

Cycles of Membership Growth  
in the American Bahá'í  
Community  
1894-2009

# Major Points

- The Baha'i Faith has been present in the United States for 114 years (1894-2008).
- It has grown from one local community and a handful of members to 1100 communities and 164,000 believers.
- The community has seen three great pulses of growth (1894-1900, 1929-45, 1968-72) followed by periods of slower expansion and consolidation (1900-21, 1945-60, 1974-2007).

# Major Questions

- How have Baha'is attracted others to the Faith?
- How have they consolidated the new believers?
- Why has the Faith grown in pulses?

# The First Growth Pulse, 1894-1899

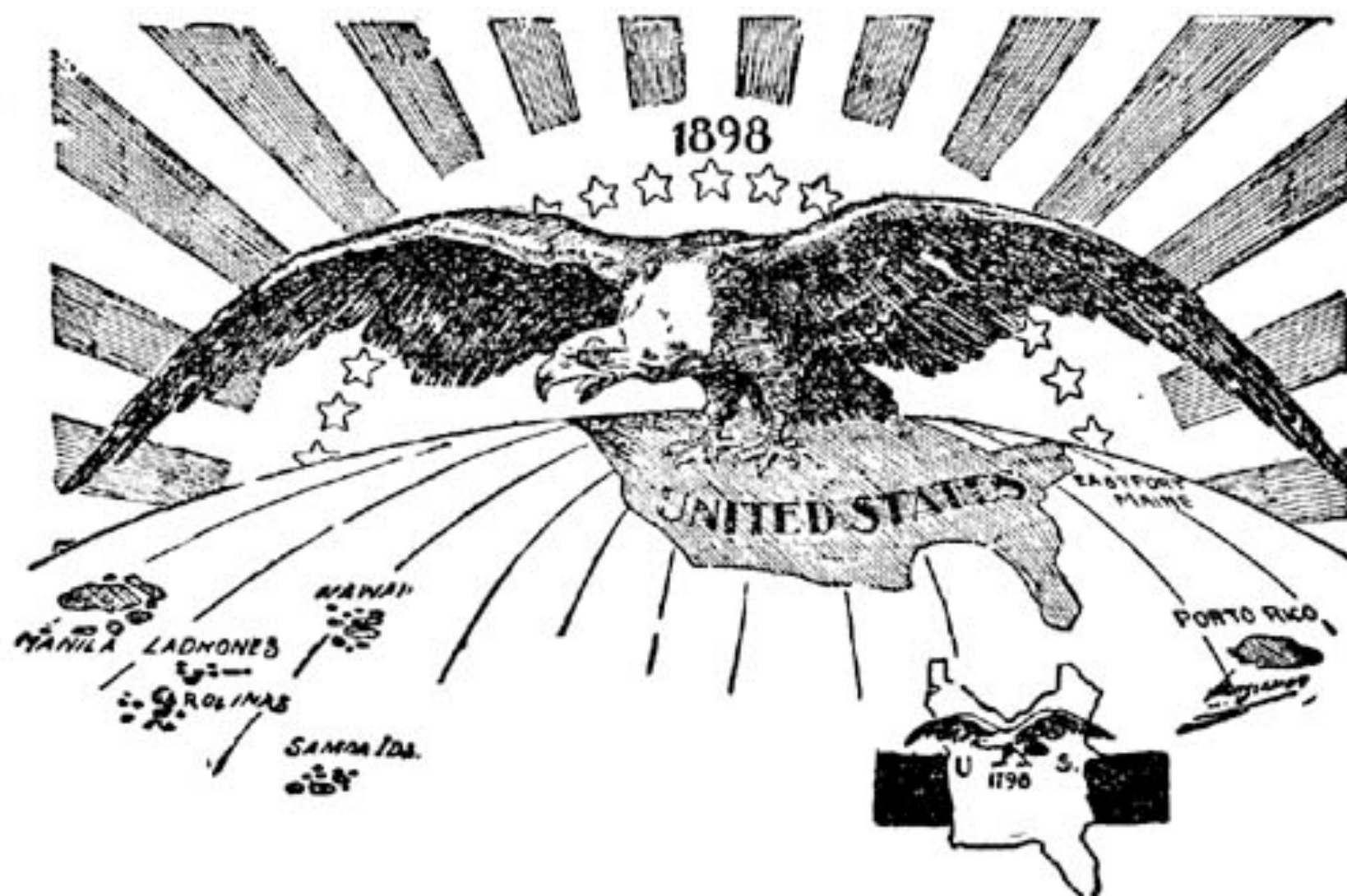
- 1894      2 U.S. Bahá'ís
- 1895      5
- 1896      28
- 1897      292
- 1898      887
- 1899      1,467 (according to 1899 membership ledgers)
- How did they do it?

# Community Strengths:

- Accurate information on the Faith? No way! `Abdu'l-Bahá was the return of Christ? But it was a “millennial community”
- A series of twelve lessons (an “Institute process”?)
- Regular Sunday worship meetings (core activities of a sort)
- “Receiving the Greatest Name” (an enrollment process)

# Outside the Faith . . .

- 1890: The closing of the American frontier
- 1893 Parliament of Religions; non-Christian religions are taken seriously for the first time
- Mid 1890s: a major depression (largest before the 1930s)
- The first march on Washington (of Civil War veterans demanding bigger pensions)
- US builds a big navy, becomes a world power
- Spanish-American War, Apr.-Aug. 1898 (with peace demonstrations)
- The BIG domestic question: What sort of nation have we become? Where will America go?



Ten thousand miles from tip to tip.—Philadelphia Press.

# Internal Bahá'í Community Factors, 1900-1920s

- Community founder became a Covenant-breaker, 1900
- The twelve lessons are abandoned (bye bye, “institutes”)
- Sunday worship is progressively abandoned (bye bye, “core activity”)
- “Receiving the Greatest Name” is abandoned; no enrollment process took its place
- A dozen works of Bahá'í scripture are translated by 1910
- `Abdu'l-Bahá visits, proclaims the Faith, but consolidation is less effective
- All contact with `Abdu'l-Bahá cut off for 2 years
- Four episodes of Covenant-breaking, 1911-13, 1917-19
- “What is the Bahá'í Faith?” became less clear
- No strong Bahá'í organization before 1921



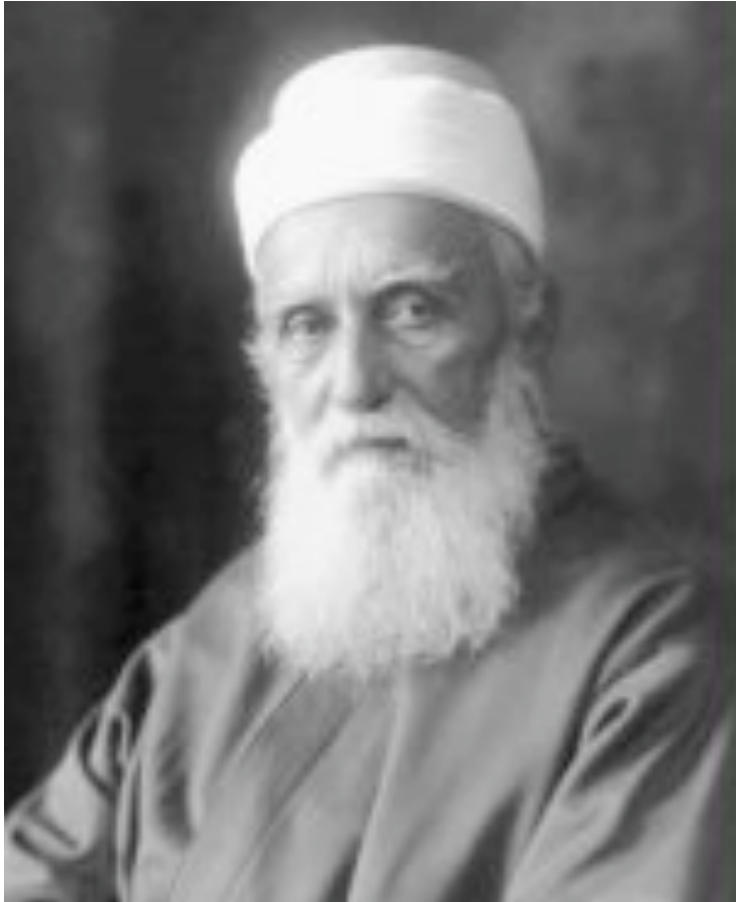
# Outside the community, 1900-29

- Prosperity and economic stability
- No major political crises (except WW 1)
- Interest in non-Christian religions remains low
- Xenophobia grows, first “Red Scare” occurs, first limits on immigration set
- Some social turmoil (the Muckrakers, for example, but not much)
- So: Did the Bahá’í community grow?

## Growth, 1900-30

- 1899 1,467 U.S. Bahá'ís
- 1900 500? (Covenant-breaking impact)
- 1906 1,280 (U.S. census; 1000-1600)
- 1916 2,884 (but includes sympathizers)
- 1920 1,234 (from a private list of Bahá'ís)
- 1922 1,362 (list sent to Shoghi Effendi)
- 1926 1,247 (U.S. census)
- 1936 2,584 (U.S. census)
- Flat membership or negative growth, 1900-1929

# What About 1912?



- 'Abdu'l-Bahá toured the United States, Apr.-Dec. 1912
- He spoke in at least 166 venues to at least 36,000 people

# What about 1912?

- Hundreds of newspaper articles (mostly very favorable)
- Known enrollments (based on 1935 Bahá'í census):
  - 1910: 36
  - 1911: 24
  - 1912: 51
  - 1913: 36
  - 1914: 30
- BUT many of the 1912 Bahá'ís were kids of Bahá'ís

# The Second Pulse: 1929-1945

- 1926      1,247
- 1936      2,584
- 1944      4,920
- 1946      5,134
- 411% membership growth in 20 years!
- 7% growth per year (compounded)
- Probably closer to 10% per year, as growth was low until 1930 or so.

# When did the Faith Grow?

- 1926: 44 enrollments
- 1927: 35
- 1928: 28
- 1929: 62  
(Depression begins)
- 1930: 71
- 1931: 74

- 1932: 149  
(Depression deepens)
- 1933: 140
- 1934: 140
- 1935: 150
- Numbers from the 1935 Bahá'í census; about 65% of the Bahá'ís participated

# Outside Events:

- 1929: The Great Depression begins
- 1932: The Depression gets worse, unemployment hits 25%; GDP declines 35%. Depression bottoms out, but improvement is very slow
- Late 1930s: Terrible political instability in Europe
- 1939-45: World War 2 and a terrible threat to civilization

# Community Activities

- Functioning LSAs and Feasts
- Firesides (mom was usually at home to plan them; and sometimes dad, too!)
- Public Meetings fed by a stream of expert traveling teachers (well attended before the era of mass entertainment)
- Systematic expansion to new cities and states (first Seven Year Plan, 1937-44)
- No enrollment without studying all the major works (and a “quiz” when enrolled!); a rough equivalent of the institute process



## 1946-63: “A Steady Flow of Fresh Recruits”?

- 1947      5,720
- 1948      5,987
- 1951      6,729
- 1954      7,674
- 1955      7,754
- 1956      7,578

- 1957      7,728
- 1958      8,243
- 1962      9,659
- 1963      10,247
- 78% growth in 16 years (almost 4% growth per year; respectable, but not fast)

# Why slower (but sufficient) growth?

- Between five and ten percent of the community—the most active—pioneered overseas
- An era of great prosperity and economic growth
- “Piety on the Potomac”: A time when Protestantism is popular
- A time of moral conservatism and status quo (for whites, anyway)

**FATHER KNOWS BEST**(not  
people interested in the Bahá'í  
Faith)



# The “First Sixties” (1960-67)

- A growing Civil Rights movement
- Social liberalism and sexual liberation
- “God is Dead” and Vatican II
- A time of “belief, fresh hope, and high ambition” (Leonard Sweet, church historian)
- Firesides, public meetings, study classes still provide a foundation for expansion

# Bahá'í Growth

- 1962      9,659
- 1963      10,247
- 1964      12,156
- 1966      14,716
- 1967      15,461
- 1968      17,765
- 84% growth in 6 years (10% per year!)

# The Second Sixties (1968-72)

- A time of “broken dreams, worn-out emotions, shattered institutions, fragmented selves, and failed communes” (Leonard Sweet)
- Assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King
- Detroit, many American cities, Paris have riots
- Tet Offensive and Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia
- The world was “falling apart”

# The Third Growth Pulse, 1968-72

- 1968      17,765
- 1969      20,256
- 1970      23,994
- 1971      40,221
- 1972      59,372
- 1974      63,470
- 1968-72 (five years): 334%, or 40% per year
- Did the Bahá'ís suddenly figure out how to teach, then forget? Probably not. External factors were probably prominent.

# Growth Factors

- Firesides, public meetings continue
- Systematic deepening before enrollment had been abolished in the early 1960s; enrollment was easy but consolidation was hard and withdrawal rate was high
- Strong youth movement (about 25% of the community was youth at one point)
- Mass teaching in the south



# Consolidation and the Long Slowdown, 1974-Present

- A time of increasing cultural conservatism
- The collapse of the Civil Rights movement
- The rise of new liberal causes like gay liberation, and new social controversies like abortion
- The rise of evangelicalism and Fundamentalism and a new approach to biblical prophecy (the Rapture)

# Slowing Growth

- 1975-80: 65,000 to 82,000; 26% (5% per year)
- 1980-85: 82,000 to 94,000; 15% (3%)
- 1985-1990: 94,000 to 114,000; 21% (4% per year)
- 1990-95: 114,000 to 131,000; 15% (3%)
- 1995-2000: 131,000 to 141,000; 8% (1.5% per year)

# Growth and Consolidation

- 2000-2007: 141,000 to 155,000; 10% (1.2% per year)
- Consolidation efforts of mass-taught believers largely unsuccessful; 10% of the mass taught believers are still Bahá'ís after 35 years
- Less than half of the 1968-72 youth remain active Bahá'ís
- Percentage of Bahá'ís with good addresses drops to 45%

# Other Factors

- Public meetings lose appeal (people want to see it on television)
- Hours worked per week increase and the times worked diversify; it's harder to invite people to your house
- Greater social isolation; people know neighbors less and visit homes less
- Women now work as well; harder to plan events and invite people to them
- Social teachings are less attractive, more "passe"

## 2002: Core Activities

- The Institute Process to provide skills training
- Devotional meetings
- Children's classes
- Youth classes
- Firesides continue
- Home visits contribute

# Growth?

- 2002-2006: Flat, 1,000 per year
- Withdrawal rate increases 30%
- 2007-08: With a new emphasis on direct teaching, enrollments grow to 1,600
- 2008-09: Enrollments increase to 2,500 per year, but it is not yet clear that the direct teaching results will last.

# A Five Year Scenario, 2008-13

- Assume 60% increase in enrollments per year:
- 2008-09: 2,600 (rounded to 2 digits)
- 2009-10: 4,200
- 2010-11: 6,700
- 2011-12: 11,000
- 2012-13: 18,000
- Total five year growth: 32,500 (excluding births, deaths, immigration, which add 1,000 per year)

# Where might we stand, 2013:

- Total membership grows, 157,000 to 190,000 (195,000 including births, etc.)
- Loss rate of new believers currently is about 5% a year for the first five years, 30% total (and more later, but the rate slows)
- Assuming the loss rate for direct teaching is the same as above (a big assumption; it used to be much worse, but the core activities should help) percentage of Bahá'ís with good addresses will increase to about 48-49%
- Bahá'ís with good addresses increase from 71,000 to about 95,000



# Other Thoughts

- The scenario has been created so that in 2013 we can see where it went wrong (Growth in enrollments? Consolidation?)
- What consolidation rate for mass taught believers is “bad”? (10%? 30%? 50%?)
- Long term, will the percentage of Bahá'ís with good addresses decline?
- What impact will the “change in community culture” have (“Fundamentalistic tendencies”? Level of knowledge?)

# A Comparison

- Christianity grew from a thousand members to the population of the entire Roman Empire (70 million) in about 300 years (according to Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*)
- The growth rate averaged just 3.5% per year for 300 years
- Growth was not constant; Stark says it was probably higher at times of plagues and other social stresses

# The Future?

- 1900 to 2000, the American Bahá'í community grew from 1,500 to 141,000, 94-fold, or a bit over 5% per year
- Extrapolating 5% for another century, there would be 13 million American Bahá'ís by 2100CE / 256 BE
- 1.2 billion by 2200CE / 356 BE (which will probably exceed the U.S. population)
- Bahá'í growth rate is roughly similar to ancient Christianity