Unity in Diversity

Around the globe, Bahá’ís are united by a common outlook that holds to high moral standards, a modern worldview, and a commitment to serving the wider community.

As a young man, Hizzaya Hissani Mwani decided his goal in life would be to help his fellow Africans climb out of poverty, racism, and illiteracy. For a time, he thought a career in politics would be the best way to accomplish that. But since becoming a Bahá’í more than 25 years ago, his focus has been on working directly with people in remote villages on basic things like reading and writing, simple health practices, and moral virtues.

Tahireh Sanchez manages a computer training center in the jungle of western Panama. Located in the high school in the village of Soloy, the center serves the indigenous Ngabe-Bugle people. A member of the Ngabe-Bugle herself, Ms. Sanchez is also a second-generation Bahá’í. On her off days, Ms. Sanchez, who has a ninth-grade education, leads free classes in literacy and helps at a Bahá’í-run educational and research institute that serves the Ngabe-Bugle in the region. Her daily goal, she said, is to serve others in her community.

In Norway, Lasse Thoresen spends his days teaching about and writing music. A senior professor at the Norwegian State Academy for Music, he is also widely recognized as one of Norway’s top composers of modern classical music. For inspiration, he often draws on various traditional music styles — ranging from aboriginal Norwegian songs to Gregorian chants. His works, reviewers say, bring together both simple and complex elements to create a new expression of diversity. The goal, Prof. Thoresen said, is to express through music what he sees as the spiritual principles for today.

Although different in their cultural heritages, educational backgrounds, and national origins, Dr. Mwani, Ms. Sanchez, and Prof. Thoresen are united by a common belief in the Bahá’í Faith — and a commitment to its ideals.

The worldwide Bahá’í community may well be the most diverse and widespread body of people on earth. It is also among the world’s most unified organizations, a feature that is perhaps its most distinguishing characteristic.

Promoting equality of women and men is a primary goal, as is ending racial and ethnic strife. Working towards the establishment of economic justice for all peoples is another major objective. So is ensuring access to good education for all. The community eschews all forms of superstition and sets for its followers high moral standards. Universal peace and the establishment of a united world community are primary concerns.

Indeed, no other world organization of similar diversity, whether affiliated along religious, political, or social lines, can claim a membership as committed to a vision that is at once so singular, coherent, and universal.
The source of this vision is Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892), the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith. A Persian nobleman who spent the last 40 years of His life as a prisoner and an exile, He authored the equivalent of more than 100 volumes — writings that form the foundation on which the worldwide Bahá’í community stands.

**A way of life**

From the earliest times, religion has been a powerful force for personal and social transformation. In both the lives of individual believers and the distinctive communities it has spawned, the Bahá’í Faith is a dramatic illustration of this principle in action.

The primary purpose of life for Bahá’ís is to know and to love God, and to contribute to an ever-advancing global civilization. Bahá’ís seek to fulfill this purpose through a variety of personal, family, and community actions. The Bahá’í writings, for example, stress the importance of daily prayer and meditation, strong family and marriage ties, regular community worship, and efforts to serve the world at large.

Born in 1948 in East Africa, Hizzaya Hissani Mwani was orphaned at the age of three. Adopted and raised by a wealthy Indian Muslim family in Dodoma, Tanzania, he grew up in what was then a racially segregated society — and he was well aware of racism’s pain.

“There were areas for Europeans and areas for Indians and areas for Africans,”

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**Not a sect, an independent religion**

In the past, some scholars referred to the Bahá’í Faith as a “sect” of Islam, owing to the fact that its Founder and early followers emerged from an Islamic society.

Today, religious scholars recognize that such a reference would be equivalent to calling Christianity a “sect” of Judaism, or referring to Buddhism as a “denomination” of Hinduism.

Although Christ was indeed born a Jew, and Buddha was likewise born into a social order defined by Hinduism, Their religious teachings went far beyond a simple reinterpretation of the religious systems in which They emerged.

In the same way, Bahá’u’lláh laid entirely new spiritual foundations. His writings are independent scripture, and His work transcends that of a religious reformer. As historian Arnold Toynbee noted in 1959:

“Bahá’ísm [sic] is an independent religion on a par with Islam, Christianity, and the other recognized world religions. Bahá’ísm is not a sect of some other religion: it is a separate religion, and it has the same status as the other recognized religions.”

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Dr. Hizzaya Hissani Mwani, program manager of UPLIFT, a Bahá’í-inspired literacy project in Uganda’s West Nile Region. Dr. Mwani has played a key role in developing UPLIFT’s innovative and holistic approach to the teaching of literacy.
said Dr. Mwani, describing the conditions some 40 years ago. “So during certain celebrations, even though I was a Muslim, I would have to eat separately, after all the other people had dispersed. I found that the community didn’t fully accept me, because I was African.”

These sorts of experiences led Dr. Mwani on a search for answers — for answers about religion, and for answers about how to help his own people. “I used to think I would be a politician,” he said, because that seemed the best way to change things.

In 1978, while teaching high school in Dar Es Salaam, he picked up a small book about the Bahá’í Faith — and was immediately attracted to the Bahá’í vision of unity.

“When I learned about the Bahá’í concept of the unity of mankind, I was very excited,” said Dr. Mwani. “I was inspired by the Bahá’í teachings, because they were free of prejudice.”

Soon after becoming a Bahá’í, Dr. Mwani moved to the Democratic Republic of Congo, to help with a Bahá’í project to promote development among the Bayanda (Pygmy) people. There he came to see literacy — and not politics — as a critical tool for helping others.

“So many people in that area believed that Pygmies are inferior, and not like other human beings,” said Dr. Mwani. “But slowly, through literacy, it was proved that they are just as good as anyone else.”

He began a serious study of literacy methods, obtaining first a master’s degree and then a doctorate. Today he is project manager of the Uganda Program of Literacy for Transformation (UPLIFT), a Bahá’í-inspired literacy project that serves more than 100 communities in the remote West Nile Region of northwest Uganda.

While traditional literacy programs focus mainly on getting adults to read and write, the UPLIFT method incorporates other kinds of knowledge — such as how to combat malaria, how to make compost, and how to obtain better nutrition — into its outreach. It is an integrated and holistic approach that has enabled most participants to learn to read and write in about 100 hours of class time — versus the usual 200 to 300 hours.

UPLIFT’s distinctive approach was devised in great part by Dr. Mwani himself, who credits the Bahá’í teachings on unity and oneness with helping him to see how literacy training can be something more than rote memorization. Rather, it can be used as part of an integrated approach to development.

“We look at the parts of language and experience, and relate them to the whole,” said Dr. Mwani, explaining his method for teaching literacy to the Alur people in the West Nile region. “For example, the people here believe that it is the witch doctors who cause malaria. So we must

“The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.”

— BAHÁ’U’LLÁH

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**Some statistics of the Bahá’í World Community**

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<th>Category</th>
<th>World Total</th>
<th>Africa</th>
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*Compiled by the Department of Statistics at the Bahá’í World Centre for the year 2004. *As of 2003
“The peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God.”
— Bahá’u’lláh

Mountains in western Panama. Bound by a common language and diffusely settled throughout the region, the Ngabe-Bugle people exist largely on the margins of Panamanian society and have historically been among its poorest members.

Over the last 30 years, some 8,000 Ngabe-Bugle have embraced the Bahá’í Faith. Many were attracted to the Faith because of indigenous prophecy that spoke of the coming of a new religion that would teach love and unity.

With the help of the wider Panamanian Bahá’í community, the Ngabe-Bugle Bahá’ís built the Ngabe-Bugle (Guaymí) Cultural Center in the village of Soloy. Established in 1982, the center has over the years operated an agricultural research program, promoted the development of a series of tutorial schools in nearby villages, operated a secondary-level education program, and sponsored cultural and folklore festivals. All of these programs have sought to combine traditional wisdom and culture with modern knowledge in a curriculum of education appropriate to the Ngabe-Bugle people, who used to teach them to use modern medicine. So when we learn the word for malaria, we don’t do it in isolation. We study it in connection with prevention and the treatment and the cause and the cure.

“The approach is to look at the needs of the community as a whole and to relate the content of the program to the lives of the learners,” said Dr. Mwani.

Community service in Panama

In Panama, Tahireh Sanchez and her husband, Benjamin, likewise feel strongly about serving their community — the some 80,000 Ngabe-Bugle people who live in and around the Cordilla Central Mountains in western Panama.

The Nineteen Day Feast

A blend of worship, fellowship, and grassroots democracy

The centerpiece of Bahá’í community life is the Nineteen Day Feast. Held once every 19 days, it is the local community’s regular worship gathering — and more.

Open to both adults and children, the Nineteen Day Feast promotes and sustains the unity of the local Bahá’í community. Although its program is adaptable to a wide variety of cultural and social needs, the Feast always contains three elements: spiritual devotions, administrative consultation, and fellowship. As such, the Feast combines religious worship with grassroots governance and social enjoyment.

The use of the word “feast” might seem to imply that a large meal will be served. That is not necessarily the case. While food and beverages are usually served, the term itself is meant to suggest that the community should enjoy a “spiritual feast” of worship, companionship, and unity. Bahá’u’lláh stressed the importance of gathering every 19 days, at the beginning of each Bahá’í month, “to bind your hearts together,” even if nothing more than water is served [see Bahá’í Calendar, page 64].

During the devotional program, selections from the Bahá’í writings are read aloud. A general discussion follows, allowing every member a voice in community affairs and making the Feast an “arena of democracy at the very root of society.” The Feast ends with a period for socializing.

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Ms. Sanchez and her husband are active supporters of many of these programs. Both have run training sessions in moral education, for example, and both have worked in the center's radio station, which broadcasts in the Ngabe-Bugle language and serves as a cohesive force in the community.

As with Dr. Mwani, the motive for their community service stems from their faith. “If I wasn’t a Bahá’í, my way of thinking would be very different,” said Ms. Sanchez. “I would just think about living day-to-day, not thinking about tomorrow or doing something good for others — especially doing something that will bring happiness and well-being to others.”

The Sanchezes also strive to incorporate the principles of the Bahá’í Faith in their own family life. This is especially evident in the manner in which their married life differs from that of the typical Ngabe-Bugle husband and wife. As in many other places in the world, the woman is subservient to the man in a traditional marriage. If the couple has a horse, the man rides while the woman walks. And the woman typically does all of the cooking, washing, and child care.

In their household, the Sanchezes have over the years shared all duties, striving to follow the principle of equality between women and men. “In the house sometimes he cooks, and sometimes I do,” said Ms. Sanchez. “Sometimes I wash the clothes, and sometimes he does. And we try to show respect towards each other.”

Ms. Sanchez’s parents were among the first Ngabe-Bugle to become Bahá’ís, and she was raised as a Bahá’í. The effects of the Faith’s teachings on the oneness of all people are evident in the self-confidence and openness she projects to visitors — qualities that distinguish her from most Ngabe-Bugle people, who have traditionally been quite isolated and suspicious of outsiders.

“Among ourselves, we are very kind and socialize a lot,” Ms. Sanchez said. “But with the outside people, we are very afraid to talk to them and relate to them. But in my family, I was taught to socialize with others and to treat everyone as equals. So this allows me to go out and make friends with all people.”

After some years as a government literacy worker, Ms. Sanchez in 2003 took a new job coordinating the computer training center that has been established at the public high school in Soloy with the help of a Bahá’í-inspired development agency.

“The experience with Internet is something really great, in which we can become connected to the world and receive information from different places,” said Ms.
Sanchez. “This will let the whole world come in and is a way to communicate with different people as equals.”

**The importance of prayer**

In Norway, Lasse Thoresen strives to invoke the spiritual principles of the Bahá’í Faith through his music. Music, the Bahá’í writings say, is “spiritual food for soul and heart,” with a great capacity to inspire and motivate.

“The human spirit must undergo a metamorphosis and be transformed until it reflects divine qualities,” said Prof. Thoresen. “Prayer and meditation are important means, and music can be used to further reinforce the effect of the process.”

Like other Bahá’ís around the world, Prof. Thoresen makes a point of taking time to pray at least once a day, choosing from among the hundreds of prayers revealed by Bahá’u’lláh and other central figures of the Bahá’í Faith, and to spend at least a few minutes in quiet reflection or meditation. “We have no clergy in the Bahá’í Faith, we have no gurus or other spiritual authorities, so the type of meditation you do is left up to the individual,” said Prof. Thoresen.

Raised in the Lutheran Church, Prof. Thoresen felt “spontaneously religious” as a child but as a teenager began to question Christianity and declared himself an atheist. “As a young intellectual it seemed somehow illogical to believe in God.” The shock of watching his father die spurred him to search again for the truth in religion. “I hadn’t understood the reality of death,” he said. “So suddenly I found myself being an atheist, faced with the understanding that that is the fate of everyone.”

Then in his 20s, he began to investigate various belief systems, from Buddhism to Hinduism to Greek philosophy. In the summer of 1971, he heard about the Bahá’í Faith and was instantly attracted. Presented with a book of the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, he felt that “it seemed very much to be a revelation from God,” said Prof. Thoresen.

“First of all, I saw in the Bahá’í writings there are some eternal things in the Bahá’í Faith that go through all religions, themes that have to do with eternity, detachment from the world, righteousness, justice, and love.”

“And it also seemed to fit the world situation today. From what I had studied, I knew we are all in a global village. And Bahá’u’lláh essentially said that more than 100 years ago.”

▶ Lasse Thoresen.
The worldwide Bahá’í community is established in virtually every country.