

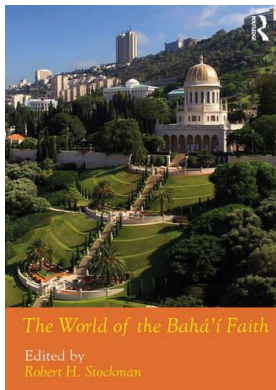
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 25 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The World of the Bahá'í Faith

Robert H. Stockman

North America

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429027772-53>

Robert H. Stockman

Published online on: 31 Dec 2021

How to cite :- Robert H. Stockman. 31 Dec 2021, *North America from: The World of the Bahá'í Faith*
Routledge

Accessed on: 25 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429027772-53>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

46

NORTH AMERICA

Robert H. Stockman

The Bahá'í scriptures see much promise for the Americas as a whole and North America in particular. Bahá'u'lláh (Kitáb-i-Aqdas para. 88) exhorted 'the Rulers of America and the Presidents of the Republics therein' to 'bind ye the broken with the hands of justice, and crush the oppressor who flourisheth with the rod of the commandments of your Lord.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized that eventually America 'would lead all nations spiritually' (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 104). 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Prayer for America (*Bahá'í Prayers* 25) elaborates on three themes: that America should become 'glorious in spiritual degrees even as it has aspired to material degrees'; that it must 'upraise the standard of the oneness of humanity'; and that it must 'promulgate the Most Great Peace.' The Bahá'í scriptures thus view the establishment of justice, the combatting materialism, the promoting of racial equality and oneness, and the advancing of the cause of world peace as the central priorities not just of the Bahá'ís, but of the region as a whole.

Origins, 1894–1921

The United States was the first country in the European cultural world to have a Bahá'í community. The Bahá'í Faith was introduced to the United States in 1892, when Anton Haddad and Ibrahim Kheiralla, two Bahá'ís of Christian background from what today is Lebanon, arrived in New York to find work. Haddad soon left; by early 1894 Kheiralla had improved his English and began to teach his understanding of the Bahá'í religion to Americans. The first Americans converted in that year, including Thornton Chase, who is regarded as the first American Bahá'í (Stockman 2002: 260). Lacking books of Bahá'í scripture, and intrigued by biblical prophecy, spiritual healing, Middle Eastern magic, and American folk Protestantism, Kheiralla forged his own unique form of Bahá'í belief and taught it to a growing number of Americans. By 1899, 1,500 had been attracted to the new faith. Bahá'í communities of more than 200 members existed in Chicago, New York, and Kenosha, Wisconsin. Cincinnati, northern New Jersey, Philadelphia, and Racine, Wisconsin had communities of 10 to 50 members; individuals and handfuls of Bahá'ís resided in at least 54 more localities in 25 states, the District of Columbia, and Ontario. The latter province had a group of five Bahá'ís after Edith McGee heard of the Bahá'í Faith in Chicago and returned to London, Ontario, introducing the Bahá'í Faith to her mother, sister, and her two aunts (Stockman 1985: 163; van den Hoonard, 'Canada').

Particularly attracted to the Faith were middle- and lower-middle-class Americans of British, German, and Scandinavian heritage. Most were of Protestant background; some had been active in churches when they converted, though most were inactive or unchurched. A substantial fraction had become interested in alternative religious expressions such as Swedenborgianism, Christian Science, Theosophy, Vedanta, Buddhism, and New Thought before becoming Bahá'ís. Others had been Masons or members of other secret societies, or had been interested in philosophies focused on health and healing.

In late 1898 Ibrahim Kheiralla and a group of American Bahá'ís went on pilgrimage, initiating the community's formal contact with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who had become head of the Bahá'í Faith on the death of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892. The American Bahá'ís discovered, much to their shock, that Kheiralla had been teaching them a mixture of Bahá'í and other ideas, and that many of his innovations contradicted statements in the Bahá'í scriptures. When Kheiralla and the others returned to North America a crisis resulted, Kheiralla insisting that his teachings were correct and orthodox Bahá'í belief, the others denying his claim and asserting that Bahá'ís should now turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá for guidance, not to Kheiralla. In 1900 Kheiralla attempted to start his own independent Bahá'í sect, an effort that ultimately attracted no more than one or two hundred of the American Bahá'ís and which endured about a half century before disappearing. Half or more of the American Bahá'ís became temporarily or permanently disaffected from the Faith as a result of the crisis. In 1900 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent Bahá'í teachers from the Middle East—'Abdu'l-Karím-i-Ṭihirání, Ḥájí Ḥassan-i-Khurásání, Mírzá Asadu'lláh, and Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl—to provide the remnant with accurate knowledge of the Bahá'í teachings.

Over the next 12 years, the American Bahá'í community underwent steady development. The first phase (1900–04) was a phase of consolidation. The Middle Eastern teachers travelled to the various communities, deepening them and helping them to organize themselves. Chicago, New York, Kenosha, and northern Hudson County, New Jersey all elected consultative bodies, forerunners of modern Spiritual Assemblies. New communities formed, including a substantial group in Montreal as a result of the efforts of May Bolles Maxwell. The next phase (1904–08) saw a burst of translations of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, providing the American Bahá'ís with a substantial body of Bahá'í scripture in English. Consultative bodies formed in Washington, D.C., Boston, Spokane, and briefly in Oakland, California. The third phase (1909–11) was one of the establishment of continental organization and a focusing of energy on several projects: construction of the Bahá'í Temple; establishment of a continental coordinating body, the Bahai Temple Unity; founding of *Star of the West*, the first successful national Bahá'í periodical; and creation of the Persian-American Educational Society, a social and economic development project through which the American Bahá'ís provided their Persian brethren with educational, medical, and technical assistance.

In 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited the United States and Canada for eight months, a trip that had a profound impact on the Bahá'ís. Most were too poor to afford the lengthy and still arduous trip to Palestine, and thus His visit was the only chance many had to see Him. They also brought their friends and contacts to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá and hear His talks, producing a modest upswing in the enrolment of new members. His talks were regularly published in *Star of the West* and were eventually compiled into a volume, thereby bringing them to an even wider audience. He visited some 50 localities, gave up to four talks a day—for a total of over 400—to a cumulative audience of about 93,000 people (Stockman 2012a: 1). Over 350 newspaper articles about 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His Faith were published, resulting in widespread publicity for the Bahá'í religion for the first time.

Consolidation of the Bahá'í community was perhaps the most important result of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit. 'Abdu'l-Bahá laid the cornerstone of the Bahá'í temple outside Chicago and had the

Chicago consultative body reorganized. His emphasis on race unity was constant. He spoke to dozens of African American audiences totalling thousands of people, including to those attending the fourth annual conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He encouraged Louis Gregory, an African-American lawyer, and Louise Mathew, an English Bahá'í, to marry, and theirs became the first interracial marriage in the American Bahá'í community (Morrison 1982: 63–68). Their presence alone was a constant reminder to the Bahá'í community that it stood for racial unity.

His talks brought deeper knowledge of the Bahá'í teachings to some, but strengthened the convictions of others that the Bahá'í ideals would be widely disseminated only if the Bahá'í community mixed more with others and did not view the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion. Many found obedience to 'Abdu'l-Bahá a difficult membership requirement to follow.

The years 1913–21 witnessed a dialectic of consolidation and crisis. The advent of World War I (1914–18) cut the Bahá'ís off from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and left them to resolve their disagreements by themselves. The Bahá'ís soon differed over their attitude toward the war. Some advocated American support of the Allies and went out to sell war bonds; others opposed the war and became the focus of government investigations. Some of the latter published a master compilation of Bahá'í scriptures on peace.

Many Bahá'ís questioned whether Bahá'í Faith was an independent religion and whether it could be organized. Those who saw it as an independent religion usually favoured organization; those who preferred to see the Bahá'í ideals as a set of teachings that one could mix with other beliefs and with adherence to other movements often criticized the organizers as exclusivist and narrow-mindedly sectarian. In 1917 some of the inclusivist-minded Bahá'ís established a reading room in Chicago, which split the Bahá'í community; they were eventually expelled from the Bahá'í Faith as Covenant-breakers (Smith 1982: 189–191). In 1919 another inclusivist-minded group of Bahá'ís in New York founded *Reality* magazine, which after 1922 evolved into a platform for attacking Bahá'í organization and exclusivism. It eventually ceased to be affiliated with the Bahá'í Faith and quickly went out of business (Smith 1984: 135–155).

But the 1913–21 period also saw many important and positive developments in the American Bahá'í community. In 1916 and 1919 the American Bahá'ís received 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan, a series of letters to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada that gave them a mandate to take the Bahá'í religion to every nation and territory on the globe. The tablets focused the Bahá'ís' attention on traveling to teach the Faith. They also produced a renewed concern about the strengthening of Bahá'í organization. Committees to coordinate the teaching work in Canada and in the north-eastern, central, southern, and western states of the U.S. were established. The Chicago and Kenosha consultative bodies, which had lapsed, were re-established, and Cleveland established a consultative body of its own, the first new body to be formed since 1910. By 1917 the American Bahá'ís had about six local Bahá'í governing bodies, the forerunners of local Spiritual Assemblies. In order to improve the quality of Bahá'í literature, in 1918 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked the Bahai Temple Unity convention to appoint a committee to review and approve all new Bahá'í literature. Further accelerating the teaching of the Faith and the consolidation of the Bahá'í community was the North American visit of the renowned Persian Bahá'í teacher Fáḍil-i-Mázindarání in 1919. The year 1920 witnessed the selection of the architectural design for the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette (Whitmore 1984: 87–94).

The 1913–21 period also saw a significant diversification of the American Bahá'í community. Catholics and Jews were attracted in larger numbers. The number of localities where Bahá'ís resided in Canada grew to at least eight. A shift from an emphasis on fulfilment of biblical prophecy to a focus on the Bahá'í social reform teachings probably encouraged greater receptivity. Most significantly, Blacks enrolled in the Bahá'í Faith in many of the larger communities,

resulting in their racial integration. Before 1912, no more than a dozen or two African Americans had joined the Bahá'í Faith, nearly all of them in Washington, D.C. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's strong insistence on racial integration was beginning to have an important effect on the white Bahá'ís.

1922–63

On 28 November 1921 'Abdu'l-Bahá died, plunging the Bahá'í world into grief. In His Will and Testament He appointed His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to be His successor, and specified the mechanism for establishing local and national Spiritual Assemblies and the Universal House of Justice. Shoghi Effendi took the Will and Testament as his mandate for organizing the Bahá'ís, and used the Tablets of the Divine Plan as his mandate for spreading the Bahá'í religion to the entire planet in a systematic fashion. The North American Bahá'í community was to be his chief instrument for accomplishing both goals.

Shoghi Effendi wrote the North American Bahá'ís within months of taking up his role as Guardian that local Spiritual Assemblies should be elected in every locality having nine or more Bahá'ís, and that the Bahai Temple Unity's Executive Committee should evolve into a national Spiritual Assembly. While some opposition to the new emphasis on organization occurred, in the form of Ahmad Sohrab's New History Society and Ruth White's attack on the authenticity of the Will and Testament, the vast majority of Bahá'ís came to accept Shoghi Effendi's leadership and the new emphasis on organization it entailed. By April 1928, the number of Spiritual Assemblies in the continental United States had grown to 45, with two more in Canada (*Bahá'í World* 1928: 183–185). Conversion of the Bahai Temple Unity into a national organization took four years; in 1925 Shoghi Effendi recognized it as the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada. The national Spiritual Assembly was legally incorporated in 1929; its declaration of trust and bylaws, approved by Shoghi Effendi, became the model of similar incorporations worldwide. The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New York City was incorporated in 1932, and its incorporation papers became a similar model for local incorporations worldwide. The 1920s and 1930s saw North America emerge as the cradle of the Bahá'í administrative order.

Shoghi Effendi wrote a stream of essays to the American Bahá'ís on basic Bahá'í teachings that clarified their understanding of the station of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the status of the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion, the nature of the Bahá'í social and spiritual teachings, and the centrality of the Bahá'í Administrative Order to the Faith's continued progress. These were subsequently published as *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* and *The Advent of Divine Justice*. One result of better organization and better understanding was the beginning of genuine, long-term growth of the American Bahá'í community, whose membership had fluctuated between about one and two thousand from 1898 to 1926. The 1936 religious census conducted by the United States government revealed 2,584 Bahá'ís, a doubling over the numbers of ten years earlier. In that year the community had 69 local Spiritual Assemblies, including two in Canada (*Bahá'í World* 1937: 515–517).

The establishment of local communities and the incorporation of Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies also simplified the acquisition of property. Green Acre, a retreat and conference centre in Eliot, Maine, established by a Bahá'í in 1894, became Bahá'í property in 1929. John and Louisa Bosch opened Geyserville on their ranch north of San Francisco in 1927 and deeded it to the National Spiritual Assembly in 1935. Lou and Helen Eggleston started Louhelen Bahá'í School on their farm, 70 miles north of Detroit, in 1931.

Growing membership, better understanding of the basic teachings, and stronger organization in turn allowed the launching of systematic plans for growth. In 1937 Shoghi Effendi gave

the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada a Seven Year Plan. It had three principal goals: the opening of every republic of Latin America to the Bahá'í religion through the settlement of pioneers (Bahá'ís who move to a place to establish a Bahá'í community); completion of the exterior of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois; and establishment of at least one local Spiritual Assembly in every state in the United States and in every province in Canada. When the plan began, 11 states and provinces had no Bahá'ís at all; 34 lacked Spiritual Assemblies. In spite of World War II, which hampered transportation, prevented the obtaining of construction materials, and made it nearly impossible for Bahá'í pioneers to find housing in their goal areas, all of the goals were won by 1944. The number of North American Bahá'ís increased from 2,600 in 1936 to about 5,000 in 1944; the number of local Spiritual Assemblies from 69 (including two in Hawaii and two in Canada) to 131 (including two in Hawaii, ten in Canada, and one in Puerto Rico). In 1944 Canada also had seven groups of two to eight Bahá'ís each and 27 isolated Bahá'ís, for a total of 209 believers (van den Hoonaard 1996: 303). Even the territory of Alaska was able to form a local Spiritual Assembly, in Anchorage in 1943.

Shoghi Effendi gave the North American Bahá'ís a two-year respite before launching the second Seven Year Plan in 1946. The new plan called for completion of the interior ornamentation of the House of Worship and its landscaping, so that it could be dedicated (Figure 46.1); the

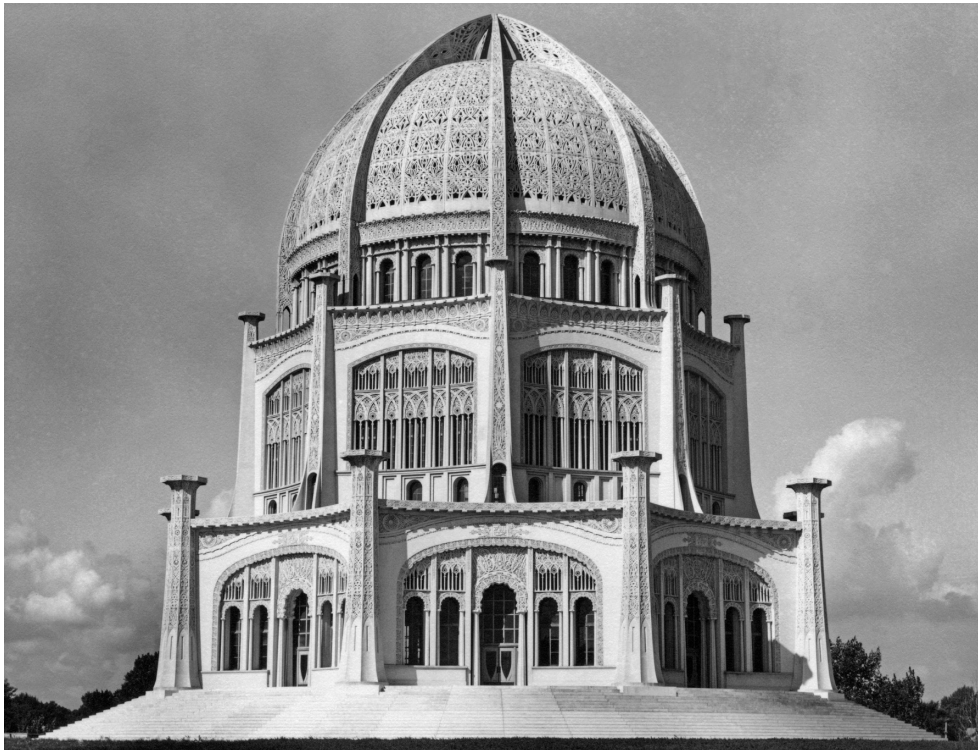


Figure 46.1 The Bahá'í House of Worship for North America, located in Wilmette, Illinois, 25 kilometres north of Chicago. Called 'the Mother Temple of the West,' planning started in 1903 and it was completed in 1953.

Source: Bahá'í World News Service.

establishment of national Spiritual Assemblies for South America, Central America, and Canada; and the re-establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in war-torn Europe. North American pioneers soon opened 11 European countries to the Bahá'í Faith. The number of local Spiritual Assemblies in the continental United States continued to rise. The Canadian national Spiritual Assembly was first elected in 1948; one each for Central America and South America followed in 1951. In 1950 Shoghi Effendi announced a supplemental two year plan to open much of Africa to the Faith.

In 1953 the second Seven Year Plan was successfully concluded. Shoghi Effendi designated it a Holy Year, for it was the centenary of the beginning of Bahá'u'lláh's mission. It also marked the beginning of the Ten Year Crusade, an international plan to take the Bahá'í Faith to the rest of the nations and major territories on the planet. The United States Bahá'ís were given a major share of the goals. In the first six months of the plan, five of the nine members of the national Spiritual Assembly resigned to go pioneering; a substantial fraction of America's active Bahá'í membership spent all or part of the next decade in distant lands. The Crusade saw a quadrupling of the number of localities worldwide where Bahá'ís resided; the number of languages in which Bahá'í literature was translated more than tripled; and the number of national Spiritual Assemblies worldwide increased from 12 to 56. North American Bahá'ís were responsible for perhaps a third of the goals of the plan. Among the new national Spiritual Assemblies was Alaska, which was elected in 1957. At that point, the territory had six local Spiritual Assemblies and 107 believers.

Growth on the home front also continued between the years 1953 and 1963. The number of Bahá'ís in the United States had grown to almost 7,000 by 1956 and to 1,000 in Canada by 1957. By 1963 U.S. membership exceeded 10,000, and enrolments were increasing that number by at least 1,200 per year. A third of the new enrolments were youth (aged 15–20). By 1963, the number of Canadian Bahá'ís was approximately 2,500 and the number of local Spiritual Assemblies was 68 (van den Hoonaard n.d.b, 'Canada'). Alaska had 257 Bahá'ís and 15 local Spiritual Assemblies that year (van den Hoonaard n.d.a, 'Alaska').

The period also saw the first systematic efforts to reach indigenous peoples. In 1937 Mary Farley Steverson of the Omaha nation became a Bahá'í. After a time in Chicago, she moved to Macy, Nebraska, a town within the Omaha Reservation. In 1948 a local Spiritual Assembly formed there; all nine members were Omaha Indians. In 1949 two native Bahá'ís, Melba and Alfred Loft, pioneered to the Mohawk reserve (reservation) of Mr. Loft (Watts and Verge 2011: 41) in Tyendinaga, Ontario. In Alaska, the first native became a Bahá'í in 1949.

In 1962, a small group of Dine (Navajo) became Bahá'ís and decided to call a Council Fire of their relatives in Pine Springs, Arizona, to inform them of the Faith. They expected 100 to attend, 1,000 came, and hundreds of Dine became Bahá'ís. Two of them later served on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States. The formation of a social club in Calgary, Alberta, brought native and non-native people together and led to teaching on the Peigan Reserve, where Canada's first all-native local Spiritual Assembly was formed in 1961. In 1963 a local Spiritual Assembly was formed on an Athabaskan reserve north of the Arctic Circle. Bahá'í literature was translated into at least ten native languages. By 1964, 20% of all local Spiritual Assemblies in Canada consisted primarily of indigenous Bahá'ís.

1964–96

In 1964 the Universal House of Justice announced an international Nine Year Plan. The United States was asked to form local and national Spiritual Assemblies in various Caribbean island groups and to assist nearly two dozen national Spiritual Assemblies all over the world by sending traveling teachers or by helping them to acquire properties. On the home front, the number of local Spiritual Assemblies was to be raised from 334 to 600, with at least two in every state,

and the number of localities where Bahá'ís resided was to grow from 1,650 to 3,000. Particular efforts to reach Japanese, Chinese, Hispanic, native, and African Americans were specified.

All the goals were exceeded, perhaps by the largest margin in American Bahá'í history. Bahá'í teaching efforts received an unexpected boost from the times; the 1960s were turbulent, causing many to despair for solutions to the world's problems and search for new alternatives. The atmosphere fostered by the rapidly growing civil rights movement of the late fifties and early sixties was perhaps a major cause for the 10 to 15% annual membership growth rate that the American Bahá'í community experienced in the early 1960s. The late sixties and early seventies, however, saw both the greatest social unrest and the most rapid Bahá'í growth. Sociologists have noted that after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the bloody Tet offensive in Vietnam, and race riots—all in the first half of 1968—the youth culture took a radical turn. A comparatively small number of those searching youth became Bahá'ís, but the number had an enormous impact on the Bahá'í community.

The most significant expansion in numbers in the United States came from 1969 through 1971, when the youth culture was successfully reached. The number of Bahá'ís in the United States stood at 13,000 in 1969; 18,000 in 1970; 31,000 in 1971 (when teaching of rural Blacks also began); 40,000 in 1972; and 60,000 in 1974. The membership growth produced a considerable expansion in the number of local Spiritual Assemblies, which reached 824 in 1973 (up from 331 in 1964); 238 assemblies were legally incorporated. The number of localities where Bahá'ís resided increased from 1,710 in 1964 to 4,809 in 1973. Expansion of the membership among young adults resulted in further impetus to acquire legal recognition of Bahá'í marriage; with the achievement of such recognition in Rhode Island in 1970 and West Virginia in 1971, all 48 contiguous states granted legal status to Bahá'í marriage.

Alaska and Canada saw a similar expansion; local Spiritual Assemblies increased from 17 and 68, respectively, in 1964, to 38 and 201 in 1974, and the number of localities with Bahá'ís jumped from 53 and 350, respectively, in 1964, to 158 and about 1,000, in 1974. Canadian Bahá'í membership rose from 2,500 in 1963 to 7,700 in 1973 and 12,600 by 1979 (van den Hoonaard n.d.b, 'Canada'). Alaska's Bahá'í membership went from 257 to 3,200 from 1963 to 1973 and most of the new believers were indigenous (van den Hoonaard n.d.a, 'Alaska'). Efforts in Quebec began to bring in Francophones, who had been a tiny minority in the Canadian Bahá'í community heretofore.

Sudden growth also had its challenges. The vast majority of the new Bahá'ís knew little about their new religion's teachings; many of the newly formed local Spiritual Assemblies had difficulty functioning as a result. Withdrawal rates also jumped; perhaps a third to a half of the new believers did not remain Bahá'ís. Since the withdrawals occurred over many years, subsequent Bahá'í membership growth appeared to be less than it really was; for example, by 1979 the American Bahá'í membership had grown to 75,000, only 15,000 more than in 1974, but the increase reflected a much stronger enrolment rate than the net growth suggested. Alaska's membership grew by only 100 from 1973 to 1979. Some new Bahá'ís ceased to remain active; others dropped out entirely and never notified the Bahá'í community. As a result the percentage of the members with known addresses dropped. Nevertheless, the North American Bahá'í communities had permanently and significantly grown in size.

Not all of the expansion of the membership was caused by conversions from the youth culture; the Nine Year Plan was also the time the community discovered that going door to door was effective in many communities. In the rural south, particularly in South Carolina, the African American population proved particularly receptive and joined the Faith by the thousands. Consolidation of the new believers proved more difficult and occurred at a slower pace. In South Carolina a permanent facility, the Louis G. Gregory Institute, was established in 1972 to deepen

the local Bahá'ís and help them elect local Spiritual Assemblies. Hispanic populations also were attracted to the Bahá'í Faith, particularly in Florida, California, and Oregon. Systematic efforts on the Lakota Sioux Reservations in the Dakotas brought hundreds into the Bahá'í Faith. In 1981, a survey showed that 42% of the Alaskan Bahá'ís were natives, and that 3% of Alaska's native population was Bahá'í (van den Hoonaard n.d.a, 'Alaska').

The Five Year Plan, 1974–79, saw a significant expansion in the number of local Spiritual Assemblies; from about 900 to 1,488, 88 more than the plan called for. Diversification of the community continued. The number of Bahá'í communities on Indian reservations with local Spiritual Assemblies exceeded 25. After 1975 Southeast Asian refugees began to enter the United States; some had been Bahá'ís in Vietnam and Cambodia, more had converted in Asian refugee camps, and others became Bahá'ís in the United States. This introduced an entirely new ethnic group into the American Bahá'í community. After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978, Iranian Bahá'í refugees also began to enter the United States; eventually about 10,000 settled.

One goal of the Five Year Plan—increasing the use of the media—proved of great importance when the persecution of the Iranian Bahá'ís began in 1978. The American Bahá'ís had developed contacts with the media and, to some extent, with government officials, and now the experience proved useful. Throughout the Seven Year Plan (1979–86) and the Six Year Plan (1986–92) press coverage of the Iranian Bahá'ís was considerable, articles about the American Bahá'í community steadily increased, and the consequent awareness of the existence of the Bahá'í religion in the mind of the public steadily improved. In 1986 the Universal House of Justice declared that the Bahá'í Faith had emerged from obscurity, a long-sought goal of the Bahá'ís.

The 13-year period covered by the two plans saw strong membership growth, though it was slower than in the previous period. In Canada, the number of Bahá'ís went from 7,700 in 1973 to 27,700 in 1986—close to a 10% increase per year—partly because of a large influx of Bahá'í refugees from Iran. The number of local Spiritual Assemblies went from 201 to 338. The contiguous 48 states of the United States saw the number of local Spiritual Assemblies in the United States double from 824 to about 1,700; total membership grew from 61,000 to 100,000 (an average growth of almost 5% annually), a statistic that included about 10,000 children not previously counted. Alaska's local Spiritual Assemblies increased from 38 to 76 and Bahá'í membership grew more slowly, from 3,200 to 3,900, probably because efforts to reach indigenous people had overtaxed resources. Membership growth continued to slow in the United States; by 1996 it had reached 133,000. Enrollments, which had run as high as 5,000 per year, dropped to 2,000, then 1,500.

In addition to growth, the period saw significant consolidation of the Bahá'í membership. The youth who enrolled in the late sixties and early seventies completed their education, married, and started families. A significant fraction of the marriages were between European and African Americans, or between newly arrived Persians and members of either group. A small number of the converts from among the 'baby boomers' became interested in Bahá'í history, Islamic Studies, comparative religion, Arabic and Persian literature, and other fields in the humanities and social sciences; as a result, Bahá'í Studies, which had been a very minor effort, began to develop. In 1966 the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States established an intellectual magazine, *World Order*. In 1975 a Canadian Association for Studies of the Bahá'í Faith was established; in 1980 its territory was broadened to include the United States and its name was changed to the Association for Bahá'í Studies. It established the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in 1988. Starting about 1980, the number of books about the Bahá'í Faith published annually in English increased significantly.

In order to consolidate the rural African American population in South Carolina, a Bahá'í radio station, WLGI, began broadcasting in 1984. Native American converts were assisted by the establishment of the Native American Bahá'í Institute on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona in 1982. First Persian, then Southeast Asian Bahá'í refugees were aided by a Bahá'í Refugee

Office, established in Wilmette in 1984. The 1980s also saw significant interest in the Bahá'í Faith among Haitians and Chinese residing in the United States. In the late 1980s the United States received goals from the Universal House of Justice to expand the Bahá'í Faith in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Twenty-five years of plans, 1996–2021

To strengthen the capacities of Bahá'í communities to grow, the Universal House of Justice initiated new efforts when it launched a Four Year Plan (1996–2000). It focused on the development of local study circles coordinated by regional training institutes in order to raise up more human resources, so that local Bahá'í communities could grow on their own. They also authorized national Spiritual Assemblies, starting in 1997, to divide their countries into regions where regional Bahá'í councils would be elected annually by all the members of the region's local Spiritual Assemblies. The United States established four regional Bahá'í councils, and subsequently subdivided the regions until there were twelve such councils by 2020. Canada established six councils.

In 1999, the Universal House of Justice declared the 21-year period from 2000 to 2021 as a time dedicated to accelerating the process of entry by troops. After a 12-month plan (2000–01), the remaining 20 years were divided into four five-year plans. Over the first 11 years, the House of Justice developed and nurtured a series of new agencies and procedures:

- Clusters, each of which was a group of localities, some of which might have local Assemblies. To coordinate outreach efforts in each cluster, the Regional Bahá'í Council appointed various local committees or individuals. The United States established over 900 clusters in the contiguous 48 states in 2001.
- Core activities (personal and community devotional programmes, study circles, and children's classes), starting in 2002. Junior youth groups were added in 2005. Children's and junior youth programmes focus on acquisition of virtues such as truthfulness and kindness, offer stories about the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and emphasize service to one's community.
- Study of the Ruhi books, initially seven of them, parts of which were used as far back as the 1990s, became the standard curriculum for study circles in 2006. The books focus on developing capabilities, especially ones that involve serving others.
- Social action, practical efforts to improve a neighbourhood or village for the benefit of everyone, which have been important activities for decades, but received a new emphasis in 2009. These efforts are separate from efforts to teach others the Bahá'í Faith.
- Public discourse on important social issues that the Bahá'í teachings address, which always had been done but which was recognized as an important component of Bahá'í efforts, starting in 2009.

All of these efforts were meant to supplement existing institutions and procedures: locally elected Spiritual Assemblies, one per civil jurisdiction, such as a city, town, or county; the Nineteen Day Feast, where the local Bahá'í community meets to pray, consult, and socialize; Bahá'í holy days; firesides to teach new people about the Bahá'í Faith; and deepenings to provide deeper understandings of the Bahá'í texts and principles. Human resources were limited, however, so sometimes firesides were replaced by devotionals and deepenings by study circles. The election of local Spiritual Assemblies remained important, but goals to elect additional ones were no longer set, and when the number of Bahá'ís in a locality dropped below the minimum number of nine—usually because Bahá'ís moved out of that civil jurisdiction—there

was no systematic effort to encourage others to move in and save the Assembly. As a result, the number of local Spiritual Assemblies decreased. Worldwide statistics were no longer published, presumably because they were no longer a goal to be measured. In the contiguous 48 states, the number of local Spiritual Assemblies dropped to 974 by Riḍván 2020, 60% of the peak number in 1986. Canada had some 217 local assemblies in 2016 (www.bahai-ottawa.org/history_canadian_bahai_community.html), two-thirds of the number in 1986. Alaska's number of assemblies dropped from 76 in 1986 to 15 in 2011 and 12 in 2020 (Alaska Bahá'í Statistics Department 2011 and 2020: personal communications).

Expansion of Bahá'í membership also became a lower priority as the emphasis shifted to bringing people into the core activities in order to create a community of people dedicated to helping others and transforming neighbourhoods. Sometimes people who joined study circles or helped to run Bahá'í-inspired classes for children and junior youth became Bahá'ís, but there was no requirement that they do so. Rather, they were counted as members of the 'community of interest,' or as 'friends of the Faith.' Official Bahá'í membership in the contiguous United States continued to increase, but more slowly; by 2020 the community reached 176,000, a 32% increase over 24 years, about 1% annually. Canada reported 35,000 Bahá'ís in 2020 (www.bahai.ca/#a11), double the 17,700 they had in 1986 and a 2% annual increase. Alaska's membership, on the other hand, fell to 1,353 by 2011 and 826 by 2020 (Alaska Bahá'í Statistics Department 2011 and 2020: personal communications), presumably in part because Bahá'ís moved to the lower 48 states.

The new activities, however, saw a steady increase. In December 2001, the Universal House of Justice introduced the concept of *two essential movements*: 'the steady flow of believers through the sequence of courses offered by training institutes, for the purpose of developing the human resources of the Cause [and] the movement of geographic clusters from one stage of growth to the next' (Universal House of Justice 2006: 27.2). Clusters were ranked from A through D, D having no Bahá'í activities and A being ready to initiate an 'intensive programme of growth.' Bahá'ís were encouraged to join study circles; by 2006, 9,600 study circles had been held in the United States and 19,183 Bahá'ís had taken Ruhi Book 1, a number that increased to 32,093 by 2011 (National Spiritual Assembly of the United States 2011 Annual Report). Canada, saw similar increases; its 1,465 core activities, serving 8,845 persons in 2006, had increased by 50% in 2011, serving twice as many persons (National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, 2012 Annual Report, 1). By 2006 the United States had established 34 intensive programmes of growth (IPGs), a number that increased to 236 by 2010 (National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, 2011 Annual Report).

Success necessitated a new system for ranking clusters. In 2011 a system based on milestones was adopted. Milestone 1 clusters were those with a minimal number of core activities—equivalent to the old C clusters—milestone 2 clusters involved perhaps 20 or more core activities serving a hundred or more persons, and milestone 3 clusters involved a hundred or more activities serving hundreds or thousands. Most of the IPGs were at milestone 2 and now had a higher set of goals to strive for. By 2016, Canada had over 100 milestone 2 clusters and eight milestone 3 clusters (National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, 2016 Annual Report, 2–3). In the United States, 34 clusters had reached milestone 3 status and 259 were at milestone 2 in 2020 (National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, 2020 Annual Report, 19).

The results were good in villages and cities alike. To give a few examples: in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, in the Canadian Arctic, a town of 2,500 people with a youth population of 400, 70 of the youth became involved in ongoing conversations about community building and service to their community (National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, 2016 Annual Report, 6–7). In Stockton, California, the junior youth programme was welcomed into the public schools in 2018; in 2020, it was renewed with a community reflection gathering with county leaders and law enforcement staff about the issue of racism (<https://sites.google.com/bahai.us/race-unity-action/>

ideas-for-action/community-building/junior-youth-groups). In Vancouver, British Columbia, efforts to serve immigrant populations encountered language barriers and resulted in the formation of ‘English corners’ that taught English skills through reading materials and discussions about contributing to social transformation, overcoming cultural isolation, and avoiding assimilation into the mainstream culture. The result was the Colibri Learning Foundation, which served 200 persons in 2012 and 340 by the end of 2015 (Bahá’í World Centre 2017: 102–103).

Impact on the Bahá’í world

The North American Bahá’í communities have exerted more influence on the Bahá’í world than any other community except Iran. They have played such a significant role in the Bahá’í world for several reasons. The Bahá’í Faith grew much more quickly in America than in Europe and was much less affected by the social unrest and wars that disrupted much of the twentieth-century world. While the Iranian Bahá’í community was larger and older, it suffered from severe legal limitations and periodic persecution; in contrast, the Bahá’í Faith on the North American continent was free to grow and express itself. The large, educated, prosperous, and relatively receptive population allowed that continent to establish a relatively large Bahá’í community, and that community was able to produce leaders and provide financial resources unavailable to the Bahá’í Faith elsewhere in the globe.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada served as an organizational model for much of the Bahá’í world; its creation and development, closely monitored by Shoghi Effendi, served as a laboratory for the creation of the Bahá’í Administrative Order. Its bylaws became the model for Bahá’í bylaws worldwide, and its organization, committee structure, and policies were copied by many other assemblies. Its editions of the Bahá’í scriptures served as the standard editions of many of the English-language texts. The pioneers it sent out helped to establish the Faith in Latin America, the Pacific, Australasia, East Asia, part of Africa, and much of Europe. Its committees oversaw the initial development of the Faith in many of these regions.

Of the forty-nine individuals who have been named as Hands of the Cause of God, at least seventeen were North Americans; among them were such luminaries as Rúhíyyih Khánum, Horace Holley, Dorothy Baker, Martha Root, and Keith Ransom-Kehler. Green Acre in Maine was the first Bahá’í summer school and became a model for similar facilities across the globe.

Impact on American culture and society

The Bahá’í communities of the United States and Canada have grown considerably in size since their establishment in 1894, but remain very small in comparison with their countries’ total populations: about 1/2000th the population of the U.S. and 1/1000th the population of Canada. Their impact on society and culture, in turn, has been minor to date. Their greatest impact, perhaps, has been in the field of race relations in the United States. Among the recognized public advocates of civil rights have been three Bahá’ís: Alain Locke, Robert Abbott, and Nina Gomer DuBois (the wife of W. E. B. Dubois). Louis Gregory, the most prominent African-American Bahá’í, was in touch with nearly every prominent Black American between the years 1910 and 1940, and influenced the thinking of some of them. The support that white Bahá’ís lent to Black organizations, especially before 1950, was appreciated and had an impact on them. The first major public statement of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, *The Vision of Race Unity: America’s Most Challenging Issue*, focused on America’s race problems and the relevant Bahá’í principles.

Canadian Bahá’ís, similarly, have been very active in the rights of First Nations people; a Bahá’í, Robert Watts, served as an Executive Director of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation

Commission. Richard St. Barbe Baker, OBE (1889–1982) of Saskatchewan, founded the Men of the Trees (now called the International Tree Foundation) in 1924 and was an important early pioneer in the field of environmentalism and reforestation.

North American Bahá'ís have also made important contributions to American art and music. Notable are Robert Hayden (1813–1980), one of the most prominent African American poets and the first African American Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress; Mark Tobey (1890–1976) and Otto Donald Rogers (1935–2019), internationally renowned abstract painters; and John Birks ‘Dizzy’ Gillespie (1917–93), the jazz trumpeter and band leader.

References and further reading

- The Bahá'í World, vol. II, 1926–28* (1928), New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee.
- The Bahá'í World, vol. VI, 1934–36* (1937), Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Bahá'í World Centre. (2017) *The Five Year Plan, 2011–2016: Summary of Achievements and Learning*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre.
- Bramson-Lerche, L. (1982) ‘Some Aspects of the Development of the Bahá'í Administrative Order in America, 1922–1936’, in M. Momen, ed., *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History*, vol. 1, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press. This volume has several useful articles about North American Bahá'í history.
- Etter-Lewis, G. and R. Thomas. (2006) *Lights of the Spirit: Historical Portraits of Black Bahá'ís in North America, 1898–2000*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing.
- Hanley, P. (2018) *Man of the Trees: Richard St. Barbe Baker, the First Global Conservationist*, Regina, Sask.: University of Regina Press.
- Morrison, G. (1982) *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Nakhjavani, V. (2011) *The Maxwells of Montreal: Early Years, 1870–1922*, Oxford: George Ronald.
- Shoghi Effendi. (1971) *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- . (1974) *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters by Shoghi Effendi*, 2nd rev. ed., Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- . (1999) *Messages to Canada*, Thornhill, ON: Bahá'í Canada Publications.
- Smith, P. (1982) ‘The American Bahá'í Community, 1894–1917: A Preliminary Survey’, in M. Momen, ed., *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History*, vol. 1, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press.
- . (1984) ‘Reality Magazine: Editorship and Ownership of an American Bahá'í Periodical’, in J. Cole and M. Momen, eds., *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History, vol. 2: From Iran East and West*, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press. This volume has several useful articles about North American Bahá'í history.
- Stockman, R. (1985) *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins, 1892–1900*, vol. 1, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- . (1995) *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Early Expansion, 1900–1912*, vol. 2, Oxford: George Ronald.
- . (2002) *Thornton Chase: First American Bahá'í*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- . (2012a) *Abdu'l-Bahá in America*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- . (2012b) *The Bahá'í Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Universal House of Justice. (2006) *Turning Point: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice and Supplementary Material, 1996–2006*, West Palm Beach, FL: Palabra Publications.
- Van den Hoonard, W. C. (n.d.a) ‘Alaska,’ unpublished manuscript drafted for the Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project.
- Van den Hoonard, W. C. (n.d.b) ‘Canada,’ unpublished manuscript drafted for the Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project.
- Van den Hoonard, W. C. (1996) *The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898–1948*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press.
- Venters, L. (2015) *No Jim Crow Church: The Origins of South Carolina's Bahá'í Community*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Watts, E. and P. Verge. (2011) *Return to Tyendingaga: The Story of Jim and Melba Loft, Bahá'í Pioneers*, Essex, MD: One Voice Press.
- Whitmore, B. (1984) *The Dawning Place: The Building of a Temple, the Forging of the North American Bahá'í Community*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.