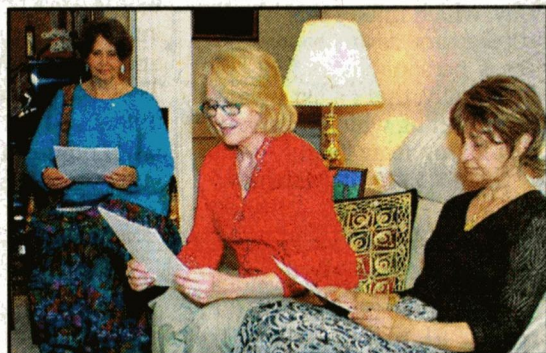


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Kay Campbell/Huntsville Times

Marlene Brown, center, reads a passage for the interfaith devotional held once a month in the home of Darren and Ruhi Hiebert, both members of the Baha'i faith, in Madison. Respecting other faiths is part of the creed for Baha'is. Listening to Brown read is interfaith minister the Rev. Wanda Gail Campbell, at left, and Oliya Aqsanoshohada.

Baha'i family also embraces different views

Interfaith devotional fulfills duty to respect all religions

By KAY CAMPBELL

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The Baha'i faith is hard to spell, easy to understand.

One of the foundational stories of the faith, begun in 1844, illustrates the conundrum.

Not long after the Persian prophet Bah'u'llah issued the proclamation of Baha'i as a new step for faith, a brave woman stepped into the center of a group of elders discussing whether the prophecies were truth or heresy.

The woman, Taharih, had read and understood Bah'u'llah's message of the unity of all people, including women.

She ripped off the veil that Muslim custom had forced her to wear over her face.

The audacity of her clear assertion of equality with the men registers in the moment captured in a painting in the dining room of Darren and Ruhi Hiebert's home in Madison.

One elder cuts his own throat in dismay. One readies to kill Taharih. All faces – except the calm Taharih's – register shock and awe.

The painting captures the revolutionary simplicity of the Baha'i faith: that many paths lead to God, and that all people can arrive there equally.

Misunderstood faith

The Hieberts, who are Baha'i, hold monthly interfaith devotionals at their home to celebrate that belief, but not to proselytize for the faith that's been often misunderstood since its inception.

Ruhi Hiebert suffered imprisonment and whippings in her native Iran because she was Baha'i before she moved to the United States several years ago. Marlene Brown of Gurley, who became Baha'i when she was a teenager in Detroit, faced trying to convince her Catholic mother that she wasn't joining a wicked sect.

And some people have trouble understanding that when the Hieberts invite people to an "Interfaith Devotional," they mean just that.

It's not a Baha'i prayer meeting, though Baha'i prayers are included along with readings from

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Joining together in prayer

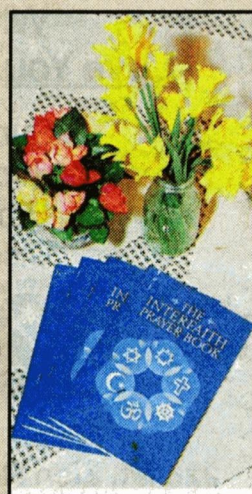
■ The Hieberts welcome guests to the monthly interfaith devotional in their home in Madison. Contact Darren Hiebert at darren@darrenhiebert.com and 705-0123.

■ One Human Family, an interfaith, intercultural community choir, invites anyone who enjoys singing to join. The choir, led by Helen Oney, practices at 7 p.m. Wednesdays at The Baha'i Center.

■ The Baha'i Center, 3209 Pulaski Pike, has regular meetings Sundays at 10:30 a.m. The services are member-led since there are no clergy in the Baha'i faith.

"The Interfaith Prayer Book" includes prayers from the world's religious traditions, including: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi and Baha'i. A creed for Baha'is is respect for all faiths.

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Baha'i

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the Bible, the Quran and other holy scriptures. It's not a Baha'i entrapment where guests must listen to an explanation of the obscure, but worldwide faith.

It's just people. Praying together after eating some of Ruhi's saffron-scented rice pilaf. Listening to prayer songs from the world's faiths. Laughing together over cheesecake and coffee.

"It's just a devotional," said Darren Hiebert, handing out copies of the selections from scriptures he'd put together for the evening last month. "Tonight's theme is prayer."

Hiebert sat with his daughter, Samineh, 11, near the controls for the stereo. He started the devotional by playing an aching beautiful Baha'i hymn, "The Most Melodious of Tunes," sung by Carol Macky. Other music selections during the evening would include Bach and Handel, and a new song by writer Jim Parker.

Then guests, which included Jews, Protestants, Catholics, New Thought, and Baha'is, took turns reading the short passages from the Quran, the Bible, the Hindu Vedas, and other scriptures.

The living room became a circle of voices and thoughts — from Samineh's young, clear voice, to the exotic Persian-born accents of her mother and aunt to the gravelly Alabama accent of a bearded guest.

This sort of meeting is as close to a ritual as Baha'is get. The overriding goal of Baha'i work in the world is to help



Kay Campbell/Huntsville Times

Samineh Hiebert reads a passage from selections from several sacred texts during the monthly interfaith devotional organized at her home. Her father, Darren Hiebert, follows along.

unify people and promote respect for all religions.

The democratic equality of all members asserted by Tahar-ih continues.

For a wedding, the husband and wife marry each other. The community says prayers together for the dead, and Sunday meetings are to share the writings of the prophet and to pray together.

"Baha'i is a faith defined by faith, not by practice," Hiebert said. "No individual has more authority than another to interpret the writings."

It was this democracy and wide-open respect that attracted Marlene Brown to the faith from Catholicism when she was a teenager.

"I never had to denounce anything about Jesus," Brown said. "This was just another step, more knowledge and more spiritual guidance."