ís of Gaithersburg, MD, has grown over the years to include individuals from all walks of life who are committed to programs that will contribute toward building a prejudice-free world.

## Key Themes

- Human resource development
- Power of individual initiative

## Key Outcomes

- Equality
- Justice

The Institute was created to serve the goals of the broader community, and in fact most of its original supporters were not Bahá'ís. The participation of Bahá'ís grew over the years, and Ms. Talley links that growing support directly to the area's increase in study circles, which are groups of people who come together to study the Bahá'í writings and translate what they learn into fellowship and service.

The Institute's activities, which have included monthly presentations as well as a large commemorative event for Martin Luther King Day, are well attended and have not only raised awareness of the Bahá'í message of the oneness of mankind but have also enabled other socially conscious organizations, such as the Interfaith Conference of Washington, DC and IOTA Epsilon Fraternity, to collaborate with the Institute on programs within the Washington, DC metropolitan area.

Programs include a presentation, entertainment and food, with the entertainment generally provided by churches and other faith groups. Programs have been held at different venues in order to draw different kinds of audiences. "The community center attracted more of the Bahá'ís and people in the community who use the center," says Ms. Talley. "The library attracted people going to the library, more readers and intellectuals. The hotel attracted more business types."



## Participation

Community development projects are sustained through the development of human resources, which means that they must address challenges which might affect people's participation. While the Institute quickly gained a broad base of support from various groups outside of the Bahá'í community, participation from Bahá'ís themselves increased only gradually.

In the beginning, many Bahá'ís were reluctant to help plan or even participate in Institute events and felt challenged by the concept that race unity work is not an event but a process. There also seemed to be a lack of



*Everyone finds a place under the shelter of race unity.*

understanding of the attitudes and personal qualities needed for the community to come together on race unity activities. Some felt the race problem was not “their issue” and refrained from offering support. Others, though interested initially, grew tired of the dialogue and objected to its continuance. Faced with the challenge of a general lack of support within the Bahá'í community, efforts aimed at building unity around the project within the Bahá'í community continued even as Institute programs and outreach were sustained through the efforts of one individual and a small group of volunteers.

“For a good five years, I was the only one committed,” Ms. Talley recalls. “There were a lot of interested people who would work for a specific event, but none was fully committed. The non-Bahá'ís, on the other hand, were committed.”

Fortunately, however, the situation improved. “Now we have a real committee. We rotate the leadership roles and everyone is responsible for a specific area. Now they see it as a community thing. Each group is committed and it has made a world of difference. Before, I would work until I burned out and then

start over. Now we all work together and too much isn't laid on any one person. Also, since everyone plays a part, there is more commitment. In fact, it seems to bring the community together.”

What changed, in Ms. Talley's view, was the introduction of study circles within the Bahá'í community. An important component of these study circles is service: offering service to the Bahá'í community, and indeed to the larger community of which the Bahá'ís form a part, is increasingly understood by the Bahá'ís to be an essential part of individual and community spiritual development.

The Institute appears to have been the beneficiary of this new understanding, and of the human resources trained by the study circle approach. “Something has changed,” Ms. Talley says. “Now (the Bahá'ís) are really supporting (Institute programs) with time, energy and also people they want to teach about the Faith. Some things we are doing now would have been impossible a few years ago.”



# Women on the Move

*Rancho Cucamonga, CA*



The idea came from Ireland. Just a little over two years later, the idea is beginning to show its potential.

“I had an opportunity to visit the Bahá’ís of Ireland,” says Dr. Wilma Ellis-Kazemzadeh, “and saw what they were doing about race unity, which is a big issue there because of increased immigration. I was very impressed with how well they were organized, the quality of what they were doing and I thought, ‘We can do that!’” Returning home to California, she gathered two other friends around her kitchen table and, after four hours’ consultation, they were ready to start.

## Key Themes

- Transition from event to process
- Planning for continuity

## Key Outcomes

- Gender equality
- Organic growth

In their area, addressing issues relating to the equality of women and men seemed to be more helpful, both for the Bahá’ís and for the general public, and so this group of friends made equality their focus. Linking equality with the creation of a peaceful society and the realization of the full potential of both women and men, the organization’s mission statement affirms that Women on the Move (WOTM) will “take vital and meaningful steps towards the emergence of a peaceful society through action-oriented programs of community service and awareness-raising....”

The group formed a board of directors, sought the sponsorship of the nearest local Spiritual Assembly and planned a large conference as their kick-off event. In October, 2002, with a gathering entitled “It’s Our Time,” Women on the Move got started.

## Quality, Continuity, Inclusion, Resilience

Talks, workshops and informal conversation around meals engaged 200 participants at that first event. The planning group views quality as a part of their service to the community: well-known keynote speakers, a dignified venue and well-planned communications are all essential. Organizers also emphasized, “This is not a man-bashing conference...we have to deal with realities.”

A single annual event, however, would not be sufficient to fulfill their mission. The group sought to stimulate an inclusive, continuing dialogue about gender issues, partly because equality is important in and of itself, and partly because

“We want to reach out to other faith communities,” as Dr. Ellis said in a 2003 newspaper interview. She also explained, “It’s really helpful to come together and emphasize the things we have in common. One way or another, all faith communities talk about the brotherhood of man.”

With continuity in mind, planning for a series of monthly luncheons began in tandem with preparations for the first conference, and conference attendees were invited to the first luncheon less than a month after



For more information, please visit  
[www.wotm9.org](http://www.wotm9.org)





*"It's really helpful to come together and emphasize the things we have in common."*

the conference. These multi-faith gatherings, "Spiritual Connections," have been held each month since 2002.

To lend further visibility to its activities, WOTM became a member of the local Chamber of Commerce.

A second annual conference, in November, 2003, was hampered by forest fires that raged through Southern California. With financial assistance from the sponsoring local Spiritual Assembly, the conference was held anyway, setting what the group feels will be its pattern for future annual events: joint sponsorship with a local college club, which gives visibility to the Bahá'í presence on campus and reduces costs; workshops by experts, both women and men, in a variety of fields; respected keynote speakers; and video profiles of women who are making a difference in their chosen fields of activity.

"There was not a dry eye in the crowd," says Dr. Ellis about the reaction to one keynote presentation, "because we were talking about things that are real."

A third conference is being planned for 2005. The group is also working on other projects, including a quarterly luncheon series begun in the spring of 2004; writing seminars for women; mentoring for junior youth and women in their twenties on issues of low self-esteem, social pressures and relationships; and coaching for young mothers on their education and career options.

The mentoring program is already in a pilot phase. WOTM chose to partner with an existing, well-regarded area program in order to learn the process and recruit supporters until it is ready on its own to assist women, in its organizers' words, "balance heart, mind and spirit" in overcoming social, economic and cultural obstacles to realizing their capacities.

### Lessons Learned

What lessons has the project

learned? Many, say the organizers:

- Find out what the local community needs;
- Start small and grow incrementally as opportunities and needs are identified;
- Use local resources, including partnerships with a variety of types of organizations: business, academia and the nonprofit sector;
- Make intelligent use of media outreach opportunities;
- Intentionally cultivate unity among all participants; and
- Have fun.

A statement by Diane Gunther, a WOTM board member, sums up the practical orientation of this group's activities. In commenting on the first conference and the seminars to follow, Ms. Gunther told the *Los Angeles Times*: "The equality of women and men is overlooked as a prerequisite to world peace. I hope that everybody will take something away that they can use in their daily life and in their family and in their community to promote peace."

# Women for International Peace and Arbitration (WIPA)

*Glendale, CA*



“There were hundreds of people lining the road, some beating drums, others waving hoops with brightly colored paper fastened on them, all the while young and old (were) shouting ‘Welcome.’”

That was the sight, according to a report of a recent visit, that greeted members of Women for International Peace and Arbitration (WIPA) as they arrived in a village in Kangbao County, several hours’ dusty bus ride from Beijing.

They had come to visit a school where “Spring Bud” classes for young girls are held under the combined auspices of WIPA and the All-China Women’s Federation. This school is one of three, each in a different province of China, where five years ago a total of 150 young girls were selected from among each region’s poorest families. The girls’ only chance for education has been these classes, underwritten by WIPA.

“We were delighted,” the WIPA trip report continues, “to see [that the girls] were much taller now, and quite beautiful. They are now young ladies.” WIPA’s commitment to these young women is to fund their education through high school.

One of the students, in her speech of welcome to the visiting WIPA delegation, said, “When we were on the edge of poverty it was you who helped us get education again. We have studied hard and during exams for middle school we were ranked first in the county. However because of the drought for three years our parents have done their best but we still need your help.” Tears running down her face, the young student concluded, “Just at that moment, it is again our aunts and uncles who helped us. We will not disappoint you. We will justify your trust in us.”

## History

WIPA’s story began during a 1984 vacation for Mrs. Juana Conrad, the organization’s founder and a former Court Administrator of the California court system. Her vacation reading list included several Bahá’í books on peace and the road to its achievement. After a day’s reading, Mrs. Conrad said to herself, “If there’s going to be peace in the world, women have to get involved. I’m a woman; I have to do something.”

Returning home, Mrs. Conrad called together 30 people—women and men, of diverse ages and ethnic groups, Bahá’ís and non-Bahá’ís—and shared her idea with them. She asked them three questions: Do you think

## Key Themes

- Individual initiative;
- Dedication to peace

## Key Outcomes

- Gender equality and justice
- Organic growth



For more information, please visit  
[www.wipa.org](http://www.wipa.org)

this is a good idea? Should the organization be linked to any Bahá'í institution? Would you be interested in serving on a board?

Within months of that first meeting, Women for International Peace and Arbitration was established in California as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation; it had not sought sponsorship or association with any Bahá'í institution, as the founding group had decided. A few years later, owing to the group's growing portfolio of international projects, WIPA secured recognition from the United Nations as a non-governmental organization (NGO). In March, 2005 WIPA will have completed twenty years of service to the cause of world peace.



*East and West embrace in a Chinese schoolyard.*

### Organic Growth

WIPA started small. The founding group decided the organization should focus on five basic principles: promote the education of women regarding their role in bringing peace to the world; equality of women and men; arbitration and mediation; communication through an international language; and elimination of prejudice.

The group wrote these principles into a series of workshops they called "Sitting Room Seminars," informal meetings in a living room setting that centered on mediation concepts and techniques, and their application in the home and local community. The other program in that first stage was a series of informational booklets entitled "Keys to Peace."

And they networked. Attending conferences on peace, women's issues, mediation and other topics related to their core principles, WIPA members found their circle of acquaintances growing. They supplemented these activities with advertisements at conferences, through a quarterly newsletter and, most recently, via a website ([www.wipa.org](http://www.wipa.org)).

Before long one of WIPA's new friends made sure the organization was invited to a conference in Moscow,

the first of two such invitations that came in quick succession during the final years of the Soviet Union.

That first Moscow trip, it turned out, opened the door to the "bridge-building" activities that followed: a delegation of ten women from the Soviet Union and eastern Europe came to the U.S a few months after the conference. Such exchanges have remained a key aspect of WIPA's work ever since. "There is such a sense of urgency about the role of women in peace-making," Mrs. Conrad says, "that ways—legal ways—have always been found to work around obstacles in some countries."

WIPA realized it had to expand its membership if its work of promoting its core principles was to attain any significant scope. Consultation produced the answer: write guidelines for local chapters, get the word out, and make it easy for people who catch the vision to get started on their own. There are, as of late 2004, chapters in Sierra Leone, British Columbia, Illinois, Georgia and California.

Mrs. Conrad seems especially proud of the chapter in Sierra Leone, which has helped 83 orphaned children find homes with surviving family members,

created development projects and offered classes in skills building and literacy. “Communication is so difficult, with the country’s alternating periods of war and peace. The chapter’s office was bombed, some of its members have disappeared, and yet they keep on. During one lull in the conflict, we learned there was to

“If there’s going to be peace in the world, women have to get involved.”

be a peace celebration of some sort, and the government chose WIPA to give the keynote address because, they said, ‘You are the only ones to have both men and women working for peace.’ The last message we had from them, though, was some time ago, when they told us they were moving to a new office. We hope they are all right.”

### Asia

Asia seems to be where WIPA’s heart is. The relationship with the All-China Women’s Federation has proven especially fruitful: a few highlights include joint participation in the 2000 United Nations Women’s Conference; the Red Phoenix Project, that helps send young women from Shaanxi Province to university; and the Spring Bud Project in Hubei, Hebei and Gansu provinces.

Similarly, WIPA has a strong relationship with Taiwan’s Modern Women’s Foundation (MWF). Mrs. Conrad tells of arriving to give a talk, sponsored by MWF and televised live via seven of Taiwan’s networks. The subject of the talk, according to their initial communications, was to have been domestic violence. As she was being introduced, however, she learned the subject was actually child abuse. “You have to be flexible,” she recalls, laughing, “and you have to rely on that unknowable essence we call God.” Her improvised talk, drawing on her experience in the California courts, was a great success, audience members affirmed afterwards.

### Next Steps

The board has consulted on WIPA’s next steps. The organization’s first priority is to continue the projects already under way. There is also interest in exploring prospects for microenterprise programs in some of the areas WIPA serves; indeed, there were some very preliminary discussions with representatives of the All-China Women’s Federation, who felt it was not timely to pursue just then and suggested reopening the subject at a later date. Finally, WIPA board members see the need to broaden the

base of funding and expect to work during 2005 on strategies to accomplish financial goals commensurate with WIPA’s potential for growth.

### Lessons Learned

The first lesson WIPA has learned is the value of perseverance. “If you know your vision is right, is helping, then it is easier to stick with it and carry on,” Mrs. Conrad affirms. Carrying out programs in nations with difficult internal situations, or with whom the United States’ relations are not always cordial, often presents enormous difficulties. The focus is on peace, and on women’s role in bringing peace to the world, and after trust has been established, points of agreement and collaboration can usually be found.

Mrs. Conrad also emphasizes that the work is “fun; I don’t know how to get that across. When you see that change has occurred, even to a modest degree, even in just one young person, it gives you tremendous energy to keep going.”

Finally, WIPA’s experience illustrates, in vivid and real ways, that no matter where one lives, and regardless of background or material circumstances, humanity is one, the needs of its children are essentially the same, and unity is easy when the issue is meeting those needs and working toward a peaceful world in which the young can grow up.

“Any individual can help heal, even in some small way, the wounds of the world.”

# The Voicemail Project

*Danville, CA*



How does a small group of people, with limited resources, take on a problem as vast as homelessness? The Bahá'í communities in the San Francisco Bay area are exploring a way, and it started, for them, with motivation. "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements," read the quote from the Bahá'í writings taped to Daska Babcock's law office wall, before she got involved with the Voicemail Project.

The Voicemail Project (originally called "Voicemail for Homeless People") was established in 1994 to provide voicemail boxes for homeless people seeking employment and housing. The program grew out of a service project of the Danville, California Bahá'í community, which had agreed to serve a meal to homeless people during the Intercalary Days (days set aside for service and celebration at the end of the Bahá'í year). After learning more about the challenges homeless people face in getting jobs and housing, the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Danville, the local Bahá'ís' administrative council, consulted on how to be of continuing service to this population. The Assembly decided that facilitating a homeless person's ability to collect phone messages from potential employers and landlords would be a big help in their struggle.

A plan was established to secure voicemail equipment, software and logistical support. Consultations with a local homeless shelter produced a model contract governing the relationship between a local Bahá'í Assembly and a social service agency. In the ensuing months, the Danville Bahá'ís worked to build support networks between and among neighboring local Assemblies and a variety of public and private service agencies, using the models and lessons developed at each stage in order to progress to the next, more complex stage.

There are now eleven participating local Spiritual Assemblies. These Bahá'í institutions have contracted with more than 60 public and private social service agencies, such as the Red Cross and Catholic Charities, whose case managers match appropriate clients to the voicemail service. The corporate co-sponsor, APEX Communications, has enabled the Project to modify computers, purchased by participating Assemblies, to create the voicemail systems on which the service is based. Two volunteers in each of the eleven Bahá'í communities contribute about four hours a month apiece to operate their part of the system and reach out to local service agencies.

"In 2003 The Voicemail Project served 330 households," according to the Sonoma County Taskforce on the Homeless website. The Task Force further states that "case managers in participating agencies reported that 54 received job assistance, 87 received housing assistance, and 233 received other help that involved the use of the voicemail system." At any given time, these local voicemail systems serve the needs of more than a thousand homeless and other discommunicated individuals in the 4,000 square mile San Francisco Bay area.

## Key Themes

- Addressing a vast problem with limited resources
- Coalition-building

## Key Outcomes

- Consultation
- Justice
- Organic Growth

For more information, please email [secretariat@voicemailproject.org](mailto:secretariat@voicemailproject.org)

### Building Partnerships

One of the most compelling features of the Voicemail Project has been the quality of the partnerships developed among nearly 100 social service agencies and the Bahá'í institutions that serve them. Only a broad-based, participatory process of consultation, built into the project's design and development from the beginning, could have made this achievement possible.

Bahá'í communities have found themselves well-suited to the needs of the Project, explains one of its initiators, a Bahá'í from Danville who has helped to coordinate the initiative on behalf of his local Spiritual Assembly: "This program commands immediate attention from local governments and social service agencies in that the Bahá'ís do not accept payment for this service. Moreover, the unity of purpose required to set up such a network over such a wide geographical area had proven impossible among well-meaning counties with conflicting agendas, and equally well-meaning agencies who compete with each other for funding."

Several factors have helped the Project accomplish its initial goals and set the stage for future learning:

1

#### Infrastructure and Collaboration:

The network of local Spiritual Assemblies is geographically well-situated for an area-wide effort, has a history of working together and counts on a ready pool of volunteers. These advantages have made the Bahá'í administrative network an efficient vehicle for delivering the voicemail service. A well-funded federal program had already found it impossible to expand beyond a single county; that program could neither purchase nor assemble the kind of network that already existed within the Bahá'í community.

The network is actually highly decentralized, which has made each local commitment easier to sustain. The bulk of the interactions have been between one local Bahá'í Assembly and one or a handful of service agencies working in their locality. At the same time, there have been opportunities for members of the eleven Bahá'í Assemblies to come together for the common vision to be maintained.

2

**Reliance on Consultation:** Since the idea of working with the homeless was raised, local Assemblies, though lacking expertise on the issue of homelessness, have used consultation with other Bahá'í institutions and the contracting agencies to become better acquainted with key concerns and to create a new system to minister effectively to the needs of the homeless population.

The interaction among these various parties has proven to be crucial to solving the many problems that have arisen during the Project's execution. Indeed, Project participants have found that, each time a difficulty was encountered, if they submitted it to the sponsoring local Assembly for consultation, not only was the problem solved but a new impetus was generated that advanced the Project further. "In each case, the consultations have advanced the Project beyond where it would have been had the difficulty not arisen," says a Project report.

3

#### Program Management and Maturation:

The ability of Bahá'í institutions to undertake, jointly with others, a project of such scope has enabled them, according to one participant, to gain a better understanding of the principles of reciprocity and symmetry, as articulated in the Bahá'í teachings:

*"Although the body politic is one family," wrote 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, "yet because of lack of harmonious relations some members are comfortable and some in direst misery, some members are satisfied and some are hungry, some members are clothed in most costly garments and some families are in need of food and shelter. Why? Because this family lacks the necessary reciprocity and symmetry. This household is not well arranged."*

Greater clarity about these complementary principles has given participants both a motive to commit to the Project and an idea of the kinds of relationships needed for the Project to be successful. Not only have they experienced the imbalance between their own circumstances and those of the homeless clients of the service, but



## A network like the one already existing among Bahá'í communities could neither be purchased nor assembled.

"we have begun to understand," says Ms. Babcock, "the institutional arrangements required for wide-scale cooperation between Bahá'í institutions and governmental and social service agencies at the local level."

The program is now in its tenth year. As a result of the demonstrated capacity of Spiritual Assemblies to manage their respective tasks, the Project's convening Spiritual Assembly began, in late 2004, the process of transferring its role to a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation. The administration of local efforts, however, will remain the responsibility of each sponsoring Assembly for the foreseeable future.

Project participants see non-profit incorporation as the next major stage of maturation. Their expectation is that the new entity will bring together all parties, including Project clients, to evaluate the program, to explore ways to improve the process and meet other, still unidentified needs and to raise necessary funds.

### 4

**Willingness to Serve:** Bay area Bahá'í communities saw how providing voicemail made it possible for them to help address, within the constraints of their modest resources, a vast problem in a meaningful way. Motivated by the Bahá'í principle of service, these groups have overcome many problems: scarcity of funds for the initial investment; slowness of telephone companies in installing new lines; and skepticism of the contracting service agencies, many of whom initially questioned the Bahá'ís' ability to undertake this challenge without grants or other sources of funding.

Indeed, the Project's independence from grant funding is cited as a major factor in its successful establishment. The Assemblies own the equipment, draw on a pool of dedicated volunteers and incur only the minor expense of incoming telephone lines, so they "live outside," in the words of one report, "the

grant cycle and can more readily adopt the attitude of learning..."

An Assembly member relates an incident that demonstrated the spirit behind the Project: "Some time ago, our representative spoke with heads of thirty agencies in Alameda County to present the program and invite participation. One participant asked, 'How long does the program last?' Our representative asked for clarification. The question was restated: 'How long is your grant for?' Our representative responded that 'We own the equipment, it is operated and housed by volunteers for whom service is their form of worship, and it is sponsored by institutions Bahá'ís regard as eternal.'"

This spirit is also affirmed by Walt Boyd, a Bahá'í from Northern Sonoma County: "The Bahá'ís of Northern Sonoma County are embarked now and for the foreseeable future in a social program of expanding dimensions, a challenge of major proportions to individuals and to the Assembly. We are...becoming known for the very principles on which our beloved Faith stands, demonstrated through service in action. [Doesn't Bahá'u'lláh tell us], 'Let deeds, not words, be your adorning?'"