

Not Quite So New in Kansas

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Everyone knows that there are Jews, Muslims and Buddhists in Kansas and others outside the Christian tradition, but there is one religious community in our state, which is nearly unknown. That community has been in Kansas for over a century, grown from one small locality to now be spread across the state. It has quietly gone about its practices and attracted little attention. One would think it would not be possible for a statewide organization to be relatively unknown after a century, but it is true.

This is the community of the Bahá'í Faith. When people first hear the word "Bahá'í" (which rhymes with Hawaii) they think it is something new, but the Bahá'í Faith is not new to Kansas. Interestingly enough, the Kansas Bahá'í community is the second oldest Bahá'í community west of Egypt. Before there were any Bahá'í communities in Europe, most of Africa or all of South America, there was a Bahá'í community in Kansas. We were second (the first was Chicago).

Barbara Ehram of Enterprise, Kansas invited the Bahá'í teacher in Chicago to spend the summer at her home. He and some of his family came the summer of 1897. He gave classes which resulted in "a small group of believers" after he left, thus the Kansas Bahá'í community was born. Interestingly, newspapers all across north-east Kansas carried some mention of those classes in 1897. Most of the believers in Enterprise eventually moved to other cities or other interests but one moved with her family to Topeka in 1906 and the Topeka Bahá'í community has been continuous since that time.

Barbara Ehram was a Swiss immigrant to this country and married men who were both also Swiss immigrants. Her family settled near Valley Falls. Her first husband, Joseph Hilty, was killed in an accident after his service in the Civil War. She and her brother then moved further west to where their sister and her husband had settled on the Smoky Hill River and founded the town of Enterprise. There she married Jacob Ehram the mechanic who had helped build her brother-in-law's mill on the river. Jacob then founded a machine company that operated for a hundred years.

After her children were grown, Barbara was searching for a deeper meaning in life. She, as well as her sister, had the fanciest house in town and the social status of their economic position, but she

sought a deeper meaning in life. In this search she investigated many different points of view. The Bahá'í message was one that attracted her interest. Basically, the Bahá'í faith says that there is one Creator of the universe and one human race. God has educated the human race through special messengers who have come at different times. Separate religions have developed from the messages they have brought. The time has now come for the human race to acknowledge the validity of all these messengers and their messages, and stop fighting each other. Peace is the next stage of human development, some guidelines and decision making tools are offered to achieve that goal.

Bahá'ís believe the latest Messenger from God is Bahá'u'lláh, the Glory of God. He was a Persian nobleman of the nineteenth century who was imprisoned for forty years for teaching that the Qur'án is not the last word of God, that women are equal to men, etc. Bahá'ís are to pray and study the word of God every day and improve the society in which they live. Backbiting and gossip are serious spiritual offences. Families are the foundation of society and farming is the most important occupation. Any work performed in a spirit of service, is considered to be worship. The life of a Bahá'í is to be one of continuous worship. These are high goals, but without goals nothing can be achieved, and it is the effort towards them that is most important.

Bahá'ís practice what they preach, though they don't actually preach. There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith, so there is no preaching. Bahá'í worship is not liturgical and consists of reading from the scriptures of the world's religions and prayer. Meditation and singing are included to the extent which each local community desires. Funds are not solicited at worship services and it is forbidden to accept money for Bahá'í purposes from those who are not Bahá'ís.

All members of the Bahá'í community participate to the extent each wishes to. Women are not restricted or limited to any certain roles. Diversity is encouraged to such an extent that, if an election for a position is tied by a minority and someone else, the minority automatically wins. All elections are democratically conducted with no campaigning or nominating. Voting is an act of prayer in the individual's heart. Service to the community is an act of worship.

Kansans from all backgrounds have found the Bahá'í message to be an inspiring and encouraging one. Kansas Bahá'ís have been farmers as well as urban residents. They have been college professors, skilled laborers or held other occupations. They have come from every religion represented in Kansas and nearly every culture and ethnicity.

In the century since its beginnings in 1897, the Bahá'í community of Kansas has grown to every corner of the state. In addition to Enterprise and Topeka, other Bahá'ís, in the early years, lived in Kansas City (1898) and Wichita (1902). These were years when the American Bahá'í community

was beginning to grow and become organized. Real growth in Kansas came in the latter half of the twentieth century. Today there are local Bahá'í communities in about 100 cities all across Kansas.

Bahá'í communities are administered by councils of nine members, on the local, national, and international levels. At the local and national level these are called "Spiritual Assemblies." The first efforts at administrative organization in Kansas took place in Topeka in 1920. It was not until 1935 that the first Spiritual Assembly there was formed. Other Spiritual Assemblies were gradually organized in other Kansas cities: Wichita 1955, Kansas City 1958, Lawrence 1964, Salina 1968, etc.

Starting a religious community poses challenges other than simply getting organized. Laws needed to be changed so the religious community could function. The first Bahá'í wedding was performed in Kansas in 1950, but it had no legal validity, a civil marriage was also required. This situation continued until 1968 when the Kansas statutes were amended to recognize Bahá'í marriage.

One reason the Bahá'í community may not have a high profile in Kansas is a lack of buildings. Bahá'ís have preferred to spend their money helping those in greater need instead of having buildings for themselves. So, they generally meet in homes or other places from time to time. Money from Bahá'ís in Kansas has gone to all parts of the world to build schools, medical clinics, agricultural projects and educational radio stations, just to name a few. There is a Bahá'í center, a multi-purpose facility, in Wichita. It was opened in 2002, a century after the first Bahá'ís had lived in Wichita.

Local Bahá'í communities have engaged in a wide range of service activities to benefit the larger society. These have included highway trash pick-up, child mentoring, ESL classes, medical assistance, serving meals or simply offering strangers cold water on a hot day.

In 1997 the Bahá'ís of Kansas came to Enterprise to celebrate their centennial birthday. For that day, the population of Enterprise increased by one third. The celebration included a parade, a brief historical sketch, dramatic skits, historic tours and an art exhibit. Bahá'ís from as far away as Florida and New York attended. Two special guests were Kansas Bahá'ís who had also been former members of the international Bahá'í council at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel. One was a native Kansan, born near Winfield, the other had been a professor at the KU Medical Center.

To have two of the nine members of the international council being from Kansas is a distinction indeed! Kansas Bahá'ís have also distinguished themselves in literary and artistic pursuits, in personally assisting in medical and educational projects in different parts of the world, and directly helping local Bahá'í communities in other nations.

Kansas has a rich history of alternative religious communities. Most of these have not lasted past the life of their founder. For the Bahá'í community to not only survive, but flourish, is a noteworthy accomplishment. And, that Kansas Bahá'ís have had an influence on the international Bahá'í community, up to the highest levels, is laudatory. For over a century, Bahá'ís have brought honor to the state of Kansas, yet the state of Kansas has remained largely unaware. Perhaps this account will help to enlighten and inform those who may have heard of the Bahá'í Faith and wondered what Bahá'ís are doing in Kansas.