

# WORLD NEWS

## Alice Springs .. the place .. the people .. the Faith

Greetings from my temporary home of Alice Springs in the heart of Australia and also the heart of Bahá'í activities. When I arrived here 3 months ago I had no idea how beautiful and how crucial this Bahá'í community is. Over the last 2 years it has experienced the beginnings of entry by troops of the indigenous, aboriginal community and has tripled in size. This makes for a variety of interesting and challenging opportunities.

### Background history

The history of the aboriginal peoples is very sad and understandably an embarrassment for Australia. Australian history has usually been taught as starting 200 years ago when it was "discovered" by Europeans, however at that time it was actually inhabited by over a million aborigines. About 700 different languages were spoken then within an intricate, beautiful and respectful culture. The aboriginal attitudes towards family and family responsibility, their beliefs about the relationship between the physical, human and spiritual worlds and their ability to adapt to the harsh climate of central Australia are just some of the valuable aspects of aboriginal life that are different to "mainstream" Australia.

However, the practice for many years was to try and remove this "sub-human" society from the continent of Australia, to the extent that only in 1967 were the aboriginal people allowed to vote in national elections. This was after being subjected to innumerable hardships and much injustice which included: systematic removal from their land; not being allowed to enter cities without permits and the separation of children from families to be brought up in institutions as a means to try and "civilise" these "primitive peoples". The "stolen generation" which is a term commonly used to describe these children remains an important issue that the country is only starting to understand and come to terms with. The result of so much prejudice has left much of aboriginal Australia disillusioned and hopeless, and this is compounded by continuing prejudice and institutional racism.

### Alice Springs

When I arrived here I expected a dry and arid tiny town with one or two shops. I was completely wrong and everything about Alice Springs has pleasantly surprised me. It is a growing town with about 30,000 inhabitants. It has the largest aboriginal population in Australia (25% here as compared to 2% overall) and a constant stream of tourists attracted by the beautiful and accessible countryside and Uluru or Ayers Rock which is 300 miles away.

The climate is just wonderful and since I arrived we have had three years worth of rain so the countryside is green, lush and stunning. I have witnessed dry river beds become raging torrents in a couple of hours.

Alice residents are in general open, kind and friendly, which I think is a reflection of the fact that as it is so remote here, everyone relies more on one another and so there is a strong feeling of family with even new friends. Alice has a transient population and seems to attract people who are looking for something different, yearning to be a part of a constructive process in the development of Australia. Work is readily available especially in the fields of health, education, community development, and the tourist industry.

I have been working as a remote psychiatrist, travelling in a four-wheel drive along dirt roads to visit people in their communities. I am away from town on average two nights each week and the work gives me privileged access to communities that are rarely visited. Some of these are really special, set in stunning locations and with inhabitants that are friendly, warm and humorous. Many communities are run by annually elected "councils" that through consultation coordinate the affairs of the community. One of the most popular activities is playing Aussie football. Art centres and women's groups are also developing.

### Central Australian Bahá'í Community

Alice Springs has a unique role to play in integrating the aboriginal "way" with the rest of Australia and the Bahá'í community has much to offer in this process. Unfortunately only a few Bahá'ís have chosen to settle here, although these pioneers are an inspiring bunch. They include Maori and Tongan believers and families recently over from Guinea-Bissau and Iran. The closest local Bahá'í community is over 1000 miles away and even that does not describe how vast this area is. Only two other communities in the whole area have Bahá'ís living in them, so the task in hand is immense.

The Alice Bahá'í community committed itself to the process of entry by troops and following guidance from the Universal House of Justice adopted a systematic approach which has yielded amazing results. The overall aims are, "To win the steadfast allegiance of the indigenous people of Australia to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. To empower them to take this message to their people throughout their continent. To engage the special qualities and skills of indigenous Australians in the expansion and development of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh."

The community has embarked on what is called the "Seven Sisters' teaching project". The Seven Sisters are a constellation of stars referred to by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as Pleiades and they are also part of a traditional Aboriginal "Dreamtime" story. The project started two years ago when a group of Bahá'ís from the Pacific region came to Alice for a week-long proclamation event. At this time there were no aboriginal Bahá'ís in Alice Springs. The visiting travel teachers included Aboriginal believers from the east coast of Australia, Maori and Native American Bahá'ís. Their programme included a prayer vigil at Uluru and a formal meeting with the aboriginal elders of the region, informing them of the Bahá'í message. This was in keeping with Aboriginal custom. At the end of the week a local Aboriginal man, Gibson John, declared his faith in Bahá'u'lláh and the majority of declarations since then have been by members of his family.

Last year the community saw even more activities and growth. The Australasian Continental Board of Counsellors all chose to all meet in Alice. At this time a "Spiritual Call to the Elders" took place, where the Counsellors met with the indigenous elders of Alice Springs. The Seven Sisters hosted a youth project with three different travel teaching groups and the national Bahá'í youth conference was held here.

The Seven Sisters' project is helping to consolidate new believers. It has further plans to open new communities to the Faith - identifying those in which relatives of current Bahá'ís live and hence involving the new believers actively in the teaching work. The project has been supported in large by other communities throughout Australia, through prayers, human resources, financial assistance and by donating a community bus and an exhibition stand.

Since my arrival I have enjoyed many different activities. We have had a number of fireside BBQs with a constant stream of declarations (I have lost count!), study circles, 19-day Feasts, dawn prayers, a regular stall at the town market and community consultations. The Bahá'í youth are well known and recently performed African and Torres Strait Island dances at a Reconciliation meeting held in the centre of town.

With so many new believers here the potential for further growth is clear but resources are scarce. Most of the friends are exhausted just thinking about what needs to be done. Current projects include starting children's classes (there are around 50 Bahá'í children here under 12), translating the Writings into a local aboriginal language, finding a Bahá'í Centre, study circles and travel teaching.

### **Come and see for yourself**

The pioneers carry many responsibilities and any form of support is welcome. Why not visit the Australian outback soon - you'll feel what real warmth is like!

