

Baha'i membership statistics

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Bahá'í membership statistics

Robert Stockman

1998-11

Letter One, question

Subject: Re: Bahá'í Growth

Date: 11/1/98 1:34 AM

Greetings!

Does anyone know the basis for the membership figures given below? Are they running composites of declarations less withdrawals and deaths? Are they the number of American Bahá'í subscribers? Do the figures include folks who signed cards during mass teaching campaigns without recognizing the station of Bahá'u'lláh? If so, is there an other basis for measuring "believers"?

Figure 1, "Number of American Bahá'ís for selected years" appears in Robert Stockman's short essay, "U.S. Bahá'í Community Membership: 1894-1996," published in *The American Bahá'í* November 23, 1996, page 27.

Note: Statistics are available for most years, but not for all. The years shown were chosen to represent trends.

Year Membership

1894 -- 7

1899 -- 1,500

1900 -- 500

1906 -- 1,500

1916 -- 2,884

1920 -- 1,500

1926 -- 1,500

1936 -- 3,000

1941 -- 4,256

1946 -- 5,134

1951 -- 6,729
1956 -- 7,578
1962 -- 9,659
1966 -- 14,716
1968 -- 17,765
1970 -- 23,994
1971 -- 40,221
1972 -- 59,372
1974 -- 63,470
1979 -- 77,396
1984 -- 91,669
1989 -- 112,000
1993 -- 120,000
1996 -- 133,000

Letter Two, answer

Subject: RE: Bahá'í Growth

Date: Sun, 1 Nov 1998

From: "Stockman, Robert"

To: "Bahá'í Studies"

Dear Friends:

The list of Bahá'í population numbers in the United States from the 18890s to the present is a composite from various sources. The figures before 1934 are the best estimates possible, based on the US Religious Census (information collected by the Bahá'ís based on various definitions of membership). The figures from 1940 to the 1960s or 1970s come from Bahá'í News, where the figures were occasionally published. From some time in the 1970s on, a staffer at the National Teaching Committee (one with graduate school experience, not someone with no statistical experience) compiled the data from national membership records, probably annual membership reports in the files.

The definition of membership is more or less the same since the 1930s; a person must sign a declaration card stating he/she believes in Bahá'u'lláh, the Bab, and `Abdu'l-Bahá, and understands there are laws and institutions to obey (the card does not specify them).

The National Center, obviously, is not in the position to decide which cards were signed in good faith and which were not. The National Spiritual Assembly instituted a two-tier process about 1974, of (1) declaration, and (2) enrollment, the latter involving a meeting with the declarant to ascertain that the person understands what s/he is doing. The two-stage process was inaugurated because of abuses in mass-teaching campaigns during 1968-72. It is difficult to say how

extensive "abuse" was; there are stories about what people did ("sign here and you'll start getting a newspaper every month" for example). I participated in mass teaching in Florida in 1979 and saw no cutting of corners. I have never heard anyone say that "corner cutting" was extensive or widespread, so I am of the opinion that rigorous sociological research is needed to determine it, rather than relying on anecdotes.

The National Bahá'í Center does not maintain a list of "inactive" Bahá'ís. Its membership list is divided into several categories:

Bahá'ís in good standing, known addresses.

Bahá'ís in good standing, "mail return."

Bahá'ís in good standing, "address unknown." This category is a more definitive one than (2). I am not sure what the difference between the two are; the people in Information Services have reliable definitions or each. Perhaps it has to do with the post office's reply.

Bahá'ís who have lost their rights, are in mental institutions, prisons, etc. These are coded as separate categories. I am uncertain to what extent their addresses are maintained. It would depend on whether they get *The American Bahá'í,* because the main maintenance of the mailing list has to do with the "address correction requested" feature on *The American Bahá'í.*

Bahá'ís who are dead. When someone dies they remain on the database and their id number is permanently theirs. Obviously, they are not counted as part of the current membership! I say this only because someone has suggested in print that they are included. They aren't, I assure you.

I am typing at home and do not have all the latest figures. As of Ridvan 1998 the American Bahá'í community included 58,240 adult men; 58,903 adult women; 5,776 adults whose sex is unknown in Wilmette (I am sure it is known to the persons in question); for a total of 122,920 adults. The community also includes 7,212 youth (aged 15-20) and 8,036 children (aged 0-14). These total 138,168 persons. These figures do not include Bahá'ís in the Falklands or the Turks and Caicos Islands, which are under the jurisdiction of the United States NSA (of course, there are 14 Bahá'ís in the Falklands and 142 in Turks and Caicos, so they don't change the figures much). The figures also do not include Bahá'ís in Alaska (about 3,000, I think), Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, and other US possessions not under the jurisdiction of the U.S. NSA.

These figures are from the annual statistical report sent to the Universal House of Justice in late August and are public statistics. If you'd like to know how many Bahá'ís there are in any particular state, I can tell you.

Of the 138,000, roughly half have good addresses, and I think about a quarter each are mail returns and address unknowns. But people do not stay in the mail return or address unknown categories because sometimes they notify the NSA of their correct address. The Information Services department makes over 20,000 address changes a year; Bahá'ís move a lot (the United States census reports the average American moves once every five years). When an address is updated the date of the update is now kept, but I don't know whether it has always been kept. At some point in the future Bahá'í sociologists could define "membership" as someone whose address has not been listed as "address unknown" for the last, say, five years or the last ten years, but I am not sure whether the data would allow that yet.

A few other matters. Electoral districts are defined based on known addresses, of course. Some areas have more "address unknowns" than others. I once asked the computer to give me the list of everyone in South Bend, Indiana (where I live) who falls in all three categories. We had 27 with known addresses and maybe three in the other two categories.

Defining membership is extremely subjective and whenever anyone says group X has so many members you always have to ask "by what definition"? There are usually several definitions that are legitimate. If you go through a town and ask everyone what their religion is, you will get a definition based on "religious identity." You will find people who say they are Lutherans that the local Lutheran church has never seen, because they moved into town as Lutherans and still consider themselves Lutherans, but never go to church. There are a very small number of people in the United States that are Bahá'ís by that definition. When I was the Bahá'í representative to the Harvard-Radcliffe United Ministry I got all the "religious identification cards" that had been marked "Bahá'í" (these were included in the registration packet every September; completing it was optional). In addition to the cards turned in by the Bahá'ís there were always 1 or 2 people we had never heard of. There were also a few people who checked multiple boxes, like "Orthodox Jew" "Bahá'í" and "Buddhist."

Even with the "address known" people, the "quality" of faith varies a lot. I have a friend who declared after knowing about the Faith for 20 years. Every now and then we get in a discussion and he say "Rob, what do we believe about X?" He wants me to tell him what "we" (he and I) as Bahá'ís believe! This friend also gets feasts and firesides mixed up. But does he have a Bahá'í identity? Yes.

Regarding what fraction of the "mass taught" Bahá'ís have a Bahá'í identity, this requires research to answer. If people didn't have an identity when they signed a card, maybe they do after receiving *The American Bahá'í* for twenty years! Whenever new membership cards are

mailed to people, a hundred or so are returned by people who say they aren't Bahá'ís. Recently an effort was made to find telephone numbers for Bahá'ís who were "address unknown" in South Carolina and they were called. I haven't heard the details, but the informal estimate I heard was that maybe 10% of them do not identify themselves as Bahá'ís.

I hope we can get better data, though. Recently 4,000 Bahá'ís were chosen at random and sent a letter asking them to participate in a "survey panel" for 18 months. A third replied favorably; almost no one refused. The panel has been divided into thirds and each third will be surveyed twice a year on different matters. Then a different 4,000 people will be selected and asked to participate and new panels will be constituted. The surveying task force hopes to make surveying a permanent part of the Bahá'í community culture. The panels are being checked for sample bias and other scientific efforts are being made to check reliability of the results. I hope in a year or so the results can be published in a proper, peer-reviewed journal, just like research on Baptists and other groups. The Bahá'í Faith is part of the Cooperative Congregational Survey project, a massive effort by 40 denominations to survey their congregations simultaneously about the same issues in early 2000 (coincident with the decennial US census). So surveying of the American Bahá'í community--which actually began in the early 1980s, and accelerated with small surveys in 1988 and 1992--is now beginning to be developed on a professional basis. I hope the results, in a few years, will replace anecdotes and speculation with hard data.

METADATA

Views22937 views since posted 1998; last edit 2012;

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