

Baha'i Faith conference on race draws hundreds of participants

 [timesfreepress.com/news/life/entertainment/story/2019/sep/02/bahai-faith-conference-race-draws-hundreds-pa/502635](https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/life/entertainment/story/2019/sep/02/bahai-faith-conference-race-draws-hundreds-pa/502635)

September 2, 2019



Staff photo by Wyatt Massey / Sanam Milani, 15, presents at the Tennessee Baha'i School at the DuBose Conference Center on September 1.

Photo by Contributed Photo /Times Free Press.

Staff photo by Wyatt Massey / Irene Iturburo,...

Photo by Contributed Photo /Times Free Press.

More than 300 people spent the Labor Day weekend at the DuBose Conference Center in Monteagle, Tennessee, for the annual Tennessee Baha'i School.

The school, which has been held for 39 years, focused on the topic of racial reconciliation and featured three days of small and large group study on the topic, along with prayer and worship services. On Sunday morning, participants gathered to share their reflections and ways in which they can impact their own communities.



Irene Iturburo, who facilitated some of the discussions, said the topic was chosen because race continues to be a dividing issue in the country. The Baha'i Faith seeks the unity of all people, so finding ways to bridge the social and cultural divides of the time are necessary. The faith uses a number of activities, such as youth programs and adult study gatherings, to open this important work to all people, not just Baha'is, Iturburo said.

"These activities we feel are important to change the hearts," she said. "Because we can change laws and regulations but we need to accept people who look different than us."

What is the Baha'i Faith?

The Baha'i Faith believes in the unity of all people over time through the world's various religions. In the faith, God reveals understanding to people at various times through prophets from other religions, such as the Buddha, Muhammad and Jesus. The religion was founded in Iran by Bahá'u'lláh in the mid-19th century and is followed by around 7 million people today.

Baha'is have been in the Chattanooga area since the 1940s, said Andrew Lefton, secretary for the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Chattanooga. The local assembly incorporated in 1975 and has around 100 members from Hamilton, Bradley and Marion counties, he said.

The education programs create spaces for people to interact with people who may come from different backgrounds, Iturburo said. Exposure to these differences creates understanding and unity.

Youth who attended were encouraged to share their views and participate in the discussions that included adults. Sanam Milani, 15, was one of the participants who shared her group's ideas at the Sunday morning reflection.

"The youth are the most important place to target," Milani said, adding that to create lasting change people must mobilize all generations. "We are just talking about it but we are not acting on it."

Milani's group said they could use social media, such as Instagram, to share meaningful messages with young people and activate them to take part in meaningful conversations around race. Sohayla Reimer, 14, said people can shy away from these kinds of conversations because they are too focused on other things, like material objects.

Taino Smothers, 23, said one of the most polarizing issues around race in his community in Nashville is gentrification. The redesigning process of neighborhoods forces out families who have lived in that area for generations. Smothers is not Baha'i but said he was drawn to the conference because of his spirituality and the weekend's opportunity for discussion.

"I feel that no matter what, people are going to come together," Smothers said. "No matter what."

Barbara McCord, who helped organize the weekend, said the weekend was also a chance for Baha'is across the region to see one another.

"Because of the diaspora, because of the horrible treatment of Baha'is in Iran, we've been spread all over the U.S.," McCord said.

The 1979 Iranian revolution ushered in a hardline government, forcing thousands of Baha'is to flee the country. Since then, more than 200 Baha'is have been killed and thousands imprisoned, according to a 2019 report by Baha'is of the United States. The Iranian constitution does not offer any protection to Baha'is.

The conference served people in states across the Southeast, including places where there may not be a large Baha'i community. The organizing team is considering another school for people in the region in February, McCord said.

Contact Wyatt Massey at wmassey@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6249. Find him on Twitter at [@News4Mass](https://twitter.com/News4Mass).