

Baha'i convention displays unity, love

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For The Times

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The Baha'i national convention has the "two-fold function of electing the body of the National Spiritual Assembly, and of offering any constructive suggestions in regard to the general administration of the Cause ..."

The National Spiritual Assembly is the nine-member governing body of the Baha'i Faith in this country. The Baha'i Faith was founded by Baha'u'llah (meaning "the Glory of God") 150 years ago in present-day Iran, and first brought to the United States in 1897.

The convention's "main and essential purpose is to enable the assembled delegates and friends to have a deeper and broader vision of the Cause (of Baha'u'llah) through an increase in the spirit of unity and of wholehearted cooperation."

This spirit of unity and cooperation was very evident during the convention. I was deeply touched by the warm and loving family atmosphere that surpassed even previous conventions I have been fortunate to attend.

The Baha'i electoral process is unique among the world's electoral systems: There are no nominations and no campaigning – nobody runs for the positions. Every believer in good standing, 21 years of age or above, is eligible to be elected. Following prayerful devotions, each delegate simply writes down the names of the nine people "whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold."

When all votes have been tallied, those nine people with the highest number of votes are elected, whether or not they would have wished for it or feel worthy – serving when elected is regarded as a sacred obligation.

The Baha'i Faith is the most diverse organized body of people on the planet, a feature of which its adherents are very proud, and the elected members of the National Spiritual Assembly reflect this value. Among the nine members elected this year were four women, two African Americans, and one American Indian.

The focus of the consultation at this year's convention was derived from guidance provided by the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Baha'i Faith seated in Haifa, Israel.

Three years ago, this body set the Baha'is on a worldwide undertaking consisting of two essential movements: the move-

ment of individuals through a series of courses designed to increase their spiritual capacity to serve the spiritual needs of mankind, and the movement of Baha'i communities through increasing levels of functional development, enabling them to channel the efforts of the individuals effectively.

These two movements are implemented along three lines of action: study circles centered upon collective study, in small group settings, of the sacred word and its transformative effect; devotional gatherings designed to uplift and inspire; and the spiritual education of children. These activities are open to all people.

The effects of the study circles on their participants around the world have been truly amazing, and the participants give glowing reports. The communities of those taking the study circles have been energized and their members have been inspired to new levels of service to humanity.

The delegates were informed of one such example of service in San Francisco, where local Baha'is initiated a collaboration between a provider of voice mail services and community service providers to offer a voice mail service for the homeless of the area. Homeless people often find themselves unable to re-enter the work force because they have no means of being contacted for jobs for which they apply. Such a service can provide the critical missing link that allows people to get back on their feet.

I felt honored and privileged to have been able to attend this convention and found myself spiritually refreshed through my participation and through association with the other delegates. For the next two months, I will be sharing my report of the convention with believers throughout the region who elected me to serve in this capacity.

Anyone interested in participating in a study circle, attending a devotional meeting, or enrolling children in classes, call 881-0057.

For more information, visit www.us.bahai.org.

Darren Hiebert of Madison recently returned from serving as one of 171 delegates to the annual National Convention for the Baha'i Faith in the United States. It was held April 22-25 at the Baha'i House of Worship on the shores of Lake Michigan, outside Chicago.