

# Faith & Values

## Baha'is greeting new year with fast

Religion started in 1844 counts 150K members in U.S.

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*Religion News Service*

**W**ASHINGTON — Even before the bright Sunday sun rose over the nation's capital, important decisions had to be made — none of which dealt with foreign policy or homeland security. Instead, breakfast.

One woman crunched on an apple. Another chose a hearty breakfast of cornmeal pancakes and yogurt. And one man bravely decided to go the entire day on a mere glass of water.

The three belong to the Baha'i tradition, a faith that has nearly 150,000 members in the United States.

At this time of year, a decision over breakfast fare takes on extra importance for Baha'is. Currently they are engaging in their annual 19-day fast. Once the sun comes up, they may not eat or drink again until sundown. Followers, ages 15 to 70, observe the fast from March 2 to 20, culminating in "Naw Ruz" or the Baha'i new year.

On Sunday, March 9, the three Baha'is joined about 20 others at the Baha'i Faith center on 16th Street in Washington. The center serves as a venue for children's classes, monthly worship gatherings and public meetings.

Followers, who had been fasting for a week by that point, cited a number of effects from the practice.

"Fasting is not designed to torture or kill," said Margaret Mattinson, the center's interim resident manager. "It is designed so that you orient yourself — like a plant's leaves do — toward God."

"The spiritual energy generated by the fast will give us joy, radiance and inspiration to serve humanity," said Vasu Mohan, a Baha'i living in Washington.

"It's an individual thing," said Hazel Neave, who served as center manager for four years. "But it makes you feel good you're doing this thing others are doing."

As Baha'is, Mattinson, Mohan and Neave belong to a tradition that dates back to 1844.

That year — according to "The Baha'is," a publication of

# Fast

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the Baha'i International Community — a young merchant in Iran proclaimed he was Islam's promised Qa'im, or "He who will rise." He took the name Bab, meaning "gate" or "door," and he indicated a messenger of God was forthcoming.

Baha'u'llah, a Persian leader in the Babi movement, announced in 1863 that he was that messenger. The founder of the Baha'i faith, Baha'u'llah recorded his revelations and lived for years in exile until his death in 1892.

The tradition, now with more than 5 million followers, has spread throughout roughly 230 countries and dependent territories.

Back in Washington, Dean B. Mohr, who became a Baha'i in 1980, discussed some of the faith's teachings during that Sunday gathering at the center.

Mohr said, for example, Baha'is believe in "progressive revelation," or the idea that "one religion is established and then it is expanded upon" and that "(the religion) has a period of time when it's valid and (when) it has its mission to fulfill."

Thus, Baha'is hold that there is one God whose will has been revealed to humanity through a series of messengers, including Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus and Muhammad. Each came to meet humanity's needs for that particular time.

"Baha'u'llah claimed to be the prophet of God for all mankind for this day and age," said Mohr, noting a new prophet will emerge after

2863 — the 1,000th anniversary of Baha'u'llah's announcement.

"(Baha'u'llah's) claim is either true or false," said Mohr. "We're asking you to make a decision based on your own investigation."

Independent investigation, another central principle to the Baha'is, means that members make up their own minds based upon Baha'u'llah's writings. There are no clergy or experts.

"One of the blessings of this faith is," said Kweli Powell, a graduate student at the University of Maryland at College Park, "I can open the book myself and make my own conclusions. So there's no pressure."

Other Baha'i beliefs, according to Mohr, encompass such areas as gender equality, racial integration, participation in government, avoidance of gossip and parti-

san politics, no alcohol or drugs — unless doctor prescribed, prayer, fasting, chastity and attendance at monthly meetings or "feasts." There are 19 months in the Baha'i calendar, each containing 19 days.

For Mohr, the 19 days of fasting, en route to a new year, force him to reflect on his spirituality.

"How do you really suffer for the cause of God," he asked. "Well, fasting is suffering. Fasting keeps you focused, for that one time of the year, on our ultimate true spiritual purpose. It reminds us. And it is a gift to God."

Given the communal, social and spiritual lessons Baha'is say they discover while fasting, it is not really surprising that Mohr closed his talk with an unusual invitation.

"At this point," quipped Mohr, "you cannot have any refreshments."