

Faith Communities Today 2000 Report:

The Bahá'í Faith

By Mike McMullen

INTRODUCTION: Faith Communities Today (FACT) is the survey response data generated by the Cooperative Congregational Studies Project (CCSP) headed by Hartford Seminary. It is a joint venture of more than 40 US religious denominations and faith groups, including the Bahá'í Faith, to measure the importance and vitality of religious congregations and communities in our society. Surveys were to be sent to “key informants” in thousands of religious congregations throughout the country; for most groups, this would have been a member of the clergy. For Bahá'ís, the survey was directed to the secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly.

The Bahá'ís disseminated our survey through the mail to the approximately 1200 LSAs in the US. Respondents returned the survey by mailing it back to the Bahá'í National Center (327 responses). This represents a response rate of 28.4%. I had responsibility for getting the mailed responses entered into a computer data base.

Because of the way some of the questions were asked, I have below sometimes reported percentages, sometimes averages, and sometimes medians or modes. I do this because sometimes averages are misleading in that one or two large Bahá'í communities (who have large membership or large budgets, etc.) can artificially inflate the average. The median, on the other hand, states that half the respondents are below the median number, and half are above. The mode is also used instead of the average when reporting the answer category most frequently chosen by respondents.

The following data follow the order of the questions as printed on the questionnaire.

I) Community Identity and Worship

Community Identity

In this part of the questionnaire, key-informants were asked how well each of the following statements described the local Bahá'í community. In each case, I will report the combined “quite well” and “very well” categories (in other words, the percentage who responded favorably to the statements, rather than neutrally or negatively).

To the statement “our community feels like a close-knit family,” 58% said that “quite well” or “very well” described their local Bahá’í community. Half the respondents said “our community is spiritually vital and alive” (another 41% said this described their community “somewhat”), while almost two-thirds (62%) said “members are excited about the future of our community” and 57% said “our community has a clear sense of mission and purpose.” Nearly three-fourths (72%) of respondents said “our community’s worship services are spiritually uplifting.” One-third of respondents said “our community is working for social justice,” while half said “our community helps members deepen their relationship with God” and 41% said their community is a “moral beacon” in the community.

Almost 57% of respondents said that their local community is “trying to increase racial/ethnic/national diversity.” Nearly 9 out of 10 (89%) respondents said that their community “welcomes individual initiative.” Nearly two-thirds (62%) said that their community “deals openly with disagreements and conflicts.”

When asked to respond to the statement “new members are easily incorporated into the life of our community,” two-thirds (63%) agree favorably. Another two-thirds (67%) said “our community has developed a strong sense of Bahá’í identity for its members.”

Finally, two-thirds (67%) of respondents said that their community’s programs and activities are “well organized,” and 71% said their programs and activities “strengthen personal relationships among participants.”

Worship

Several questions on the survey were asked about frequency and style of worship. Most of the questions in this section had to be drastically modified, since the Bahá’ís were unique among the participating faith groups in that our 19-day calendar/worship cycle does not correspond to weekly Friday, Saturday or Sunday worship. Bahá’í worship takes place at what are known as 19-Day Feasts (or just Feasts) which happen on the first day of each Bahá’í month, once every 19 days.

When asked about frequency of Feast, 16% of communities indicated they sponsored between 12-18 Feasts per year, while 79% support all 19 Feasts in a year. Half (51%) of the local communities responding to the survey said they hold no joint Feasts with neighboring communities, while 15% said they held one joint Feast with nearby communities.

When asked if their community is divided up into more than one area for the purpose of holding Feast, nearly 10% said yes. On average, communities reported the following attendance figures:

Adults	14
Children	3
Youth	2

English is the most often used language in Feast, although of the 13% of communities reporting the use of additional languages, half (54%) use Spanish. Most often the additional language was Persian.

Communities report the following included as part of the community's devotional portion of the Feast (percentages combine the "always" and "often" categories):

Children's participation in readings	66%
Read Bahá'í writings in non-English languages	31%
Participants choose readings and/or prayers	28%
Use of incense or candles	18%
Use of visual projection equipment	8%
Silent prayer/meditation	5%
Readings from non-Bahá'í scripture	3%
Use of dance or drama	1%

Communities report the following included as part of the community's administrative portion of the Feast (percentages combine the "always" and "often" categories):

Discussion of National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) or Universal House of Justice (UHJ) messages	82%
Discussion of Local Spiritual Assembly (LSA) messages/concerns	77%
Time to discuss stories about teaching the Faith	53%
Closing prayer	52%
Opening prayer	44%
Topics for consultation provided by LSA	26%
Brief talks by Bahá'ís	16%

Communities report the following included as part of the community's Feast in general (percentages combine the "always" and "often" categories):

Any music at all	54%
Use of recorded music	52%
Soloists	8%
Singing without songbooks	8% (25% report both "sometimes" and "never")
Singing from songbooks	4%
Use of string or wind instruments	4%
Use of drums	1%
Use of electronic keyboard	1% (87% report "never")
Choirs	1% (84% report "never")
Use of piano	1% (70% report "never")
Use of electronic guitar	<1% (91% report "never")

When asked about the use of music at Feast, respondents answered:

50% said the amount of music decreased
 41% said the amount increased
 9% said the amount of music at Feast has stayed the same

53% said the diversity of music increased
 44% said the diversity decreased
 3% said the diversity of music used at Feast has stayed the same

When asked to rate the change in the last 5 years of the overall quality of the Feast, respondents indicated:

Has improved a little	54%
Has improved somewhat	30%
Is basically the same	21%
Has improved a great deal	17%
Community did not exist in 1995	4%
Gotten somewhat worse	3%
Gotten a little worse	3%
Gotten a great deal worse	2%

When asked if there had been any changes in Feast in the last five years, what has been significant to the life of the community, and respondents indicated:

Spirit of unity in community	55%
Addition of music	43%
Quality of consultation	43%
Quality of the devotions	41%

Communities report the following as being important sources of authority in the life of the community and as part of the community's Feast in general (percentages combine the "absolutely foundational" and "very important" categories):

Sacred scripture	99%
Pronouncements of NSA or UHJ	97%
The holy spirit	74%
Human reason	64%
Personal experience	51%
Historic examples of early believers	49%

By far, sacred scripture was listed by 84% of communities as the most important source of authority for worship.

Summary:

Respondents seem to indicate that most Bahá'ís are positive about their local community (it is “vital and alive” and they are excited about its future). Most local communities hold Feasts, and both adults and children participate actively. However, music is one of the weakest elements of Feast, although most respondents feel the quality of Feasts have improved. Consultation during the administrative portion of Feast tends to focus on NSA and Universal House of Justice messages, and on teaching activities.

II) History, Location and Building

The next part of the survey asked questions related to the history and physical location of the local community.

In the Bahá'í community, when asked the approximate year in which the respondent's LSA was first elected, the median year was 1976 (in other words, one-half of the communities were founded before 1976, and one-half were founded after 1976).

Respondents indicated the following in terms of the location of the Nineteen Day Feast:

Held in community members' homes	91%
Held in a community-owned Bahá'í Center	6%
Held in a rented space	3%

Of the 6% of communities who own their own Bahá'í Center, the median year in which it was purchased was 1995. Over 71% of respondents indicated that they did not share their building with another religious community. Of the 9% of communities who either own or rent space as a Bahá'í Center, respondents indicated the following about size of the building/space:

58% indicated that the parking space was “slightly” or “much” less than needed

52% indicated that the educational space was “slightly” or “much” less than needed

46% indicated that the worship space was “about right” (38% said it was “slightly” or “much” less than needed)

42% indicated that the fellowship space was “slightly” or “much” less than needed

When asked about the demographic characteristics of the local Bahá'í community, respondents indicated the following:

Community Located in:

Rural area	5%
Town less than 10,000	10%
City of population:	
10,000-49,999	38%
50,000-249,000	40%
250,000 +	8%

If in or around a city, is your community located in:

Older suburb	34%
Central City/Downtown	24%
Another area of city	23%
Newer suburb	19%

If in or around a city, is your community located in:

Residential area	76%
Mixed residential and commercial area	21%
Commercial or industrial area	3%

Summary:

Because Bahá'í communities tend to be small, the vast majority hold worship in members' homes. Only about 9% of local communities own or rent a space for a Bahá'í center (and about half of those communities with a center have had them only since 1995). Demographically, most Bahá'í communities are in small towns or cities, are in the suburbs, and are in residential areas.

III) Community Programs

The survey found that when looking at spiritual education in the community, respondents indicated:

60% of Bahá'í communities held regular deepenings/classes for adults (median 8 attendees)

42% of Bahá'í communities held regular children/youth deepenings (median 9 attendees)

Of those communities that indicated either adult OR children's classes were regularly held, over half were jointly supported or sponsored by another LSA.

In addition, respondents indicated the following number of meetings held in their communities:

Average of 2.5 Firesides per month (17.8 per year)
 Average of 2.5 deepenings per month (14.1 per year)
 Average of 2.1 prayer meetings per month (13.6 per year)
 Average of 1.1 training institutes per month (3 per year)

When asked what the community deepenings or institutes focused on, respondents indicated “yes” to the following at least one time in the past year:

Teaching the Faith	80%
Study of Bahá’í scripture	76%
Prayer/meditation	67%
Race unity	67%
Assembly development	66%
Equality of men/women	56%
Service to others	55%
Other social/contemporary issues	44%
Religious/theological study	43%
Youth/teen activities	42%
New believers programs	36%
Music or performing arts	29%
Spiritual Retreats	29%
Marriage or family enrichment	25%
Personal growth/self-help	23%
Recreation, fitness/exercise	16%
Singles	7%
Sports teams	4%

When asked how much the LSA has emphasized the following home or personal practices, respondents indicated “quite a bit” or “a great deal” to the following:

Personal prayer/devotion	48%
Fasting	41%
Displaying Bahá’í imagery	25%
Abstinence from alcohol/drugs	21%
Suspending work on Holy Days	17%
Family devotions	17%
Efforts to strengthen family/marriage	16%
Abstaining from premarital sex	15%
Holding family consultations	11%
Hosting family deepenings	10%
Vegetarianism	1%

When asked about the types of outreach to new or inactive Bahá'í in the last 12 months, respondents indicated “yes” to the following:

Phone calls/visits to seekers	78%
Stressing personal teaching efforts	78%
Focused efforts to identify relocated Bahá'ís	73%
Newspaper advertisements	69%
Public programs for non-Bahá'ís	69%
Specialized programs for non-Bahá'ís	59%
Radio or TV advertisements	42%
Systematic teaching campaign	30%
Direct mail promotion	15%
Door to door teaching	8%

When asked about the types of service the local Bahá'í offers to the wider community, respondents indicated “yes” either directly by the local community or in cooperation with another community or agency to the following:

Race Unity programs	66%
Clothing/thrift store	44%
Food pantry	42%
Cash assistance	41%
Litter removal	28%
Community organizing	26%
Tutoring/literacy programs	17%
Conflict resolution programs	14%
Other senior citizen programs	13%
Hospital/nursing home facilities	11%
Health education	9%
Elderly/emergency housing	9%
Counseling services	9%
Immigrant programs	7%
Prison outreach	6%
Day care/after school programs	5%
Employment counseling	5%
Substance abuse programs	4%
Voter registration/education	3%

The median number of people a local Bahá'í community served in a typical month was five.

Summary:

Bahá'í communities focus most on programs that serve the Bahá'í community itself, and secondarily focus on service programs/projects for the wider community. This reflects the small size of most Bahá'í communities, whose limited resources go into supporting the educational/spiritual needs of the community, and also to teaching. Most communities hold regular deepenings, and average around 2 Firesides and prayer meetings per month. Bahá'í communities focus on prayer and fasting as part of a Bahá'í's personal practice, and reach out mostly through newspapers, special advertised programs, and individual teaching efforts. Bahá'í service is most likely to take the form of helping out at food and clothing pantries, or cash assistance. Most impressively, two-thirds of Bahá'í communities serve the local community by providing race unity programs—one of the unique hallmarks of the Faith.

IV) Leadership and Organizational Dynamics

When asked about the number of volunteers that serve on local/area committees, teach adult/children's classes, or provide other services, respondents indicated that:

On average, 6 persons volunteer from the LSA jurisdiction (median of 3), and
On average, 3 persons volunteer from outside the LSA jurisdiction (median of 0)

Respondents indicated that almost half (45 %) of Bahá'í communities find that “recruiting people to serve is a continual challenge, but we eventually find enough willing people” (27 % said they had “no problem” finding volunteers, and 28 % said that they “cannot find enough people” to serve). Only 2% of respondents indicated that their community had any paid staff.

In looking at the demographic characteristics of the LSA, respondents indicated the following median numbers:

Gender:

5 Women
4 Men

Educational Level:

3 persons with some college
3 persons with a bachelor's degree
2 persons with a high school diploma
1 person with a master's or professional degree
0 person with less than a high school diploma

Age:

4 persons between 45-59
2 persons between 30-44
2 persons over 60

1 person in their 20s

Race:

7 White
 (includes 2 Persian)
 1 Black
 1 Multi-ethnic background
 0 Hispanic
 0 American Indian
 0 Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 0 Asian

Respondents indicated that on average, the LSA met 19 times per year, current LSA members who were on the LSA 5 years ago averaged five and the following number of communities elected each of the following officers:

Chair	99%
Secretary	97%
Treasurer	97%
Vice-chair	87%
Recording Secretary	42%

Respondents indicated that the following number of communities elected/appointed the following committees:

Librarian	64%
Publicity/External affairs	55%
Feast/Holy Day committee	45%
Newsletter	40%
Teaching committee	34%
Children/Youth committee	28%
Deepening committee	18%
Properties committee	13%
Training institute	10%

The average LSA met with an Auxiliary Board member (or their assistants) two times in the past year, and the average LSA had a Board member or assistant give a presentation to the local community only once.

When asked about any affiliations between the local Bahá'í community and non-denominational or non-Bahá'í national or international religious organizations, only 13% said yes.

When asked about where the local community gets worship, education or teaching materials, respondents indicated the following:

51% primarily from the NSA and its agencies
 28% exclusively from the NSA and its agencies
 18% from a balance of NSA and other sources
 3% primarily from private companies owned by Bahá'ís

When looking at how the LSA communicates with the local Bahá'í community, respondents indicated that the LSA uses the following methods:

Verbal announcements during Feast	98%
Email network	56%
Other written communications	49%
Community newsletter	45%
Intercommunity/regional newsletter	31%

When asked about the local community's involvement with intercommunity or interfaith activities, respondents indicated the following:

75% had Joint programs (29% had interfaith programs)
 57% had Joint worship services (other than Feast) (24% had interfaith services)
 50% had Inter-assembly councils/task forces
 45% had Joint service projects (30% had interfaith projects)
 43% had Interfaith organizations/ministerial associations

When asked about sources of conflict in the local community, respondents indicated "yes" (either very serious, moderately serious, or not very serious) to the following sources of conflict:

Behavior/lifestyle of individual Bahá'í	45%
Application of Bahá'í teachings	39%
Decisions of the LSA	38%
Money/Finances	25%
Feast programs	22%
Teaching campaigns	21%
Racial/ethnic tensions	16%
Decisions of the NSA	10%

When asked about the need to sanction individuals in the community, most respondents (74%) answered that "our Assembly has made extensive efforts to counsel Bahá'ís before recommending sanctions."

Summary:

Bahá'í Local Spiritual Assemblies (LSAs), as the leadership of the local Bahá'í community, tend to have 5 women and 4 men, tend to reflect some ethnic diversity, and

have members who on average are well educated. LSAs tend to appoint Feast/Holy Day, publicity, and teaching committees and librarians, and spend relatively little time on interfaith projects/organizations. LSAs tend to have to deal most with conflicts surrounding the application of Bahá'í teachings, individual behavior, or disagreements with its own decisions.

V) Participants

Several questions were asked about the number of people who associate with the Bahá'í community. Respondents indicated the following averages and medians (averages reported first, medians in parentheses):

Number of persons associated in any way with local community	45 (27)
Number of adult Bahá'ís on membership list	29 (17)
Number of regularly participating adults	16 (12)
Number of regularly participating children/teens	6 (4)

Since 1995, communities responded in the following ways about growth or decline in the community:

	<u>Adults</u>	<u>Children/Teens</u>
Stayed about the same	44%	40%
Increased 10% or more	26%	25%
Increased 5-9%	11%	9%
Decreased 5-9%	8%	9%
Decreased 10% or more	7%	13%
Our community did not exist in 1995	4%	4%
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	100%	100%

Demographic characteristics of regularly participating adults include the following (modal scores are reported):

Married	between 61-80%
Female	between 41-60%
At least college graduate	between 41-60%
Born in Bahá'í family	between 21-40%
New to community in last 5 years	between 21-40%
Age 35 or younger	between 11-20%
Currently holding volunteer leadership role	between 1-10%
In household with income below \$20,000	between 1-10%
Born outside USA	between 1-10%
Over 60 years old	between 1-10%
In homes with children under 18	between 1-10%
Less than high school diploma	none

Estimated racial/ethnic background of regularly participating adults (averages reported):

White	66%
(Persian)	(40%)
Black	11%
Other	4%
Hispanic	3%
American Indian/Alaska Native	2%
Asian	2%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1%

When asked to estimate the total number of adult participants involved in the following, respondents who indicated “most” or “almost all”:

Expressing their faith in helping others	67%
Activities outside of worship that strengthen their faith	55%
Recruiting new members	48%

When asked if the number of high school age children within the community are involved in the religious life of the community, 43% respondents indicated “most” or “almost all.”

Summary:

Bahá’í communities are small: only about 30 members on average, and half of all Bahá’í communities have no more than 17 adults. Most communities, however, report membership growth since 1995. Members of the local Bahá’í community tend to be well educated, middle-class, married, and middle-aged. One-third of the Bahá’í community in the US are non-white.

VI) Finances

When asked about the financial health of the community, the percentage of respondents that indicated either “good” or “excellent”:

Currently:	69%
In 1995:	60%

When asked about preparing a formal annual budget, 76% respondents indicated “yes,” with an average community income of \$12,944 (the median income was \$6,000).

On average, respondents indicated that the local community had the following expenditures (average is given first, median is given in parentheses):

Other	\$11995 (\$6098)
Donations to National Fund	\$5299 (\$2500)
Other programs	\$1626 (\$200)
Endowments/Investments	\$1599 (\$0)
Donations to International Fund	\$1117 (\$180)
Assembly operations (including staff salaries/benefits)	\$740 (\$200)
Teaching efforts	\$704 (\$400)
Bahá'í Center mortgage	\$704 (\$200)
Donations to Continental Fund	\$565 (\$40)
Publicity efforts	\$451 (\$196)
Classes/Institutes	\$358 (\$124)
Donations to Regional Councils/District committees	\$199 (\$0)

Strategies used to raise money were indicated by the following percentage of Bahá'í communities:

Personalized contribution envelopes	64%
Fund education efforts by local treasurer	63%
Appeals based on specific needs	61%
Appeals by Bahá'ís at Feast	42%
Special fundraising events	39%
Distribution of fliers/letters about need	21%
Pledge or commitment cards	14%

When asked about how new believers are educated about fund contribution, respondents indicated the following percentages:

Included in new believers' classes	34%
LSA fund orientation with new believers	17%
Presentation to new believers by treasurer	13%
Written information to new believers by treasurer	7%

On average, respondents indicated that most new believers (43%) are likely to contribute "immediately" (another 29% after 3-6 months), and that new believers are most likely (78%) to contribute to the local fund exclusively. On average, community participation in giving to the local Bahá'í fund is 56%. Only 48% of local communities have a mortgage or other debt (averaging \$25,128), and since 1992, only 48% of communities indicated that they have sponsored a Huququ'llah training program.

Summary:

Because of the small size of the average Bahá'í community, the average income and expenditures are correspondingly small. Half of the Bahá'í communities have a budget of no more than \$6000 per year, with the biggest expenses going to National Fund

contributions, teaching efforts, and assembly operations. The LSA's elected Treasurer is most likely to take on fund education efforts, but there are relatively few communities that systematically utilize fund education efforts for new believers.

Overall Summary:

Overall, the FACT data indicate that Bahá'í communities are spiritually thriving and socially engaged in their local communities. This is despite the fact that half of Bahá'í communities have no more than 12 active, regularly participating adults (and 4 children/teens) do to the work of administering, organizing, teaching, and serving the community. The level of activity is all the more impressive given that in most communities, of the 12 active believers on average, 9 of them are on the LSA, leaving few others to whom the LSA can turn for help. In fact, I decided to run some statistical tests on the issue of size, comparing “small” and “large” Bahá'í communities on a number of variables. Size does indeed make a difference. (In statistical language, the variable “size” is statistically significantly related with other substantive variables when crosstabulations are performed). For example:

- Small communities are **more likely** to be in small towns or suburbs instead of cities or commercial/industrial areas
- Small communities are **more likely** to be “younger” or have more recently elected an LSA
- Small communities are **more likely** to be in better financial shape (or have smaller, more manageable budgets)
- Small communities are **more likely** to have experienced membership growth
- Small communities are **more likely** to hold Feast in members' homes
- Small communities are **more likely** to be able to incorporate new members into the life of the community

However, the LSAs of small communities are **less likely** to:

- engage in interassembly task forces
- hold joint worship services with other communities
- affiliate with non-Bahá'í organizations
- appoint children/youth educational committees
- appoint deepening committees
- appoint a Feast/Holy day committee
- appoint a teaching committee
- sponsor deepenings
- sponsor Firesides
- sponsor prayer meetings
- sponsor new believers' programs
- sponsor training institutes

- publish a community newsletter
- get volunteers for a project

In addition, “small” Bahá’í communities are less likely to engage in service work to the wider community (the kind of services frequently done by churches). In fact, “large” Bahá’í communities engage in social service work at the same rate as do similarly sized Christian churches (in statistical language, when the variable size is “held constant,” Bahá’ís engage in social service work at the same rate as do other religious groups). Thus, small Bahá’í communities are **less likely** to:

- sponsor youth/teen groups
- provide parenting classes
- provide counseling services
- provide litter removal
- sponsor theological study groups
- sponsor support groups for immigrants
- sponsor a thrift store/food pantry
- sponsor a literacy training/tutoring program

Respectfully Submitted,
Mike McMullen
Department of Sociology
University of Houston-Clear Lake
Houston, TX 77058
(281)-283-3435
mcmullen@uhcl.edu

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