

4th Annual Baha'i Black Men's Gathering of San Diego

In the aftermath of a most joyful 19th Annual Baha'i Black Men's Gathering (BMG) at Green Acre (July 2005), preliminary planning began for the 4th Annual BMG of San Diego. The following is a fairly comprehensive review of that process to conclusion.

In keeping with previous years, November dates were set (4 – 6th), and on August 8, 2005, the first announcement was e-mailed out to all the brothers who had attended the Maine BMG. Concurrently, notices were sent to the local brothers inviting them to prepare to participate, in the shadow of 123 who had made a solemn commitment at Green Acre, to redouble efforts towards the goals of the 5 Year Plan – completing a sequence of institute courses, as well as involving ourselves with children's classes and devotionals. That a major focus was to reach out and invite brothers of African descent from the general community to share in the BMG experience.

As responses began to come in, inquiries were made as to the nearest and most reasonable accommodations, as well as those who locally could be hosts, since some brothers would be coming from Oakland, the Los Angeles area and Las Vegas, NV. No longer leasing the Unity Center, the Gathering was being held at the San Diego Baha'i Center for the first time.

On October 10, eight brothers (Hennin Forman, Ray Daniel, Joe Walker, Dale Bivens, Sylvester Scott, Guy Mount, John Myers, and myself), gathered at my abode to plan the agenda for the 3-day celebration. Nine days later, a reminder invitation was disseminated to the brothers of the region. In the meantime, using the guidance from Dr. Roberts, National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, the Gathering would be dedicated to the memory of Mr. Robert Turner, the first person of African descent in the United States to declare his faith (150th anniversary this year), in the Blessed Beauty. Included in this announcement were directions to the Baha'i Center, the closest/most cost effective accommodations and names of locals who would serve as hosts for those requesting.

On behalf of and with full support from the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of San Diego, with guidance of the National Assembly, the Gathering began on Friday evening, November 4, 2005 about 4 p.m.

Packets were prepared for each participant, marking that the 4th Annual BMG was dedicated to the memory/commemoration 150th anniversary of the passing of Mr. Robert Turner. The insert included the Ridvan Letter 2005; National's letter regarding Mr. Turner; handouts – Pupil of The Eye; Baha'i World News Service: African descendants plan for better society/Salvador Bahia; list of all Core Activities in San Diego and letter of support and encouragement from Dr. Roberts. Also included were pamphlets: "Who Are the Baha'is"; "Walking the Talk"; and "A New Vision of Race Unity".

Following tradition, a button designed to commemorate the Gathering was given to each participant (also to the members of the Local Assembly and others who served in some way).

Prior to arrivals, on Friday eve, flowers were delivered to the Center to fragrance and beautify our meeting space – sent by an anonymous donor. These were placed around lit candles and African artifacts providing a setting for new friends and re-acquaintances to socialize – awaiting a delicious Persian dinner catered by a local Baha'i. After dinner introductions were made, welcoming the eight (8) men not yet declared in the Faith of Baha'u'llah. Before the evening concluded, after open consultation, the video treat of beloved Dr. Elsie Austin was shown; chronicling her extraordinary life and the Baha'i legacy she left us and the world. IN the BMG tradition, we closed with prayers around 9:45 p.m.

Breakfast, prepared by Susan Collins, was served at 8:30 a.m. Devotionals began approximately 10 a.m. Joining us was Nana Yaw Asiedu, a local drummer who teaches drumming to the Baha'is Children's Play Groups every other week. Nana proceeded (with 10 drums, shakers, bells, etc.); to give a mini-lesson to those of us unskilled in the art, culminating in a wonderful session, that prompted an approval response from the master drummer!

The agenda commenced with a welcome and statement of the purpose of BMG by Jihmye, followed by continuance of introductions, carrying us into a break for lunch, deliciously prepared by the steadfast maidservant. Oluyemi opened the afternoon session with a spirited prayer on his ax.

The program throughout the rest of the day and evening included presentations: Baha'i overview/Joe Walker; Ridvan Letter/Hennin Forman; Pupil of The Eye/Sylvester Scott; and sandwiched around a catered soul food dinner – with Susan's specialty – sweet potato & pecan pies – excerpts from One Common Faith/Ray Daniel. All generated much thought and questions during consultation that followed each presentation.

Saturday concluded with the reading (Guy Mount) of the letter from the National Assembly, commemorating Mr. Robert Turner, and open consultation. During the evening, exchanges of calls were made to/from the brothers in Virginia (Alfred Fox III), as they were gathering on the same weekend. A nice ending touch (as we were cleaning up), caught Oluyemi and Musa Khaleem (not Baha'i) with his tenor sax, doing a tasty duet, as they made a great connection of hearts and minds on their instruments.

On Sunday morning after breakfast, the Baha'i Center began to be filled with friends from all over the area, including many not Baha'i. The welcome and overview of BMG and its dedication to Mr. Turner was given by Jihmye, followed by the drums struck up under Nana's direction. As the tempo increased, instruments were taken by many in the audience, as collectively we carried the morning into an electrifying intensity! The joy everyone felt abounded in a way never before witnessed at this Center, as many later spoke of. Jihmye then led all into a prayer session with "O Lord My God..." with children/youth/everyone joining in. The joy on faces and the love in the room could not be captured with a camera, although a beloved soul did video tape the gathering, and we hope to receive a copy soon.

Concluding around noon, the men of the BMG assumed responsibility for serving a delightful brunch prepared by a beloved Persian couple (Pari & Arash Monjazebe) and two wonderful Latina maidservants, (Ana Loftin & Margarita Pierre-Jerome), who volunteered without solicitation! Our many thanks to them serving in the great success of the 4th Annual BMG.

It must be noted that on both Saturday and Sunday's program, Oluyemi Thomas read a poem written by his beloved wife Ijeoma, accompanying it with a horn solo, and chants from the audience of Robert Turner, Robert Turner...He took us up on Saturday night, and on Sunday we went even higher, as the Blessed Beauty surely hovered around him. Also, Michael Casey offered the finale at its highest crescendo, leading us to the beat of the drums...

"Allah'u'Abha, Allah'u'Abha, Baha'is are greeting you.....A new Day has come, a new Day has come, Baha'u'llah has come!"

By any measure, this year's Gathering generated a spirit of excitement in the overall community that we of the BMG hope will thrust us all to great service in fulfilling the 5 Year Plan as it winds down.

The following are a few of the comments (and requests) regarding the BMG:

-The Divine Art of Living Conference requested a BMG-style of drumming and prayers at its November 2005 opening

From not-Baha'is:

"Thanks to you – for inviting me, in the process I made two new friends. I was refreshed, spiritually."

Yves Domond

"I want to thank you all for your hard work and dedication in putting together such a great event. I found the BMG very moving and intense. I truly appreciated the opportunity to be with you and a great group of Baha'i Black Men. I was deeply moved by the process and entire program. I hope we can continue this."

Frank Holmes

"Hello ...I wanted to thank you for a wonderful weekend and I am looking forward to next year. Being a guest of the Baha'i community has somewhat awakened me. I plan to learn more about the Baha'i community. Links to your sites were given to me and I plan to pursue the information on those sites."

Willis J. Lacy III

From the friends:

"I've never seen the men so happy!"

"This was the most spiritually intense time I've ever had at a Baha'i event!"

"We should do this at least once a month!"

"This could become contagious!"

"My mother has attended Baha'i events all her life and has never joined in any singing. This morning, she was singing louder and with such joy that I was truly shocked! She was so happy!"

Continuing to be of service to the BMG, on Saturday, November 19, Susan again prepared dinner – for a debriefing meeting. John Myers surprised and redeemed himself, by bringing a pan of finger-licking bar-b-cue ribs! Attending were: Ray Daniel, Hennis Forman, Dale Bivens, Joe Walker, John and myself.

Following are the highlights of the debriefing:

- a commitment was made by each to make a greater effort to reach out to the community of interest, especially African Americans
- of note was a demonstration of Baha'i consultation to participants not yet Baha'i as well as their appreciation of efforts to answer their questions
- a proposal to meet quarterly/planning for next year's Gathering, consultation/exchange of information regarding those from community of interest that we meet/study together The Advent of Divine Justice; determine how best to participate in giving to the Fund with those not Baha'i present

Questions/Baha'i men:

-Can there be an agenda prior to the meeting, to allow not yet Baha'is to pick and choose when they may participate?

-Should there be a session for Baha'i brothers on (perhaps the first evening)?

Question/not yet Baha'i men:

-Can the Gathering agenda include topics other than Baha'i?

-if one believes in the tenet/teachings of Baha'u'llah and lives the life, does he have to become a Baha'i?

Twenty-two of us attended and collectively it was felt to be the best of all the local Gatherings due to the spirited participation of 8 men not Baha'i, along with drumming/devotionals, sharing with the broader community, eliciting a greater understanding of and purpose for BMG and the spiritual connectiveness – indeed a great success!

Oh, by the way, one of the attendees Anthony Hamm, whom the community has been nurturing since his attendance at last year's Gathering declared his belief in the Cause of the Blessed Beauty, during the Divine Art of Living Conference, two weeks following BMG! Ya!Baha'ul'Abha!

Reported by: Jihmye Collins, with thanks and praise

