

From the Editor's Desk

LINDA S. COVEY AND
ROSHAN DANESH

In 1916 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructed the nascent Bahá'í communities of the United States and Canada to "attach great importance to the indigenous population of America" because of the unique potential of those peoples to "enlighten the whole world" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). 'Abdu'l-Bahá penned these words as part of His blueprint for the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, which would assist in the dissemination of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and the advancement of the goal of creating patterns of justice, equality, and peace among all the peoples of the world.

At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message, there were no Indigenous Bahá'ís in North America, and Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States were enduring exceptionally egregious treatment. In both countries, colonial oppression, racist laws, and policies fueled by Social Darwinism, missionary zeal, and disease had decimated Indigenous populations and communities and disconnected them from their traditional lands, family and community systems, and governmental structures. Far from recognizing the "great importance" of Indigenous peoples to the "whole world," both Canada and the United States continued to establish a network of

residential schools, which in some places remained active well into the 1990s. These schools were devised expressly to break up Indigenous families and communities, separate children from their culture and identity, and destroy languages and cultures. As has become fully apparent to the broader Canadian public only in recent years, although justified as advancing civilization, the residential schools were, in fact, utterly pernicious vehicles for systematically imposing physical, psychological, cultural, social, and spiritual harm. This same realization caused the United States to pass the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 and to gradually cease allotting federal funds to these residential schools.

For the small Bahá'í communities of Canada and the United States, fueled by the core Bahá'í teaching of unity in diversity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's emphasis on the importance of Indigenous peoples presented a challenge to establish a pattern of thought and course of action distinct from that of the broader society, a plan that had to include recognition of the value of diversity and the importance of culture, love, and inclusion in community building. This challenge led to an increasing intersection between Bahá'ís and Indigenous peoples in the 1920s and 1930s, including more systematic efforts by Bahá'ís to reach out, share Bahá'u'lláh's message of fellowship and unity, and create a diverse Bahá'í community.

In the 1960s these efforts expanded massively, sustained by the leadership and dedication of both Indigenous

and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, including Bahá'í leaders such as Amat'ul-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, who traveled to meet Indigenous peoples across the Americas on their lands and in their homes. Through these efforts, the unifying message of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation was shared, and the Bahá'ís' commitment to a new pattern of just relations between diverse peoples was visibly demonstrated.

Over the past number of decades, in addition to ongoing and strenuous efforts of individual Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, there have been a wide range of institutional initiatives to create new structures, campaigns, and gatherings aimed at encouraging and deepening the presence of, respect for, and recognition of Indigenous peoples within the Bahá'í community. To be clear, in the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, there is no naïve or simplistic utopian perspective about the challenge faced by society to extricate itself from patterns of oppression and injustice and replace them with relationships based on unity and peace. Such work is slow, arduous, and multi-generational. It requires recognition that while this important work progresses, individual Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities will inevitably be influenced by the broader dynamics and forces in society, even while striving to be guided by and to become compliant with the ideals, standards, and goals set forth in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. As Shoghi Effendi emphasized in 1956:

the condition that the world is in, is bringing many issues to a head.

It would be impossible to find a nation or people not in a state of crisis today. The materialism, the lack of true religion and the consequent baser forces in human nature which are being released, have brought the whole world to the brink of probably the greatest crisis it has ever faced or will have to face. The Bahá'ís are a part of the world. They too feel the great pressures which are brought to bear upon all people today, whoever and wherever they may be. (Letter dated 19 July 1956, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 440)

Reflecting on the complexity of transforming entrenched patterns, Shoghi Effendi further emphasized that eradicating racial injustice requires not only “complete freedom from prejudice,” but also demands that society address the reality that racism is sufficiently pernicious that it can infect “the whole social structure” (*Advent* 22, 33).

Accomplishing this essential change requires the hard work of transforming mindsets and behaviors. It also necessitates that humankind discover and implement methods for reordering detrimental social and structural patterns and establishing collaborative relationships upheld by a collective vision of justice and fellowship at the levels of the neighborhood and community life. But this journey toward justice and unity is one of learning, trial and error, sacrifice, love, and pain.

For these reasons, in their efforts to contribute to the advancement of society, Bahá'ís have been broadly

encouraged by the Universal House of Justice to recognize that the believers must pursue a “wide latitude for action,” must be granted “a large margin for mistakes,” should recognize that “human beings are not perfect,” and in light of these realizations, seek to foster encouragement and not succumb to criticism at the “slightest provocation” (Letter dated 19 May 1994 to a National Spiritual Assembly ¶7).

For these same reasons, having Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples coming together in new ways to build a community that actualizes Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about unity in diversity engendered, in the process, the expected trials and sacrifice, as well as progress and achievements. The experience of Indigenous peoples within the Bahá'í community, and the Bahá'í community's experience of engaging with Indigenous peoples, has been at times contiguous with predominant patterns seen in society at large and, at others, drastically different. While there has been conscious striving to infuse a commitment to the spiritual and social imperative of unity—including valuing the distinctiveness and diversity of Indigenous peoples—in efforts at forming new patterns of community life, there have also been complex challenges, such as the need to confront old world order patterns and attitudes.

This special issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* is a beginning effort to explore some of the complexities of the history of the intersection between Indigenous peoples and the Bahá'í Faith. It comes at a particularly propitious moment—exactly a century

after 'Abdu'l-Bahá articulated the importance of Indigenous peoples in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. It is also an opportune moment because of broader societal dynamics. For example, in recent years Canada has been awakening to the fact that one of its central social, political, cultural, economic, and spiritual challenges is that of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Likewise, in an ongoing effort to recognize the American Indians and their cultural presence and distinctive history, the United States declared 1992 as the “Year of the American Indian” and designated the month of November as National American Indian Heritage Month.

There is growing global awareness of how essential it is that the world's approximately four hundred million Indigenous peoples be recognized and that their rights as individuals, communities, and nations be fully acknowledged and respected. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)—now fully endorsed by many countries around the world, including the United States and Canada—establishes one of the necessary foundations for the full participation of Indigenous peoples in human affairs.

It is in this context that the contributors in this issue of the *Journal* offer a wide range of voices and perspectives on the intersection between the Bahá'í Faith and Indigenous peoples. Linda Covey's article, based on a specific case study that identifies critical outcomes regarding Bahá'í teaching work among Indigenous populations,

provides valuable insights about those skill-sets and sensitivities required for this important endeavor. Joyce Baldwin and Alfred Kahn Jr. share their personal stories, providing us with a window into their lived experience as Indigenous Bahá'ís and conveying the wisdom and insights derived from decades of dedication to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. Patricia Verge also shares her life experience working to advance reconciliation, drawing on her vast expertise as an author who has chronicled pivotal aspects of the history of Indigenous Bahá'ís. Chelsea Horton draws on her doctoral work on the history of interaction between Indigenous peoples in North America and the Bahá'í Community as derived from personal interviews with Indigenous Bahá'ís. Horton's article provides a historical perspective on the challenges faced by Bahá'ís in actualizing the principle of unity in diversity—lessons that can be helpful as the Bahá'í process of fashioning unity at the local level proceeds under the guidance of the Five Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice.

While each article stands alone as a distinct contribution by its author, taken together they raise interconnected themes and questions. As such, the reader is strongly encouraged to read all the articles, preferably in the order in which they are published. By approaching the subject matter this way, it is hoped that this special issue will offer perspectives that can assist ongoing efforts at the community level to advance critical work such as learning through the institute process, inform teaching work, and help generate ideas

about how the history of the North American Bahá'í communities might inform current social discourses such as that of reconciliation.

Our attention to the experiences of Indigenous Bahá'ís does not end with this issue of the *Journal*: consideration is being given as to how to support further contributions that are specifically aimed at informing and influencing local and global public discourses regarding Indigenous peoples. Articles are already in the works that will share more on the experience of Indigenous Bahá'ís in Canada. As always, we value your comments and suggestions, and we welcome submissions for possible publication.

WORKS CITED

- Shoghi Effendi. *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971. Print.
- . *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America 1947-1957*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980. Print.
- . Letter dated 19 July 1956. In *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*. Ed. Helen Hornby. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994. Print.
- The Universal House of Justice. Letter dated 19 May 1994 to a National Spiritual Assembly.



Members of the Omaha Nation form the first all-Native American
Local Spiritual Assembly in Macy, Nebraska, in 1948.
(Photo courtesy of National Bahá'í Archives, United States)