



ONE COUNTRY

"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" – Bahá'u'lláh

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Newsletter of the Bahá'í
International Community
October–December 1999
Volume 11, Issue 3



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photo by Akia Teschner

African youth perform at the closing ceremony of the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions.

CAPE TOWN, South Africa — Without doubt, one of the highlights for religious leaders gathered here for the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions was a speech by a secular political leader: former South African President Nelson Mandela.

Addressing the thousands of representatives gathered from the world's major faith groups, the 81-year-old former political prisoner said that religious institutions played a major role in bringing about the end of apartheid in South Africa.

"Without the Church and religious institutions, I would never be here today," said President Mandela, explaining that it was Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Jewish religious groups that were instrumental in providing him and other young blacks with an education — and later in giving comfort to political prisoners and their families.

"I appreciate the importance of religion," he said on 5 December 1999. "You have to have been in a South African jail under apartheid where you could see the cruelty of human beings to each other in its naked form. Again, religious institutions and their leaders gave us hope that one day we could return."

President Mandela went on to say that "religion will have a crucial role to play in guiding and inspiring humanity to meet the enormous challenges we face" in the next century.

In a few short lines, President Mandela summed up one of the major themes of this gathering: that religions, especially when they work together, can and must play a critical role in solving the problems humanity faces.

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is published quarterly by the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community, an international non-governmental organization which encompasses and represents the worldwide membership of the Bahá'í Faith.

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ISSN 1018-9300

Printed on recycled paper ♻️

The invisible new movement

Rapid change is among the hallmarks of our modern era. In the last decade alone, the development of the internet, the end of the Cold War, and the acceleration of globalization have transformed our world.

Unnoticed against this backdrop may well be one of the greatest and, ultimately, most paradigm-shattering changes of all: the dramatic coming together of the world's religions and the development of a worldwide interfaith movement for social progress.

Although this movement is in many respects still in its infancy and will no doubt undergo many tests and trials, the distance it has traveled already is remarkable, given the world's long history of religious division and rivalry.

For thousands of years, religious differences were more often the cause of war than peace. Even today, many of the 50 mostly small-scale wars still boiling around the world have roots in religious strife.

All the more remarkable, then, that religious leaders at the highest levels have begun not only to meet and "dialogue," but have managed to produce consensus documents that set out common positions on significant social, economic and moral issues.

In this issue of ONE COUNTRY, we report on two such meetings and their output — the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions (PWR) and its final document "A Call to Our Guiding Institutions," and the second high-level meeting of the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) and its remarkable statement "Poverty and Development: An Interfaith Perspective."

As Thomas Lachs, a representative of the Reform Jewish Community to the WFDD, put it: "I feel it is sensational, that so many of the leaders of the world's faiths can get together and issue a common document. Don't forget that the normal relationship between religions over the centuries has been war."

A careful reading of the Parliament's "Call" and the WFDD's "Perspective" tells much about the directions of this new movement and its implications. Both documents speak of the interdependence of the world's peoples. The Perspective views "the whole of humankind as a family," and the Call

emphasizes the need for "robust cooperation within the human family" and an ethic of "world citizenship."

Both documents also underscore the commonality of moral virtues and their role in contributing to a lasting solution to global social problems.

"No society can be truly developed until the people within it have made their own the attributes which are commonly known as 'virtues,'" states the Perspective. "These include trust, solidarity, altruism, companionship, honesty, respect for others, tolerance, forgiveness and mercy."

The Call speaks of the "strength" of such values, noting that they are "held in common by the world's religious and spiritual communities."

The two documents emphasize and underscore the social principles that have become the hallmarks of progressive thought in our age. Both documents emphasize the need for women's equality and the full implementation of "universal human rights." They stress the importance of recognizing and tolerating diversity, the necessity of promoting sustainable development, and the identification of justice as a prerequisite for peace. They both call for urgent action to eradicate poverty.

Taken together, these precepts constitute a new global ethic — a term used at the Parliament to describe the set of values religionists are striving to promote.

At first glance, agreement on all of these ideas might not seem new. Of late, we have become used to hearing progressive thinkers and activists promoting such values and ideals. Historically speaking, however, the world's religious communities have not always upheld these principles in practice; indeed, religious leaders through the ages have often drawn opposite interpretations from their scriptures.

So the emergence of agreement on these values and ideals from interfaith consultations is of enormous significance.

In the first place, the theological meaning is tremendous. By implication, agreement on fundamental values suggests that God is one and His reflection in the human



United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, second from right, was among the featured panelists at a discussion entitled "Challenges and Hopes for Freedom of Religion or Belief in the New Millennium," which was held 5 November 1999 at the UN headquarters in New York. Also participating were, left to right: William Vendley, Secretary-General of the World Conference on Religion and Peace; David Little, Professor of the Practice of Religion, Ethnicity, and International Conflict at Harvard University; Janis Bjorn Kanavin, Human Rights Ambassador of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Anwarul K. Chowdhury, the Permanent Representative of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to the UN; Ms. Robinson; and Nikoo Mahboubian, a Bahá'í International Community representative to the UN, who chaired the discussion as president of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief. For a full report, see the ONE COUNTRY website at www.onecountry.org.

spirit is universally manifest. For, surely, if there were more than one God, then one would expect instead the emergence of a multiplicity of definitions of good and evil.

In other words, recognition of fundamental and universal spiritual values is philosophically synonymous with recognition of the oneness of God. Religious scholars will no doubt be forced increasingly to ponder this point.

More important to the secular world, however, is this observation: If the world's religious communities have essentially agreed that certain progressive ideals and moral virtues are universal and represent the definition of "good," such an agreement gives a huge moral impulse to these ideals.

The global ethic identified in these documents in many ways echoes the social principles that have emerged from the major United Nations conferences of this decade, as well as parallel statements and plans by secular civil society. Yet no one could argue that anyone — the UN, governments, or civil society at large — has yet fully implemented these principles anywhere.

Religion has a long acknowledged and special role in promoting and instilling values — and so it is especially meaningful that the world's religious communities are now coming together around the promotion of this new global ethic, which, in the face of pervasive materialism and deep-rooted prejudices, still has detractors and opponents in many quarters.

Religious belief and the individual quest to understand spiritual reality lie at the foundation of human motivation and social transformation for the majority of the world's peoples, who are religious believers.

Although interfaith organizations like the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions and the World Faiths Development Dialogue are usually careful to avoid any specific recognition of religious unity, the degree to which the world's religions have in these recent documents identified a commonality of purpose and values suggests an underlying process of convergence that goes beyond simple notions of tolerance and mutual respect.

In the long run, such a convergence of ideals and values — not to mention teachings and spiritual vision — has the capacity to revitalize the role of religion in world affairs, returning it to its rightful place as one of the guiding instruments for human progress.

"The central purpose of the divine religions is the establishment of peace and unity among mankind," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the early part of the twentieth century. "The foundations of all the divine religions are peace and agreement, but misunderstandings and ignorance have developed. If these are caused to disappear, you will see that all the religious agencies will work for peace and promulgate the oneness of humankind. For the foundation of all is reality, and reality is not multiple or divisible." *

In Atlanta, basketball helps get youth off the streets and into their studies

Thomas Robinson, center, holding the basketball, with a group of STAR program participants at a recent basketball practice session at the Bahá'í Unity Center.



The Bahá'í Unity Center offers a variety of programs – from youth basketball to computer classes – aimed at empowering and uplifting African Americans and refugee and immigrant families.

DEKALB COUNTY, Georgia, USA – After practice, coach Thomas Robinson gathers his dozen or so school-age basketball players in a circle on the polished wooden court floor and gives them a quick pep talk.

Unlike typical coach-to-player motivational speeches, however, Mr. Robinson focuses not on their talents as a team or their handling of the ball but rather on their willingness to do academic work.

"Is there anyone who feels uncomfortable about studying?" he asks, receiving a collective "no" back from the group.

"Why?" he asks again, looking around with intensity.

"We don't want to be stupid," responds one young player.

The exchange reflects the unusual nature of the program, which is run by Mr. Robinson and his wife, Cheryl, at the Bahá'í Unity Center here on the outskirts of met-

ropolitan Atlanta in southern DeKalb County. The STAR program, as it is called, requires its athletes to maintain a minimum median-level grade average in school. Otherwise, they are not allowed to play. And for many of the mostly African American students in this predominantly black neighborhood, basketball is a much cherished activity.

"Most youth athletic programs — and this isn't to knock them — are just about basketball," said Mr. Robinson, a 34-year-old African American lawyer, explaining that the STAR program not only requires good grades but also provides special after-school tutorial sessions. "So as an athletic institution, we function differently and, we hope, can be a model for other youth programs."

The same goal, it could be said, applies to most of the programs offered at the Bahá'í Unity Center, which include a Friday night basketball game/group dialogue session for

older youth, a computer class for adults, and training in public speaking for youth and adults. All of these programs are aimed at empowering and uplifting African Americans. Also connected with the Center is a nationally recognized local outreach program serving refugee and immigrant families in DeKalb's northern region.

Founded four years ago in response to local concerns at evidence of rising violence, health problems and drug abuse among area young people, the Center seeks through such programs to address core issues facing young people and their families in a fragmented society where many families lack direction and young people are drifting into negative behavior.

"We have identified needs in this general community, needs that include training in conflict resolution, skills training, parenting training and virtues training," said Fred Ming, a director of the Family Unity Institute, a Bahá'í-run non-profit organization which sponsors the various outreach programs offered at the Center. "There is a lot of capacity out there in this community, but it is not connected. We want the Family Unity Institute and its programs to be a unity force, consolidating the capacity for the benefit of all."

Diversity in DeKalb

DeKalb County has the distinction of being the most diverse county in the state of Georgia. An influx of refugees from Eastern Europe and Asia, as well as new migrants from Hispanic regions, has raised the non-English speaking population to more than 10 percent of the county's roughly 600,000 people, who are almost evenly divided between blacks and whites.

Yet these diverse populations are largely separate, living throughout the county in neighborhoods that have become defined primarily by race. In the southern part, for example, more than 70 percent of the population is black, according to the Atlanta Regional Commission. In the northern part, blacks compose less than 20 percent of the population — and some neighborhoods are nearly all white, with fewer than 7 percent blacks. (See map at upper right.)

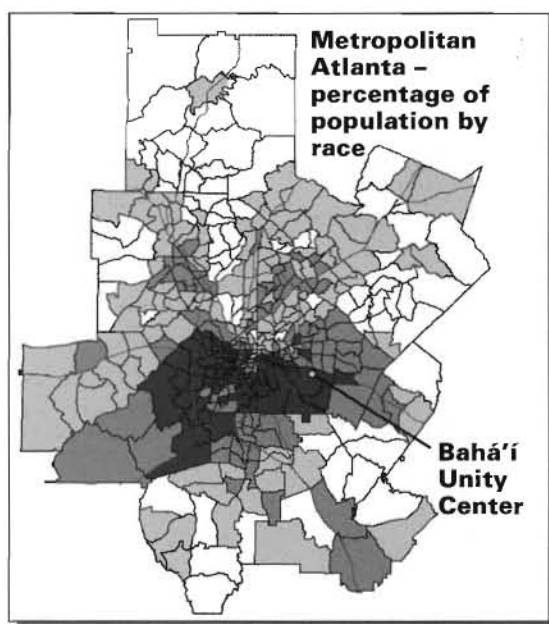
The neighborhood in which the Bahá'í Unity Center is located is predominantly black — and it is that population that the Family Unity Institute mainly serves. The area is not poor, but the high level of racial segregation has left many young

people here feeling bitter and isolated from the mainstream.

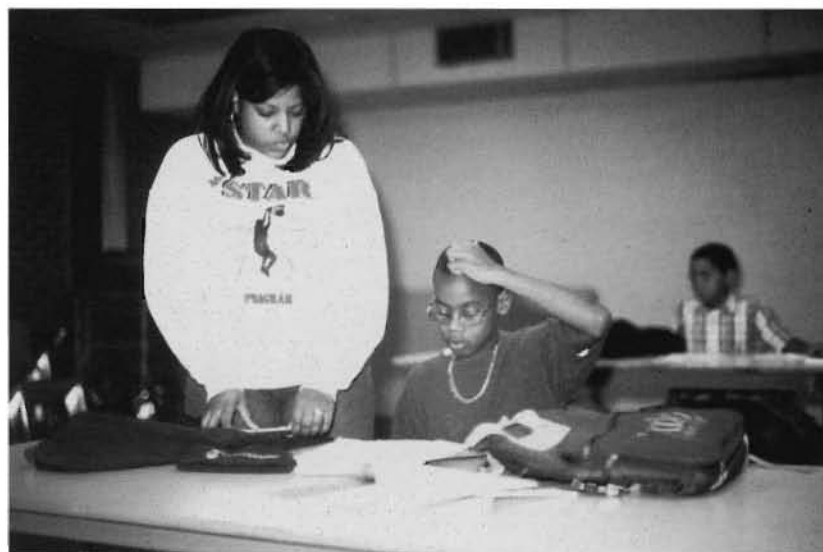
"This isn't a county where people have severe economic needs," said Sharon Akiele, chair of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of DeKalb County South, the local governing council for the Bahá'í community here. "But there are definitely declining social values when you have so many teenage parents, when you still have significant drug use, and you have one of the fastest growing populations for AIDS among young African American girls."

Statistical data for the county confirms the often sharp distinction between the races in terms of social indicators and problems. Scores on standardized academic tests are lower on the average for African Americans, for example, and in 1997, some 17 percent of the white women who had babies were unmarried, compared to 55 percent of African-American women.

"What those birth rate figures mean is that roughly half of the kids in the DeKalb school system are from a single parent, and probably from a relatively low income, poorly educated single parent," said Douglas Bachtel, a sociologist and demographic



The darkest regions indicate neighborhoods where more than 70 percent of the population is African American. In the lightest regions, less than 7 percent of the residents are African Americans. (Source: Atlanta Regional Commission, 1998.)



Cheryl Robinson works with Ervin Chapman during one of the required tutoring sessions sponsored by the STAR program. Ms. Robinson, a middle school teacher, is academic director of STAR.

The Center and the Institute take an overarching view of social problems and their causes. Bahá'ís view disunity, intolerance and self-centered materialism as the underlying causes of most social problems; they see remedies in the promotion of unity, tolerance and high moral standards.

specialist at the University of Georgia.

Concerned about these trends, the Southern DeKalb Spiritual Assembly, which represents the roughly 100 members of the Bahá'í Faith in the district, decided in the early 1990s that something must be done. "The Assembly decided that however small we are, and however limited our resources are, we would do something for the youth — and we would do it for all of DeKalb County," said Rosland Hurley, a member of the local Assembly and a lawyer.

At the same time, Mottahedeh Development Services (MDS), a non-profit agency established by the Bahá'í community of the United States of America to promote social and economic development worldwide, had established a domestic partnership program for grassroots projects in the USA. The two groups joined forces and the result was the purchase of a former Baptist church along with its recreational and classroom buildings — which became the Bahá'í Unity Center and is owned by the South DeKalb Assembly — and the establishment of the Family Unity Institute, which operates out of the Center under the joint sponsorship of the Assembly and MDS.

The approach of the Center and the Institute is to take an overarching view of social problems and their causes. Bahá'ís view disunity, intolerance and self-centered materialism as the underlying causes of most social problems; they see remedies in the promotion of unity, tolerance and high moral standards.

Within that framework, the programs of the Institute have arisen largely as members of the Bahá'í community have come forward

to volunteer their time and talents.

The STAR program, for example, had been established previously in another neighborhood by Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, who are both Bahá'ís. But the facilities of the Center and the framework of direction suggested by the Institute offered an ideal setting for their project, which has received modest local publicity and tremendous community support for its innovative approach at encouraging young African Americans to study harder and succeed academically. STAR is an acronym that stands for "scholarship, teamwork, ambition and respect."

Among young people here, working hard in school is not something that is always encouraged by peers; winning at basketball is. The program capitalizes on that second ambition by requiring attendance at tutorial session for students to be eligible to stay on the STAR basketball team. Tutorial sessions often incorporate basketball themes into their lessons. "For math studies, we might study Michael Jordan's shooting percentages, and then come out on the court and calculate our own shooting percentages," said Mr. Robinson.

Mr. Robinson, a Stanford University educated lawyer employed as a senior homicide prosecutor for neighboring Fulton County, said an important goal of the program is to keep its young participants off the streets and engaged in positive activities.

"Keeping these kids busy and in school is important," said Mr. Robinson. "Statistically, over 90 percent of youth involved in juvenile criminal justice system are school dropouts."

The program currently serves about 30 youth, aged 9 through 15. Parents say they are delighted with its double focus. "My boys love basketball," said Marie Bryant, who has two sons in the program. "They get up with the ball in their hands; they go to bed with the ball in their hands. So this motivates them to do good school work. For both of them, their grades have improved."

Umoja means unity

Another program at the Center serves older youth, aged 16 through 25, also using basketball as a motivating force. The issues addressed by the Umoja Soldiers, as the group is called, are somewhat more hardcore, ranging the gamut of concerns facing young black men in America, from police harassment to the attractions of illegal drugs.

"When we started the program, we



The Bahá'í Unity Center in DeKalb County, Georgia.

wanted to promote a positive atmosphere for youth in this area as an alternative to just hanging out in the streets," said Adrian Hooper, 23, one of the program's founders. "And over time we started to focus on the issues and problems faced by the African American community."

The Umoja Soldiers meet every Friday night at the Center, and from 30 to 60 young men regularly attend. After a game or two of recreational basketball, the group gathers in a circle of chairs to discuss the problems and challenges the members face.

The word "umojā" means "unity" in Swahili, and it is in the "unity circle," as the program's founders call the discussion session, that the dialogue is guided toward principles of tolerance and self-respect.

"The purpose of Umoja Soldiers is to empower young African American brothers mentally, spiritually, and physically in order that we can achieve self-determination and attain unity," said Anthony Outler, 22, another founder and currently the group's leader. "The whole thing behind it is that as a people, black men have been given false notions about who they are — like for instance the whole thing about always being 'cool' and 'down' and in the way violence and drugs and alcohol are glorified or the way women are treated."

Mr. Outler said the discussion leaders suggest alternatives, urging the young men to think for themselves and to recognize their spiritual nature. "We can't just preach and say, 'don't do drugs' — that wouldn't be accepted," said Mr. Hooper. "But the discussions are more like an investigation of truth, all with a common theme, which is just not to accept what everybody else is doing."

At the present time, the other programs at the Center — such as the computer class and the public speaking sessions (which are co-sponsored by Toastmasters International) — also mainly serve local African Americans.

There are exceptions to this focus. The Institute also runs an outreach program entitled "Healthy Multi-Cultural Families" that serves Asian and Hispanic families in and around Chamblee, a city in the northern part of DeKalb County. Chamblee has recently seen a large influx of refugees and immigrants and many are deficient in English language skills. The program provides an after school tutorial for children whose poor English might otherwise retard their progress through school.

The program, which won national rec-



ognition in the form of a Martin Luther King Day of Service grant for \$5,000 from the National Service Corporation in 1998, also aims to prevent injury and violence in the families it serves by providing health education and working to strengthen family bonds and uplift the status of women.

"We have found through informal interviews that many new immigrants are experiencing family violence and that women are often targets of abuse," said Carole Miller, director of domestic programs at Mottahedeh Development Services. "The primary prevention method has been to promote the development of bonds of trust, love and respect in youth and their families, through education and health-related activities for the entire family."

More than 60 families have been served by the Healthy Families program.

In another area of endeavor, the Institute has twice sponsored interfaith conferences with the idea of bringing together the various ethnic and religious groups that inhabit the county.

In the future, the Center and Institute hope to reach out increasingly to the wider community in DeKalb county.

"There are a lot of organizations that address the problems facing families and children, but there are not a lot of organizations here addressing them from a perspective of unifying diverse groups," said Ms. Hurley of the Bahá'í Assembly. "We look at this community as one, not as a bunch of separate groups. And it is our perspective that the social ills facing us require that we all come together." *

Anthony Outler, center, and Adrian Hooper, at right, founded the Umoja Soldiers, a discussion group for young adults that addresses real world issues ranging from drugs to police harassment. At left is Vicki Muhammad, who lives near the Center.

"When we started the program, we wanted to promote a positive atmosphere for youth in this area as an alternative to just hanging out in the streets."

— Adrian Hooper, co-founder Umoja Soldiers

1999 Parliament of the World's Religions offers a chance for dialogue and action

Parliament, continued from page one

Among other things, the Parliament offered up a blueprint for religious and secular partnership in addressing global challenges in the new millennium.

Held here 1–8 December 1999, the Parliament drew more than 7,000 participants from some 90 countries. Coming six years after the last Parliament, held in Chicago in 1993 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the famous 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, the South African event offered a glimpse of some of the current directions in the worldwide interfaith movement — which by all accounts is growing and gaining strength and acceptance.

"We're convinced that the international interreligious movement is one of the most important features of the modern world," said Jim Kenney, international director of the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR), co-sponsor of the event, along with the Parliament of the World's Religions, South Africa (PWRSA).

"Our motivation in holding the Parliament comes from the fact that the world is shrinking and that diversity is more and

more apparent," said Mr. Kenney. "Twenty years ago, a Westerner might never have encountered a Buddhist or a Bahá'í or a Muslim or a Hindu. Now, in many places, the followers of all of these traditions live adjacent to each other."

Kenney said that the Parliament was intended not only to increase and improve the dialogue among faith groups but to take them to the next level of involvement: joint common actions.

To this end, the Parliament unveiled two new efforts: a major interfaith consensus document, "A Call to Our Guiding Institutions," and a listing of interreligious projects, announced under the heading of "Gifts of Service to the World."

The "Call" offers a blueprint for religious and secular partnership in addressing global challenges in the new millennium.

"We find ourselves at a moment when people everywhere are coming to recognize that the world is a global village," says the Call, which touches on a wide range of issues, from sustainable development to global governance, from Third World debt relief to media ethics.

"Unique to this moment is the possibility of a new level of creative engagement between the institutions of religion and spirituality and the other powerful institutions that influence the character and course of human society," the Call continues. "What is needed now is a persuasive invitation to our guiding institutions to build new, reliable, and more imaginative partnerships toward the shaping of a better world."

The listing of "Gifts of Service" represents the beginning of such "joint common actions" in the field of interreligious and religious/secular cooperation. Presented to the Parliament in the form of a booklet, it details some 250 projects that reflect a "commitment to interreligious convergence."

"To me, this is very exciting — that we are starting to see common actions and co-operative projects across religions," said Howard Sulkin, chairman of the CPWR. "In the past, that was heard of much less."



South Africa's interreligious community has long been involved in the fight for justice in South Africa. Representatives of various religions met with then President Nelson Mandela at his official residence on 12 June 1999 to discuss the efforts of religious communities in ensuring free and fair elections. Shown left to right are: Lester Hoffman, representing Judaism; the Rev. Mxolisi Mpambani, an Anglican priest; Amy Seidel Marks, of the Bahá'í community; President Mandela; Anglican Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane of Cape Town; and Imam Rashied Omar, of the Islamic community.

The Parliament opened with a colorful procession of religious leaders and believers through the streets of Cape Town. However, as several thousand African indigenous religionists, Bahá'ís, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and others wound their way through this diverse city, they were at times heckled by fundamentalist Muslim and Christian groups that opposed the Parliament — a reflection of the challenges that surround interfaith dialogue.

Protests met with tolerance

Yet the protests were met largely with smiles of tolerance. "The examples of protest were minimal compared to the overall sense of unity that pervaded the eight days," said Louise Todd Cope, founder of Cloak the Earth, a USA-based interfaith organization.

The daily program of the Parliament began with morning prayers and meditations, followed by numerous workshops and talks, and, in the evening, plenary sessions and artistic performances. Scholars, activists and religious leaders addressed topics ranging from the basic teachings of world religions to an exploration of faith-inspired solutions to world problems.

"Much time and energy was devoted to discussing practical problems such as poverty and discrimination, social injustice and the stifling of ancient traditions, environmental pollution and global ethics, economic exploitation and health issues," said Varadaraja V. Raman, Professor Emeritus of Physics and Humanities at the Rochester Institute of Technology in the USA and a representative of the Zygon Center for Science and Religion. "Thus, for example, in one session a speaker expounded on the human rights violation suffered by millions of untouchables in India, while in another, an eminent scholar interviewed some Native American elders on how their religions and cultures have been marginalized in modern America."

Viewed from a distance, the crowd of participants offered an ocean of color. Hindus adorned in saffron robes sat with Christian priests dressed in black robes with white collars. Moslem clerics attired in all-white shirts and trousers walked with Buddhists draped only in yellow cotton. Women of all colors dressed in brightly colored silk saris chatted with men and women dressed in business suits. Always present were Africans,



often wearing traditional clothing.

During the final three days, an Assembly of some 400 religious and spiritual leaders gathered for consultations and to make further commitments to joint common action. Included in the Assembly meeting were secular leaders from business, agriculture, academia, the media and international organizations, such as the World Bank.

The closing ceremony featured a short speech by the Dalai Lama, leader of the Tibetan Buddhists. He said he was encouraged that so many faiths could convene and honor each other's religions and expressed the hope that such meetings would result in concrete social action.

Long heritage

The 1999 Parliament builds on the heritage of the first World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, which brought together several hundred scholars, theologians and religious leaders, including representatives of Eastern religions. It is widely viewed as the dawn of interfaith dialogue.

The Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions was established after a highly successful 1993 centenary of that event, called the Parliament of the World's Religions, drew more than 10,000 participants to Chicago. Among the major products of the 1993 Parliament was a document called "Towards a Global Ethic," a statement of global ethics as defined by the world's major religions.

Council officials said they chose South Africa for the 1999 Parliament because of the role that religion and spirituality played in the struggle against apartheid. "We be-

Parliament, continued on page 15

More than 100 Bahá'ís attended the Parliament and many were integrally involved in its organization and operation. Shown above are some Bahá'ís marching in the opening day procession through Cape Town, under a banner that reads: "So powerful is the light of unity that it can illumine the whole earth."

More information on the Parliament of the World's Religions, including the text of "A Call to Our Guiding Institutions," can be found at: www.onecountry.org

Second summit between World Bank and world religions focuses on projects

Religious leaders gathered with World Bank President James Wolfensohn, bottom row, fourth from left, in Washington in November 1999 for a second summit meeting of the World Faiths Development Dialogue.



WASHINGTON — Some twenty-one months after their ground-breaking summit at Lambeth Palace in London, representatives of the world's major religions and top World Bank officials gathered here in November to continue their high-level "Dialogue" on how they can work together to more effectively overcome global poverty.

Participants said the one-day meeting of the group, which is now called the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), was marked by a warm atmosphere, a high degree of enthusiasm by all parties, and a great sense that the Bank and the religions were moving towards greater understanding of — and joint activities on — the challenges of world development.

Participants received reports on newly launched interfaith development efforts in Ethiopia and Tanzania, offering a glimpse of the kinds of future projects that are expected from the Dialogue's processes.

"The commitment to improving the lives of the poor found among those at the conference enables the bridging of huge cultural and theological divides," said World Bank president James Wolfensohn and Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey in a joint final statement. "It is crucial to try to replicate this in many practical country settings, and the signs are that is already beginning to happen."

Entitled "Ways Ahead for the Dialogue," the meeting was held on 11 November 1999 at the World Bank headquarters here and, like the Lambeth Palace event in February

1998, was co-hosted by Mr. Wolfensohn and Dr. Carey.

Other participants included many of the same high-level religious representatives who were present at Lambeth meeting, including His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan and His Highness the Aga Khan, representing Islam; Bishop Diarmuid Martin of the Vatican, representing the Catholic Church; Rabbis Rene Sirat and Arthur Hertzberg, representing Judaism; Nambaryan Enkhbayar and Sulak Sivaraksa, representing Buddhism; Swami Vibudhesha Teertha and Acharya Shrivatsa Goswami, representing Hinduism; Sri Singh Sahib Manjit Singh, representing Sikhism; and Dr. L. M. Singvhi, representing Jainism. Lawrence Arturo represented the Bahá'í Faith.

Also joining the Dialogue in Washington was Michel Camdessus, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although Mr. Camdessus has indicated that he will resign from the IMF in mid-February 2000, he reportedly expressed "enthusiasm" for the continuing participation of the IMF in the Dialogue.

Dialogue to continue

The group reached several agreements. First, it was decided unanimously that the Dialogue "remains as timely and important as ever," and should continue for at least the next five years and that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) should be a partner in the process. Second, it was agreed that

Participants received reports on newly launched interfaith development efforts in Ethiopia and Tanzania, offering a glimpse of the kinds of future projects that are expected from the Dialogue's processes.

the group should hold another high-level meeting in two years to assess progress. In the interim, a team of independent consultants will be called in to make recommendations about the ongoing structure and administration of the Dialogue.

As noted, the group will also seek to bring religious leaders and secular development thinkers together at the local and national levels. In particular, the WFDD hopes to encourage more grassroots and national-level interfaith development projects and collaborations like those in Ethiopia and Tanzania, said Wendy Tyndale, the coordinator of the WFDD.

In Ethiopia, Muslims and Christians have formed an interfaith body to make a contribution to the planning of a very large multi-donor program on food security.

"The idea is for faith-based organizations working in development to visit each others' projects," said Ms. Tyndale, "and to hold some regional workshops to discuss, among themselves, how the religious organizations are contributing to food security in Ethiopia, and what, if any, is the special contribution they make as religious organizations, rather than as secular NGOs. Then when they have gathered up this information, they will draw conclusions and come up with some recommendations to the multi-donor program."

A presentation on the effort in Tanzania, where Hindu, Muslim and Christian organizations are cooperating to identify key issues in the delivery of health and social services, was made by Dr. Wilson Mtebe, the General Secretary of the Christian Council of Churches in Tanzania. As with the Ethiopian project, the project will draw up an inventory of what faith-based organizations are doing in the health field, in order to make an input into the national health program, which is funded in part by the World Bank.

A common statement

Also formally presented at the Washington meeting was the Dialogue's first major publication, entitled "Poverty and Development: An Interfaith Perspective." The result of extensive consultations by members of the Dialogue, the "Perspective" presents a powerful faith-based vision of economic development based on the idea that "there can be no meaningful separation between the social, economic, political, environmental, cultural and spiritual dimensions of life."

Participants said that these activities

demonstrate the increasing willingness of the religions to work together and a serious commitment to the process of dialogue by both the religions and the Bank.

"I feel it is sensational, that so many of the leaders of the world's faiths can get together and issue a common document [like the Interfaith Perspective]," said Thomas Lachs, a representative of the Reform Jewish community to the Dialogue. "Don't forget that the normal relationship between religions over the centuries has been war."

For the Bank's part, Mr. Wolfensohn told the group that he hopes to incorporate a recognition of the importance of spiritual and moral values into all aspects of the Bank's work. Mr. Wolfensohn suggested that the failure of the efforts made so far to overcome poverty was the hitherto disconnected and project-oriented approach of all involved, from the faith-based organizations to the World Bank and government agencies. He described WFDD as a "modest attempt" to link faith communities with international institutions, according to a statement issued by the Bank. Mr. Wolfensohn said that religions have a leading role to play in the fight against corruption.

A warm atmosphere

Participants in Washington said these successes contributed to a warm atmosphere for this second major high-level meeting.

"Everyone noticed that it was a more relaxed atmosphere, both among the Bank and the faiths and among the faiths themselves," said Swami Amarananda of the Ramakrishna Mission, a representative of Hinduism to the Dialogue. "There seemed to be a great harmony, and above all a kind of enthusiasm has been created. Remember that nothing like this has happened before."

Participants also said that officials of the World Bank seemed much more comfortable discussing the spiritual aspects of development work.

"Both Mr. Wolfensohn and Mr. Camdessus spoke of spiritual values as being at the heart of development, and both spoke of God," said Mr. Arturo, the Bahá'í representative to the Dialogue. "Most of the discussions during the meeting centered around values. Indeed, it was remarkable to watch major religious figures from a diversity of faiths, and heads of major international institutions, profess their agreement on core concepts, principles and teachings found in the world's religions." *

"The commitment to improving the lives of the poor found among those at the conference enables the bridging of huge cultural and theological divides. It is crucial to try to replicate this in many practical country settings, and the signs are that is already beginning to happen."

**– Statement by
World Bank
president James
Wolfensohn and the
Archbishop of
Canterbury George
Carey**

More information on the World Faiths Development Dialogue, including the text of "Poverty and Development: An Interfaith Perspective," can be found at: www.onecountry.org

In Seoul, a global conference of NGOs focuses on forging deeper partnerships

SEOUL, Korea — Most of the major international gatherings of civil society in the 1990s have been organized around a specific issue, such as environment and development, the equality of women, or peace.

These meetings were usually held in connection with major United Nations conferences such as the Earth Summit or the Fourth World Conference on Women — with the exception of the 1998 Microcredit Summit and the 1999 Hague Appeal for Peace.

The 1999 Seoul International Conference of NGOs continues the trend of independent global NGO meetings and represents the first such major meeting dedicated primarily to the question of how NGOs themselves might become better organized and empowered on a global level to address the broad range of challenges confronting humanity.

As such, the Seoul Conference, which was organized by NGOs themselves without any specific connection to a UN event and held here 10–15 October 1999, offered an important snapshot of the vision and vitality of international civil society. The picture that developed was one of a diverse worldwide movement that is surprisingly unified in its concerns and plans for action.

“The Conference brought together different groups of different people from different parts of the world,” said Sudha Acharya, vice president of the Conference of NGOs, which was one of the sponsors of the event. “Yet there was a wonderful spirit of cooperation and unity.”

Drawing more than 10,000 participants representing some 1,400 NGOs from at least 107 countries, the Seoul Conference addressed 10 major themes in nearly 200 workshops and five major plenary sessions. Those themes re-examined the output of the major UN conferences of this decade; among the specific issues addressed were environment, gender equality, social and economic development, education for all, and human rights.

Yet, it was clear that the overarching concern of the event was the issue of how to better organize and empower NGOs so that global civil society can act in a concerted

way to address these problem areas.

This concern was reflected in the Conference’s documents, which included an opening “Vision Statement,” a “Millennium Declaration” and a “Draft Plan of Action.” All of these documents stress the interconnected nature of the challenges facing the world and the need for coordinated action.

“We begin the new Millennium facing grave and interconnected challenges,” states the Declaration, which was issued at the end of the Conference. “Yet, there are many reasons for hope. The last decades have witnessed the phenomenal growth of people’s movements, civil society organizations and NGOs committed to addressing these ills.

“Increasingly there is more shared awareness of what is at stake and what we need to do together,” the Declaration continued. “In this context, the Seoul Conference considered a number of interrelated themes, declared a shared vision for the 21st Century and agreed on concrete actions to make this vision a reality.”

Striving for a vision

The Conference was sponsored largely by the two main associations of NGOs granted status by the United Nations — the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) and the Executive Committee of NGOs associated with the Department of Public Information of the United Nations (the NGO/DPI Executive Committee) — along with a Korean partner, the Global Cooperation Society International (GCS), a Seoul-based NGO with chapters in 35 countries. The conference was hosted by Kyung Hee University of Seoul and held at the Olympic Park, site of the 1988 Olympic games.

The stated goals of the meeting were to “explore and monitor” implementation of the global action plans produced by the major UN conferences of the decade, to “strengthen NGO partnerships with the UN,” and to “enhance communication and collaboration” among NGOs worldwide.

The 1999 Seoul International Conference of NGOs represents the first major NGO meeting dedicated primarily to the question of how NGOs themselves might become better organized and empowered on a global level to address the broad range of challenges confronting humanity.

Both in the Conference's plenaries and in numerous workshops, much was said about the critical importance of NGOs and civil society in the coming millennium, especially in view of humanity's increasing interdependence. "NGOs are now becoming absolutely necessary for the rights, safety and happiness of all people," said Korean President Kim Dae-jung. "They are no less indispensable than the United Nations and national governments."

Young Seek Choue, president of the co-sponsoring GCS, urged NGOs to increase international collaboration and forge a "global common society" dedicated to reaching effective solutions to international problems for a "single global family."

"Globalization has made the world a 'borderless society'," said Dr. Choue. "However, we are still witnessing a number of conflicts and disputes arising among countries... To counter and overcome such anti-democratic and anachronistic inclinations of nation-states, NGOs with transnational influence must assume an active role."

Human rights links

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson told the gathering that NGOs played a key role in helping her office to protect and promote human rights, acting not only as "direct witnesses" to human rights violations, but also bringing such violations to light and therefore "shaming" governments into taking action to protect and promote human rights.

"Our work in the High Commission would be impossible without close contact with NGOs," said Ms. Robinson. "NGOs should concentrate on deepening the impact and widening the circle."

Ms. Robinson also said that progress in other issue areas, from peace to women's advancement to health, is intimately linked to human rights — a view that was echoed in other speeches and workshops.

"There was a connection throughout the conference to human rights themes, based on the idea that every other issue ultimately comes down to a matter of human rights" said Ronald Brinn, the UN representative of the International Association against Drug Abuse and Drug Trafficking, a Moscow-based NGO. "People pointed out that health is a human right, clean water is a human right and so on."

United Nations agencies that work regularly with NGOs expressed keen interest in



the Conference. According to the program, more than 60 representatives of various UN agencies were involved in the Conference.

"The presence of so many representatives of international organizations of the UN system demonstrates that new partnerships are being developed," said Stan Bernstein, a senior research advisor with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). "This meeting reaffirms the growing recognition of the importance of NGOs."

The Seoul Conference also produced a draft Plan of Action, tentatively titled "An Agenda for Peace, Security and Development in the 21st Century," which offers up a list of endorsements, recommendations and action steps aimed fulfilling the promise of the UN global conferences of the 1990s.

The Agenda remains a draft document and has been posted at the CONGO website [www.conferenceofngos.org]. The plan is to have NGOs around the world continue to comment on the Agenda and then to present it in final form at the Millennium Forum in May 2000. [See related story page 14.]

Among other items, the Agenda calls for the establishment of a "standing UN Peace force"; more peace education programs in schools and universities; wider recognition that human rights are "universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated"; a mobilization of "social movements and civil society for the promotion and protection of human rights"; inclusion by governments and the UN of women in conflict resolution processes; and steps to "ensure that global and regional economic institutions are held accountable to international human rights principles and standards." *

— with reporting by Beth Bowen

The Bahá'í community of South Korea was deeply involved in the Seoul Conference, sponsoring a workshop entitled "New Millennium and New Civilization" and an exhibition booth. More than 20 Bahá'ís from around the world attended. Shown here at the Bahá'í booth are three members of the Korean Bahá'í community, left to right: Danton Ford, Kang Sung-ho, and Firaydun Mithaq. Mr. Kang also served as program director of the Conference.

Expanded coverage of the 1999 Seoul International Conference of NGOs, including the text of the declaration and plan of action, can be found at the ONE COUNTRY website: www.onecountry.org

The Millennium Forum refines its program and opens on-line registration

UNITED NATIONS — A tentative program and tighter criteria for registration were among the topics addressed at a meeting of the Millennium Forum Planning Consultative Council in December.

Scheduled for 22–26 May 2000 at United Nations headquarters in New York, the Millennium Forum will bring together representatives of civil society from all over the world to consult about the role of the United Nations in 21st Century. The Forum will also serve as an adjunct to the Millennium Summit of world leaders being organized by the UN for September 2000.

As proposed to the Planning Consultative Council on 14 December 1999, the format for the Forum aims for a high level of interaction among participants. Under this proposal, morning plenary sessions focusing on each of the six main themes of the Forum will feature short keynote presentations followed by active interchanges. In the afternoon, working group sessions will narrow the focus of the discussions, aiming to produce a final document for presentation to world leaders at the Millennium Summit.

The main themes of the Forum are: 1) peace, security and disarmament; 2) the eradication of poverty, including debt cancellation and social development; 3) human rights; 4) sustainable development and the environment; 5) the challenges of globalization; and 6) strengthening and democratizing the United Nations.

Also discussed was the need to tighten the criteria for participation in the Forum, due to the fact that the United Nations General Assembly Hall can only accommodate some 1,400 people.

“Although holding the Forum at the United Nations gives it the highest degree of credibility and impact, it also means we must limit the number of people who can physically attend the main Forum,” said Techeste Ahderom, co-chair of the Forum’s Executive Committee. “We hope to have satellite and on-line events that will facilitate participation at other venues. But we will have to strictly hold the line in New York.”

As a result, said Mr. Ahderom, the Executive Committee has established a working set of criteria for participation. Those criteria will seek to “create a gathering that truly represents the diversity, depth, and breadth of global civil society,” said Mr. Ahderom.

The Forum’s Executive Committee hopes to do this by assigning priority to participation by duly appointed representatives of non-governmental organizations and organs of civil society that have been the most active and/or have the most expertise in addressing the major themes of the Forum; that have democratic structures and/or most appropriately and genuinely represent major groups that have often been neglected or under-represented in the global arena (such as women, youth, workers, and indigenous peoples) and which meet the need for an equitable geographic representation of civil society.

To facilitate the selection process, a special application form that seeks to collect basic data about an organization’s size, structure and expertise has been designed. It is available on-line at the Forum’s website at <http://www.millenniumforum.org>. The Executive Committee is also working to distribute paper-based versions of the application form to major regional civil society networks and focal points.

To give regionally based selection committees enough time to process the applications, a tentative deadline of 1 March 2000 has been established for applications.

“Because of the low level of financial resources that are generally available to NGOs, we must rely largely on the Internet for our registration and communications processes,” said Mr. Ahderom. “Although this puts an extra burden on those organizations without Internet access, our hope is that brother and sister organizations around the world with computers and access will assist other NGOs and local organizations in applying, either by printing and distributing paper forms or helping them register on-line and also in terms of communicating news of the Forum.”

“Although holding the Forum at the United Nations gives it the highest degree of credibility and impact, it also means we must limit the number of people who can physically attend the main Forum.”

– Techeste Ahderom, co-chair, Millennium Forum

Full information about the Millennium Forum can be found at its website at: www.millenniumforum.org

Review: *Celebration: Congo Music*

Review, continued from back page

tively unknown young singer named Kabila, it is accompanied by a single acoustic guitar in the style of a traditional French ballad. The result is beautiful and moving.

Most of the songs, however, have a fast pace that carries the listener along with a driving rhythm. The melodies are catchy and bright, but never redundant. Instruments are a mix of Western and traditional, as in the delicate rumba *Ntoma Ya Nzambe*, which features three *likembes*, also known as “thumb pianos,” to create lead, rhythm and bass tracks.

The album was recorded and mixed in Kinshasa at Studio Aurore, a small recording house founded by Jason Sheper, a Canadian-born musician who acted as executive

producer on the album. It is distributed by Live Unity Productions, a Toronto-based production company, founded by Jack Lenz, a prominent producer, composer and artist in his own right. Live Unity also provided essential technical assistance to Studio Aurore, helping them choose and obtain modern recording equipment and also by offering the “loan” of a top recording engineer, Kevin Doyle.

“We are really trying to meld traditional African music with modern music in a way that makes it something that Western people would want to listen to, rather than a museum piece — and which at the same time makes traditional music accessible to young Congolese,” said Mr. Sheper, who also composed some of the songs and plays bass on many of them. “We also wanted to create a collection of styles that, in effect, travels around the world and at the same time celebrates the spirit of the Bahá’í Faith.” *

UN again expresses concern over human rights in Iran

UNITED NATIONS - For the 14th time in 15 years, the United Nations General Assembly has expressed “concern” over human rights violations in Iran, specifically mentioning the “unabated pattern of persecution” against Iran’s Bahá’í community.

By a vote of 61 to 47, the General Assembly on 17 December 1999 passed a resolution calling on the Islamic Republic of Iran to abide by international human rights covenants and “to ensure that all individuals within its territory” including “religious minorities,” “enjoy the rights enshrined in those instruments.”

The 17-paragraph resolution took note of the Iranian Government’s “efforts towards strengthening democracy” and promoting the “rule of law.” However, the resolution also called for a continuing examination of human

rights in Iran, “including the situation of minority groups, such as the Bahá’ís...”

In related news, the Bahá’í International Community learned on 14 December 1999 that the death sentences against two Bahá’ís in Iran are being commuted. According to reliable reports, the death sentence against Dhabí’u’llah Mahrami has been commuted to life imprisonment and the sentence against Musa Talibi is in the process of being commuted. Four Bahá’ís remain under death sentence in Iran.

The Community also learned in late December that three Bahá’ís, who had been arrested by the Iranian Government in the autumn of 1998 in connection with raids against the Bahá’í Institute of Higher Education, have been released. *

Parliament of the World’s Religions calls for action

Parliament, continued from page 9

lieve that there is a unique role that religion and spirituality plays in social transformation,” said Dirk Ficca, executive director of the Council. “It provides resources for the people to get a clear vision of where they might go, and an outline of the most peaceful and just way to get there.”

Once the decision was made to hold the 1999 Parliament in South Africa, much of the planning and implementation for the event was turned over to the Parliament of the World’s Religions, South Africa, an au-

tonomous interfaith organization. “The South African interreligious community, humble as it was, rose to the immense task of playing host to the Parliament,” said Amy Seidel Marks, co-chair of the PWRSA and a member of the South African Bahá’í community. “In truth, it can be said that the 1999 Parliament of the World’s Religions was achieved on the interreligious foundations built by the those who were key players in the struggle against apartheid.” *

— with reporting from South Africa
by Suzanne Bamford and Muhtadia Rice

Out of Africa: a global mix of musical styles

**Celebration:
Congo Music**

**Vision Arts and
Culture**

Kinshasa

In much of the Western world, religious music as a genre is quite separate from popular music. Whether on radio stations, in concert halls, or recorded albums, the two forms are rarely mixed.

In Africa, however, religious music is more often heard side by side with popular music — and is far more likely to be found on pop radio play lists.

In this context, the album *Celebration: Congo Music* belongs to this category, emerging as perhaps the strongest effort so far to compose and record African music inspired by the Bahá'í Faith.

The result is appealing to anyone interested in “world music,” a current trend in popular music that blends musical styles and cultural influences from around the globe and is a major element in many of the songs of today's top performers.

A collaborative effort involving about a dozen musicians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo — many of whom are Bahá'ís — and a group of Canadians who provided the technical expertise and equipment necessary to produce and distribute the album, *Celebration* features 13 songs that span a global mix of musical styles, from traditional French ballads to Caribbean reggae.

While the influences of everything from American country and western to rap are evident, the rhythm of the traditional Congolese rumba provides a unifying underpinning throughout the entire recording.

The languages of the songs include English, French, at least four different languages or dialects from the Congo itself, and some from Nigeria.

The lyrics draw on the history, teachings and holy writings of the Bahá'í Faith, presented as a “celebration” of its inspirational message of unity and oneness.

The result is a happy and uplifting album that almost continually surprises and delights listeners by its diversity, creativity and spirit.

Many of the songs draw on a wide range of styles and expressions even within themselves. Take *Le Desert de l'Ignorance*, for example, which takes the listener on a journey of styles that opens with the kind of

“pop fusion” one might hear on any of today's top-selling songs and moves on to an instrumental section that features Congolese and South African percussion and chants. That interlude is then overlaid with an American-style rap spoken in French. A female chorus later joins in and the song finishes with an almost symphonic crescendo. Although this description may read as if the song were a confused pastiche, it works well, drawing the listener into a powerful musical experience.

Le Desert was composed by Oscar Diyabanza, who was the artistic director for the National Ballet of Zaire for more than 20 years. Although not a Bahá'í himself, Mr. Diyabanza has written a song that speaks of wandering through the “desert of ignorance” until finding Bahá'u'lláh's message of “peace and love of all humankind.”

Other performers on *Celebration* include Pembe Lero, a percussionist and song writer who was a key figure in the collaboration



that led to the album, Marius Mof'Nene, a singer, guitarist and composer who performed for many years with OK JAZZ, one of Congo's premier bands, and André Zamambu, a singer with the Orchestra Sim Sim, one of Congo's most venerable groups.

At the other end of the musical spectrum from *Le Desert* is *Prière du Matin*, a prayer of Bahá'u'lláh set to music. Sung by a rela-

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***Celebration: Congo Music* can be ordered from Live Unity Productions, Toronto: www.liveunity.com**