

Devotional meeting pulses with energy



NEW YORK, 28 November 2005 (BWNS)

-- The sounds of African drums and soaring voices burst out over a normally quiet lower Manhattan Street lined with antique dealers and four-story apartment buildings.

It was a recent Sunday morning and the pulsating energy was coming from the New York Baha'i Center where a drum circle was being led by African-American men, with people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds joining in.



Drummers send out energy and inspiration during a Hush Harbor devotional meeting at the New York Baha'i Center. Photo by Mike Relph.

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The gathering was a striking example of a new and growing feature of Baha'i community life: community devotional meetings designed to engage the world at large through uplifting and inspirational prayers, music, readings and more.

In this case, the monthly event also offers a striking antidote to the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt sense of racial segregation that still pervades American society.

Called the "Hush Harbor Devotional," the gathering takes its name from meetings held by slaves who hung wet fabric on tree branches to stop their voices carrying while they were praying and planning escapes.

"The whole idea is to extend that idea of a safe place, not just for black folks but for everyone that comes to the devotional," said Lloyd Lawrence, one of the organizers.

"I think we free people up from their own cultural limitations," Mr. Lawrence said.



People from diverse backgrounds are attracted by the spirit of the Hush Harbor devotional meetings at the New York Baha'i Center

William Roberts, a keen observer of the progress of the devotional, said many newcomers are surprised that they feel so comfortable in an environment that is led by African-American men.

"In the larger society, people are made to fear black men," said Dr. Roberts, who himself is African-American and serves as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States.

Dr. Roberts said that at the Hush Harbor Devotional gathering people are helped to feel at ease, to feel welcomed and embraced.

"Many people want to have a conversation with God, feel the spirit of

Baha'i Center.

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the Almighty," said Dr. Roberts.

"They want to have their souls quickened with that spirit -- and coming into this kind of devotional allows them to feel that spirit."

Participants are welcomed with refreshments and invited to stay for lunch. In addition to drumming and singing, the Hush Harbor Devotional also features the chanting of prayers in a wide range of languages, including Arabic, Persian, Mandarin, and Spanish.

The Hush Harbor Devotional began about three years ago. The idea came from participation by New York City Baha'is in the Black Men's Gathering, which are regular events that were founded by Dr. Roberts in 1987 and have continued ever since.

The aim of that gathering, which has proved an ongoing success, is to change the conditions of men of African descent and help them to achieve spiritual transformation. The use of the drumming combined with prayers began with the Black Men's Gathering and became the model for the Hush Harbor Devotional.

"The purpose [of Hush Harbor] is not to perform, it's not to read perfectly, but to pray," said Dr. Roberts.

Kenneth Ray, who organizes the event with Mr. Lawrence, said he thought it had helped the community to understand its wonderful diversity.

"When we first started, Hush Harbor was mainly attracting the African-American community, but now it is inclusive of people from all backgrounds, Baha'is and non-Baha'is alike," Mr. Ray said.

Mr. Ray said the question the organizers attempt to answer is this: "How many different ways can we present the [Baha'i] Faith to as many different backgrounds?"

One of those attracted is P.J. Sanchez, a law student, who learned of the Baha'i Faith initially from her mother and then read some Baha'i material online. She came to realize the New York City Baha'i Center was within walking distance from her apartment, and so she decided to attend a devotional gathering there.



Inspirational prayers, music, and readings create an uplifting atmosphere at the Hush Harbor devotional meetings in the New York Baha'i Center.

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Organizers of the Hush Harbor devotional meetings: Lloyd Lawrence (left) and Kenneth Ray.

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"I was struck with the inclusive nature of the worship," Ms. Sanchez said.

"I felt as if everyone was actively participating, rather than just listening or responding by rote as I have felt in other forms of worship," she said.

"The lack of clergy and the lack of a script or plan -- the lack of ritual, I suppose -- for the devotional made the worship feel much more self-directed and organic, as if it was springing up naturally from the hearts and minds of the participants."

Ms. Sanchez said she was also struck by the diversity of the participants. "There seemed to be a much wider variety of race and class than I have usually

found in various religions, and everyone mingled together without the formation of cliques," she said.

"Everyone participated in the devotional in a way that felt comfortable to them -- shouting out or not, moving around or not, praying in English or in Spanish -- and this was respected by all of the other participants.

"The musical nature of the Hush Harbor Devotional seemed very unique to me. Instead of music being an interlude from prayer, it was the mode of prayer itself. I found this to only enhance the words being said."

Ms. Sanchez attended a discussion about the Baha'i Faith that followed the lunch and was able to ask about the various forms of worship in the Faith. She says she is interested in learning more.

One of the core activities of Baha'is around the world is to increase the efforts made to host devotional gatherings and to enhance their quality.

The Hush Harbor Devotional is now seen as an example of how to reflect on positive aspects of one's culture and to bring that to the rest of the Baha'i community and the population at large.

"Really what's happened is we've witnessed men who have been marginalized in their community step forward," Dr. Roberts said.

"It allowed them to know that being a Baha'i does not mean you have to put aside your culture, your way of doing things," he said.

Mr. Ray said that the devotional provides many with a different understanding of diversity and worship.

"It's a way for everyone to express his or her spirit -- it's about the full participation of everyone in the room," he said.

"We seek to touch people's hearts. If people's hearts are affected then Hush Harbor is serving its purpose."

(Report by Stephanie Vaccaro.)

(Photographs by Mike Relph.)



Participants in the Hush Harbor devotional meetings at the New York Baha'i Center.

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