

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

As a child, our churches were as segregated as our neighborhoods. Just as the streets we lived on, there were separate African American churches, Irish American churches, Italian American churches, and Latin American churches.

We blindly accepted the status quo and didn't question it until about our teen years. Our high school included students from all these ethnic groups. We became good friends, but at the end of the day we'd all go back to our separate neighborhoods.

As more years passed this disunity increasingly bothered many of us. What most disturbed me was attending segregated churches. We all prayed to the same God, so why couldn't we sit in the same church? I attempted to attend church in the African American section but didn't feel welcome. Likewise, people of other backgrounds would occasionally attend our Irish church and weren't treated warmly. I suspect many of us wanted to get past those old divisions, but misunderstandings undermined our hopes.

Fast forward a decade. I met someone who identified as a Baha'i. It sounded like a cult, but he mentioned a few principles that perked my interest. He explained that Baha'u'llah, its Founder, inaugurated a worldwide faith based on spiritual principles that emphasized the oneness of humanity. He said Baha'is comprise one of the most diverse human organizations on the planet, and don't just worship together, but administer the faith together, become the best of friends, and even intermarry. Baha'is feel there's only one race – the human race – and are building a worldwide community based on this central principle.

He wasn't talking about a global political organization like a central government. It essentially isn't about politics or economics. It's a spiritual community that aims to coordinate our just governments within a spiritual framework of oneness and mutual reciprocity.

I reached out to the local Baha'is to find out more and was impressed by the diversity. It was exhilarating to meet them and feel at home with people of different ethnic, social, and financial backgrounds. What impressed me most was that such diversity was not the focus, but just a natural outcome of this consciousness of oneness. That is, the emphasis was on our common humanity and not on our diverse backgrounds. Nobody identified as Black Baha'is, Irish Baha'is, Italian Baha'is, or Hispanic Baha'is (to repeat the earlier categories).

Now many years passed. Baha'is of a similar background may sometimes congregate in informal groups according to familiarity with ethnicity, nationality, or language. But the Universal House of Justice wrote that it would be against Baha'i principle for any such group to "adopt a practice of meeting among themselves". That should be read in context for a fuller understanding. But the essential focus remains on "unity in diversity," and not on our diversities taken separately.

Please See References