

# Local Baha'i communities celebrate Ridvan

BY MIKE ADLER  
Staff Writer

Baha'i communities in York Region gathered yesterday for the most important festival of their faith.

Such occasions here can bring together people for dramatic readings, music and fellowship. But in Toronto or Iraq or Baffin Island, gatherings for the

same occasion may look very different.

Baha'is have no clergy and there is no proper way to mark the first day of Ridvan, a 12-day period that ends May 1. The Baha'is share one faith, however, and take great joy in knowing communities all over the world celebrate in their own way and by their own cultural expression.

"In the Baha'i faith the whole issue of rituals or rites is kept to an absolute minimum," explained Susan Lyons, a member of Markham's 110-person Baha'i community.

What Baha'is will often do on the first, ninth and twelfth days of the festival, she said, is read historical accounts of the events behind Ridvan. That name is taken from a garden in Baghdad, Iraq, where, in 1863, the faith's founder, Baha'u'llah, announced his mission to establish a world religion.

"It marked the public beginning of our faith," Gerald Filson, external affairs director for Canada's Baha'i community, said this week at the Baha'i National Centre, on Leslie Street in Thornhill.

It also began a long period of exile for Baha'u'llah in different cities within the Ottoman Empire. The progressive, world-embracing teachings of this man, however, have won allegiance all over the world, said Lyons, a Roman Catholic until she encountered the Baha'i faith 30 years ago.

"At heart, we are all one. We are guided by one God, whatever we call him by."

Yesterday's celebrations were public events, but on the night before Ridvan's first day, each Baha'i community met to elect a spiritual assembly of nine who will serve as local administrators for a



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Behjat Ebrahimzadeh rejoices in baby Sevdalaghayi, who is four months old, at a special service to celebrate Ridvan, at the Heintzman House in Thornhill yesterday.

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curious effect. This Ridvan, the six Baha'i communities of Metropolitan Toronto are merging, like the six former cities, into one. In Canada, the ideas of Baha'u'llah have 28,000 followers.

When Kay Muttart and her husband moved to Richmond Hill in 1980, the town had, at most, 25 Baha'i adults. It now has close to 200 members, or 300 counting youth and children, she said.

year. Wherever you can find nine Baha'is such a group is always chosen. Municipal amalgamations have a

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