

Southland (Waihopai/Invercargill)

A report of post-conference reflections

Date: 6 June, 2022 9am- 6.30pm

Venue: PIACT, Bowmont Street, Invercargill.

Spirit and Atmosphere

Starting the day with a pōwhiri really gave a beautiful start to the day. The pōwhiri was facilitated by two friends of the Faith who assisted us so lovingly. According to Māori protocol, the Tangata Whenua were all of us 'local' people there- Bahá'ís and their friends, and the manuhiri were those who had travelled ...our Bahá'í guests, so right from the start there was the sense of unity and togetherness.

From the conversations held with people throughout the conference, it is clear that the conference affected people and they were moved by the atmosphere they felt there. It was more than just a "day out!". Even those who participated briefly, only joining one session, were uplifted and felt they got so much from the experience. One friend who had come to perform with the Kaumatua ukulele group had arrived early and joined the first session on the vision of Bahá'u'lláh- she said that after the conference she had met someone who had had a Bahá'í wedding on a marae- and she said because of her involvement she felt she was able to talk with some awareness about the Faith.

The decision to make it an inclusive family conference contributed well to the spirit of the conference and the harmony and good behaviour of the children meant that none of the adults had to miss the conference to go and see their kids. The children were able to participate at their level in the art activities that were assigned to each theme.

Attendance

In the context of our Bahá'í community, the level of attendance was remarkable. 20 adult Bahá'ís (13 local/7 visitors), and 8 Bahá'í children, and of the friends of Faith there were 39 adults, 7 children and 1 Junior youth.

We will make a point of communicating with Peter and Grace Manins, Jill Cookson and Jan Tilley to thank them personally for their attendance and contributions to the conference. We also had Ashkon and his grandmother attend, which added another dimension to the sessions.

We really loved the pōwhiri which was led by Sue's Southland Institute of Technology (SIT) kaiako, Rosina, and a friend of Valessa and Taumei, Mana and his son Rangī.

Preparation and Planning

The act of preparing for the conference drew us, as a Local Spiritual Assembly, closer together and created an intensity that we had not witnessed before. It was pleasing how it drew many of the members of the community closer as well. Our collective desire to please the House of Justice was evident. We all committed to daily prayers for the conference, and this was undertaken by the community.

On the last day of Ridván, to help our community gain a better understanding of the conference, we had a pre-conference gathering, using the booklet, "A Cherished Commitment" prepared by the Geelong community in Australia. This booklet helped the children, as well as the adults, gain a clearer understanding of what the House of Justice was calling us to do. We also watched a little video clip of a young English girl explaining what the conference was about and how we can invite our friends and family to join the conference. These activities were enjoyable and also helped us to get excited about the conference! In preparing for the "How far we have come" timeline display, a lot of research was done at the public library by Sue, which led to us finding out that the first Local Assembly was established in 1973, meaning that next year we could be celebrating our golden jubilee!

Also, this research led to inviting Jill Cookson (who was featured in an early newspaper article) to attend our conference (which she did-) and then resulted in a newspaper article being published in the Southland Times and a friendship being struck up with the young reporter, who showed a lot of interest in the Faith and subsequently dropped in with her friend to visit the conference just before dinnertime, staying on for dinner and closing devotions.

The programme

The programme included four of the topics:- The Vision of Bahá'u'lláh, (facilitated by Peter Manins); How Far we Have Come (Photographic Timeline display put together by Sue Whitley); Building a Vibrant Community facilitated by Sue Whitley; and Educational Endeavours, facilitated by Losa Taufalele (Study circles), plus junior youth and the programme for the spiritual education of children (Behnam Farvardin).

Much of the material we borrowed from the Dunedin conference, and the idea for the timeline came from Manurewa. So we were collaborating with other friends around the country for ideas. In the order of the programme, we had the Vision of Bahá'u'lláh before lunch, Building a Vibrant community, and then Educational endeavours after lunch and afternoon tea respectively, with "How Far we have come" and the walk around the photos at the end of the programme, before the last artistic display session and dinner. This was a time when some people were tired and so didn't participate, and also by this stage many people had left. However, because of it being a display there the whole day, some individuals did browse the photos during break times.

One reflection regarding the sessions is that it is very important to be clear about who is facilitating — in the first session (The Vision of Bahá'u'lláh) it was unclear who was able to help each group and that led to some confusion. The activity involved looking at the Holy Writings and translating them into language to put onto a world poster and so it required someone to ensure that the main concepts were highlighted. In one group, the majority of the members were Tongan and being able to speak and consult in Tongan was helpful, leading to a lot of sharing of ideas.

It was felt that the first session needed more time as we had only allotted one hour and the seven minute video clip of "What is the Bahá'í Faith", was included in this time period. In the third session- educational endeavours- there were a couple of interesting challenges — one was that the 10 Ruhi Book 1's that were provided from our stock turned out to be in Spanish!! Unfortunately, no one in the group was fluent in that language so it made the session more challenging for the facilitator, Losa! The other challenge was that the puzzles we had made for the programme for the spiritual education of children (PSEC) activity turned out to be too hard, added to the fact that the light plastic tablecloth underneath kept moving and breaking the puzzle...so that was challenging too.

However, the facilitators made the best of the circumstances and although the rotation of the three groups was cut short, with the groups visiting only two of the educational imperatives, it was still enjoyable and informative.

Artistic performances

Throughout the programme we had scheduled four short artistic performance slots, and these were really enjoyed by everyone. The friendly atmosphere meant that people felt comfortable to perform — and even when things didn't go as planned, there was plenty of love and patience shown — and this was noted by people at the conference.

There were a really nice variety of artistic performances: a Tongan dance by one of our young Bahá'ís, Olivetti, which she had been practising in preparation for the conference; and varied performances from friends of the Faith: a ukulele group from members from a local Kaumatua group, Filipino dancing by some young performers, an Indian singer, and a ukulele song from Nicki. As well as these performances we had

some participatory activities — Ashkon led us, with his drum, in singing a Hidden Word, and Valessa taught us a simple dance from Tuvalu which we all really enjoyed.

Games

We had an excellent icebreaker at the beginning of the conference resulting in much laughter, playing 1,1,2,2, and eventually forming groups of five, then identifying 3 things that all the members of the group had in common and sharing with the big group. The Māori kemu “whitu” was a real success, with people really getting into it. This also caused a lot of laughter as it progressively became more tricky!

Children

We were very impressed at how well the children did, even though it was a long day for many but generally they were quite engaged in the programme. Most of the children who participated in the sessions had been attending our children’s classes so they were all familiar with each other. Some children came to perform the Filipino dances and did not really stay for the sessions.

Food

It had been decided that because we were so few, it would be more efficient to buy in ready made food for lunch and dinner, and have simple snacks and fruit for morning and afternoon tea. However, because it was a Monday, many restaurants did not open until 5.30pm, pushing dinner back to 5.45pm. It would have been better if it could have been at 5pm as we had planned. Notwithstanding that, we all really enjoyed the food.

One difficulty faced was the issue of food preferences/requirements and the breakdown of communication about friends’ needs. The learning was that in the future we should provide vegetarian food as an option regardless. We can all do with more vegetables!

Another learning was that people giving feedback during the actual meal/snack time wasn’t helpful and made people stressed — as nothing could be done at that time, so afterwards is the best time to give feedback.

We need to be aware of food allergies and requirements and make sure they are clearly communicated to the people in charge of the food. It was a great decision to buy in ready-made food rather than cook it, even though it was more costly, everyone could focus on participating in the programme and not worry about the food.

Our last learning was that because we started early it would have been good to have some heavier food for morning tea as some people hadn’t eaten breakfast, so muffins, sandwiches, etc., would have been good.

Capacities developed

Sharing out responsibilities but still helping each other was great. A good learning experience giving a good foundation for what we could do with a family camp. A newspaper article was published as well which raised the profile of the Faith. The reporter who wrote it also joined part of the conference. Next year is 50 years since the Local Assembly was established and the research done will be useful next year. Universal participation in regards to prayers daily for the success of the conference.

Next steps

Follow up- individuals who invited their friends can follow up with them, and what would be the next step for them — home visits, a Book 1, a devotional meeting, firesides, joining the Faith etc. Special thanks to be given, on behalf of the community, to Mana and to Rosina for the pōwhiri and to others mentioned above. It is clear that all of those who were invited and participated in some way, have moved closer to Bahá’u’lláh — thinking in terms of concentric circles. Conversations since the conference have advanced and friendships have been further strengthened. This is an ongoing process, which will stand our community in a stronger position in light of future expansion and consolidation activities. Alláh’u’Abhá!