

Centenary of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia

The Australian Bahá'í community has its roots in the dedication of a small group of people a century ago.

In 1920 Englishman Hyde Dunn and his Irish wife Clara sailed to Australia and became the first Bahá'ís to set foot in this country. At some point in time they emigrated from the United Kingdom to the United States where they met and eventually married. Hyde was a salesman while Clara worked as a nurse. He was sixty-five years old while she was fifty when they landed in Sydney on 10 April 1920 after a sea journey through Hawaii.

Clara and Hyde Dunn came to spread the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith is a world religion whose purpose is to unite all the races and peoples in one universal Cause and one common Faith. Bahá'ís are the followers of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Dunns had little money and fell ill when they arrived. Clara found a job as a nurse while Hyde eventually recovered and obtained a position as a travelling salesman for Nestlé. This made possible for Clara to give up her job and follow him in his business travels around Australia. During those trips Hyde and Clara made a lot of friends to whom the Bahá'í Faith was taught. After three years Hyde had visited as many as 225 towns. Father and Mother Dunns, as they affectionately were called, also visited New Zealand.



Hyde and Clara Dunn in the early 1920s in
New Zealand



Mother Dunn crossing the Australian desert

In 1922 the first Australians joined the Faith. They were Oswald Whitaker, a Sydney optometrist, and Effie Baker, a Melbourne photographer.

Soon Bahá'í groups sprang up around the country. By 1934 there were enough Bahá'ís to elect a national governing body, the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand.



A Bahá'í meeting in Melbourne in 1923

In 1955 Fred Murray of South Australia was among the first Aboriginal people to become a Bahá'í. 'Uncle' Fred belonged to the Minen tribe that roamed in the Western Australia coast. The tribe was almost exterminated at a poisoned waterhole at the turn of the 19th century. A child of nine years, Fred was able to survive along with his brother eventually becoming the last survivor of the tribe. Many people of his race knew of the Bahá'í Faith through him. Fred often said of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh: "One people, one God, everybody one-that is good!"



Fred Murray (1884-1963)

The Faith's numbers surged in the early 1970s as young people found in the Bahá'í teachings answers to spiritual questions and solutions to global issues.

The Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney was dedicated on 17 September 1961 and opened to the public after four years of construction. The initial design was approved in 1957 with seating for six hundred people. The building is a highly visible landmark from Sydney's northern beaches in a natural bushland setting overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It's surrounded by gardens containing a broad variety of native fauna and flora.



Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney

The size and diversity of the community was boosted in the 1980s when Australia opened its doors to those fleeing the resurgence of persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. Their subsequent settlement, integration and contribution to Australian life have been a major success story.

Since the beginning the Bahá'ís of Australia have become involved and spoken out on a number of civic issues - from world peace initiatives to conferences on socio-economic development, indigenous issues, human rights and the environment. The Faith has also gained a higher profile through its activities for peace, interfaith harmony and gender equality as well as the religious education it provides in many State schools in Australia. There are over 17 000 Bahá'ís throughout Australia.



Bahá'ís attach great importance to the spiritual and moral education of children.

In an October 2019 letter to the Bahá'ís of Australia the Prime Minister Scott Morrison wrote:

The values of love, acceptance and unity, as taught by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, are a source of understanding, compassion and purpose that enrich our community and help make our multicultural, multi-faith society one of the most harmonious on earth.



A Bahá'í Conference in Sydney

For more information about the history of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia please access:
<http://vimeo.com/11590457>

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