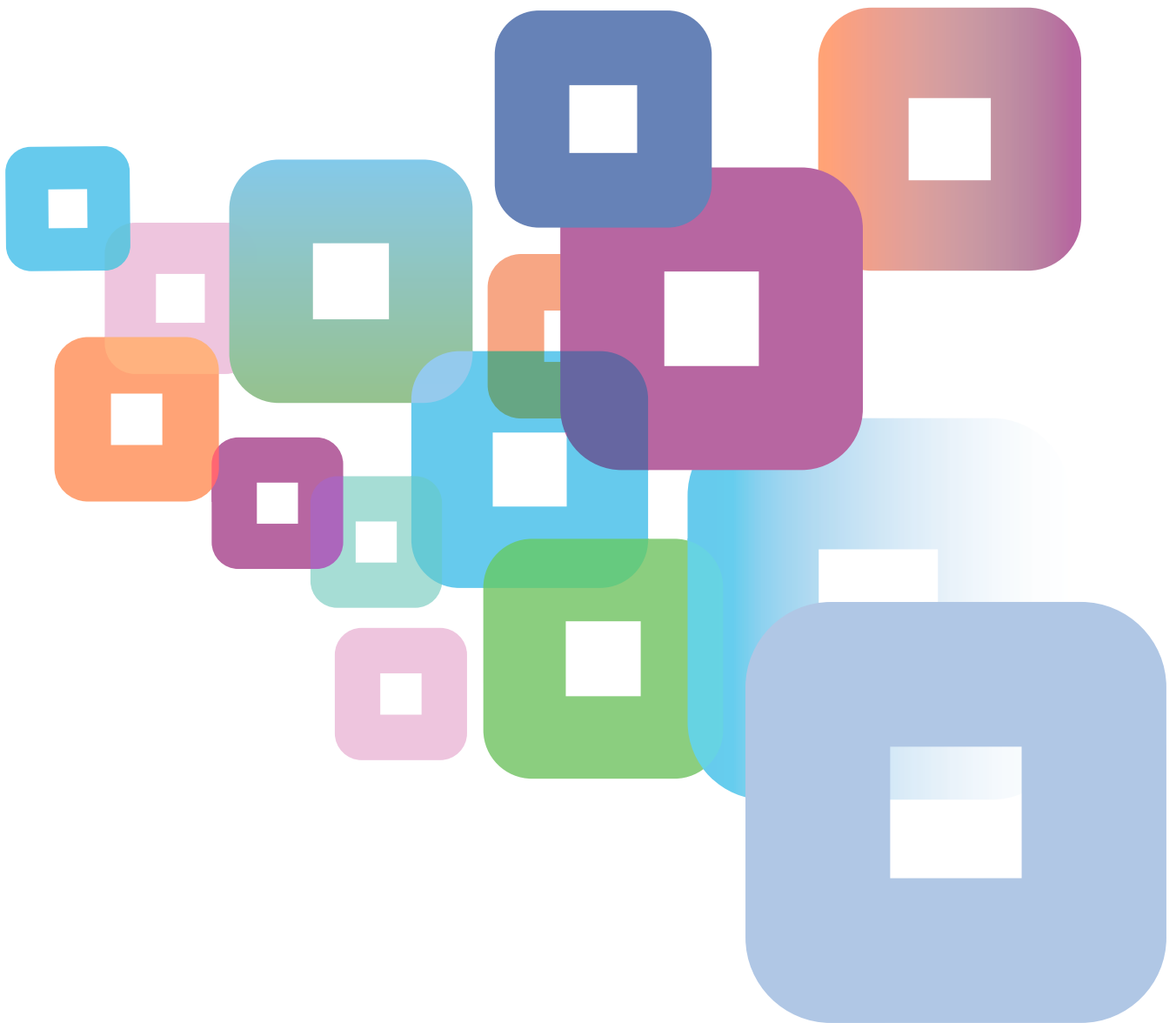




# Culture and Religion Information Sheet

## Baha'i



## Aim

**This information sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Baha'i religious and cultural practices to assist service providers in the government and not-for-profit community sectors to improve service delivery.**

## Introduction

Western Australia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for all religions are integral parts of our shared culture and are important underlying principles of multiculturalism and democracy.

There are a number of international treaties and national laws that recognise freedom of religion and belief as fundamental human rights, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948*, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966* and the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986*.

In Western Australia it is unlawful under the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* to discriminate against a person because of their religious conviction in certain areas

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of public life including employment, education, the provision of goods, services and facilities, in accommodation, clubs and in application forms (see the Equal Opportunity Commission website <http://www.eoc.wa.gov.au/Index.aspx>).

Service providers and employers who recognise, value and promote cultural and religious diversity can address more fully the needs of their clients and staff, thus providing services based on good practice. Respecting the roles of religion in various cultures is part of courteous, ethical and professional behaviour, which promotes a just and equitable society.

## History of the Baha'i Faith in Western Australia

The Baha'i Faith was introduced to Western Australian in the 1920s. In 1924 Australian Baha'is Clara and Hyde Dunn and Effie Barker visited Perth. This was followed by a lecture tour by American Baha'i Martha Root in July 1924, after which Perth's first Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is was established.

There are more than 30 elected Spiritual Assemblies in Western Australia that look after the affairs of the Baha'i community. The first Baha'i Council of Western Australia was elected in 2001. The State's first Baha'i Centre of Learning was opened in the same year and is located in the Perth suburb of Myaree.

## Demographics

According to the 2011 Census, there were 2201 people affiliated with the Baha'i Faith in Western Australia, an increase of 255 people, or 13 per cent, compared with 2006.



Between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses, the number of people in Australia who identified themselves as Baha'i increased by 1376 people, or 11 per cent, to 13,707 people. Australia's Baha'is were born mainly in Iran and Australia.

It is estimated that there are more the seven million Baha'is worldwide.

## Background and origins

The Baha'i Faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions. It was founded in 1863 by Baha'u'llah (1817–1892), a Persian living in exile in Baghdad, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. He was from one of Persia's most prominent dynastic families.

Baha'u'llah was guided by the message of the Bab (meaning 'Gate') who was born in 1819 in Shiraz in present-day Iran. The Bab announced the imminent appearance of the Messenger of God and was executed for his beliefs. Baha'u'llah was exiled because of his support for the Bab. The faith was consolidated by Baha'u'llah's eldest son, Abbas Effendi, who took on the title 'Abdu'l-Baha' meaning the 'servant of Baha'. Baha'u'llah's followers became known as Baha'is.

Baha'u'llah's central message was the oneness of God, the oneness of humanity and the oneness of religion. His message was that God had set in place forces to overcome barriers that divide societies such as race, class, creed and nation. The main principles of Baha'i Faith include the:

- abandonment of prejudice
- equality of men and women

- unity and relativity of religious truth
- elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth
- realisation of universal education
- responsibility of each person to independently search for truth
- establishment of a global commonwealth of nations
- belief that true religion is in harmony with reason and the pursuit of scientific knowledge.
- worships end with a prayer for universal peace and harmony.

## Key beliefs

Baha'is believe that Baha'u'llah is the most recent messenger of God. They accept Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Christ and Muhammad as earlier messengers, and that their religions are chapters of the monotheistic tradition.

The Baha'i way of life is based on Baha'u'llah's teaching that each person is a 'mine rich in gems' which are hidden capacities to be cultivated and developed. Baha'is are encouraged to do this through:

- daily prayer and meditation
- working with people from diverse backgrounds
- abstaining from drugs and alcohol.

Baha'is believe that humanity has reached a stage of spiritual maturity that makes the unification of the human family and the building of a peaceful, global society, possible.

## Greeting

There are no sensitivities to be observed on greeting or introducing a Baha'i. However, Baha'is believe that all interactions should be conducted with the utmost kindness and politeness.

## Names and titles

The Baha'i Faith has no clergy or other leaders with titles. Similarly, there are no naming conventions.

## Dress and appearance

Baha'is do not have specific dress requirements other than to be modest and observe the utmost cleanliness.

## Seating

There are no special seating requirements.

## Food, drink and fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious communities. When hosting events where food is served, offer a selection of vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods on separate trays as a matter of good practice. A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function.

Although there are no dietary restrictions, the following issues relating to food, drink and fasting should also be understood:

- observant Baha'is do not consume alcohol
- Baha'is observe an annual period of fasting from 2 to 20 March, abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset.

## Religious festivals and days of significance

Baha'is observe 11 holy days each year, including days associated with the lives of Baha'u'llah and the Bab. They are commemorated with community gatherings for prayer, reflection and fellowship. On nine of these holy days, Baha'is abstain from work. The main days of observance are:

- New Year on March 21
- Ridván, a twelve-day period in April/May that commemorates Baha'u'llah's declaration of his mission.

## Family and marriage

The varying family characteristics of religious groups should be appreciated.

- Baha'is believe that the family is the basic unit of society. Monogamous marriage stands at the foundation of family life, and healthy and unified families are the foundations of a strong society.
- Marriages are not arranged, however, parental consent is encouraged. Parents are expected to provide guidance in order to preserve unity within the marriage and the extended family.
- The marriage vow is sacred and both partners are expected to be faithful.
- Baha'is believe in the equality of women and men. However, Baha'u'llah's teachings also recognise their physical and emotional differences.



- Men are expected to share in household duties and child rearing. However, Baha'is believe that mothers play a special role in a child's early development when the basic values and character of every individual is formed.

Divorce is permitted, but strongly discouraged. Baha'is are encouraged to observe a 'year of patience', supervised by the Local Spiritual Assembly, where they live apart and attempt to reconcile. Following this, a divorce can be granted in accordance with civil law.

## Death and related issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly important for all religious communities.

Baha'is believe in life after death. Baha'u'llah believed in the existence of a separate, rational soul. When the human body dies, the soul is freed to begin its progress through the spiritual world. Baha'is understand the spiritual world to be a timeless and placeless extension of our own universe.

**It is Western Australian Government policy to provide competent interpreting and translating services to clients who are unable to communicate effectively in spoken or written English.<sup>1</sup>**

**Government agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone 131 450.**

1. The Western Australian Language Services Policy, 2008, Office of Multicultural Interests, Western Australian Government.

## Further enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Office of Multicultural Interests with the support of the Baha'i community of Western Australia. For further information please contact the Baha'i Centre of Learning:

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