

**THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH  
50 YEARS IN SINGAPORE  
1950 - 2000**

*With compliments*

**The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore**

55 Cantonment Road  
Singapore 089754  
[www.bahai.org.sg](http://www.bahai.org.sg)  
Email: [nsasing@singnet.com.sg](mailto:nsasing@singnet.com.sg)  
Tel: 62226200 Fax: 62229166

## THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH - 50 YEARS IN SINGAPORE

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The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore Ltd.

110-D Wishart Road

Singapore 098733

Tel: (65) 2733023

Fax: (65) 2732497

E-mail: [nsasing@singnet.com.sg](mailto:nsasing@singnet.com.sg)

Website: <http://www.bahai-sg.org>

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## PREFACE

The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest independent world religion. Founded more than a century and a half ago by His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh, the Bahá'í Faith is today among the fastest growing of world religions with more than six million followers in at least 233 countries and dependent territories. According to the 1992 *Encyclopædia Britannica Book of the Year*, the Bahá'í Faith has already become the second most widespread faith after Christianity in its geographic outreach.

Bahá'ís believe that there is only one God, the Creator of the Universe. Throughout history, God has revealed Himself to humanity through a series of divine Messengers - each of whom was the Founder of a great religion. This succession of divine Teachers reflects a single historic "plan of God" for educating humanity about its Creator and for cultivating the spiritual, intellectual and moral capacities of the entire human race. The goal of this process of progressive divine revelation is to prepare for the establishment of a world civilization based on equality and justice for all human beings. The ever expanding Knowledge of God's Will for humanity to bring about a truly global society was revealed just over 100 years ago by His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh, who is the latest of these divine Messengers.

26 May 2000 will mark 50 years from the date the first Bahá'í pioneer, the late Dr. K.M. Fozdar, arrived on our shores. The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore is happy to publish this commemorative book to mark the Bahá'í Faith's Golden Anniversary in our nation.

The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore  
April 2000

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**HIS HOLINESS BAHÁ'U'LLÁH**  
**(1817-1892)**  
**Prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith**

Bahá'u'lláh, which means "The Glory of God", was born in Teheran, Iran in 1817. As a young man, He turned His back on a life of wealth and, sacrificing freedom and material possessions, devoted Himself to the promulgation of laws, precepts and principles designed to carry humanity forward. His mission, Bahá'ís believe, represents the age of fulfilment prophesied by Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Christ, Muhammad, Guru Nanak and the founders of other great Faiths.

Born the son of a wealthy government minister, Bahá'u'lláh could trace His family's ancestry back to the great dynasties of Iran's imperial past. Yet, at the age of 22, Bahá'u'lláh declined the ministerial career opened to Him and chose instead to devote His energies to a range of philanthropies which had, by the early 1840s, earned Him widespread renown as "Father of the Poor".

This privileged existence swiftly eroded when Bahá'u'lláh became one of the leading followers of Siyyid Ali Muhammad known by his title the "Báb" which means "Gate" in Arabic. The Báb, Himself the Founder of an independent divine revelation, announced in May 1844 that His mission was to prepare humanity for the imminent appearance of a new messenger from God, the One promised to all the religions of the world.

The religion of the Báb was widely accepted throughout Iran but it suffered intense persecution from religious and government forces, who viewed the Báb's claim as heretical. The Báb was executed in 1850; Bahá'u'lláh Himself was arrested and thrown into a notorious dungeon in Teheran, where conditions were so bad that few were expected to survive. It was here, during His four month imprisonment, that Bahá'u'lláh received a vision of God's Will that He was to bring humanity a new religious revelation.

On His release, Bahá'u'lláh was subjected to a series of exiles and imprisonments which lasted 40 years. The first was to Baghdad where, in 1863, Bahá'u'lláh openly declared Himself as the Messenger of God promised by the Báb and foretold in all the holy scriptures of the past.

*Verily I say, this is the Day in which mankind can  
behold the Face, and hear the Voice, of the Promised One.*

Bahá'u'lláh



From Baghdad Bahá'u'lláh was exiled to Constantinople, then to Adrianople, and finally to Akka, a penal city in what was then Palestine in the Turkish Ottoman empire (modern-day Israel).

Throughout His years of imprisonment Bahá'u'lláh revealed thousands of divinely inspired verses which make up over one hundred volumes of His Works. In these Writings, Bahá'u'lláh expounded His doctrine, His laws and His ethical guidance. The heart of His ethical teachings is contained in "The Hidden Words", a compilation of moral aphorisms. In the "Kitab-I-Aqdas" or "Book of Laws", He detailed the distinctive laws and principles to be observed by His followers, and laid the foundation of the Bahá'í administrative order.

Some of the principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh for a global society are:

- Acceptance of the oneness of humanity and to be of service to mankind
- Recognition of the divine origin and essential oneness of all the world's great religions
- Equal opportunities, rights and privileges for men and women
- Elimination of extreme wealth and poverty, and spiritual solutions to economic problems
- Compulsory universal education
- Adoption of an international auxiliary language
- Recognition that true religion is in harmony with science
- Independent search for truth, free from prejudices born of custom and tradition
- Sustainable balance between nature and technology
- Establishment of a world federation based on collective security and justice for all.

Towards the end of His life, even though still under sentence of exile and prison, Bahá'u'lláh was allowed to move outside the city walls of Akka to an estate known as Bahji. It was here on 29 May 1892, that He passed away and was laid to rest in a garden room adjoining the mansion in Bahji. For Bahá'ís, this spot is the most holy place on earth and a place of pilgrimage.

# HISTORY OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN SINGAPORE

## Introduction

Singapore, although tiny in area and devoid of natural resources, is rich and vibrant in the variety of its most precious asset – its peoples and their traditions.

Located at the crossroads of South East Asia, Singapore is influenced both by the cultural as well as the commercial and industrial infusions from the region and even the world at large. This vital mixture aided by an enlightened government, has given Singapore its unique dynamism and made it a model of political, economic and inter-religious stability. Its multi-ethnic composition of four major races – Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian and its four official languages – Chinese, Tamil, Malay and English make Singapore a virtual miniature “United Nations” – a cross-section of humanity. Strategically located at the crossroads between north and south and east and west, this tiny island has become one of the greatest transportation and communications hubs of the world and at the cutting edge of technological advances in South East Asia.

In terms of religious affiliation, almost every major Faith has found a home in our nation. The Chinese are predominantly Confucianists, Taoists, and Buddhists (what has been called “the Chinese religion”), the Malays predominantly Muslim, the Indians predominantly Hindu and the Eurasians predominantly Christian.

## Winds of Change

In the realm of the planet’s political development the demarcation line between the colonial and post colonial eras must be placed squarely at the midpoint between the two halves of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when fully half the human race shirked off the yoke of empire and gained independence. Nations emerging from the holocaust of World War II recognized the imperative of globalization and created supranational agencies for the protection and well-being of humanity. With the ever-present threat of planetary catastrophe looming in the background, these new political arrangements with their military checks and balances and mechanisms for socio-economic integration have, however imperfectly, continued on to our present times.

As with the widening of our socio-economic and political horizons so, too, on the plane of ethical and spiritual development predating the latter by a half century, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to new definitions of Religion’s message and its purpose for being.

With the rapid increase in modes of travel, religions expanded their ambits to envelope the globe and Singapore too, was touched by this process of inter-religious mingling. The ethical and social mores it had inherited from the surrounding region by virtue of its location were in turn confronted and influenced by the rapid spread of modernism and technology providing a fit setting for the arrival on its shores of yet another sacred Faith -- the world's youngest independent religion -- the Baha'í Faith, then itself barely a century old.

### By Way of India

*Say: teach ye the Cause of God, O people of Bahá, for God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of proclaiming His Message, and regardeth it as the most meritorious of all deeds. Bahá'u'lláh*

The subcontinent of India has always played a significant part in the political, social and cultural fortunes of South East Asia. The British, for instance, used to rule the Straits Settlements of Penang, Singapore and Malacca from the office of the Governor-General in India. The spiritual history of the region is also connected to India. Indian traders visiting the region transmitted religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam to countries such as Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Characteristically, the first Bahá'í teachers to this region, also came from India. In the 1880's, two Bahá'í teachers, Sulayman Khan-i-Tunukabani (popularly known as Jamal Effendi) and Siyyid Mustafa Roumie, stopped over in Singapore for a few weeks on their way to the Javanese and Celebes islands.

Jamal Effendi was the first Persian teacher of the Faith sent to India in 1878 by the Faith's Founder, Bahá'u'lláh. His travel companion, Mustafa Roumie was a Muslim of Iraqi descent, whom Jamal Effendi had converted to the Bahá'í Faith during his religious teaching tour in India. In the 1880's both of them decided to team up for the purpose of teaching the Faith to the inhabitants of the countries of South East Asia. In Singapore, they stayed in the Arab quarters of the town, as guests of the Turkish Vice Consul, a well-known Arab merchant. They mixed freely with the Arab community. It is very likely that they taught the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore to the Arab and Indian traders, but it is unlikely that they preached to the Chinese race due to language problems and the fact that 19<sup>th</sup> Century Singapore was generally segregated geographically along racial lines.



## The First Pioneers

It was only in 1950 that the first Bahá'í "pioneers"<sup>1</sup> arrived in Singapore for establishing the Faith. The first pioneer to arrive was Dr Khodadad Muncherji Fozdar, who after resigning from his medical practice in the Indian State Railway set sail from Bombay and after a three week sea journey reached Singapore on 26 May 1950. Dr Fozdar was joined later that same year on 19 September by his wife Shirin. Besides being the first Bahá'í to settle in Singapore, Dr Fozdar also "pioneered" for the Bahá'í Faith in Africa as well as in the Andaman Islands in 1953-54 and was bestowed with the title "Knight of Bahá'u'lláh"<sup>2</sup> by the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith for his services in the Andaman Islands. The Fozdars came in response to the call of the National Spiritual Assembly ("NSA") of the Bahá'ís of India to all Bahá'ís in that sub-continent to establish the Faith in all parts of South East Asia. With the help of friends, which he had made on board ship, Dr Fozdar quickly found employment as a private medical practitioner in the colony. To open Singapore to the Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, Dr Fozdar placed Bahá'í books in the Raffles Library and also gave public talks on his beliefs at the YMCA and the Theosophical Society to which he was often invited.



Dr K.M. Fozdar and Mrs Shirin Fozdar  
(1950)

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<sup>1</sup> Pioneers are not "missionaries" in the commonly understood sense of the term since no financial support is given or special theological training is involved. While "pioneering" may constitute an individual's sole purpose, Bahá'í pioneers often combine it with practicing their profession or furthering their formal education, business opportunities, or even as a creative retirement.

<sup>2</sup> "Knight of Bahá'u'lláh" is a title bestowed by the great grandson of Bahá'u'lláh, the Guardian of the Faith His Eminence the late Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1958), upon 299 Bahá'ís who left their native land to open up new countries and territories to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh during the Faith's World Crusade which stretched from 1953 to 1963. The names of the "Knights of Bahá'u'lláh" are recorded in an Honour Roll which is enshrined at the Faith's World Centre in its place of Pilgrimage.

**The First Public Proclamation of the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore** came about through an interview with Dr K.M. Fozdar by The Straits Times, which was published in its issue of 15 September 1950. Besides summarizing the aims and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, the news item announced the forthcoming arrival on 19 September of his wife Mrs Shirin Fozdar under the heading "*A Woman With A Message*". The article also contained a synopsis of her many remarkable achievements especially in the cause of women's emancipation.

The day after her arrival, Mrs. Fozdar gave a public lecture at the Singapore Rotary Club, then the most prestigious club in the colony. As this was the first public lecture given by a woman at the Rotary Club (then an all-male preserve), the press found this newsworthy and reported parts of her speech the following day under the caption "*No more nonsense from men, says Mrs. Fozdar.*" This was just the beginning of hundreds of newspaper articles about her<sup>3</sup> and the Bahá'í Faith in the years that followed.

Some members of the Theosophical Society were very interested in the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith as they shared several common ideals regarding the brotherhood of man and the fact that religion should be the cause of unity. A significant portion of the early believers on the island were in fact, former members of the Theosophical Society. A prominent member of the Singapore Bahá'í community, Mr Teoh Geok Leng, a professional accountant, was, for example, a former President of the Theosophical Society.



**Teoh Geok Leng (1907-1986)**

Affectionately known as "Uncle Teoh", Teoh Geok Leng embraced the Bahá'í Faith in 1952 and was a member of the first Local Spiritual Assembly ("LSA") of the Bahá'ís of Singapore. He remained a member of the Spiritual Assembly until 1972 when he was elected to the newly established National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore. In the 50's and 60's, he made several trips to teach the Faith in the tin mining and rural districts of Malaya.

"Uncle Teoh" was noted for his meticulous manner of preparing accounts for the Spiritual Assembly of which he was a member and for his punctuality at meetings. He was also the first official marriage solemniser for Bahá'í marriages appointed by the government and used to offer philosophical yet witty advice to the newly married couples as they crossed the threshold to married life. Mr Teoh Geok Leng is buried at the Choa Chu Kang Bahá'í Cemetery.

<sup>3</sup>By reference to National Archives microfilm NA. 2044 it can be verified that there are over 500 pieces of newsprint publicity on the activities of Mrs Shirin Fozdar in "The Straits Times" of Singapore.

## Governance or Administration of Bahá'í Communities

*The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá'í, and should it exceed the number it doth not matter. They should consider themselves as entering the Court of the presence of God, the Exalted, the Most High, and as beholding Him Who is the Unseen. It behoveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth. It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly... Bahá'u'lláh*

The administration of Bahá'í communities predicated upon the above teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, is devoid of priesthood or clergy and instead is characterized by a system of Assemblies or Houses of Justice elected by the community of believers within each locale, with limited terms of office for its members. These elected bodies are responsible for ministering to the needs of the individual believer as well as the community at large. Thus, Bahá'í governance functions through collective decisions based on the principles and procedures laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and not through personality or individual leadership.

The bedrock upon which members of the community mingle with and get to know their fellow Bahá'ís so as to enable them to elect annually the members of the Spiritual Assembly is the institution called “**The 19-Day Feast**” (quite like a town meeting) consisting of three parts: “Devotional”, “Administrative” and “Social”. The 19-Day Feast is held on the first day of each of the 19 months comprising the Bahá'í Calendar (The 18<sup>th</sup> month has four extra days to round out the solar year of 365 days). During the devotional programme, selections from Bahá'í Holy Writings as well as the sacred Scriptures of other religions are read or chanted. Thereafter, reports and consultations follow during the administrative part, finally ending with refreshments and fellowship.

### The Early Bahá'í Community of Singapore

Within two years of Dr K.M. Fozdar's arrival, there were a total of 12 declared believers in the Bahá'í Faith, the first of whom was Mr Naraindas Jethanand. Thereafter, an election was held in April 1952 to decide who among the twelve would constitute the first governing body for Bahá'í affairs in Singapore. The nine elected members of this historic first Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore were

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<sup>4</sup> Signifying the numeral “9”

(in alphabetical order): Mr Gianchand Datwani<sup>5</sup>, Mr Goh Beng Wan, Dr John Fozdar<sup>6</sup>, Dr K.M. Fozdar, Mrs Shirin Fozdar, Mr Kishenchand Khemani, Mr Motiram, Mr Ramsay, and Mr Teoh Geok Leng.



*Members of the first Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore, incorporated July 28, 1952*

Seated L to R: Mr Teoh Geok Leng, Mr Gianchand Datwani, Mrs Shirin Fozdar, Dr K.M. Fozdar, Mr Ramsay  
Standing L to R: Mr Goh Beng Wan, Mr Kishenchand Khemani, Dr John Fozdar, Mr Motiram

Mrs Shirin Fozdar is seen here holding the Persian Calligraphy "Ya-Baha-el-Abha"  
("O Glory of the Most Glorious") symbolizing a name of God.

This first Spiritual Assembly, as is normal for these bodies, met regularly to consult on matters concerning the Faith and the community and to plan activities such as holding "fireside"<sup>7</sup> meetings in their homes for expanding their membership, as well as occasional public meetings.

As the community grew larger, money was raised for an administrative centre which believers could call their own. And, with a gradually enlarging membership, the Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly of Singapore asked the government for a cemetery. A plot at Choa Chu Kang was given to the Bahá'í community in 1957. Dr K.M. Fozdar who passed away in April 1958 was the first Bahá'í to be buried there.

<sup>5</sup> Mr Gianchand Datwani and Mr Kishenchand Khemani after some years also set sail to pioneer for the Bahá'í Faith, the former to Hongkong and the latter to Indonesia.

<sup>6</sup> In 1954 Dr John Fozdar, settled in Brunei to pioneer there and was declared "Knight of Bahá'u'lláh" by the late Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith for his services in that land.

<sup>7</sup> Regular fireside meetings are a means for Bahá'ís to talk about the teachings of their Faith to friends and contacts.



Subsequent years also saw the arrival of other Bahá'í pioneering families in Singapore. They came to settle, and simultaneously, to pursue their own career and business opportunities. Among them were Col. Eshragian, from Persia, and his family in 1958. They stayed for two years before leaving for Australia. Other pioneers who resided in Singapore in the late fifties and who stayed for at least a year included Mahesh Dayal and Mangubhai Patel from India, Wesley Huxtable from Canada and John McHenry III from the United States. In the sixties, these pioneers were joined by Mr and Mrs Rostum Rahnema from Persia and Mary Robinson from Britain. Dr and Mrs Fozdar also visited Malaya occasionally to help there with the teaching of the Faith. Their second son Dr John Fozdar worked as a surgeon at the Singapore General Hospital for three years and left Singapore in 1954 to pioneer for the Faith in Brunei. Through the effort of all these dedicated early believers both foreign and local, the numbers of Bahá'ís began to swell in Singapore and especially in Malaya.

During the years 1957 to 1964, the mushrooming Bahá'í communities in the countries and territories of South East Asia, comprising Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaya, Sarawak, Philippines, Portuguese Timor, Mentawai, Brunei, Andaman, Nicobar and Cocos Island, were administered by the Regional Spiritual Assembly ("RSA") of South East Asia which was elected in 1957. In September of the following year this RSA of South East Asia was given the privilege to host one of the five Inter-continental Bahá'í Conferences held under the aegis of the World Centre of the Bahá'í Faith. The honour of the venue for this conference fell to Singapore. The other four Inter-continental conferences also held that same year were in Kampala, Uganda in January; Sydney, Australia in March; Wilmette, Illinois, USA in May; Frankfurt, Germany in July.

The fifth Bahá'í Inter-continental Conference held in Victoria Memorial Hall (27-29 September 1958) was graced by the presence of the Hand of the Cause of God<sup>8</sup>, Mr Leroy Ioas, the Representative of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, His Eminence the late Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, and eight other Hands of the Cause of God, besides members of various National and Regional Assemblies.

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<sup>8</sup> "Hand of the Cause of God" is a life-time rank bestowed by the Guardian of the Faith upon the pre-eminent champions of the Faith. There have been a total of 47 Hands of which 20 were appointed by Bahá'u'lláh in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the remaining by the Guardian. The Hands do not participate in matters of administration which fall within the purview of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. Only two Hands are still alive.



Photo shows the Hand of the Cause of God Mr Ioas seated on the left while Mrs Shirin Fozdar, Chairperson of the RSA of South East Asia delivers her opening address welcoming all the participants to this historic first international Bahá'í Conference to be held in South East Asia, the Conference Secretary Mr Jamshed Fozdar and Dr M Salm anpur who translated the proceedings in Persian and French.

The many Bahá'ís from Singapore and Malaysia experienced for the first time what an "international" Bahá'í conference was like. They had the rare opportunity to meet in one place many Hands of the Cause as well as well-known teachers and believers of the Faith, who had journeyed from many regions to come to attend this historic conference. The Singapore community became so enthused after the conference that a number of them left the country to go as pioneers for the Faith to other lands.

### **The Bahá'í Centres of Singapore**

Early believers congregated in each other's homes to read the scriptures, to consult on administrative matters and to socialize.

By 1962, the Singapore Bahá'í community had raised enough money to purchase a flat at Jalan Kechil for their meetings. This was sold a decade later as it proved inadequate for the community's needs. Subsequently, a small bungalow was purchased at Hartley Grove, Frankel Estate in 1968. When this became too small, a bigger place was found at Cooling Close in 1973. Subsequently, the Bahá'ís rented offices in town, after which a unit was purchased at the Association Building, Geylang. The Bahá'í administrative centre is currently situated at Wishart Road.

## How do Bahá'ís raise funds?



Nine-petalled Bahá'í House of Worship, New Delhi

Only Bahá'ís are permitted to contribute financially for strictly Bahá'í activities and projects. Accordingly, the Singapore Bahá'í community is financially supported by its own registered membership. Local and national finances are discussed at each Nineteen Day Feast. All individual contributions are strictly voluntary and confidential.

## Singapore and Malaysia

The history of the Singapore Bahá'í community is also closely linked to that of the Malaysian Bahá'í community. By virtue of the tremendous response to her presence in Singapore in the various newspapers Mrs Fozdar also became the “engine” for the entry of the Bahá'í Faith in the then Peninsula Malaya. Exactly two years to the date of her first stepping foot in Singapore, The Straits Times of 19 September 1952 reported her public talk in Penang the day before where she spoke on one of the cardinal principles of the Bahá'í Faith: “*Equality of opportunity for both sexes*”, and emphasized the dire need for women’s education and upliftment. Her talks in Malaya in the various towns and cities were arranged by the early Bahá'ís of Malaya. Chief among these were Mr Yankee Leong (who in December 1953 became the first to accept the Bahá'í Faith in peninsula Malaya), Mr and Mrs Leong Tat Chee, Mr and Mrs G. Saurajan, Mr K. Rajah, Mr and Mrs Tony Fernandez, Dr and Mrs Chellie Sundram, Ms Jeanne Frankel, Mrs Margaret Bates, (the last two both Knights of Bahá'u'lláh for Nicobar Islands) and others. The first Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly in Peninsula Malaya was established in Seremban in April 1954<sup>9</sup>.

From 1952 Mrs Fozdar had been teaching the Faith in Malaya, and was later joined by Mr Yankee Leong and others. Their efforts proved successful in creating the first Malayan Bahá'í communities in Seremban, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Together with a few other members of the Singapore Bahá'í community, Mrs Fozdar made several more teaching trips across the Causeway, sometimes residing in places such as Kulai and Alor Star semi-permanently.

<sup>9</sup> The first Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly of what was to later become Malaysia was established a year earlier in April 1953 in Kuching, Sarawak through the pioneering efforts of Mr Jamshed Fozdar (the eldest of the Fozdar children) and his wife Parvati who had settled there in early 1951.

In the early years the two communities, Singapore and Malaya, often regarded themselves as belonging to the same community. Malaysians attended conferences in Singapore while Singaporeans attended the summer schools<sup>10</sup> of Malaya such as the 1957 summer school held in Malacca.

### First World Congress of the Bahá'í World



In 1963, a handful of Bahá'ís saved quite a substantial sum of money to help charter a plane to take them to the first ever Bahá'í World Congress (28 May – 2 June), in London's Royal Albert Hall, a celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Baha'u'llah's Declaration of His mission as the world Redeemer promised in all the sacred scriptures of the past. The Bahá'í Faith had by 1963 established itself in all the countries and dependent

territories of the planet and ranked second only to the 2000 year old Christian Faith in the geographical coverage and ethnic diversity of its planetary scope. Besides discussing new vistas for expanding the Faith's world-wide ambit and strength, the 6000 plus participants at the Congress were also introduced to the nine member Supreme Body of the Bahá'í World – The Universal House of Justice<sup>11</sup>, elected a week earlier for the first time by members of the National Spiritual Assemblies of 56 countries who had convened at the first International Convention held at the Faith's world centre in Haifa, Israel, under the shadow of one of its two most Holy Shrines, that of His Holiness the "Báb", on Mount Carmel. (See above photo).

<sup>10</sup> The purpose of summer schools is to give Bahá'ís the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the social principles and laws of the Faith, its history and its relation to other religions.

<sup>11</sup> The Universal House of Justice is elected every five years.



The intensive teaching effort put in by Bahá'í pioneers everywhere in the ten years preceding 1963, resulted in a tremendous increase in the number of Bahá'ís and in the localities where they resided. The time had come for the various national communities which had been under the jurisdiction of the Regional Spiritual Assembly of South East Asia to elect their own National Spiritual Assemblies.

Hence, in 1964, the National Convention for Malaysia was convened to elect its National Spiritual Assembly, with 19 delegates attending from the different Bahá'í communities in Malaya, Sarawak, Brunei, Sabah and Singapore which would be administered by this National Assembly. This first National Convention of Malaysia, held in Kuala Lumpur, was graced by the presence of Amatu'l-Bahá Ruhíyyih Rabbani, the Bahá'í world's most eminent personality, wife of His Eminence the late Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. As part of the Malaysian Bahá'í community, Singapore believers helped establish many local assemblies in Malaysia as well as opening other localities where Bahá'ís went to reside. Singapore also helped to acquire the Bahá'í centre in Kuala Lumpur.

Although political separation from Malaysia occurred in 1965, the Singapore Bahá'í community remained part of the Malaysian Bahá'í Community until 1972. During this period, the Singapore Bahá'í community also received periodic visits from Malaysian Counsellors<sup>12</sup> Yankee Leong and Dr Chellie Sundram as well as Malaysian Auxiliary Board Members, Leong Tat Chee and Betty Fernandez to inspire the community to greater efforts for the Faith.

By the late sixties, it became clear that Singapore itself was developing its own identity. Hence, the Faith's supreme governing body – the Universal House of Justice – decided that the Singapore Bahá'í Community should have its own national governing body. To prepare for this eventuality, the NSA of Malaysia began to take steps to strengthen the Singapore Bahá'í community. This it did by organising some of its more important annual programmes in Singapore. Accordingly, the first South East Asian Youth Conference was held in Singapore in December 1969 and the Malaysian Winter School, a highly popular activity with Malaysians, was held in

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<sup>12</sup> "Counsellor" is a rank bestowed by the Bahá'í World Centre upon eminently qualified Bahá'ís who have demonstrated their capacity for encouraging Bahá'í communities in the field of teaching and service. Their term of service is five years which may be extended. Counsellors, unlike National or Local Spiritual Assemblies, are not involved in the administration of Bahá'í communities. Counsellors cover their region of responsibility with the help of members of their Auxiliary Boards (ABMs), who are appointed by the Counsellors.

Singapore in 1971, as well as the Oceanic Conference of the South China Sea held the same year which attracted a few hundred believers from various countries and nations.



The aim of the conference was to achieve immediate expansion of the Faith and to raise a corps of travelling teachers, whose objective would be to visit the Bahá'í communities and groups in the area. Bahá'í youths also participated whole heartedly in this vital activity.

#### **G.S. Santhanam Krishnan (1945-1975)**



A youth who became a Bahá'í following the Oceanic Conference in 1971 was G.S. Santhanam Krishnan. He played a key role in establishing relations between the Bahá'í community and the local press and in strengthening the local Bahá'í youth group. He later pioneered to India where he served with great courage and devotion. He passed away at his pioneering post in 1975.

One of the other youth was Navanita Sundram, then an undergraduate at the University of Singapore, who also helped inaugurate a Bahá'í Society at the University.

By 1972 there were five Local Spiritual Assemblies in Singapore and a greatly expanded and strengthened community.

## Yan Kee Leong (1899-1986)



Photo shows Mr Yan Kee Leong with his good friend Tunku Abdul Rahman "Father of Malaysia" at Hiroshima Japan (Nov 1952)

Malaysian Chinese Yan Kee Leong, renowned cartoonist, played a crucial part in the spread of the Faith in Singapore and Malaya. In 1953, Yan arranged for a series of talks by Mrs Fozdar in Malacca, Seremban and Kuala Lumpur. At the end of the talks, he himself became a Baha'i. In Malacca, the talk was presided over by the well-known Chinese scholar and politician, Dato Tan Cheng Lock. Very soon after, Baha'i communities sprang up in Malacca, Seremban and Kuala Lumpur.

## Leong Tat Chee (1910-1972)



Mr and Mrs Leong Tat Chee were active Bahá'ís from Malacca who played an important role in the formation of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Queenstown in 1969.

Both Yan Kee Leong and Leong Tat Chee served on the RSA of South East Asia. Both were appointed in 1964 as ABMs and they were the first Malaysian Bahá'ís to travel extensively to teach the Chinese of Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and Singapore. Both of them resided in Singapore to help the community grow in the years just before the formation of the NSA of Singapore in 1972.

## Chellie Sundram (1920-1993)



Dr Chellie Sundram was a distinguished physician from Penang who became a Bahá'í in 1958. As member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Malaysia and later of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Asia from 1968 until 1988, he paid many visits to Singapore. Known for his administrative acumen, his brilliant conceptualization and his artistic talent, he contributed to the development and strengthening of Singapore's Bahá'í administration.

## The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore

*In every country, where any of these people reside, they must behave towards the government of that country with loyalty, honesty and truthfulness.*

**Bahá'u'lláh**

The Singapore Bahá'í Community had only a Local Spiritual Assembly for twenty years. From 1952-1957, it was under the aegis of the National Spiritual Assembly of India. Then from 1957-1964, it came under the administrative ambit of the Regional Spiritual Assembly of South East Asia and thereafter, was under the purview of the National Spiritual Assembly of Malaysia. In April 1972, an election was held among Singapore Bahá'ís to elect nine members to form the first NSA of the Bahá'ís of Singapore. Those elected were (in alphabetical order): Mrs George Lee, Mr G. Machambo, Mr Kenneth Mak, Mrs Rose Ong, Mr Henry Ong, Miss Navanita Sundram, Mrs Lena Tan, Mr Edward Teo and Mr. Teoh Geok Leng.

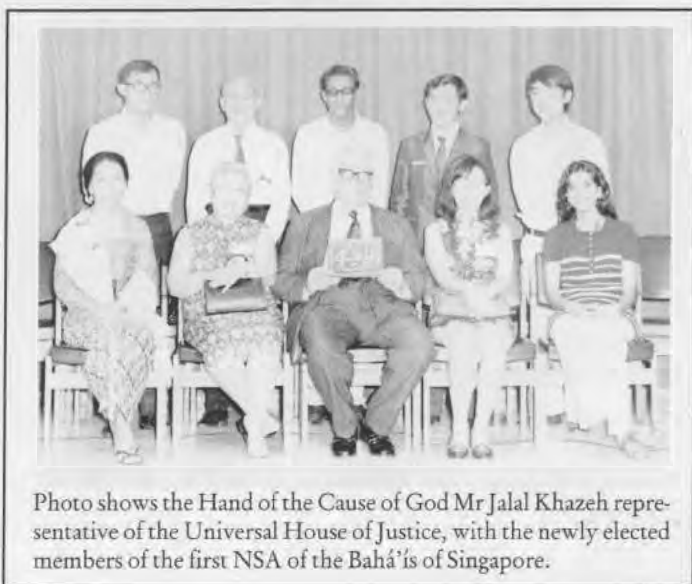


Photo shows the Hand of the Cause of God Mr Jalal Khazeh representative of the Universal House of Justice, with the newly elected members of the first NSA of the Bahá'ís of Singapore.

Since then, members of the National Spiritual Assembly have been elected each year by the Bahá'ís at an annual national convention. The delegates to the National Convention who are responsible for electing the nine-member NSA are themselves elected by their respective local communities for this sole function. There are currently five LSAs in Singapore administering the local communities of Katong, Macpherson, Queenstown, Serangoon and Yishun. Every year, each local community is apportioned



a number of delegates according to their respective Bahá'í population. The delegates are elected in much the same way as the local governing council. There is no nomination or campaigning in the election process.

These administrative bodies use a distinctive method of non-adversarial decision-making known as "consultation". The principles of consultation are laid down in Bahá'u'lláh's writings and are a procedure for building consensus and making decisions. Bahá'ís have found consultation to be useful in virtually any arena where group decision-making and co-operation is required, including their businesses and families.

Bahá'í Holy Days were gazetted in 1972. The days gazetted are those when Bahá'ís are required to abstain from work or school.

The Bahá'í Holy Days gazetted are:

Naw Ruz March 21 (*This is the first day of the Bahá'í year*)  
Ridvan April 21, April 29, May 2 (*This is a 12-day period with festivities on the first, ninth and twelfth days marking the time prior to the departure of Bahá'u'lláh from Baghdad when He made His public Declaration to be God's messenger for today*)  
Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh's Forerunner, the Báb May 23  
Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh May 29  
Martyrdom of the Báb July 9  
Birth of the Báb October 20  
Birth of Bahá'u'lláh November 12

### **Bahá'í World Centre's statement on 'BAHÁ'U'LLÁH' Presented to Head of State**

To mark the Centenary of the Passing of Bahá'u'lláh on 29 May 1992, the Bahá'í World Centre published a comprehensive statement on the Life and Message of Bahá'u'lláh and the Universal House of Justice requested all National Spiritual Assemblies to present the statement to their respective Heads of State.

In Singapore, the statement on 'BAHÁ'U'LLÁH' was presented to His Excellency President Wee Kim Wee on 22 July 1992 at the Istana by the Representatives of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore Mr and Mrs Jamshed Fozdar.



Photo shows President Wee Kim Wee with Mr and Mrs Fozdar in the Istana

## Counselling Institutions

The decisions made by the governing bodies such as the Local Spiritual Assemblies and the National Spiritual Assemblies are influenced by the advice of a group of counselling institutions that are an inherent part of the Bahá'í administrative order. Chosen for their outstanding qualities and a mature understanding of the Faith, the individuals who serve on these institutions are appointed to act both as advisors to governing bodies and as sources of encouragement and stimulation for individual members of the Faith.

Foremost among these advisors are the "Hands of the Cause of God".

Hands of the Cause who visited Singapore include Shua'u'llah Ala'i, who stopped here to teach for a week in January 1960, Tarazullah Samandari in 1966 and Amatu'l-Bahá Ruhíyyih Rabbani in 1961 and 1964. The latter gave a well-received public talk entitled "All the Races are needed" at the Singapore National Library. Other Hands who visited Singapore were Dr R. Muhajir, A. Faizi, Collis Featherstone, Enoch Olinga and Jalal Khazeh.

To extend into the future the functions of the Hands of the Cause, the Universal House of Justice designated a number of spiritually mature and experienced individuals as "Continental Counsellors".

Appointed to five-year terms, they reside in specific continental regions and are charged to advise communities at the regional and national levels. In 1985, a member of the Bahá'í Community of Singapore was appointed a Counsellor for Asia by the Universal House of Justice.

## Mrs Rose Ong



Reader's Digest, October 1998 Vol. 72 No. 427

Mrs Rose Ong was appointed as Counsellor for Asia and served for the period of 1985-1995. During this time, she was the advisor to several National Spiritual Assemblies in Asia. She travelled extensively to many countries of South East Asia as well as to Taiwan, China and Mongolia. In 1995, Mrs Ong initiated the idea of a Singapore

Bookshelf in many libraries of the less endowed colleges in China. This project caught the attention of both the Chinese and English press in Singapore. Many kind-hearted Singaporeans donated their books. Collecting and despatching books was time consuming but the effort has paid off. To date, eleven colleges have received books for their libraries. The project is ongoing.

## The Advancement of Women

*"The world of humanity is possessed of two wings – the male and female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realised; humanity cannot wing its way to heights of real attainment."*  
Abdu'l-Bahá

For the first time in history, a major world religion has explicitly stated that women and men must enjoy equal opportunity. The Bahá'í Writings also state that:

- ◆ Girls should be given preference over boys when educational opportunities and resources are limited.
- ◆ In Bahá'í marriage, neither the husband nor the wife has a dominant voice.
- ◆ Any apparent inequality between the capacities of women and men is due solely to the lack of educational opportunities denied to women in past ages.

Not surprisingly, the rise of the early women's movement in Singapore and well before that in the world at large, is closely connected with the Bahá'í Faith. The world's first woman suffrage martyr, Tahirih, the most famous poetess of 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran, was a follower of the Faith who, fully a half century before her sisters in the west proclaimed the cause of women's emancipation and for this she suffered martyrdom by strangulation in 1852 at the young age of 35. Her fame, which after her martyrdom quickly spread even to the west in books and articles about her life and aims, by renowned scholars in England, France and America, as well as in the Middle East, was one of the chief causes motivating the suffragette movement in the west to arise and successfully achieve women's emancipation.

In Singapore the movement for the emancipation of women got its start exactly a century after Tahirih's championing of this cardinal Bahá'í principle in the Faith's cradle, her native Iran. This was marked by the arrival on our shores on 19 September 1950 of Mrs Shirin Fozdar, an ardent champion of the Bahá'í Faith and a famous feminist who, long inspired by Tahirih's shining example had already made her mark as early as 1934 in the League of Nations in the cause of women's emancipation. She was also an associate of Mahatma Gandhi (Father of Modern India) in his task of establishing Hindu-Muslim understanding and amity in western India, especially the hot-bed Ahmedabad. Mrs Fozdar became recognized both by the public and in the mass media as the champion of



women's rights in Singapore and, as the Secretary-General of the Singapore Council of Women which she founded in April 1952 amidst intense public interest and press coverage, she spoke fearlessly on the controversial issues of polygamy and divorce which affected women's welfare adversely. She was strongly supported by many eminent women, among them Mrs Robert Eu, Mrs H.B. Amstutz, Mrs E.V. Davies, Ms Zahara Bte. Noor Mohammed and Mrs George Lee, who was elected the first President of the SCW.

### MRS GEORGE LEE (1904-1999)



Mrs George Lee was the President of the Singapore Council of Women (SCW), from its inception in 1952 until 1971. As President of the SCW, Mrs Lee was responsible for the formation of the first Girls Club in Singapore in 1953 which was formally opened by Singapore Chief Minister, Mr Lim Yew Hock. The girls were taught English, Mandarin, cooking, sewing and the art of self-defence<sup>13</sup> during their free time. Mrs Lee accepted the Bahá'í Faith in March 1958. Mrs Lee visited several countries for the dual purpose of teaching the Bahá'í Faith and advancing women's emancipation.



L. to R. Mrs George Lee, Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Marshal Chen Yi of the People's Republic of China and Mrs Shirin Fozdar

In August 1959 Mrs Lee and Mrs Fozdar visited China for a three week tour at the invitation of the National Women's Federation to inspect various women's activities in the PRC. While there, they also met some of the high government officials, among them the Vice Premier and Foreign Minister

Marshal Chen Yi, as well as many women's organisations which were also very interested in the efforts for the Women's Charter for Singapore.

As an active Bahá'í, Mrs Lee was a prominent member of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore in the fifties and sixties. In addition, Mrs Lee was an elected member of the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore in 1972. Earlier, she was also elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Malaysia in 1964 and 1965.

<sup>13</sup> The honorary instructor for which was Mr Jagjeet Singh Sehgal, BBM, PBM who later became the Chairman of Singapore's Central Sikh Gurdwara Board.

Because of Mrs Fozdar's fame as a crusader of women's rights, the media also frequently reported on other talks she delivered which were not merely on women's rights, but on other fundamental teachings of Bahá'u'llah which addressed the spirit of the new age, such as the "Oneness of the Human Race", "The Source of Religion is One", "A Spiritual Approach for Economic Well-being", "A Universal Language" and "A World Legislature". The people who came to listen to or read about her talks became sympathizers and friends and some accepted the Bahá'í Faith as the religion for our times.

Mrs Fozdar's work led to the legislation of the Muslim Ordinance of 1957, which provided for the establishment of a Muslim law court (Syariah Court) in 1958, so as to make the process of Muslim divorce more difficult. By 1961 the work of the Singapore Council of Women, spearheaded by Mrs Fozdar, succeeded in the Singapore Legislative Assembly passing The Women's Charter which protected the status and welfare of women in Singapore with regards to marriage and divorce. It also abolished polygamy among non-Muslims and changed the whole framework of Chinese marriages. All marriages had to be legally registered from 1961 and those done solely through customary Chinese rites were not recognized as legal.

Early appreciation of Mrs Shirin Fozdar's struggle for women regardless of race or religion came also from Singapore's Founding Fathers. The testimonial below from Mr S Rajaratnam who was also Singapore's first Foreign Minister, is one of those attesting to Mrs Fozdar's work for all Singapore women.



Cable Address:  
Telexgram:

MFA.670/2 Vol.2

MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
SINGAPORE.

18th April, 1967.

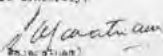
Mr. Parvati Gharat,  
Baba's Centre,  
77/1 Tel. Lang Suan,  
BANGKOK, P.O. Box 1501.

Dear Sir,

I am pleased to note that you are bringing out a souvenir brochure in appreciation of the services rendered by Mrs. Shirin Fozdar.

I have known Mrs. Fozdar when she was in Singapore and of the single minded way in which she struggled to promote and safeguard the rights of women and to enhance the status of women in our country. She did this without regard to race or creed and I would like to join with the others in recognition of her services to promote justice for women in Asia.

Yours sincerely,

  
(S. Rajaratnam)

Other countries in the region used Singapore's Women's Charter as a model for their own legislation in this important field. For her great contribution to the social development of Singapore, Mrs Fozdar was the first person singled out for tribute by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) in 1988.

Besides many others, the following tribute was received also from His Excellency President Wee Kim Wee on the occasion of Mrs Shirin Fozdar's passing.



Mrs Shirin Fozdar in  
her 85<sup>th</sup> year

After the passing of Mrs Shirin Fozdar (her resting place is at Singapore's Choa Chu Kang Bahá'í Cemetery) on 2 February 1992 at the age of 87, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) established in her memory the **Shirin Fozdar Trust Fund** which was inaugurated on 15 May 1993 with H.E. President Wee Kim Wee and First Lady Mrs Wee as Guests-of-Honour.

The objectives of the **Shirin Fozdar Trust Fund** are:

- ◆ To develop and support facilities that are beneficial to women, such as training centres, crisis centres, homes and shelters for needy women
- ◆ To provide educational and training opportunities in fields which would benefit women, such as skills training for housewives to re-enter the workforce and the training of counsellors.
- ◆ To study issues of gender and national development
- ◆ To fund publications and multi-media materials relevant to the advancement of women

Based on these objectives, the Fund will benefit organisations and individuals working towards the advancement of women in general, and needy women in particular.

With the formation of the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations ("SCWO") in 1980, a broad-based umbrella body very much like its predecessor, the Singapore Council of Women, the Bahá'í Women's Committee (later the Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women "BOAW") became one of the first associations to seek affiliation with it.

In their respective stints on the SCWO executive board, Baha'i women such as Lena Tan, Christine Lee, Lalitha Nambiar and Anula Samuel served mostly as Hon. Treasurer and/or Hon. Secretary and were also active in committees such as publication and research. In 1993, the BWC teamed up with the SCWO to publish the book *Voices and Choices - the Women's Movement in Singapore*, a landmark book which traces the history of the women's movement in Singapore and which was launched on 25 July 1993 by H.E. President Wee Kim Wee.

*Voices and Choices - The Women's Movement in Singapore (1993):* this comprehensive



book traces the history of the women's movement in Singapore, delineates women's present status and charts their aspirations for the future. It was jointly published by the BOAW and SCWO, and launched by President Wee Kim Wee.



President Wee Kim Wee and Mrs Wee with members of the SCWO-BOAW Book Committee at the Gala Dinner (1993)

Singapore Bahá'í women were also actively involved in the Fourth UN World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995. Eleven Bahá'ís went as part of the forty-eight strong SCWO contingent and the two workshops contributed by the SCWO during this conference were organised by the BOAW. These two workshops were on "Women, Work and Family" and "Young Women and a Violence-free society"



Photo shows Mrs Goh Chok Tong with members of the BOAW on 17 Mar 1994 when she was presented a book on "The Bahá'í Lotus Temple" in New Delhi that she had visited on 24 Jan 1994 during Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's State Visit to attend India's National Day on 26 Jan 1994.

The BOAW has also worked closely with government ministries. In 1995-6, Dr H.B. Danesh, an internationally renowned psychiatrist was invited by the BOAW to conduct a series of public workshops on marriage, family life and personal development. During his visits, he met with several government and non-government organisations, medical and educational institutions working in the areas of family violence and juvenile delinquency as well as with the Honourable Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, the Minister for Community Development. In 1997-8, BOAW and SCWO jointly organised a series of talks by medical doctors on various aspects of women's health. This project was given the endorsement of the Ministry of Health.



When the new SCWO building opened in 1998, the BOAW was among the first to establish its office there. It is now the focal point for Bahá'í women in their activities for service to the public.

Bahá'í women are also active in other women's organisations. A Bahá'í, Dr Phyllis Chew, became President of AWARE in 1998. During her tenure as President, she launched a public exhibition on the atrocities of mass rape and collected 45,000 signatures for a petition to the Indonesian President and the UN Commissioner for Human Rights. Dr Chew is also a founder member and past President of the University Women's Association of Singapore (UWAS), an affiliate of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW).

Many other Bahá'í women have also been recognised for their active contribution to society at large. The following Bahá'í women were also recipients of "The Long Service Award" from the Ministry of Community Development: Dr Phyllis Chew, Mrs Fatima Tia Traazil, Mrs Anula Samuel, Ms Lynette Thomas, Ms Tan Lay Kuan and Mrs Rose Ong.

## Inter-religious Activities

*Know thou assuredly that the essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the same. Bahá'ulláh*

### World Religion Day

In an endeavour to emphasise the common features underlying the sacred teachings of the religions in our multi-religious and multi-racial nation, the Bahá'í Community recently (1995) revived the observance of World Religion Day in Singapore, the first observance of which was organised by the Singapore Bahá'ís in 1956 with the Chief Minister Mr Lim Yew Hock as the guest of honour at the Victoria Memorial Hall.

Since 1995, four World Religion Day observances have been held in Singapore. The first two were organised by the Bahá'ís while the third observance in 1997 was jointly organised by the Bahá'í community of Singapore and the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO)<sup>14</sup> of Singapore. The fourth observance of World Religion Day was organized for the first time by the IRO.

#### The Aim of World Religion Day

The underlying purpose of World Religion Day, inaugurated over fifty years ago and now regularly observed in over eighty countries on the third Sunday of January, is to foster the establishment of inter-faith understanding and harmony by emphasizing the common denominators in all religions.

The message of World Religion Day is that mankind, which has stemmed from one origin, must now strive towards the reconciliation of that which has been split up. Human unity and true equality depend not on past origins, but on future goals, on what we are becoming and whither we are going. The prime cause of the age-old conflict between man and man has been the absence of one ethical belief, a single spiritual standard — one moral code.

The history of man's cultures and civilizations is the history of his religions. Nothing has such an integrating effect as the bond of a common Faith. The history of religion shows that all religions had this unifying power— the power to instil in the hearts and minds of their adherents the fundamental verities, the vital spiritual standards, and thus establish a unity of conscience for motivating man towards founding great cultures and civilizations.

Hence, through World Religion Day observances dedicated towards encouraging the leaders and followers of every religion to acknowledge the similarities in each of our sacred Faiths, a unified approach to the challenges that confront humanity can be agreed upon and then applied on an ever-expanding scale to permeate the very psyche of mankind, so that it can be made to see the whole earth as a single country and all humanity its citizenry.

<sup>14</sup>The IRO Singapore is one of the oldest if not the oldest IRO in the world. It originally began with members from the Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Sikh Faiths with the Zoroastrian, Bahá'í and Taoist Faiths joining in 1961, 1995 and 1996 respectively, thus comprising in its membership all the nine independent world religions.

These observances clearly filled an important niche in Singapore's multi-religious society for greater awareness of each others' sacred Faiths and audiences of over 1000 packed the hall for every observance to hear the eminent religious personalities address common denominators from the perspective of their own religions. The government too extended its vital support by the presence of Ministers and Ambassador-at-Large as guests of honour for each of these annually observed most popular publicly held inter-Faith events in our nation.

Eminent national and international personalities also conveyed their felicitations for World Religion Day observances to its organisers.

### Appreciations

*"The President sends his best wishes for a meaningful and successful observance."*

**Principal Private Secretary to the President of the Republic of Singapore -1/9/94**

*"I congratulate you for taking time to attend this gathering to observe World Religion Day and... wish you every success in your deliberations to bring about peace and tranquillity, no matter how distant the ultimate goal may be."*

**Former President Wee Kim Wee**

(message to the Chairman and all participants of World Religion Day Inaugural Observance in Singapore 1995)

*"He wishes the occasion a success."*

**Principal Private Secretary to Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew - 13/6/95**

*"I congratulate the Baba'i Community of Singapore for organising this inaugural observance. I hope it will become an annual event. This is an auspicious year to hold this observance because it is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the founding of the United Nations. What is the purpose of this observance? It is to promote understanding and amity among the different religions and their followers. This is a worthy goal. It is a goal which the world needs because, in some parts of the world, we still see the existence of religious intolerance, religious hatred, and religious conflict."*

**Professor Tommy Thong-Bee Koh**

**Singapore's Ambassador-At-Large**

(Keynote Address delivered at the Inaugural Observance of World Religion Day in Singapore 1995)

*"I assure you of my prayers for all who will take part in World Religion Day that you may be one heart full of love in the Heart of God."*

**Mother Teresa - 9/8/96**

*"I am heartened by this large gathering of people from different religious faiths, coming together for the common purpose of fostering inter-faith understanding. Today's gathering is a significant reflection of our efforts to promote and preserve racial and religious harmony in Singapore."*

**Mr Lim Hng Kiang**

**Minister for National Development**

(Keynote Address delivered at 2<sup>nd</sup> Observance of World Religion Day in Singapore 1996)

*"The World Religion Day observed for the third year in Singapore is significant in that the Inter Religious Organisation (IRO) is co-organising it with the World Religion Day committee of the Baba'i Community which organised the first two observances here. The intention is for the IRO to organise future WRD observances to continue the good work started by the Singapore Bahá'í Community."*

**Mr Abdullah Tarmugi**

**Minister for Community Development**

(Keynote Address delivered at 3<sup>rd</sup> Observance of World Religion Day in Singapore 1997)

*This is indeed a blessed occasion where we see people, not only of different faiths, but of different races coming together and interacting in peace and goodwill as you do today. Far from seeing our differences as impediments, we see them, rather, as causes for us to meet and celebrate; to know and understand each other. Is not diversity the essence of life and creation for us to cherish and appreciate?*

*The commemoration of World Religion Day in Singapore was started by the Baba'i community four years ago. But the Inter-Religious Organisation or IRO has agreed to be responsible for organising the annual observance from this year onwards. This 4<sup>th</sup> observance of World Religion Day in Singapore is therefore significant in that it is the first time the IRO is hosting it.*

**Mr Abdullah Tarmugi**

**Minister for Community Development**

(Keynote Address delivered at 4<sup>th</sup> Observance of World Religion Day in Singapore 1998)



The 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize in the World Religion Day Essay Competition in 1998 was won by Bahá'í youth Ms Kelly Koay for the second year in succession. As Ms Kelly was in the USA pursuing her studies in medicine, her sister Ms Michelle Koay is seen here receiving the award on Kelly's behalf from the guest of honour the Honourable Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, Minister for Community Development. The aim of these Essay Competitions which were only open to Singapore youths, was to encourage them to learn about other Faiths besides their own.

## Bahá'ís in the IRO

The first Bahá'í member of the IRO was Dr Suresh Sahadevan who became a member in 1995. Mr Jamshed Fozdar and Mr Foo Check Woo were the first Bahá'ís to serve on the executive Council of the IRO. Mr Fozdar served as the Hon. Secretary for a two-year period from July 1996-August 1998. During his tenure as Hon. Secretary, Mr Fozdar was delegated to represent the IRO<sup>15</sup> at the Executive Committee Meeting of the Asian Conference

<sup>15</sup> The IRO's objectives are to inculcate the spirit of friendship and co-operation among the leaders and followers of different religions and to improve the condition of the adherents of different religions in generally accepted moral principles. The IRO conducts regular inter-faith seminars and public talks to increase the public's knowledge about the various religious observances, and holds prayers and blessings ceremonies for various government agencies and civic institutions. It is also consulted by Committees of Parliament on matters of ethics and beliefs of the citizenry.

on Religion and Peace in Ayuthaya, Thailand held in October (15-19) 1996, which was opened by the Former Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda Privy Councilor to His Majesty King Rama IX of Thailand. In June (21-26) 1998 Mr Fozdar also represented the IRO at the United Religions Initiative Global Summit III held in Stanford University, California, USA. Mr Fozdar and Mr Foo were succeeded by Mr Selvam Satanam and Lt. Col. Yeo Yew Hock on the IRO Council.

Mr Fozdar later served as Chairman of the IRO's Committee for the Commemorative Postage Stamp to mark the IRO's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 1999 and, with Committee members Mr V.R. Nathan (Chairman of the Hindu Endowments Board) and Brother Joseph McNally (Former President of LaSalle-SIA College of Arts), was successful in having the Singapore Post issue on 15 January 1999 the IRO Commemorative stamp in three denominations listing on it in chronological order the names of its nine constituent religions: Hindu, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Bahá'í.



This set of three stamps was issued by Singapore Post on 15 January 1999 to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore. The design shows the Organisation's logo, its motto and the names of its nine constituent religions in chronological order.

## Bahá'í Presidency of the IRO

In conformity with the IRO's policy of annually rotating the Hon. Presidency among its nine constituent religions, the period from August 1998 to August 1999 saw a member of the Bahá'í Faith, Mr Selvam Satanam, as the IRO President. Mr Satanam, at the age of 29, was the first Bahá'í to become Hon. President of the IRO since the Bahá'ís joined in 1995. His term of office saw the IRO hosting a first-ever exhibition on the nine major religions of Singapore at the prestigious Singapore History Museum marking the IRO's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and also the publication of the revised edition of the book (first published in 1993) entitled "Religions in Singapore" which sold out within a couple of months of publication. The Honourable Minister for Community Development Mr Abdullah Tarmugi presided at the opening of the exhibition and the launch of the book.





The IRO published the revised edition of "Religions in Singapore" in 1999

In keeping with the tradition initiated by Singapore's First Head of State President Mr Yusof Ishak and followed by the Second President Dr Benjamin Sheares as well as the Fourth President Mr Wee Kim Wee, Singapore's Fifth President Mr Ong Teng Cheong also hosted a reception on 3 June 1999 at the Istana for representatives of the nine constituent religions in the IRO Council.



Photo shows His Excellency President Ong standing front row centre and on his right IRO President Mr Selvam Satanam of the Singapore Bahá'í Community.

## Environment

*Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. Bahá'u'lláh*

Active since 1992 when it was first established, the Baha'i Office of Environment (BOE) promotes through its activities a vision of sustainable development which combines economic, ecological and spiritual principles. The protection of the environment is viewed in the broadest possible sense as Bahá'ís believe that recognition of the oneness of mankind is a fundamental component of the environment movement.

The office works closely with various organisations with a view to sharing information and collaborating on educational projects on environmental conservation. It has contributed to awareness of our ecological problems through exhibitions, talks and children's activities. It also takes part in regular coastal and nature reserve clean-ups and organises activities to mark Earth Day, World Environment Day and Clean and Green Week.

Collaboration with other green groups, including the Singapore Environmental Council, has led to the informal setting up by the Office, of a green network for consultation on current concerns. This has resulted in a higher degree of inter-group co-operation and collaboration.

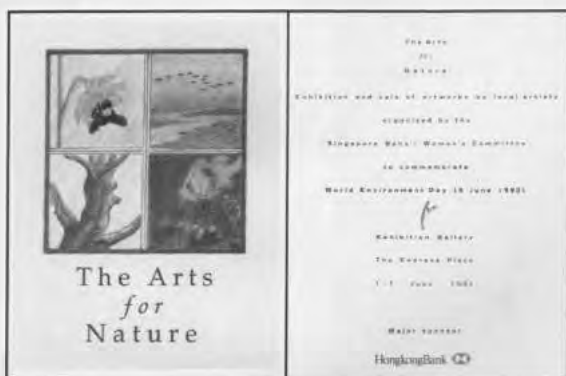
Environmental activities across interfaith lines have also been initiated, with talks by different religions on their perspectives concerning the environment, as well as inter-faith commemoration of Earth Day.



Representatives of Singapore's religious communities and BOE members at the interfaith commemoration of Earth Day at Fort Canning Park

Representatives of the BOE have attended regional and international conferences on the environment, including those organised by UNESCAP in Bangkok, the Global NGO Conference on Environment and Development in Paris, and others.

Recently the Earth Charter, originally drafted for adoption by the Earth Summit in 1992, has been redrafted following substantial input from a broad-based group of NGO's, including religious groups. Internationally and locally Bahá'ís are part of initiatives to make better known this important values statement which addresses the fundamental issues underlying any attempts to solve environmental and other problems.



Earlier, in 1990, Bahá'í women organised *The Arts for Nature* which was one of the first attempts to raise public awareness on the need to conserve our environment in Singapore. The works of more than 60 local artists were selected and their paintings,

sculptures and installation pieces were displayed at the Empress Place Museum and the proceeds from the sale of the paintings donated to the *Save the Turtles Campaign* of the Malayan Nature Society. The production of the full-colour catalogue was sponsored by the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, as part of its "Care for Nature" programme.

In 1992, a Bahá'í, Mrs Fatima Tia Traazil became the first woman to win the Ministry of Environment's Green Leaf Award in the individual category for outstanding contribution to environmental protection and preservation. She also served on the Board of the Singapore Environment Council from 1992-1998.



Photo shows Mrs Traazil receiving the Green Leaf Award on 7 November 1992 from the Minister of Environment the Honourable Dr Ahmad Mattar.

## Education

*Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom. Bahá'u'lláh*

Children's moral education classes open to all are held regularly by the Singapore Bahá'í Community. Virtues and the skills of co-operation and consultation are taught in an atmosphere of fun and enjoyment.

The independent investigation of reality, whether scientific or religious is strongly encouraged. Scientific knowledge and religious education are regarded as the two wings of the bird of humanity. Baha'u'llah's Writings portray science and religion as different yet harmonious approaches to the comprehension of reality. These two paths are essentially compatible and mutually reinforcing.

The options for teaching religious knowledge



**• TEACH WORLD RELIGIONS INSTEAD**

"THE fact that most religions have a number of denominations or sects makes it impossible to create a curriculum that treats any religion in great detail and yet satisfy every sect.

"Instead, a curriculum should be developed that discusses the teachings of the different religions, the social milieu under which each one is founded and their impact.

"Through such a curriculum, the students will gain an appreciation of the common origins of different religions and much of the animosity and misunderstanding that are the result of ignorance will be dissipated.

"It is not impossible to develop such a curriculum. Very successful curricula based on this concept had been developed in the United Kingdom and Australia and the Bahá'ís will be happy to provide the materials with textbooks used in those countries.

"Should the Government decide to have a different curriculum for each religion, there are community groups that the minority religions receive equal treatment so that the Bahá'í children now in schools will be able to receive education in the Bahá'í faith. — *Dr. Kadir V. Hattig of the Bahá'í Community.*

Bahá'í children are taught about the principles, history and practice of all world religions since "Oneness of Religion" is one of the cardinal principles of the Bahá'í Faith and, in accordance with the Faith's principle of "Independent Investigation of Truth", the children of Bahá'í parents may choose which religion they wish to belong to when they reach the age of fifteen.

In 1989, when the Ministry of Education and the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education were studying whether religious knowledge ought to be taught in schools, the Bahá'í

community made representations for school children to be taught a curriculum that covers all the world religions. The Bahá'í Community



submitted that “through such a curriculum the students will gain an appreciation of the common origins of different religions and much of the animosity and misunderstanding that are the result of ignorance will be dissipated”.

### Grow with Nature Banner Project



This was organised in 1991 by the Singapore Bahá'í Community to create awareness in school children of the importance of protecting and caring for the environment. Over 80 banners painted by primary, secondary and tertiary students were displayed along the Singapore River during that year's Clean and Green Week.

## Youth

*Blessed is he who in the prime of his youth and the heyday of his life will arise to serve the Cause of the Lord of the beginning and of the end, and adorn his heart with His love. The manifestation of such a grace is greater than the creation of the heavens and of the earth. Blessed are the steadfast and well is it with those who are firm. Bahá'u'lláh*

Bahá'í youth, wherever they reside, are committed to a strong moral code that forbids intoxication of any kind, prohibits premarital sex and discourages smoking. They are exhorted to uphold the highest virtues in both their personal and public life and to look outside themselves to see how they can be of service to the world of humanity.

In Singapore, the Bahá'í Youth Development Group ("BYDG") is affiliated to the National Youth Council ("NYC") and Bahá'í youth regularly participate in the programmes of the NYC. In 1997 and 1999 a Bahá'í youth, Michelle Koay, was chosen by the NYC to be a member of the delegation that represented Singapore at the International Youth Forum in South Korea.

The BYDG runs weekly workshops for Bahá'í youth to study the application of the spiritual and moral teachings of the Bahá'í Faith in their daily lives. Singapore Bahá'í youth have contributed to community service projects within Singapore and in China, Mongolia, Myanmar and Indonesia.

In 1996 a contemporary performing arts group, "The Singapore Bahá'í Youth Workshop", was set up by a group of Bahá'í youth to convey the principles of the Bahá'í Faith through songs, dance and drama. The Workshop has since performed at numerous youth carnivals, schools, old folks' homes and concerts. Their performances have mainly been on the eradication of racial prejudice, the prevention of substance abuse and the acquisition of virtues such as trustworthiness, justice and unity. Their signature performance is the "Step Dance" which has its origins in Africa and is a performance demonstrating the powerful impact of unity and cooperation.



The Singapore Bahá'í Youth Workshop performing the "Step Dance" at the official opening of the National Youth Centre in 1996 by the Honourable Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong.

Bahá'í youth have made their mark in international efforts to promote peace and conservation of the environment. Singapore Bahá'í youth contributed articles to two books published by Peace Child International, namely "*Rescue Mission Planet Earth: a children's edition of Agenda 21*" and "*A World In Our Hands*". In the case of the latter book, which detailed the past, present and future of the United Nations, the submission of the Singapore Bahá'í youth was considered worthy of an invitation for a representative to be on the editorial board. A Singapore Bahá'í youth, Jordan Melic, had the honour of being selected to travel to New York to present a copy of the book to UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations of the UN held in San Francisco in 1996.



*A World in Our Hands*



Singapore Bahá'í youth Jordan Melic, 14, presenting copy of: "*A World in Our Hands*" to UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1996)



Extreme right: Singapore Bahá'í youth, Sonia Ong and Adeline Koay at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations in 1998.

In 1998, two Singapore Bahá'í youth, Sonia Ong and Adeline Koay, represented the Bahá'í International Community at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations in New York. They were the only Singapore youth present at the conference. In 1999 another Bahá'í youth, Nadya Melic, represented Singapore at Peace Child International's Young Person's Millennium Conference in Hawaii, USA.

Many of the Bahá'í youth in Singapore are active in sports and have earned recognition for their contributions. Mr Anthony Joseph donned Singapore national colours for hockey from 1967 to 1973. An outstanding player from his school days in Raffles Institution, Anthony earned his first call up to the national squad when he was only 17 years old. Anthony was a member of the Singapore team that won the historic gold medal at the 1973 SEA Games and in that same year he was also the captain of the national Under 23 team. Another Bahá'í, Selvam Satanam who also hailed from Raffles Institution, was awarded the Singapore Schools Sports Council National Colours Award in 1986 for his services in the Singapore Combined Schools hockey team.

Bahá'í youth have also distinguished themselves in other arenas. The 1999 SIA Inter Junior College Debating Competition saw Jordan Melic winning the coveted Best Speaker of the Series Award.

## Marriage and Family Life

*Marriage is "a fortress for well-being and salvation".*

**Bahá'u'lláh**

Bahá'í marriage is recognized under the laws of Singapore and since 1972 Bahá'í Marriage Solemnizers have been appointed by the Registrar of Marriages.

Bahá'ís affirm that the family is the basic unit of society. Unless this all important building block is healthy and unified, society itself cannot be healthy and unified. Monogamous marriage stands at the foundation of family life. Inter-racial marriages are also encouraged in the Bahá'í teachings, which stress the essential oneness of the human race.

Parental permission for marriage is obligatory. Once it is obtained, the marriage takes place, requiring only the simplest of ceremonies. In the presence of two witnesses designated by the local Bahá'í governing council, the couple recites the following verse: "We will all, verily, abide by the will of God." For Bahá'ís, that simple commitment to live by God's will implies all of the commitments associated with marriage, including the promise to love, honour and cherish.

Beyond these simple requirements, Bahá'ís are free to arrange their own marriage celebration.



The signing of the marriage certificate at a Bahá'í wedding in the presence of Mr Kuek Yi Hsing the Singapore Bahá'í Marriage Solemnizer (2<sup>nd</sup> from right).



## Singapore Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS)

*The sanctified souls should ponder and meditate in their hearts regarding the methods of teaching. From the texts of the wondrous, heavenly Scriptures they should memorize phrases and passages bearing on various instances, so that in the course of their speech they may recite divine verses whenever the occasion demandeth it, in as much as these holy verses are the most potent elixir, the greatest and mightiest talisman. So potent is their influence that the hearer will have no cause for vacillation.*

### Bahá'u'lláh

The ABS is a committee of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore and was set up in April 1996. It organises an annual conference at which invited speakers deliver talks on aspects of the Bahá'í Faith and Comparative Religion.

These talks then form the basis for a series of papers which are collected into the Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review. This journal promotes religious and cultural harmony and provides a forum to discuss how religion might be applied to solve contemporary problems. Thus far four volumes have been published, on such topics as unity of religions, the soul and the after-life, and challenges for the new millennium.



Four volumes of the Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review

## The Goal of the Bahá'í Faith

*"The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."*

**Bahá'u'lláh**

The driving force behind the civilizing of human nature, Bahá'u'lláh asserts, has been successive interventions of the Divine in history. It has been through this influence that the innate moral and spiritual faculties of humanity have been gradually developed and the advance of civilization made possible. Associated with the missions of such transcendent figures as Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Jesus, Muhammad, and Guru Nanak, the phenomenon is an ever-recurring one; it is without beginning or end because it is fundamental to the evolutionary order itself.

Although nurtured by the process, humanity has never understood it. Instead, people have constructed around each episode in their spiritual experience a separate religious system. Throughout history the religious impulse has been hobbled by the resulting contradictions and bitter conflicts.

Bahá'u'lláh compares the maturation of the human race as a whole to the experience of its individual members who struggle, successively, through the stages of infancy, childhood and adolescence. Today, humanity has entered on its collective coming-of-age, endowed with the capacity to see the entire panorama of its development as a single process. The challenge of maturity is to accept that we are one people, to free ourselves from the limited identities and creeds of the past, and to build together the foundations of global civilization.

The vital contribution which the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh make to Religion is the development of spiritual truth from the area of the individual conscience to embrace the area of human and social relations as a whole. Thus, wherever Bahá'í communities exist, exists also a true cross-section of the human race united in conscience and united in purpose.

Hence, to Bahá'ís, both for themselves individually, as well as for the collective development of humanity, the 'purpose for being' has a single and identical goal – WORLD UNITY, achievable only through the emergence of an ethically developed race conscious and convinced of its intrinsic spirituality

and dedicated to the full realization on the material plane of the all-too-evident fact which our scientific and technological achievements have irrefutably forced upon us mentally – a fact emphatically proclaimed 150 years ago by Bahá'u'lláh – that the earth is a single home and all humanity one family.

In the words of the late Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith:

**The unity of the human race as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh implies the establishment of a world federal system ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources. Blending together the ideals of both the East and the West. Liberated from the curse of war and its miseries. A system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and its allegiance to one common Revelation. Such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life is moving.**

Whatever be their professions, in whatever climes they labour, their one over-riding calling — the prime directive — the achievement of the **unity of the human race**, is the vision that animates and energizes every Bahá'í, and to which all peoples are lovingly invited to pledge their allegiance.

The year 2000 marks the golden anniversary of the arrival of the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore. This commemorative book documents the history, achievements and contributions of the Bahá'í community during those fifty years. Among these have been the championing of women's rights, fostering inter-faith cooperation and understanding, promoting an environmental ethic and advancing moral education for children. The foundation of Bahá'í belief is in the unity of God, of religion and of humanity and it is this that propels Bahá'ís to work for the greater good of society wherever they may reside.