



The Association of Bahá'í Women – Northern Ireland



THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE of the Association of Bahá'í Women Northern Ireland (ABW NI) took place on June 2 in the beautiful setting of Mount Zion House, a former convent now used as a community/conference facility at Lurgan, Co. Armagh. Members assembled for the AGM in the morning, where, after a devotional, we had reports from our chairperson and from the local ABW branches. Our core group has met with both the newly elected Bahá'í Council for Northern Ireland and with Zarin Hainsworth-Fadaei, Director of the Office for the Advancement of Women. It was heartening to hear of all the activity going on around the localities, where a wide range of events, though often small in themselves, built relationships among women and among communities. It was inspiring to hear what other branches had been up to: relaxation mornings, regular get-togethers for coffee, invitations to civic events by simply registering with local councils and a multi-cultural festival to celebrate International Women's Day – just some of the events we heard about. Our Newry delegate had a great word for it all: synergy.

The sense of purpose and energy was further confirmed by the presentation of ABW's vision for the next five years. We have both a great challenge and an exciting opportunity ahead. By Ridván 2006, for example, we hope to have educated our Northern Ireland community on the role of women within the Faith and within society and to have established relationship and family-life training courses. Thus by Ridván 2003, we hope to have offered all of the community the opportunity to study the compilation on women and to have developed trainers and materials on marriage and family life courses. The overall vision of ABW NI is that Bahá'í women understand their role, and realise and accept their "high responsibilities" in their networking and participation in the activities of society of which we form a part. To be a Bahá'í woman is a lofty calling indeed.

In the discussion that followed we reflected on these challenges and opportunities. The phenomenon of the tour of the relics of St Therese of Lisieux was discussed as evidence of a spiritual hunger among "ordinary" people and we asked what is our response as Bahá'ís? Are we seen as being "up there" talking in language that others do not understand? It was clear that there is a need in society to "touch the heart" of other people and to develop real relationships with them. An opportunity to do just that is unfolding in Belfast where Pippa Cookson is hoping to recruit a woman to make use of a room available at her home to develop an outreach to women in an interface area of West Belfast.

After an excellent lunch we reassembled for our public meeting and welcomed our keynote speaker Caroline Smith whose theme was "What now for the Women's Movement?" Caroline is a psychotherapist from Tralee, Co. Kerry. Married with 6 children, she is in an ideal position to assess the successes and failures of the women's movement and to wonder

where it goes from here. Caroline rightly reminded us that we have come a long way from the days when women were literally the chattels of their husbands and when marriage spelt the end of a woman's career, but the failures of the women's movement need also to be taken into account. The "glass ceiling" is still very much a reality as is the earnings gap and the under-representation of women in government and public bodies. Violence against

women remains endemic, as does sexual exploitation. A renewed cause for concern is the issue of self-worth and body image as we live in an age where women are engaged in “self-mutilation” in the pursuit of beauty, an age where dieting and cosmetic surgery are multi-million pound industries.

Caroline did not lay the blame for these issues at the door of the women’s movement as such, but felt that they illustrated its failure to make an impact on society. The problem is that materialist values govern our society; everything from sex to childcare has a price put on it, with no appreciation of its true value. Economics and politics are male strongholds which are governed by the twin ideas of selling things and fighting people, while the true purpose of society, to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation, is marginalised. In such a society childcare has been reduced to having our kids supervised while we do “real” work.

It is a depressing picture in many ways but there is hope. Bahá’í women have a spiritual perspective to offer the equality debate, a perspective all too often lacking. Indeed, Caroline pointed out that Bahá’í women even have a yardstick by which the achievement of equality can be measured: when a woman can walk from one end of the earth to the other, wearing valuable jewelry and fine clothes and remain unmolested. This implies a complete absence of both sexual violence and theft of property. And how do we bring such a society about? Caroline, as the result of her work with survivors of abuse and trauma, has come to the unavoidable conclusion that there is nothing more important for humanity, nothing that needs our attention more than how we bring up our children. For they will form the basis of our future society, and if the values of materialism, self-interest and fanaticism are to be addressed, then future generations need to be empowered to tackle them.

Caroline’s words provided much food for thought as was evidenced by the discussion which followed. We left the conference with a clear picture of the challenges and the opportunities which lie ahead for us as Bahá’í women, as well as the privilege that is ours to be “true bondswomen of the Blessed Beauty”. *Compilation of Compilations*, p. 396.

I would like to thank the Core Group for their hard work in organising the conference and Caroline for her inspiring address. I hope to share the vision of this conference with the men and women of my own community.

Michele Ainley