

The BMG/NYC was held on Saturday, April 29, 2006 from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M. in New York City at the Baha'i International Community office at 866 UN Plaza, Suite 120. Four elders of the Black Men's Gathering coordinated this special event and Cornerstone, a Saturday night poetry reading, and Husharbor, a Sunday Deepening at the New York City Baha'i Center: Nasan Fitz-Henley, Lloyd Lawrence, Carl Murrell, and Kenneth Ray. Thirty men attended this first Baha'i Black Men's Gathering in New York City. One was not a Baha'i. Brothers traveled from Portland, Oregon; Tarrytown, New Rochelle, and Rochester in New York; Roanoke, Virginia; Worcester, Massachusetts; and Orange and Newark in New Jersey.

It began with a poem about Robert Turner sent by Jihmye Collins from San Diego. Then we read the National Spiritual Assembly's letter honoring Robert Turner, who became a Baha'i in 1893 and with Abdu'l Baha's encouragement had a major role in disseminating the Word of Baha'u'llah. The Brothers discussed the virtues Robert Turner exemplified and broke into smaller groups to identify those virtuous Black men in our lives who we wished to emulate. We then listed the qualities we admired on a board and voted to determine which ones stood out for the group.

The devotional period of drumming, prayer and singing lasted from 11:45 to 12:30, when we broke for lunch. Afterward we began a round of introductions. Each person was asked the traditional three BMG questions: "What is your name?" "Where are you from?" and "Why are you here?" A speaker phone in the middle of the room allowed us to share long distance calls with Elders who were among the Brothers to meet in Greensboro, North Carolina, at the very first Gathering: John "Beau Jack Mangum, William Varner, and Nasif Habu'llah. Their words were reminders of how far Black males have come in contributing to this mighty Cause—and how we must continue to study, work together, and be courageous and resilient to advance the Faith. Then William "Billy" Roberts, Treasurer of the National Spiritual Assembly, called to express his love and gratitude to those who organized and attended this BMG/NYC, to wish us a happy ninth day of Ridvan, and to encourage us to confidently serve the Faith. These four phone calls were a highlight of the Gathering, supportive and humorous and heartfelt testaments.

Around 4:35 P.M. the Universal House of Justice's Ridvan message was distributed and we read it together. We also watched a video of Counselor Eugene Andrews speaking about "A Framework for Action: 2006-2011." The letter and the videotape inspired us in our consultation to make a variety of points, pleas, and suggestions that we should reflect more deeply on and decide how we can each do our part.

### **Fund-Raising**

1. Participate in Men Who Cook, an annual event around Valentine's Day.
2. Assess our individual talents and competencies to *study* what our individual and collective roles can be in the new Five Year Plan.

3. Be innovative, keeping in mind we cannot solicit or accept money from those who are not Baha'i. How can we use economic forecasting, analyze faith-based initiatives, and imitate ideas used in public relations and advertising?
4. Keep this in mind: As descendants of slaves and oppressed groups we should resurrect their vision of how to be resilient and to have hope. Ancestors dealt with a greater adversity than we have known. Let us draw upon their example—and not merely focus on survival. We must *lead*.

### **Advancing the Cause**

1. As Counselor Andrews stressed, we must think globally and act locally, especially considering that the U.S. Baha'i community is not as persecuted as others in the world, especially in Iran. We desperately need to build human resources that will enable us to be of greater assistance to Baha'is under duress elsewhere.
2. How can we as Blacks continue to be involved in the Institute process, Ruhi courses, and devotional gatherings to reach out to others of African descent?
3. A major challenge is to sustain and improve what we do on a systematic level. Our events and activities should generate new possibilities to involve more of the Friends in our work and to attract seekers. For example, the Cornerstone poetry cipher regularly draws people who are not Baha'i, but more of us are needed to present the message of the Faith and to answer questions.
4. In Rochester, New York, a BMG-style prayer and drumming circle has become popular. People who are not Baha'i are encouraged to attend a children's class or to study Ruhi Book I. Note: Page 30 in *The Advent of Divine Justice* is worth careful reflection as it applies to this endeavor.
5. BMG brothers in New York City must develop a stronger emotional bond and commitment to each other before we can succeed in the greater Baha'i community. Build on what is working well (such as the Husharbor devotional) and help to plan, advise, bring food and beverages, arrange the seating, and clean up the premises after an event.
6. We briefly discussed the privatization of religions in today's U.S. society and how that can corrupt a religion's tenets (but not the Baha'i faith).
7. Can men of African descent become exemplars of and advocates for family unity? How can we discourage hedonistic pursuits and infidelity in a relationship, behaviors which the mass media portrays so incessantly?
8. How can we help to redefine how we present the Baha'i faith to young people who are often turned off to "religion"? Which passages in the Writings will help us in this quest?

Our consultation ended at 5:55 P.M. and some men headed to the New York City Baha'i Center for the poetry cipher. Before we said farewell, Carl Murrell reminded us to "Do *something* for the Faith you did not do before attending today."

Report prepared by Charles Lynch