

Baha'is laying foundation for a better life on Earth

By ANNETTE DROLET
Sun staff writer

Linda Brown has found it. So has Mary Allen. And the two Clearwater women say they feel a responsibility to help others find it, too.

"It" is the Baha'i faith, which Mrs. Allen calls "the most exciting thing that's ever happened to the world."

Baha'is consider their religion, based on the writings of their prophet Baha-u-llah (the name means "glory of God"), to be the one true faith. Baha-u-llah, they say, is the messiah that Jews, Christians and others have been awaiting.

"We believe the Baha'i faith is the fulfillment of all the faiths," said Mrs. Brown, who serves with Mrs. Allen on the Baha'i spiritual assembly in Clearwater. "We don't call for the abolition of any other faith."

"The Bahai's say those other religions are valid teachings from God. But we think as people study the teachings of Baha-u-llah, they will see he is the one promised by other religions."

The Baha'i faith, which grew out of 19th-century Islam, is intimately linked with the Babi religion, founded in 1844 by a Persian merchant named Mirza Ali-Muhammad, who became known as the Bab or the "gate."

Within 19 years, the Bab said, God would send another prophet made in the image of Buddha, Mohammed and Christ. The promised one, the Bab said, would usher in an age of peace for all mankind.

The Bab's teachings spread throughout Persia, provoking strong opposition by

the Moslem clergy and the government. Consequently, the Bab was arrested and, after several years of imprisonment, was executed.

His death was followed by large-scale persecutions of his followers that cost more than 20,000 people their lives.

Thirteen years after the Bab's assassination, one of his disciples, Mirza Husayn-Ali, proclaimed that he was the messenger of God whose coming had been foretold by the Bab.

Husayn-Ali, who was born in 1817, assumed the title of Baha-u-llah. The majority of the Bab's followers acknowledged Baha-u-llah's claim and became known as Baha'is.

After Baha-u-llah revealed himself in Baghdad, where he went after being exiled from his native Persia in 1852, Turkish officials transferred him from prison to prison in an attempt to destroy his influence. In 1868, Baha-u-llah was sent to the Turkish penal colony at Akka (Acre) near present-day Haifa, Israel.

Instead of discrediting him, the move served to expand Baha-u-llah's authority because, to his followers, the transfer to Akka confirmed the ancient prophecy that "the Lord of Hosts would be manifested in the Holy Land," according to a Baha'i publication.

During his years of incarceration, Baha-u-llah formulated the laws and principles of his faith and proclaimed his message to kings and rulers of both East and West, Christian and Moslem. Before he died in 1892, Baha-u-llah saw his religion spread beyond Persia and the Otto-

man Empire to Turkistan, India, Burma, Egypt and the Sudan.

After Baha-u-llah's death, his eldest son, Abbas Effendi (known as Abdu'l-Baha or "servant of Baha"), became the leader of the Baha'i community and the interpreter of Baha-u-llah's teachings.

During Abdu'l-Baha's ministry, the faith was spread to North Africa, the Far East, Australia and the United States. When Abdu'l-Baha died in 1921, his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, succeeded him as "Guardian of the Cause."

Since Effendi's death in 1957, the Baha'i International House of Justice has been responsible for making judgments on any matters of the faith not covered by Baha-u-llah's writings, Mrs. Allen said.

Today, there are approximately 3.5 million Baha'is in 165 countries, including some 100,000 in the United States and about 150 in Pinellas County.

Administrative control of the Baha'i faith is centered in local and national spiritual assemblies. In Pinellas County, there are five such local governing bodies—Clearwater, Largo, Gulfport, St. Petersburg and unincorporated Pinellas.

Both local and national assemblies are composed of nine members elected for one-year terms. Members of the national assemblies in turn elect to five-year terms members of the Universal House of Justice in Haifa.

The Baha'i community has neither priests nor rituals. The heart of the community's spiritual life, according to a Baha'i publication, is the 19-day spiritual feast that is held on the first day of every

Baha'i month. (The Baha'i calendar has 19 months consisting of days that start at sunset instead of midnight.)

In addition to the feast, Baha'is observe holy days and hold firesides—informal informational sessions for prospective members.

For such interested persons, Mrs. Brown said, "there's a freedom to investigate the faith with no coercion from the Baha'is. People aren't pressured to join. We're forbidden to proselytize."

Merely being born into a Baha'i family doesn't automatically make someone a Baha'i, said Farah Rouhani, a member of Clearwater's Baha'i community. At 15, she said, such persons must make a "conscious decision" to become a Baha'i after investigating the faith to ensure its truth.

Those who decide to become Baha'is have the freedom to decide how much of their energies they wish to contribute to the religion, Mrs. Brown said.

When persons of other faiths, say Christianity or Buddhism, join the Baha'is, they don't give up their belief in Christ or Buddha, she said. Rather, "they feel they've followed that prophet's teachings to the utmost and that he has returned," Mrs. Brown said.

Baha'is believe in progressive revelation—the idea that religion is the evolution of one faith that shows different faces to different ages. Thus, they say, Krishna (Hinduism), Moses (Judaism), Zoroaster (Zoroastrianism), Buddha (Buddhism), Jesus (Christianity), Mohammed (Islam), the Bab and Baha-u-llah were successive "manifestations" through whom

God has progressively revealed the meaning of life. Baha-u-llah, Baha'is say, is the latest but not the last prophet.

Baha-u-llah—whom Baha'is consider to be both human and divine—left behind in his writings a "valid message" from God and the blueprint for a world society based on God's teachings, Mrs. Brown said.

Baha'is believe that after a time of tribulation on Earth, a "great peace" will come, bringing with it a global government and the establishment of the Baha'i religion as the world faith.

"This is a preliminary time," Mrs. Brown said. "Humanity's not ready to accept that great peace. Look at the fabric of society. It's pretty torn. That fabric won't support a world society in the shape it's in."

Until it can, Mrs. Allen said, she and other Baha'is will busily continue to lay the foundation for a better life on Earth.

In addition to their belief in the "essential unity of mankind," Baha'is advocate independent investigation; essential harmony of science and religion; recognition of the divine foundation of all religions; universal compulsory education; equality of men and women; spiritual solution of economic problems; need for a universal auxiliary language; elimination of prejudice; and a universal peace based upon a world federation of nations.

"We're very happy people," Mrs. Allen said. "We love to be together. There's a lot of laughter. It's this unity that seems to attract people."

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