

Youth Engagement

**Thought piece prepared for the Baha'i Community of Canada
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The Baha'i community of Canada is a religious community dedicated to promoting the betterment of society. Working with thousands of youth of all ages and backgrounds to develop their talents and capacities is a central feature of our efforts to further this aim. Our experience is yielding insights into the process of youth engagement, and this paper is an initial effort to discuss some of these insights and contribute to the broader discourse on the role of youth in society.

“Youth engagement” can be defined in a variety of ways, and in this paper we are using the concept in a particular context. A distinguishing characteristic of the process of youth engagement is its twofold purpose: the personal development of the individual, and their contribution to the betterment of society. This broader purpose fundamentally shapes the approaches and methods that participants employ to engage young people, some of which we will discuss below. Such an understanding also protects those who wish to learn about empowering youth to contribute to society from feeling that their work has been reduced to learning a series of steps or techniques. For this reason, the Baha'i community is trying to gain further insight into the purpose and importance of youth engagement in the life of society and how efforts to engage youth assist participants in pursuing this twofold purpose.

Among the ideas that have informed the efforts of the Baha'i community to engage young people are those related to the period of youth. A deep understanding of the characteristics that distinguish this time of life will influence the earliest conversations that participants will have with young people to stimulate their enthusiasm for a program or activity. The Baha'i teachings call on those in their adolescence to be “inspired with brilliant motives” and “distinguished... by your sanctity and detachment, loftiness of purpose, magnanimity, determination, noble mindedness, tenacity, the elevation of your aims.” While programs and services offered to youth commonly



hinge on notions of spontaneity and excitement, an approach unduly shaped by such ideas would result in the use of more superficial motivators to engage the youth's interest. An appreciation of the innate capacity of young people to engage in systematic action has influenced how participants in programs offered by the Baha'i community have reached out to youth and encouraged their participation.

Our approach to engaging young people has also been aided by a reflection on attitudes we wish to nurture in young people as they engage in community-building activities. We ask ourselves a number of related questions. Upon their completion of a program, would youth be satisfied with the present conditions of the world? If not, what would they think should be changed? Would they feel empowered to contribute to such change? Would they derive as much joy from learning to work for the progress of humanity as they would from learning to direct their own intellectual and spiritual growth?

Another idea that has shaped our efforts is service to others. While young people enjoy speaking about their interests and aspirations, many also show considerable enthusiasm when asked to think about their relationships with others, such as their family, community, and peers. We have found that youth have much to say when asked to consider how they might positively influence the lives of their younger peers. Youth have shown a willingness to participate in meaningful discussion when asked questions that engage their deeper interests — questions that center not only on themselves but on these broader topics. For example, even the promise of becoming a “leader” or “protagonist” — an approach that calls for active participation — can sometimes isolate a few eager youth from their peers by subtly encouraging a sense of superiority in them should they decide to participate. An approach that recognizes the importance and encourages the contribution of all youth to the wellbeing of their communities, and that helps them to consider their role in that process, taps the deeper roots of motivation. Such a conception of leadership also helps youth to realize that, whether they decide to participate in an activity at the outset or later on, all have the potential to be protagonists of social change.

Although the Baha'i teachings articulate high ideals about the nature and characteristics of young people, we do not deny the effects of the



social environment on the individual. Therefore, another aspect of our approach is to analyze the constructive and destructive forces in society. We recognize that young people need to be assisted to adopt “brilliant motives,” and that while nobility and altruism are among the many innate attributes of youth, they are not easily manifested in a media environment that encourages heightened self-awareness, instant gratification, and passivity to the needs of others, an environment that would otherwise shape the values they will carry with them throughout their lives. Our conversations with youth about the forces operating in their environments and how these forces affect them have helped youth to distinguish between those attributes that are inherent to their time of life and those that are imposed on them by their social and media environments. Therefore, rather than simply engage youth in positive activities that distract them from negative forces that exist in society, our approach has necessarily involved a continual analysis of these forces. These conversations have helped to raise consciousness so that youth are less susceptible to manipulation.

To offer an example, on numerous occasions we have encountered apathy and indifference to engage youth when outreach was reduced to a series of invitations to participate in community activities. Such invitations yield “yes” or “no” answers, which easily end any possibility of the conversation going further. Without being engaged in a conversation about the importance of service with relevant concepts and questions, youth will naturally show a lack of motivation. While motivated by good intentions, such an approach to encouraging participation also fosters passivity since it does not raise consciousness.

Even when carrying out meaningful action, if youth are not helped to reflect on its purpose or effect, they could remain unconscious of the fruits of their efforts and what they have learned in action; over time, commitment will weaken. However, an approach that combines the mutual exploration of a concept (such as friendship or service), its application in service, and reflection on action, has helped us to learn about fostering commitment to long-term action, and led us to more deeply engage youth in processes of social transformation.



Capacity-building is another concept central to this framework. How are those who have participated for even a short period of time being assisted to shoulder responsibility? Just as they are being offered training and support, are they learning to reach out and offer the same support to others? Capacity-building therefore involves both study and action. We are learning that, with training and support, youth can — even at the earliest stages of their involvement — be assisted to reach out and engage others. Contrast this with an approach centred on the provision of goods and services, which will always serve to engage only a small number, since the number seeking to reach out is not expanding. While youth might be engaged for a period of time, the enthusiasm of the few will wane if they are not empowered to take charge of their own development and contribute to the life of their community. Imparting a vision of the opportunity that youth have to shoulder greater responsibility — whether in the promotion of the arts, sports and recreation, health, and literacy or in the development of other skills and capacities — helps young people to see themselves not as consumers or recipients of a service, but as active participants in a process of developing their capacity to serve others. In this way, from the very beginning, youth are helped to develop the understanding, skills and qualities needed to make sound decisions and take on higher levels of responsibility. Such an understanding, which involves both study and practice, is another source of motivation.

Participation is another concept into which we seek to gain insight, as we have seen that narrow conceptions of participation limit our ability to engage young people. The concept of a continuum is helpful here because it removes the expectation that everyone's participation or contribution will be the same. While some will participate consistently, others may come from time to time. Some participate by listening attentively, while others — also listening — offer thoughts and questions more often. When an environment encourages and welcomes this kind of diversity, participation of larger numbers is more easily achieved and accommodated. In such an environment the contribution of each individual is also able to strengthen and change with time, a contrast with prevailing approaches that standardize participation and measure excellence accordingly. Creating such an environment, however, is no simple task. Certain questions naturally emerge. How are those who arise to engage youth easily and quickly being encouraged to do so? How are participants being encouraged to



assist youth who are experiencing difficulty? How are those who need to move at a slower pace, or who cannot participate as regularly, be made to feel that their contribution is still valued and necessary to the advancement of a group? How do flexibility and creativity assist those who are guiding a group of young people to create such an environment? What are some other qualities and attitudes that contribute to the capacity of an individual to be of service to their younger peers?

While it is helpful to think about a spectrum of participation, the concept of a continuum also helps participants to see that engagement is not static. While the contribution of each individual may vary, what is important is that all participants feel that they are advancing, and are assisted to do so. In this way, the attitudes of both the youth and the participants who are training and supporting them are always centered on progress. In this kind of environment, whether new or experienced, a participant can be easily engaged in a learning process.

The Bahá'í community of Canada collaborates with a number of people to help develop contributions to thought on issues of social concern.

This paper represents thinking that is helping to inform the work of our community to participate in Canadian public discourses. This is not a position paper or official statement from the Bahá'í community, but rather a set of reflections that draws insight from the Bahá'í teachings and the experience of the community as we seek to apply them to the betterment of society.

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