

The Bahá'í Community in Atlantic Canada

Throughout the four provinces of Atlantic Canada—Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick—some thousand registered members of the Bahá'í Faith are vigorously engaged in establishing children's classes, junior youth spiritual empowerment programs, study circles and devotional gatherings—community-building activities open to all. The region's population, which has grown more diverse over the past several decades, now includes not only the original First Nations peoples, descendants of the early French Acadian and other settlers from various European countries, but Iranian refugees, and, more recently, newcomers from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The Bahá'í community is engaged with all of these peoples to translate the vision of Bahá'u'lláh into reality in Atlantic Canada and has found newcomers to be particularly alive to the possibilities it presents.

The geography of the region is challenging, with its rugged landscape, large bodies of water, farflung islands, jagged coastlines, large rural expanses dotted with small towns and villages, and only a few urban centres of modest size. To address this challenge and help the Bahá'í communities envision work within manageable geographic areas, the region has been divided into eleven "clusters". Two of these, where the work is most vibrant, Halifax and Prince Edward Island, currently serve as "reservoirs" that help other nearby clusters learn how to strengthen activities in their own communities and neighbourhoods—particularly the junior youth spiritual empowerment program.

Our region has one of the longest associations with the Bahá'í Faith of any in Canada. Kate Ives, whose parents were from Newfoundland, became a Bahá'í in Chicago in 1894; `Abdu'l-Bahá Himself addressed a "prayer to a Mr. Crowe" of Newfoundland, whom He had met in Paris in 1913; 1914 saw a public lecture on "Baháism" take place in St. John's. The first New

Brunswicker to become a member of the Bahá'í Faith was Paul K. Dealy, a railroad engineer and inventor, who left Saint John in 1865 and joined the new Faith in 1897, but without doubt, the most prominent Baha'i to have come from New Brunswick was Marion Jack (1866-1954), an artist, who became a Bahá'í in Paris around 1900 and later distinguished herself as a Bahá'í pioneer in Bulgaria. Nova Scotia's first resident Bahá'í was John Redden, who found the Bahá'í Faith in the United States sometime between 1917 and 1922, when he returned to Windsor. The earliest organized Bahá'í community in Atlantic Canada was in Saint John, established in 1910 by the American Consul Henry S. Culver and his family. By 1921, there were 17 adherents, making it the second-largest organized group in Canada, after Montréal.

Growth through these early years was supported through the efforts of travelling teachers, including figures such as May Maxwell, Ella Beecher, Martha Root, and Jináb-i-Fádíl. Marion Jack and Rhoda Nichols were the first Bahá'ís to visit Prince Edward Island in 1917; they also visited Nova Scotia during that trip, and Marion Jack and Kate Ives went to St. John's the same year. Other travelling teachers who came to "sow the seeds" included Harlan Ober, Ruth Moffet, John Robarts, Dorothy Baker, Ross Woodman, Emeric and Rosemary Sala, Louise Baker, Lorol Schopflocher, Virginia Foster, Mamie Seto, Philip Sprague, Duncan McAlear, and Laura Davis.

Eventually, individuals came to settle and establish the Faith more permanently in different communities throughout the region, and the city of Moncton, New Brunswick, witnessed the election of the third Local Spiritual Assembly in Canada, in 1938. Halifax's first Baha'i pioneer was Beulah S. Proctor, who arrived in 1939 with her daughter; by 1942, Halifax was able to form Canada's seventh Local Spiritual Assembly, although pioneers were required for many years to sustain it. On Prince Edward Island, there was a succession of pioneers from

1932, but it was the arrival of Willard and Doris McKay and Grace and Irving Geary in 1944 that allowed the formation of the first Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Charlottetown—the tenth in the country. As with Halifax, pioneers would be necessary for many years to sustain it.

Notably, Bob and Shirley Donnelly, who came in 1951, still remain at their post. In Newfoundland, Bahá'í pioneers Margaret Reid, Dorothy Sheets, and Doris Skinner arrived in 1949, followed in later years by many other pioneers, including Michael and Elizabeth Rochester, who remain in St. John's to this day. The Local Spiritual Assembly of that city was first elected in 1969. Today, there are thirteen Local Spiritual Assemblies throughout the region and ?? registered groups.

Two special goals were set during the “Ten Year Crusade” between 1953 and 1963, when Shoghi Effendi announced that Cape Breton Island and Grand Manan Island should be opened to the Bahá'í Faith and the first pioneers would be honoured with the title “Knights of Baha'u'llah”. Frederick and Jean Allan, and Irving and Grace Geary won this distinction for settling on Cape Breton Island, and Doris Richardson for Grand Manan Island.

While the early years of development of the Bahá'í community in Atlantic Canada were challenging, the 1970s saw a surge of youth enrol and arise to energetically serve the Bahá'í Faith, teaching their peers about the vision of Bahá'u'lláh, establishing and sustaining Local Spiritual Assemblies in the region, and pioneering internationally. Teaching efforts among First Nations peoples have brought notable bounties to the region. Youth travel teachers first introduced the Bahá'í Faith to Greg and Ernest Johnson of the Eskasoni First Nations community in Cape Breton, which has now elected its Local Spiritual Assembly since **1974??**, while in New Brunswick, First Nations Chief Sam Baldeagle embraced the Bahá'í Faith. Efforts have also been made through the years in different Bahá'í communities to establish relations with peoples

of African heritage, notably within Halifax but also in more isolated areas. In Guysboro District in eastern Nova Scotia, the first and only all-Black Local Spiritual Assembly in Canada was elected for the first time in 1977.

Another significant milestone was the arrival of Iranian Bahá'í refugees in different towns and cities throughout the region in the early 1980s, which saw small communities grow through striving to nurture and integrate individuals and families who had often endured great hardship. While many of the refugees eventually moved to other regions where there were greater economic opportunities, those who have remained have become cherished stalwarts of our Atlantic community.

Today, although the general population of the region is aging and shrinking as youth move out of the region for education and employment, the Bahá'í community is buoyant and energetic in its efforts to partner with others to develop healthy communities, particularly through expansion of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program. Youth pioneers, who have come to this region to work shoulder to shoulder with local youth have been in the vanguard of this latest surge of activity, but the entire Bahá'í community has demonstrated its readiness to work with them and support their efforts. Our goal is to have a vibrant junior youth program in eleven clusters in the region by 2021.