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BAHÁ'Í CANADA



Strengthening the devotional character of the community

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From the Writings

Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men. Whoso reciteth, in the privacy of his chamber, the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb. Though he may, at first, remain unaware of its effect, yet the virtue of the grace vouchsafed unto him must needs sooner or later exercise its influence upon his soul. Thus have the mysteries of the Revelation of God been decreed by virtue of the Will of Him Who is the Source of power and wisdom.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. iv.

They who are the beloved of God, in whatever place they gather and whomsoever they may meet, must evince, in their attitude towards God, and in the manner of their celebration of His praise and glory, such humility and submissiveness that every atom of the dust beneath their feet may attest the depth of their devotion. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 7-8.

Whensoever the splendor of the King of Oneness settleth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His shining becometh visible in every limb and member. At that time the mystery of the famed tradition gleameth out of the darkness: "A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him; and when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth...." For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light. And the action and effect of the light are from the Light-Giver; so it is that all move through Him and arise by His will. And this is that spring whereof the near ones drink, as it is said: "A fount whereof the near unto God shall drink...."

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 22.

One who performeth neither good deeds nor acts of worship is like unto a tree which beareth no fruit, and an action which leaveth no trace. Whosoever experienceth the holy ecstasy of worship will refuse to barter such an act or any praise of God for all that existeth in the world.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Importance of Obligatory Prayer and Fasting*, III.

Worship thou God in such wise that if thy worship lead thee to the fire, no alteration in thine adoration would be produced, and so likewise if thy recompense be paradise. Thus and thus alone should be the worship which befitteth the one True God. Shouldst thou worship Him because of fear, this would be unseemly in the sanctified Court of His presence, and could not be regarded as an act by thee dedicated to the Oneness of His being. Or if thy gaze should be on paradise, and thou shouldst worship Him while cherishing such a hope, thou wouldst make God's creation a partner with Him, notwithstanding the fact that paradise is desired by men.

Fire and paradise both bow down and prostrate themselves before God. That which is worthy of His Essence is to worship Him for His sake, without fear of fire, or hope of paradise.

Although when true worship is offered, the worshipper is delivered from the fire, and entereth the paradise of God's good-pleasure, yet such should not be the motive of his act. However, God's favour and grace ever flow in accordance with the exigencies of His inscrutable wisdom.

The most acceptable prayer is the one offered with the utmost spirituality and radiance; its prolongation hath not been and is not beloved by God. The more detached and the purer the prayer, the more acceptable it is in the presence of God. The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, pp. 77-78.

Obligatory prayer and supplication cause man to reach the kingdom of mystery, and the worship of the Supreme One. They bestow nearness unto His threshold. There is a pleasure in offering prayers that transcendeth all other pleasures, and there is a sweetness in chanting and singing the verses of God which is the greatest desire of all the believers, men and women alike. While reciting the Obligatory Prayer, one converseth intimately and shareth secrets with the true Beloved. No pleasure is greater than this, if one proceedeth with a detached soul, with tears overflowing, with a trusting heart and an eager spirit. Every joy is earthly save this one, the sweetness of which is divine. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Importance of Prayer, Meditation and the Devotional Attitude*, XIII.

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INSIDE BAHÁ'Í CANADA

ON THE COVER



A view of the apex of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Chile where a wooden carving of the invocation "Yá-Bahá'u'l-Abhá" (O Glory of the All-Glorious) was recently lifted into position. This is the eighth and final continental House of Worship to be built. Photo: *Bahá'í World News Service*

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THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Progress of the construction of the Houses of Worship

From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, 1 August 2014:

Dearly loved Friends,

Over two years have elapsed since our announcement at Riḍván 2012 of projects to raise two national and five local Houses of Worship, to be pursued in conjunction with the construction in Santiago, Chile, of the last of the continental Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs. These undertakings, inextricably linked to the development of community life now being fostered everywhere through acts of devotion and service, are further steps in the sublime task entrusted to humanity by Bahá'u'lláh to build Houses of Worship "throughout the lands in the name of Him Who is the Lord of all religions" – centres in which souls may gather "harmoniously attuned one to another" to hear the divine verses and to offer supplications, and from which "the voices of praise may rise to the Kingdom" and the "fragrance of God" be diffused.

We are deeply moved by the response in every part of the world to our call. Particularly in the nations and localities recently designated for the construction of a House of Worship, we have witnessed the friends' spontaneous expressions of joy; their immediate and heartfelt commitment to lend their share in carrying out the critical work at hand and to increase the dynamism of those activities integral to the emergence of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár within a population; their sacrificial contributions of time, energy, and material resources, in a variety of forms; and their sustained efforts to awaken growing contingents to the vision of those edifices dedicated wholly to the remembrance of God that will be founded in their midst. Indeed, the ready response of the community of the Greatest Name augurs well for its ability to further these collective undertakings.

The National Spiritual Assemblies of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Papua New Guinea as well as those of Cambodia, Colombia, India, Kenya, and Vanuatu, with the close support of the Office of Temples and Sites created at the Bahá'í World Centre in 2012, promptly moved forward with the initial preparations. A committee was formed in each country, entrusted with identifying, together with institutions and agencies at all levels of the community, means to promote widespread participation and to channel the enthusiasm engendered among the friends following the announcement of the projects. Another practical step in these national and local projects has been the selection of a suitable piece of land, one which is modest in size, strategically located, and easily accessible. Four of the seven properties are now in hand. A construction office for each project is being established to assist with the management of technical, financial, and legal issues. The work involved in the opening stage has advanced through generous contributions from the friends all over the world to the Temples Fund. Universal and sacrificial support for this Fund will ensure the steady progress of the next phases.

In four countries, the projects have reached the stage of preparing a design for the Temple edifice. This begins with the selection of potential architects and the formulation of an architectural brief defining the requirements for the structure, and it ultimately results in a contract for the final design. Architects are presented with the singular challenge of designing Temples "as perfect as is possible in the world of being" that harmonize naturally with the local culture and the daily lives of those who will gather to pray and meditate therein. The task calls for creativity and skill to combine beauty, grace, and dignity with modesty, functionality, and economy. A number of architects from near and far have gladly offered their services, and while such contributions are of course welcomed, National Assemblies are giving due regard to the value of engaging architects who are well acquainted with the area where the edifice will be built.

The erection of the continental House of Worship for South America is moving towards its completion in Chile. The steel-frame superstructure has been almost entirely installed, the placement of the interior translucent stone panels is under way, and the landscaping and the construction of auxiliary facilities are progressing according to schedule. The friends in Santiago, supported by others from throughout the Americas, have been diligently striving to prepare the surrounding population for the emergence of the House of Worship; increasing numbers are participating in the community-building endeavours, and a stream of visitors are being welcomed to the Temple site for prayer and discussion on the practical and spiritual dimensions of the enterprise. Measures are currently being put in place in that country in anticipation of the many demands that are sure to arise once the Temple is inaugurated in 2016.

As the friends worldwide rejoice in these heartening advances, their energies remain focused on the processes gaining strength in cluster after cluster. In this, they have not failed to appreciate the dynamic interaction between worship and endeavours to uplift the spiritual, social, and material conditions of society. May all those who are thus labouring in towns and cities, neighbourhoods and villages, derive insights from the exertions made to raise up the first two Houses of Worship at the turn of the twentieth century, in the East and then in the West.

In the city of 'Ishqábád, a devoted band of believers who settled from Persia, and who, for a time, found peace and tranquillity in Turkistan, bent their energies towards the creation of a pattern of life that would reflect the exalted spiritual and social principles enshrined in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. In a span of a few decades, this group, originally consisting of a handful of families, was joined there by others and grew to a few thousand believers. This community, fortified by ties of camaraderie and animated by unity of purpose and a spirit of faithfulness, was enabled to reach a high degree of cohesiveness and development, for which it gained renown throughout the Bahá'í world. These friends, guided by their understanding of the divine Teachings, and within the bounds of the religious freedom they were accorded, toiled to create the conditions that would lead to the founding of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, that "crowning institution in every Bahá'í community". On a befitting tract of land in the centre of the city that had been obtained some years before with the consent of the Blessed Beauty Himself, facilities were built for communal well-being – a meeting hall, schools for children, a hostel for visitors, and a small clinic, among others. A sign of the notable achievements of the Bahá'ís in 'Ishqábád, who in those productive years became distinguished for their prosperity, magnanimity, and intellectual and cultural attainments, was their attention to ensuring that all Bahá'í children and youth were literate in a society with rampant illiteracy, especially among girls. Within such an environment of unified endeavour and progress, and fostered at every stage of development by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a magnificent House of Worship emerged – the most prominent edifice in the area. For over twenty years, the friends experienced the heavenly joy of having realized their lofty aim: the establishment of a focal point of worship, a nerve centre of community life, a place where souls gathered at daybreak for humble invocation and communion before flowing out of its doors to engage in their daily pursuits. While the forces of irreligion eventually swept through the region and thwarted hopes, the brief appearance of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád is an enduring testament to the volition and effort of a body of believers who established a rich pattern of life deriving its impetus from the power of the Creative Word.

In the Western Hemisphere, shortly after work commenced on the House of Worship in 'Ishqábád, the members of the nascent Bahá'í community in North America were galvanized to demonstrate their faith and devotion by constructing a Temple of their own, and they wrote in 1903 to seek the Master's consent. From that moment, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár became inseparably intertwined with the fate of those dedicated servants of Bahá'u'lláh. While progress on this complex project was obstructed over decades by the effects of two world wars and a widespread economic depression, each stage in its development was intimately tied to the expansion of the community and the unfoldment of its administration. On the same day as the interment of the sacred remains of the Báb on Mount Carmel in March 1909, delegates gathered to establish the Bahá'í Temple Unity, a national organization whose elected Board became the nucleus of the far-flung local communities of the continent. This development soon gave rise to the formation of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada. 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself laid the cornerstone of the building during His travels to North America, endowing the Mother Temple of the West with tremendous spiritual potentialities. And contributions for this historic enterprise flowed from Bahá'í centres in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Pacific – a demonstration of the solidarity and sacrifice of the Bahá'ís of the East and West.



'Abdu'l-Bahá, by the cornerstone of the continental House of Worship in Wilmette, Ill. on the day of its dedication.

As the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in every land centre their thoughts on God and occupy themselves each day with His remembrance, ceaselessly exerting effort in His Name, let them draw inspiration from these stirring words addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to a believer who was devoted to building the first House of Worship, raised under His close and loving direction:

Hasten now to 'Ishqábád, in the utmost detachment and aflame with the fire of attraction, and convey to the friends of God ardent greetings from 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Kiss thou each one's face and express this servant's deep and sincere affection to all. Do thou on behalf of 'Abdu'l-Bahá move the earth, carry the mortar, and haul the stones for the building of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár so that the rapture of this service may bring joy and gladness to the Centre of Servitude. That Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is the first visible and manifest establishment of the Lord. Therefore, it is this servant's hope that each and every virtuous and righteous soul will sacrifice his all, evince great happiness and exultation, and rejoice in carrying the earth and mortar so that this Divine Edifice may be raised, the Cause of God may spread, and in every corner of the world the friends may arise with the utmost resolve to accomplish this great task. Were 'Abdu'l-Bahá not imprisoned and were there not obstacles in his path, he himself would assuredly hasten to 'Ishqábád and carry the earth for the building of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár with the utmost joy and gladness. It behoveth the friends now to arise with this intention in mind and serve in my place so that in a short time this Edifice may be revealed to all eyes, the loved ones of God may engage in making mention of the Abhá Beauty, the melodies of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár may rise at dawntide to the Concourse on high, and the songs of the nightingales of God may bring joy and ecstasy to the denizens of the All-Glorious Realm. Thus will the hearts rejoice, the souls delight in joyful tidings, and the minds be illumined. This is the highest hope of the sincere ones; this is the dearest wish of them that are nigh unto God.

The Universal House of Justice

Fostering a pattern of worship and service

From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 18 December 2014:

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

We hope that by now you have had occasion to study the message we addressed to the Bahá'ís of the World on 1 August 2014, in which the progress of the projects to establish Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs in eight locations throughout the world is described. In every case, these dawning places of His remembrance represent the rising influence of the Faith of God in society. The Bahá'ís of Iran are of course fully conversant with the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. From the earliest days following the revelation of this law, the friends in the Cradle of the Faith became aware of its significance and committed to its realization within the limited means that their circumstances allowed them. In time, not only did they become the principal force for the construction of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád, but within Iran too the practice of regular dawn prayers took root and inspired service to humankind, with the vision that the seed they were planting would in time flower into tangible reality, yielding its fruit not only in the construction of these centres of worship, but in the creation of dependencies for humanitarian service which that worship would inspire.

And so it was that, under the guiding hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a pattern of communal worship – the unity it engenders and the desire to be of service that it inspires – became an integral part of many a local Bahá'í community in Iran. In this regard, the Master's vision provided for a variety of settings and circumstances in which the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár could, in its embryonic form, be expressed. Consider His words in this regard:

> As to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, it is of the utmost importance.... It may assume any form, for even if it be an underground pit, that pit shall become a sheltering paradise, an exalted bower, and a garden of delight. It shall become a centre wherein the spirits are gladdened and the hearts attracted to the Abhá Kingdom.

Indeed, as your own experience demonstrates, a broad range of possibilities for the expression of this law and its organic unfoldment in a particular locality can be imagined.

In the Bahá'í writings, the term "Mashriqu'l-Adhkár" has variously been used to designate the gathering of the believers for prayers at dawn; a structure where the divine verses are recited; the entire institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and its dependencies; and the central edifice itself, often also referred to as a "Temple" or a "House of Worship". All these can be regarded as aspects of the gradual implementation of the law set out for humankind by Bahá'u'lláh in His Most Holy Book.

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is a unique concept in the annals of religion and symbolizes the teachings of the new Day of God. A collective centre of society to promote cordial affection, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár stands as a universal place of worship open to all the inhabitants of a locality irrespective of their religious affiliation, background, ethnicity, or gender and a

haven for the deepest contemplation on spiritual reality and foundational questions of life, including individual and collective responsibility for the betterment of society. Men and women, children and youth, are held in its embrace as equals. This singular and integral universality is captured in the very structure of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, whose design as a nine-sided edifice conveys a sense of completeness and perfection symbolized by that number.

As the place from which spiritual forces are to radiate, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is the focal point for dependencies to be raised up for the well-being of humanity and is the expression of a common will and eagerness to serve. These dependencies – centres of education and scientific learning as well as cultural and humanitarian endeavour – embody the ideals of social and spiritual progress to be achieved through the application of knowledge, and demonstrate how, when religion and science are in harmony, they elevate the station of the human being and lead to the flourishing of civilization. As your lives amply demonstrate, worship, though essential to the inner life of the human being and vital to spiritual development, must also lead to deeds that give outward expression to that inner transformation. This concept of worship – inseparable from service – is promulgated by the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. In this connection Shoghi Effendi states:

> Divorced from the social, humanitarian, educational and scientific pursuits centring around the Dependencies of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, Bahá'í worship, however exalted in its conception, however passionate in fervour, can never hope to achieve beyond the meagre and often transitory results produced by the contemplations of the ascetic or the communion of the passive worshiper. It cannot afford lasting satisfaction and benefit to the worshiper himself, much less to humanity in general, unless and until translated and transfused into that dynamic and disinterested service to the cause of humanity which it is the supreme privilege of the Dependencies of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár to facilitate and promote.

The Twin Luminaries of this resplendent age have taught us this: Prayer is the essential spiritual conversation of the soul with its Maker, direct and without intermediation. It is the spiritual food that sustains the life of the spirit. Like the morning's dew, it brings freshness to the heart and cleanses it, purifying it from attachments of the insistent self. It is a fire that burns away the veils and a light that leads to the ocean of reunion with the Almighty. On its wings does the soul soar in the heavens of God and draw closer to the divine reality. Upon its quality depends the development of the limitless capacities of the soul and the attraction of the bounties of God, but the prolongation of prayer is not desirable. The powers latent in prayer are manifested when it is motivated by the love of God, beyond any fear or favour, and free from ostentation and superstition. It is to be expressed with a sincere and pure heart conducive to contemplation and meditation so that the rational faculty can be illumined by its effects. Such prayer will transcend the limitation of words and go well beyond mere sounds. The sweetness of its melodies must gladden and uplift the heart and reinforce the penetrating power of the Word, transmuting earthly inclinations into heavenly attributes and inspiring selfless service to humankind.

Little wonder, then, that your community, whose members have from infancy been reared with the constant supplication to have "pure hearts like unto a pearl", go through life and endure every manner of hardship but will not let their hearts be defiled with hatred, rancour, or vengeance lest that gleaming pearl lose its lustre. Ultimately, prayers must be lived in purposeful lives.

We have called upon the Bahá'ís to see in their endeavours of community building the creation of a new pattern of how society can be. Taken in its entirety, that pattern fosters capacity for service – for the education of young generations, for the empowerment of the youth, for the spiritual education of children, for the enhancement of the capacity to draw upon the influence of the Word of God in accompanying others into the field of service, and for the social and economic advancement of a people in the light of the divine teachings for the age. Essential to that pattern is the devotional meeting – a communal aspect of the godly life and a dimension of the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár – which represents a marvellous opportunity for your community not only to worship the Almighty and seek His benedictions in your own lives, but to extend to your fellow citizens the spiritual energies of prayer, to restore for them the purity of worship, to kindle in their hearts faith in the confirmations of God, and to strengthen in them, no less than in yourselves, eagerness to serve the nation and humanity and to show constructive resilience in the path of justice.

Beloved friends: Gatherings dedicated to prayer throughout your blessed land, in every neighbourhood, town, village, and hamlet, and the increasing access that your compatriots are gaining to Bahá'í prayers are enabling your community to shine the light of unity in the assemblage of humanity, lending a share to the endeavours of your fellow believers throughout the world. Plant, then, the seeds of future Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs for the benefit of all, and ignite countless beacons of light against the gloom of hatred and inequity.

The Universal House of Justice

Message to the National Convention

The National Spiritual Assembly addressed the following message to delegates at Canada's 67th National Convention, following a reading of and initial consultation about the Riḍván message.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

…Before we advance more deeply into a study of the Riḍván message and explore its implications for the growth of the Cause in the coming year, the National Spiritual Assembly wished to address these brief words to you, who represent the Canadian Bahá'í community in all its diversity. You gather in this briefly-flowering institution with two purposes, to raise up the National Spiritual Assembly and to consult about the national interests of the Cause. The very range of experience and conditions in your communities are a wealth to which the National Assembly is grateful to have access, an opportunity to bring the conversation in your regions together in a single voice for a few short days.

At Riḍván last year, the Universal House of Justice described two critical tasks that beckoned: establishing new programmes of growth and strengthening existing ones. Twenty-one clusters have passed the first milestone on this journey of growth in the past year, and in a dozen more, work has begun. In 101 of Canada's 125 clusters, this process has taken root with the emergence and strengthening of two capacities – the ability on the part of one or more friends to assist others to study the sequence of courses and initiate a core activity, and then to invite others to participate. The goal of 107 such programmes by the Plan's end is within sight, each cluster a unique laboratory to learn about growth.

At the frontiers of learning, one cluster in Canada is now approaching a threshold of 200 core activities with over 1,400 participants, and a few other clusters with around 100 core activities. In the majority of clusters, the seeds of growth so lovingly planted have been slower to germinate and grow. Yet in each one, the signs described so movingly by the Universal House of Justice in its Riḍván 2011 message are evident – a light that "achieves a steady glow across whole neighborhoods and villages, as candle after candle in heart after heart is lighted by the Hand of Providence; it illuminates thoughtful conversation at every level of human interaction; it casts its beams upon a myriad initiatives taken to promote the well-being of a people. And in every instance it radiates from a faithful believer, a vibrant community, a loving Spiritual Assembly–each a beacon of light against the gloom." If growth has been slow thus far, if the candles in hearts are taking time to alight and shed their own radiance: "it will not always be so."[1]

In Canada as in the rest of the world, the youth have been a powerful force, bolstered by the community as they learn to engage their peers and serve the younger generations. They have set the pace for progress in Canada's most advanced clusters, proving the receptivity of this special population and its eagerness to channel a desire for change into concrete action. For that progress to be sustained and for the pace to accelerate in all of Canada's clusters, the generality of the community that has lovingly supported the youth – often stepping back to do so – are now called to throw in their lot, to "lend themselves to its onward surge"[2]. This requires renewed commitment to individual teaching on the part of many, a strong pattern of home visits that creates bonds of love and unity and gradually changes culture, and immersion in the life of the spirit through a multiplication of devotional gatherings – all essential elements of a vibrant pattern of community life, open to all. At this Convention, then, we place this challenge before you and ask you to explore what is needed on the part of the individual, the community and the institutions, to achieve this. What is needed to accompany every soul who cherishes "a pure and earnest desire for a better world, whatever their degree of involvement in the process of spiritual education so far, and help them translate that desire into the practical steps that day by day and week by week accrete to build vibrant, flourishing communities"[3]?

With this question in mind, we return to consideration of the Riḍván message, to speak together of Bahá'u'lláh and the simple strand of love for Him, that vital thread that weaves patterns whose effects are limitless. The National Assembly listens with eager interest and draws on your insights and experience throughout the year, giving thanks to Him for having raised up a people whose deeds are fulfilling the promise of 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, as the centenary of their revelation approaches:

> Again I repeat that the future of Canada, whether from a material or a spiritual standpoint, is very great. Day by day civilization and freedom shall increase. The clouds of the Kingdom will water the seeds of guidance which have been sown there. Consequently, rest ye not, seek ye no composure, attach not yourselves to the luxuries of this ephemeral world, free yourselves from every attachment, and strive with heart and soul to become fully established in the Kingdom of God. Gain ye the heavenly treasures. Day by day become ye more illumined. Draw ye nearer and nearer unto the threshold of oneness. Become ye the manifestors of spiritual favors and the dawning-places of infinite lights![4]

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

The National Spiritual Assembly
of the Bahá'ís of Canada

1 Universal House of Justice to the Baha'is of the World, Riḍván 2015.
2 *Ibid.*
3 Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, 5 December 2013.
4 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p. 93.

About this issue

Early in the history of the Faith, the believers in its cradle would gather in each other's homes at dawn to pray, observing the commandment of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár – literally translated as "the Dawning-Place of the Mention of God." [1] Upon being informed of the believers' faithfulness to this ordinance, Bahá'u'lláh bestowed upon them, and the world, these celebrated words that convey the significance of this act of worship: "Blessed is the spot, and the house, and the place, and the city, and the heart, and the mountain, and the refuge, and the cave, and the valley, and the land, and the sea, and the island, and the meadow where mention of God hath been made, and His praise glorified." [2]

Today, these words are enunciated by adults, youth and children alike, and remind the believers of the nearness of God and the potency of being occupied with His remembrance as they labour to build vibrant communities.

Strengthening the devotional character of the community

Since the 1 August 2014 message from the Universal House of Justice, the Canadian friends have made a concerted effort to both multiply the number of devotional gatherings in the country, and to learn more about what it means to strengthen the devotional character of the community – an element of a vibrant pattern of community life.

One individual serving at the regional level said the following related to enhancing the devotional character of the community: "We are not only trying to increase the number of devotional gatherings – although this is very important. We are trying to change aspects of culture and habits in respect to prayer so that the people who do not come to devotional gatherings notice the spirit of the community."

An individual serving in another region described the love and fellowship that can be attributed to strengthening the devotional spirit of a community: "We inevitably fall short of realizing the divine presence that surrounds us, but when – as a group of true friends – our hearts are connected and we are determined to serve humanity despite all obstacles, there is a feeling that surrounds us that can be described as being near to God."

It is the "inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker," said another individual, quoting a passage from the Ridván 2008 message. Praying together as families, groups of friends and neighbours unites our hearts, awakens spiritual susceptibilities and calls to our aid spiritual forces upon which "the efficacy of our individual and collective effort depends." [3]

An environment of mutual support and the devotional character of the community

This issue of *Bahá'í Canada* will explore the theme of strengthening the devotional character of the community. Many of the insights and accounts curated for this issue connect to the theme of creating an environment of mutual support, which was the focus of the last issue of *Bahá'í Canada*.

> "In each, a people, increasingly aware of the Person of Bahá'u'lláh, is learning, through reflection on experience, consultation, and study, how to act on the truths enshrined in His Revelation, such that the widening circle of spiritual kindred is ever more closely bound together by ties of collective worship and service." – The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2014.

At a recent cluster reflection gathering, an individual remarked that prayer is essential to cultivating a consciousness of the sacred, an ongoing challenge in a society which drowns it out in the frenetic pursuit of material gain. The individual added that in such a social climate, where the lofty station of man is often tragically reduced to a purely material existence, we are drawn away from the divine reality and blinded to the sacredness of the human heart. Unconscious of the sacred, this individual explained, we become careless with the hearts of others. Prayer quiets the tumult of a confused and disordered world, impelling us to turn inward, and in that silence, become attuned to the sanctity of the human heart, "the seat of the All-Merciful and the throne wherein abideth the splendor of His revelation." [4]

Another individual described how a conversation with a friend helped him to see that prayer, as a conversation with God, necessitates listening: "Because prayer is a conversation … the most important aspect of it is listening. This listening to our Creator with faith has a great effect on all we do to serve the Faith."

The relationship between worship and service

Essential to an exploration of the devotional character of the community is the connection between worship and service, for, as the Universal House of Justice writes, " … worship, though essential to the inner life of the human being and vital to spiritual development, must also lead to deeds that give outward expression to that inner transformation."[5]

An individual reflecting on her own service shared that an act of service can be conceived of as an act of worship – an offering, humbly presented at the threshold of the Beloved; service becomes an expression of one's love for humanity, offered in a spirit of selflessness and servitude that spring from one's love for and devotion to God.

Another friend wrote the following about the connection between worship and service: "In times when you are

serving in a way beyond your capacity, like reaching out to neighbours with the Message when you do not have the words, you are forced to rely upon the Infinite Bounty, and then prayer becomes more than a habit to begin meetings, but a need of the group to take any step forward. This is when confirmations are the clearest."

The relationship between worship and service is embodied in the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, "a universal place of worship" [6] and "one of the most vital institutions of the world."[7] Integral to the purpose of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár – "a place from which spiritual forces are to radiate" [8] – is that it consists of dependencies, "centres of education and scientific learning as well as cultural and humanitarian endeavour" to be raised up for the wellbeing of humanity.[9] In this way, worship finds its expression in service. The House of Justice wrote that the task entrusted by Bahá'u'lláh to humanity to build Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs, often referred to as "Houses of Worship," was "inextricably linked" to the "development of community life now being fostered everywhere through acts of devotion and service."[10] In this connection, many of the friends that contributed to this issue found it helpful to conceive of the work of community building within the framework of the Plan as building a future Mashriqu'l-Adhkár.

In our more recent history, Bahá'ís and their friends in Canada, many inspired by *Ruhi Book 1: Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*, have learned to think of Bahá'í prayers as something to which all people should have access, regardless of their religious affiliation. They study prayers with friends and family members, host devotional gatherings, and help their friends to begin their own devotional gatherings.

A few communities that find themselves at a plateau in the teaching work are trying to strengthen the learning process around enhancing the devotional character of the community. Groups of friends serving together across the country have decided to start praying together or to pray together with more regularity. Many clusters initiate prayer campaigns during expansion phases in which individuals sign up to say a prayer at a particular time, while members of teaching teams may decide to say particular prayers to guide them to receptive souls, to overcome tests and difficulties, and to increase their resolve. Since undertaking these actions, the initiators find that they are more detached from their opinions and "narrow conceptions of 'success' and 'failure'" [11] and have an enhanced ability to perceive confirmations in their service.

As friends across the country set out to learn about enhancing the devotional character of the community, they are asking many questions such as: What are the prevalent attitudes towards prayer in our communities? What are the habits in respect to prayer in our families, neighbourhoods and villages? These questions are germane in a social climate in which "humanity is losing its understanding of how to pray, substituting empty and meaningless rituals for indispensable inner conditions."[12] The notion of collective worship is often misunderstood. Some see worship as a private act, while others see it as an activity that one only undertakes with one's coreligionists. Others view worship as a refuge from everyday life, rather than essential to purifying our words and deeds so that they may, through God's grace, "ascend unto to the heaven of celestial glory." [13]

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This issue constitutes an attempt to begin to explore a vast theme. It includes a compilation of Writings and guidance related to themes of devotion and service; stories from the history of the Faith that shed light on what constitutes a devotional spirit and how this is expressed in service; and articles that describe the insights Canadian Bahá'ís and their friends are gaining about building communities characterized by both worship and service. We hope that our readers can enrich this unfolding narrative by sharing insights gained from experience and their study of the Writings and guidance.

We leave you with these words of the Guardian, which describe the significance of the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in the transformation of society:

> For it is assuredly upon the consciousness of the efficacy of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, reinforced on one hand by spiritual communion with His Spirit, and on the other by the intelligent application and the faithful execution of the principles and laws He revealed, that the salvation of a world in travail must ultimately depend. And of all the institutions that stand associated with His Holy Name, surely none save the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár can most adequately provide the essentials of Bahá'í worship and service, both so vital to the regeneration of the world. Therein lies the secret of the loftiness, of the potency, of the unique position of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár as one of the outstanding institutions conceived by Bahá'u'lláh.
>
> Dearly-beloved friends! May we not as the trustees of so priceless a heritage, arise to fulfill our high destiny? [14]

– The Bahá'í Canada Committee

1 Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 316.
2 Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í Prayers*, pp. iii.
3 From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 28 December 2010.
4 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 185.
5 From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 18 December 2014.
6 *Ibid.*
7 The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2012.
8 From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 18 December 2014.
9 *Ibid.*
10 The Universal House of Justice, 1 August 2014.
11 The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2014.
12 *Ruhi Book 1: Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*, To the Collaborators.
13 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, Part II – From the Persian, no. 69.
14 Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 186-187.

Stories from the history of the Bahá'í Faith

Chanting prayers in confinement

This well-loved story of Bahá'u'lláh and other Bábís unjustly imprisoned in a foul prison called the Síyáh-Chál – translated as the "Black Pit" – depicts the fervour with which they would chant prayers and their fortitude in the face of such harsh conditions of imprisonment.

I now proceed to relate what befell the remaining companions of the Báb, those who had been privileged to share the horrors of the confinement with Bahá'u'lláh. From His own lips I have often heard the following account: "All those who were struck down by the storm that raged during that memorable year in Tihrán were Our fellow-prisoners in the Síyáh-Chál, where We were confined. We were all huddled together in one cell, our feet in stocks, and around our necks fastened the most galling of chains. The air we breathed was laden with the foulest impurities, while the floor on which we sat was covered with filth and infested with vermin. No ray of light was allowed to penetrate that pestilential dungeon or to warm its icy-coldness. We were placed in two rows, each facing the other. We had taught them to repeat certain verses which, every night, they chanted with extreme fervour. 'God is sufficient unto me; He verily is the All-sufficing!' one row would intone, while the other would reply: 'In Him let the trusting trust.' The chorus of these gladsome voices would continue to peal out until the early hours of the morning. Their reverberation would fill the dungeon, and, piercing its massive walls, would reach the ears of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, whose palace was not far distant from the place where we were imprisoned. 'What means this sound?' he was reported to have exclaimed. 'It is the anthem the Bábís are intoning in their prison,' they replied. The Sháh made no further remarks, nor did he attempt to restrain the enthusiasm his prisoners, despite the horrors of their confinement, continued to display.

"One day, there was brought to Our prison a tray of roasted meat, which they informed Us the Sháh had ordered to be distributed among the prisoners. 'The Sháh,' We were told, 'faithful to a vow he made, has chosen this day to offer to you all this lamb in fulfilment of his pledge.' A deep silence fell upon Our companions, who expected Us to make answer on their behalf. 'We return this gift to you,' We replied; 'we can well dispense with this offer.' The answer We made would have greatly irritated the guards had they not been eager to devour the food we had refused to touch. Despite the hunger with which Our companions were afflicted, only one among them, a certain Mírzá Husayn-i-Matavalliy-i-Qumí, showed any desire to eat of the food the sovereign had chosen to spread before us. With a fortitude that was truly heroic, Our fellow-prisoners submitted, without a murmur, to endure the piteous plight to which they were reduced. Praise of God, instead of complaint of the treatment meted out to them by the Sháh, fell unceasingly from their lips – praise with which they sought to beguile the hardships of a cruel captivity.

– *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, pp. 632-633.

The devotion and servitude of a child

Rúḥu'lláh Varqá was a child who lived in the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahá'u'lláh. This story illustrates the heights of devotion and servitude which this young hero of the Faith was able to attain through his love for Bahá'u'lláh:

When Rúḥu'lláh was seven years old, he traveled with his father to the Holy Land. There, he had the great privilege of meeting Bahá'u'lláh, Who had brought to humanity God's message for this day. Rúḥu'lláh's heart became filled with love for Bahá'u'lláh, and he wanted nothing more than to serve Him. Upon returning home to Persia, he spent his time sharing with others news of Bahá'u'lláh's coming. Rúḥu'lláh was truthful, honest, courteous, and kind and his words had a great effect on all who heard him. He rose at every dawn to pray and, with his heart turned towards God, passed each day in servitude to Him.

One day, Rúḥu'lláh was summoned to appear before an official. At that time, many people were fearful of the new message that was being spread throughout the land. They clung to the beliefs of the past, and the followers of the new Faith often became victims of harsh punishments. For this reason, Rúḥu'lláh's



Rúḥu'lláh and his father, Varqá, in prison in Tehran shortly before they were martyred in 1896.

Photo: From *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. 4 by Adib Taherzadeh, p. 62.

father was in great danger. As proof that he had raised his sons in this new Faith, Rúḥu'lláh was asked to say a prayer in the presence of the official. This, it was hoped, would be enough to convince the official to condemn his father. Calmly, Rúḥu'lláh prepared his heart to offer supplication to God. Then, in a melodious voice, he chanted a Bahá'í prayer of exquisite beauty. The official was deeply moved. He dismissed the matter immediately, saying he would not condemn a man who had raised a child so wonderful. And so Rúḥu'lláh's father was saved.

Later, when Rúḥu'lláh was about 12 years old, he would once again set out with his father to visit the Holy Land. This time, he would be blessed to pass his days in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who loved Rúḥu'lláh very much and especially enjoyed hearing him chant in his beautiful voice the many prayers he knew by heart. Rúḥu'lláh would leave the Holy Land ablaze with Divine love, ready to sacrifice his all for the Cause of God.

- Ruhi Book 3: Children's Classes Grade 2, Set 1 -11.

The man who built the first House of Worship

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, translated as "The Dawning Place of the Mention of God," is a physical expression of the relationship between service and worship. The physical structure of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is comprised of a central building, along with several dependencies intended to provide education, healthcare and other services. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the sacrificial character of the person who set out to build the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád:

After the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, the Afnán [Ḥájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taqí], loyal and staunch in the Covenant, rendered even more services than he had before; this in spite of many obstacles, and an overwhelming load of work, and an infinite variety of matters all claiming his attention. He gave up his comfort, his business, his properties, estates, lands, hastened away to 'Ishqábád and set about building the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár; this was a service of very great magnitude, for he thus became the first individual to erect a Bahá'í House of Worship, the first builder of a House to unify man. With the believers in 'Ishqábád assisting him, he succeeded in carrying out the plan. For a long period in 'Ishqábád, he had no rest. Day and night, he urged the believers on. Then they too exerted their efforts, and made sacrifices above and beyond their power; and God's edifice arose, and word of it spread throughout East and West. The Afnán expended everything he possessed to rear this building, except for a trifling sum. This is the way to make a sacrifice. This is what it means to be faithful.

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá' *Memorials of the Faithful*, p. 128.



House of Worship in 'Ishqábád. Photo: Bahá'í World News Service

The devotional attitude exemplified by 'Abdu'l-Bahá

'Abdu'l-Bahá's example provides insight into how to pray and sheds light on the phrase of the Universal House of Justice that "prayers must be lived in purposeful lives."[1] A number of individuals have described how 'Abdu'l-Bahá prayed and the solace prayer provided Him. According to one account, 'Abdu'l-Bahá "prayed not folding his hands in the conventional manner, but holding them extended and slightly bent with concaved palms toward his breast, as though already gathering in the blessings for which He prayed."[2] One of the early American Bahá'ís, Howard Colby Ives, noted that the phrase "God willing" was constantly upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lips. He wrote that "if one could ask a leaf in the clutch of autumn winds whither it was going, would it not answer, if it could, 'I know and care not. I go where God's breezes blow me.' In truth 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a 'leaf in the breeze of the Will of God.'"[3]

Another individual recorded that "'Abdu'l-Bahá's prayerfulness aided Him to sustain equanimity even in times of deep sorrow and dire anguish."[4] In particular, this same individual notes, "In times of severe stress – when Bahá'u'lláh was away in the wilderness of Sulaymáníyyih and again when the Master Himself was in grave danger in 'Akká due to false accusations brought against Him – 'Abdu'l-Bahá was known to pray, and perhaps also to chant, throughout an entire night." The same account describes how after the death of His beloved Father, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became "almost lifeless." Nevertheless, "He rallied and was sustained by His abiding love of God."

'Abdu'l-Bahá, through His example, taught those around Him about the power of prayer. These accounts describe how two early believers learned about the power of prayer from 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

One day, He instructed the pilgrims to prepare to leave Haifa for 'Akká at six o'clock the next morning. That evening, May [Maxwell] told Lua [Getsinger] that He evidently didn't realize how ill and weak she was, or He would never have expected her to be able to go. Lua smiled and said, "You will soon realize something of the power

of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.” May recorded, “It was about dawn when I woke, feeling myself stirred by a breeze. I cannot describe what followed, but through my soul was flowing an essence; a mighty, unseen force was penetrating all my being, expanding it with boundless life and love and happiness, lifting and enfolding me in its mighty strength and peace.” She realized that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was “praying for His servants,” and she left her bed feeling refreshed and well.

– Janet Ruhe-Schoen, *A Love Which Does Not Wait*, p. 40.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was in New York, He called to him an ardent Bahá’í and said “If you will come to Me at dawn tomorrow, I will teach you to pray.” Delighted, Mr. M arose at four and crossed the city, arriving for his lesson at six. With what exultant expectation he must have greeted this opportunity! He found ‘Abdu’l-Bahá already at prayer, kneeling by the side of the bed. Mr. M followed suit, taking care to place himself directly across. Seeing that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was quite lost in His Own reverie, Mr. M began to pray silently for his friends, his family and finally for the crowned heads of Europe. No word was uttered by the quiet Man before him. He went over all the prayers he knew then, and repeated them twice, three times – still no sound broke the expectant hush.

Mr M surreptitiously rubbed one knee and wondered vaguely about his back. He began again, hearing as he did so, the birds heralding the dawn outside the window. An hour passed, and finally two. Mr. M was quite numb now. His eyes, roving along the wall, caught sight of a large crack. He dallied with a touch of indignation but let his gaze pass again to the still figure across the bed.

The ecstasy that he saw arrested him and he drank deeply of the sight. Suddenly he wanted to pray like that. Selfish desires were forgotten. Sorrow, conflict, and even his immediate surroundings were as if they had never been. He was conscious of only one thing, a passionate desire to draw near to God.

Closing his eyes again he set the world firmly aside, and amazingly his heart teemed with prayer, eager, joyous, tumultuous prayer. He felt cleansed by humility and lighted by a new peace. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had taught him to pray!

The “Master of ‘Akká” immediately arose and came to him. His eyes rested smilingly upon the newly humbled Mr. M. “When you pray,” He said, “You must not think of your aching body, nor of the birds outside the window, nor of the cracks in the wall!”

He became very serious then, and added, “When you wish to pray you must first know that you are standing in the presence of the Almighty!”

– Annamarie Honnold, *Vignettes from the Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, no. 27, pp. 131-132.

In an excerpt from one of his talks, Mr. ‘Ali Nakhjavání discusses some possible reasons why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who was always busy serving others, was able to maintain an attitude of prayer:

There is a Tablet revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, our Exemplar. In this Tablet, there is one sentence; it has not yet been translated into English. It is just one sentence; I just want to focus on this one sentence. He says, “Most of the time, I am in an attitude of prayer.” I repeat, “Most of the time, I am in an attitude of prayer.” He does not say, “All the time.” He does not say, “Most of the time I am praying.” He says, “Most of the time, I am in an attitude of prayer.” He is the Exemplar, so we have to see, how is this possible? Is it possible? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would not do something that would be impossible for us, and He is writing to an individual believer, what He does, inviting him, indirectly, to do the same. How did He do it? Nobody knows. But we can think about it a little bit.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was a very busy person. He would get up early in the morning, go and meet the sick and the poor, come back, and then He had a whole day of commitments with officials, government officials, with important prominent figures of society in ‘Akká or in Haifa. He had His correspondence, He had to read the correspondence, He had to answer the correspondence, He had two, three secretaries, He had to call them, some to dictate some of the answers . . . He was a busy, busy person. In addition to all this, He had to call on government officials, to go out. In both ‘Akká and Haifa there was no Local Spiritual Assembly. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the Local Spiritual Assembly. So if the Bahá’ís had a problem between themselves, they would go to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had to sit down and hear what was the problem between these two believers, and give His opinion or His advice. He had the pilgrims from the East, and from the West. He had to see them, to encourage them, to advise them, to take them to the Shrines, to pray with them in the Shrines. So, now it is noon. He comes home. He sees Laura Barney sitting there with two secretaries, with a list of questions. And she puts her questions to Him. ‘Abdu’l- Bahá said, “I am giving you my tired moments.” And He has to answer the questions. The secretaries are busy writing. *Some Answered Questions* comes out, one of the most important Bahá’í books on Bahá’í metaphysics. It’s a wonderful book. So important is *Some Answered Questions* that Shoghi Effendi says that every believer should read the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* and *Some Answered Questions*, carefully. So important is this book.

But how can He do all these things? And then in the afternoon it was the same thing. And He had to meet even at night, in the evening He had to meet with all the community and all the pilgrims and exhort them and advise them and love them, and then send them away for the night. That was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. How could He – such a busy person – be most of the time in an attitude of prayer? Friends, let us think about this. It is possible. . .

Now, how do we attain this spiritual condition? That is a problem that you have to solve. Each one of us has to solve this problem for herself, for himself. But let us define what it means; let us look at the implications. I think it means that I should feel that I am in the presence of God. All the time, no, pardon, it is not all, it is most of the time. Most of the time I must realize that He sees me, He knows me, I am in His presence, I am one of His servants. It is not that I am doing things and no one is seeing me. Bahá’u’lláh tells me in The Hidden Words, “I even know your secret thoughts. Whatever comes to your mind, I see it, I hear it, I know it.” “Thou seest me, O My God, Thou knowest me.” Let me just think about these two words, “O God, You see me. You know me.” This awareness is so important. It is so healthy, so healthy to do that. To feel that I am with God, I’m in the presence of God. He sees me. I should live my life in such a way that it would be acceptable in His sight. That is the most beautiful thing to do. And that is what I think ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is saying. These are just my own humble thoughts, as I said, I may be right, I may be wrong. But you have to come to your own conclusions, what it means to be most of the time in our lives in an attitude of prayer.

– From a talk given by Mr. ‘Ali Nakhjavání on 8 September 2012 in Montreal, Que. at the national commemoration of the centenary of the visit of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (the full transcript of the talk can be found on the *Bahá’í Canada* website: https://bahaicanada.bahai.ca).

1 The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of Iran, 18 December 2014
2 Earl Redman, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Their Midst*, p.37.
3 Howard Colby Ives, *Portals to Freedom*, p. 71.
4 Annamarie Honnold, *Vignettes from the Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 146.

Stories from across Canada

Learning to serve the Divine Plan as a family

The following account describes how starting a devotional gathering led to unforeseen blessings and confirmations in a family's endeavour to serve the Divine Plan.

About a year and a half ago, two families came together in London, Ont. to discuss how they could contribute to the Divine Plan. Both sets of parents had had experience reaching out and teaching the Faith in their youth and early adulthood, but had yet to experience what this looked like in the context of the current Five Year Plan. Although eager to respond to the call of the House of Justice, both were nervous to try outreaching or talking to friends to begin activities associated with the Plan. The outcome of their consultation was to begin with something simple that both families felt comfortable with: a weekly devotional gathering.

The families would alternate hosting the gathering, striving to achieve a degree of excellence in the atmosphere of the devotional: spending hours preparing the house in advance, ensuring there were refreshments, picking a theme or preparing music, and inviting friends from the Bahá'í community and those participating in the community-building activities of the Plan. Although often times it was just the two families, they would always strive to create an atmosphere that would nurture a deeper and more meaningful connection to God.

After six months, the devotional gathering stopped occurring regularly, and by the summer, had stopped completely. At the same time, however, the two families had begun a junior youth group in one of their homes with their school friends, supported and attended by both of their junior youth and youth. This was the first step they took to reach out to the wider community. One of the families is now able to look back and see how these two initial steps of hosting a devotional gathering and starting a junior youth group marked the beginning of walking a path of service as a family.

The original devotional gathering gave each member of the family the confidence to take one more step in their service and the courage to reach out to friends in the wider community. Soon after starting the devotional gathering, the family decided to convert a room in their house into a prayer room. They cleared out most of the furniture and placed a beautiful Persian rug in its stead. Each member of the family began learning more about what it means to develop a relationship with God through regular devotions, including the three- and five-year-old members of the family. Most mornings and evenings the door would be found closed with someone inside praying. The youth and parents began having conversations as a family about the importance of obligatory prayers and forming a strong habit of spending some time each day in prayer.

As the devotional character of their family life was nurtured, more and more opportunities to serve the Plan became manifest. After listening to a series of talks by Adib Taherzadeh, the father became eager to learn about striving to teach daily. He began trying to have meaningful conversations about the Faith every day with coworkers, friends or even strangers. Soon he was able to begin a regular fireside with these friends, which was focused on teaching and exploring spiritual concepts as a group.

When the expansion phase[1] arrived, the father's new-found confidence in teaching led him to decide

> "Thousands upon thousands, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in systematic study of the Creative Word in an environment that is at once serious and uplifting. As they strive to apply through a process of action, reflection and consultation the insights thus gained, they see their capacity to serve the Cause rise to new levels. Responding to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker, they carry out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character."
>
> The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván *2008*.

to join his daughter in outreaching in the cluster's focus neighbourhood for the two-week duration of the teaching project. The family then recognized a number of additional opportunities to serve this focus area. Within just a few months, the mother, son and a junior youth programme graduate from the neighbourhood had started a children's class with ten children in the neighbourhood. The family rented an apartment in the focus neighbourhood to be able to host activities in a local space. The father had begun a *Book 1: Reflections on the life of the spirit* with eight graduates of the junior youth programme in the neighbourhood. The daughter was helping to grow the junior youth programme as a few groups began to graduate. The youngest two members of the family began attending the children's class each week. The family now plans to begin a weekly devotional gathering in the neighbourhood.

These days, it is hard to find the prayer room unoccupied at any time of the day as each member of the family continually draws strength and confidence in their activities from reliance on and regular conversation with God.

Although discouraged at first when the devotional gathering stopped, the family can now perceive how this initial step of holding a devotional gathering assisted them on their path of service as a family. Not only did it contribute to the development of a strong devotional character in the home and in each individual member, it assisted the family to be open to the blessings and confirmations of God in their endeavour to serve the Divine Plan.

– Yasmin Hariri

1 "The expansion phase, often a period of two weeks, demands the highest level of intensity. Its objective is to widen the circle of those interested in the Faith, to find receptive souls and to teach them."
— The Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, *27 December 2005.*



Participants of a media camp for junior youth, held in Charlottetown, P.E.I. Photo: Ben Ingham



Children play an Inuit game at a camp in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, as a part of a children's class organized by the junior youth and youth for their service project.



A junior youth reads stories to children at a camp in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut.



Participants of a devotional gathering held in Gatineau, Que. come together each week to pray and knit.



A fireside in Halifax, N.S. Photo: Zachary Miloff



Friends gather together to share prayers at a devotional gathering in Saskatoon, Sask. Photo: Zachary Miloff

Children visit 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "home"

A children's class teacher shares the experience of taking three siblings who attend a children's class to visit and pray together at the Shrine in Montreal, Que. She was accompanied on the visit by the children's class coordinator for the cluster.

I showed them the photo of 'Abdu'l-Baha from my copy of *Paris Talks*. This was their first time seeing Him. I explained that the book is a compilation of talks given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris and that it helped heal the hearts of those who heard Him. I then read them a portion of His talk about joy and sorrow. Because of this, they decided to add "joy gives us wings!" to what they refer to as "the 'Abdu'l-Bahá song" (which begins with the words "Look at Me, Follow Me"). I told them briefly about the Shrine and suggested we visit it. They were very excited.

While walking them home, we prepared to ask for their grandmother's permission to visit the Shrine. I told them that whether she allowed us to go or not, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would not want our hearts to be sad, so we must be content with their grandmother's decision. Their grandmother agreed to allow them to go.

In the car on the way there, we prepared them for the visit, explaining that we must not touch anything without asking first, and that other people would be praying, so we must be reverent, respectful and quiet. They asked many questions about 'Abdu'l-Bahá that we were able to answer and we talked about who we wanted to pray for at the Shrine.

When we arrived, a volunteer who was looking after the Shrine for the evening greeted us. He seemed surprised to see three children and asked us to wait in the small coat room. We sat there and practiced our prayers, shared more stories of 'Abdu'l-Baha and answered more questions they had. We were then told we could enter, but that we must be quiet. We went into the living room on the first floor as the second floor was closed due to water damage. The five of us sat on the floor near 'Abdu'l-Bahá's chair and whispered prayers and songs. One of the girls whispered a prayer, adding, "I love my mom and I love you guys. Thank you for bringing me here." The volunteer watched us with tears in his eyes.

We then took the children around the dining room and into the front study. There, we kneeled together on the floor by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's chair and one of the girls asked us if she could say a prayer. She kneeled and placed her forehead on the seat of His chair. She stayed there for a while, praying silently to herself. Once she stood up, one of the other girls followed suit and prayed silently at His seat. When we asked them what they had prayed for, one child shared that she had prayed for 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the other said she had prayed for 'Abdu'l-Bahá to come back. She asked why she was not able to see Him when He was here, and why she did not know about Him before. We explained that He is in our hearts and never leaves us.

One of the girls then went close to the couch, kneeled on the ground, again placed her forehead on the seat, and prayed silently. The two others followed so that all three were kneeling at this couch, praying to themselves and to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In that moment, the children's class coordinator, the volunteer and I were overcome with emotion and began to cry. The youngest of the girls heard us crying and came to us, asking us not to cry. We kneeled down beside her and explained that we were crying because we were so happy, and because we knew that 'Abdu'l-Baha was happy, and shared that we were overjoyed to be able to come to His home with them. The other two girls joined us and the five of us hugged before leaving.

In the car as we were about to leave, one of the girls told us that she loves praying and she always wants to pray, putting her sweater over her head to hide herself as she prayed silently. The oldest girl then started to pray out loud and the youngest child said that she did not like the visit and did not want to go back. I asked her why and she said she just did not like it. I asked her why again and she smiled a cheeky smile and said she actually did like it and she loves 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Then they all prayed together.

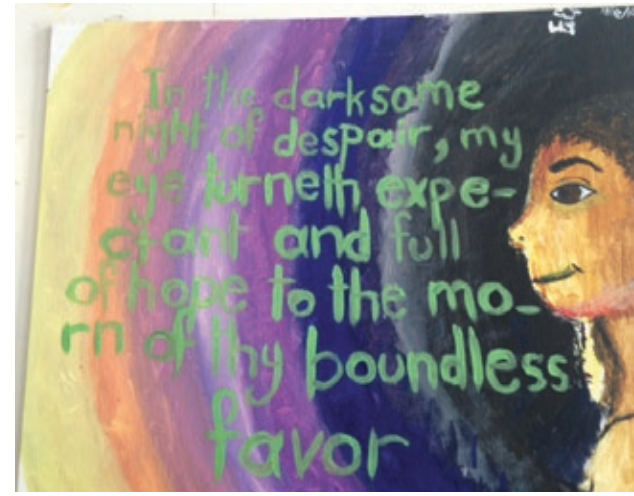
– Veronica Filson

"Train these children with divine exhortations. From their childhood instill in their hearts the love of God so they may manifest in their lives the fear of God and have confidence in the bestowals of God. Teach them to free themselves from human imperfections and to acquire the divine perfections latent in the heart of man . . . Know ye the value of these children for they are all my children."

From a talk by 'Abdu'l-Bahá recorded in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 52–54.

"In the Bahá'í Cause arts, sciences and all crafts are counted as worship. The man who makes a piece of note-paper to the best of his ability, conscientiously, concentrating all his forces on perfecting it, is giving praise to God. Briefly, all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people. Service is prayer."

'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, pp. 79.



Artwork from a group of youth in Morley, Alta.



Friends in a neighbourhood in Toronto, Ont. celebrate the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh with prayers, stories, and arts and crafts.



Participants share their art at a teaching project in Calgary, Alta.

A pattern of community life blossoms in a Toronto neighbourhood

There are a number of spaces in which friendships are forged among junior youth who participate in the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme in Toronto. These include junior youth camps, teaching projects and outings with neighbouring groups. While engaging in these activities, junior youth also undertake acts of service which allow them to collaborate. Such acts nurture bonds of friendship that further inspire their efforts to contribute to constructive change in their communities. Junior youth groups that have worked together on simple service projects – for example, supporting one another in fundraising initiatives for upcoming camps, or hosting community days or children's events – have strengthened friendships across the city. As the junior youth become better friends, their participation in junior youth groups increases.

Spending time with the junior youth and their families outside of the junior youth programme also nurtures a spirit of fellowship and love. Recently, some friends have assisted the junior youth to participate in devotional gatherings, Holy Day celebrations and reflection meetings, as participation in these spaces fosters deep and lasting bonds. One example comes from a group in the central sector of Toronto, as retold by the animator:

> The junior youth pray together in the group every week and are learning more and more about the nature of that conversation with our Creator. Since starting and ending our weekly sessions with a few prayers, we have noticed that the junior youth have more of a desire to recite prayers. At one point in the history of the group, we used the quotations from the lessons of *Walking the Straight Path*, a junior youth text, to create a prayer book for each member. Now the junior youth encourage each other to share prayers, to recite them with reverence and to sit quietly when they listen to the prayers.

The junior youth also participate in a devotional gathering hosted by graduates of the junior youth programme. Participating in the devotional gathering nurtures the junior youths' habit of turning to prayer, discussing the meaning of the prayers and seeking deeper understanding. It is not uncommon for the members of the group to answer each other's questions by referencing one of the prayers or Writings that are read. The ability to draw on prayers has also extended to the community. Friends of the animators will often visit and share prayers with the parents of the participants in the junior youth group and in the children's class. And whenever a family in the community is experiencing loss, difficulty or hardship, the junior youth are quick to create a space for the families in the community to pray. It is in these spaces that the junior youth have been able to connect with their neighbours, both young and old.

– Shared at a Toronto cluster reflection meeting



Participants at a learning site seminar for the Junior Youth Empowerment Programme, prepare to visit youth in Toronto, Ont. to have conversations about spiritual and material prosperity. Photo: Bahiyyih Tretina

"Remembrance of God is like the rain and dew which bestow freshness and grace on flowers and hyacinths, revive them and cause them to acquire fragrance, redolence and renewed charm . . . Strive thou, then, to praise and glorify God by night and by day, that thou mayest attain infinite freshness and beauty."

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Importance of Prayer, Meditation and the Devotional Attitude*, 1745.

Young children pray and play

These are two accounts of the development of devotional gatherings focused on children. A grandmother hosts a gathering in Hamilton, Ont., and her daughter-in-law, a new mother, hosts one in Guelph, Ont. Both began with the hope of bringing a spiritually uplifting environment to young families.

Pray and Play

Three years ago when I became a grandmother, I wanted to support my grandchildren and daughters-in-law as new mothers. I also noticed that there were several young families in my community that we rarely saw at Bahá'í gatherings that were held in the evening. I wondered if it would be preferable for these families to gather in the morning for a "Pray and Play" group. After some phone calls and emails, I was delighted by the response of several young mothers, fathers and even other grandmothers who attended with their little ones. Sometimes people would bring a friend or neighbour for these devotional gatherings, which also became a safe space to discuss parenting approaches and share challenges and ideas.

The children grew quickly, and by the second year, they needed a little more structure than a singing circle. New elements were added to the devotions with a focus on helping the toddlers to be aware of their nobility, and the group was called "Noble Beings Pray and Play." For example, each child turns on battery-operated tea lights to symbolize that when we make someone happy, we are like a light shining bright. Soon the prayer circle would last for longer periods as the children learned to sit reverently and enjoyed singing more and more prayers. Each week there was a story, song and game or craft that explored a simple way to bring happiness to others, for example, greeting others by saying hello or using courteous words. A snack and some play rounded out the morning, as we learned to practice our nobility by being happy together.

> "These children are even as young plants, and teaching them the prayers is as letting the rain pour down upon them, that they may wax tender and fresh, and the soft breezes of the love of God may blow over them, making them to tremble with joy."
>
> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 115, pp. 139.

Now that the devotional gathering has been taking place for three years, rather than having it at my house every week, it rotates among four households each month. One of the hosts is a friend of the Faith who is also attending *Book 1: Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*. This shared ownership of the devotional gathering has resulted in increased participation and is developing capacity among all the members of the group to learn and teach prayers and provide hospitality. It also gives each child the opportunity to learn to share their toys with other children. Children learn to pray as a community from the earliest months of their lives, and mothers have an opportunity to have elevated conversations together at a time when they often feel isolated from adult company.



Some of the Pray and Play devotional gathering participants in Hamilton, Ont.

Just as "Noble Beings Pray and Play" underwent its own organic evolution, it has been immensely rewarding to support the development of a devotional gathering called "Little Pearls" that is setting roots in my daughter-in-law's community.

– Pat Cameron

Little Pearls

I also began a devotional gathering for young families to create a spiritually edifying and nurturing space for the babes of my friends. This devotional gathering ran for one year. The following year, 'Little Pearls' was put on hold and my toddler and I attended 'Pray and Play' each week at my mother-in-law's home. Through seeing how this program worked, I could imagine hosting a similar gathering myself and re-started 'Little Pearls' gatherings for the families I had connected with in the first year. My mother-in-law accompanies me in this service, coming each week to help me prepare the space, settle children, arrange hospitality and take over teaching the program when needed.

A key focus is encouraging an atmosphere of reverence and teaching prayers to children. To teach the children these skills, we ceremoniously light a candle to start each circle and explain how we might sit when we pray. To begin, we sing just one prayer and have added a sung prayer or Writing each month. The toddlers are learning to sit reverently and respectfully together in a devotional setting and now sing four prayers together.

It has also been moving to see a natural expression of service emerge from these gatherings; some of the mothers come early to set up the space, bring generous offerings of refreshments, look after each other's children, share clothes and toys, consult over future lesson plans and praise the qualities seen in each other's children.

In mid-January, a second 'Little Pearls' group began in a friend's home. Two mothers who were unable to attend 'Little Pearls' on the day it is held in my home asked if they could host a similar gathering at their homes. After consultation, it was decided that one would host, one would prepare food and I would bring the 'Little Pearls' curriculum.

This gathering has gained momentum quickly. I believe this is from the energy that comes from working as a team; all three of us support the gathering and take time to plan together. Last week, 10 toddlers, eight babes, nine parents and one grandparent sat, prayed and learned about the importance of saying "hello" to everyone we meet to make them feel loved and welcome. Later that day, I received a text message from a mom saying her twin two-year-olds were reenacting circle time and practicing saying 'hello' to all their new friends.

Through this process we learned that elevating the devotional character of our communities has a dual benefit. Initially people attend the gatherings due to a sense of loyalty to the group and experiencing the joy of being together. But when the participants take ownership over the planning and hosting of the gatherings, there is a marked development in capacity for service, enthusiasm for the activity and expansion of possibilities.

– Rachel Cameron



A devotional gathering for young children held in Hamilton, Ont. at Riḍván in "Bahá'u'lláh's Tent", where their sweet reverence lasted for more than 25 minutes.

"Worship, though essential to the inner life of the human being and vital to spiritual development, must also lead to deeds that give outward expression to that inner transformation."

The Universal House of Justice, *18 December 2014 Message to the Bahá'ís of Iran*.



Two youth share their goals at a reflection meeting in Victoria, B.C.



Children pray together during a children's class in Vancouver, B.C. Photo: Zachary Miloff



Junior youth at a media camp in Charlottetown, P.E.I. make a short animated film about friendship. Photo: Ben Ingham



Participants of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity seminar in British Columbia play a cooperative game.

"When effort is expended wholly for the sake of God then all that occurs belongs to Him and every victory won in His Name is an occasion to celebrate His praise."

The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván 2014*.



This year's unit convention in Halifax, N.S. Photo: Anthony Power



Participants of a children's class in Vancouver, B.C. prepare for a cooperative game. Photo: Zachary Miloff



Friends enjoy a Family Day activity on Vancouver Island, B.C.



A junior youth group in Uashat, Que.



Children from a neighbourhood in Toronto, Ont. play a game during a children's class. Photo: Zachary Miloff



Children colour in sheets from *Book 3: Teaching Children's Classes* during a camp in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut.

Youth discuss spiritual reality at a devotional gathering

A weekly devotional gathering began in a Vancouver neighbourhood after a group of youth came together to reflect and plan at the end of a three-month cycle of activity[1]. The youth – some of whom are studying Book 1: Reflections on the Life of the Spirit, *while others are holding a core activity – have been conscious of creating opportunities to reflect on the significance of praying together. This account describes one such conversation.*

One night, as people gathered to pray, a discussion arose about the existence of a material and a spiritual dimension for everything. For example, hospitality can consist of offering tea to one's guests, taking their coats, allowing them to sit near a warm fire. As well, the warmth of the host's acts creates a certain spiritual feeling, and hospitality is felt through the environment created by these sentiments – the heart is affected. There is both a material and a spiritual dimension embedded in such things. The question was posed: "How can we look at both the material and spiritual dimensions of this gathering? What about it attracts us?"

One youth immediately shared that we are like an extended family. We all silently agreed with this simile, as it wonderfully describes the pattern of community life being woven by this band of youth in this neighbourhood. After a thoughtful pause, another friend added that fellowship definitely has a big role; we pray individually, of course, but to be able to pray together is different. There is a different energy and it is always uplifting. He said that after the devotional it is much easier to have positive thoughts. Someone else commented that this is because we create a certain environment when we pray together, an environment that encourages each of us and can help sustain us. The tutor of the study circle shared that when we set our heart on something, we are bound to be tested, to meet obstacles, to face difficulties. Perhaps these tests have to do with our studies, or with a project in the community, or our work. But if we are wholeheartedly striving for something, we cannot let these challenges deter us from our goals. We all have things we are working towards, and steadfastness is important if our heart is set on noble aims. The youth mentioned a talk by Mírzá Abu'l Fadl referred to in *Book 6: Teaching the Cause*, who he introduced as an early Bahá'í and a great teacher. In the talk, Mírzá Abu'l Fadl discusses love, explaining that it is easy for one to sit in his garden in front of his house, and say, "I love humanity." But it is only when one has fought the battles of love, and has been wounded for the sake of love, that he can utter such a phrase with conviction. Our love only becomes real when it is tested. Praying together helps each of us meet the conditions of true love, helping each of us in our struggle to face these tests.

Then we prayed and we were happy.

– Stefan Jauca

1 ". . . one thinks in terms of the three-month cycles of activity through which a community grows—the burst of expansion experienced as a result of intense action; the necessary period of consolidation during which increases in ranks are fortified as they, for example, participate in devotional gatherings and the Nineteen Day Feast and receive visits at their homes; and the opportunities designated for all to reflect and plan."
– The Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 12 December 2011.

"With more than 350,000 souls worldwide who have completed the first institute course, capacity to shape a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character has risen perceptibly. In diverse settings, on every continent, groups of believers are uniting with others in prayer, turning their hearts in supplication to their Maker, and calling to their aid those spiritual forces upon which the efficacy of their individual and collective efforts depends."

The Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors, 28 December 2010 Message.



Participants of a weekly devotional gathering in a Vancouver, B.C. neighbourhood.

"For the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites Man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason why Bahá'u'lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. It is not sufficient for a believer merely to accept and observe the teachings. He should, in addition, cultivate the sense of spirituality which he can acquire chiefly by means of prayer. The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man which has first to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide.

"Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organization, and becomes a dead thing. The believers, particularly the young ones, should therefore fully realize the necessity of praying. For prayer is absolutely indispensable to their inner spiritual development, and this, as already stated, is the very foundation and purpose of the religion of God."

Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, pp. 86-87.



Participants at a learning site seminar for the junior youth empowerment programme, Vancouver, B.C.



Friends consult at this year's unit convention in Halifax, N.S.
Photo: Anthony Power



A gathering held in Saskatoon, Sask. for some of the friends serving in clusters across the Prairies.

"Know thou, verily it is becoming in a weak one to supplicate to the Strong One, and it behooveth a seeker of bounty to beseech the Glorious Bountiful One. When one supplicates to his Lord, turns to Him and seeks bounty from His Ocean, this supplication brings light to his heart, illumination to his sight, life to his soul and exaltation to his being.

During thy supplications to God and thy reciting, "Thy Name is my healing," consider how thine heart is cheered, thy soul delighted by the spirit of the love of God, and thy mind attracted to the Kingdom of God! By these attractions one's ability and capacity increase. When the vessel is enlarged the water increases, and when the thirst grows the bounty of the cloud becomes agreeable to the taste of man. This is the mystery of supplication and the wisdom of stating one's wants."

'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, pp. 92-93



A guest teaches the youth and junior youth participants of a camp in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut about traditional Inuit hunting equipment.



A youth enters an igloo made by an elder with the assistance of some youth as a part of a service project in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut.



Youth walk towards an igloo to learn about how it was built and its historical significance. The igloo was constructed by an elder with the assistance of some of the youth as a part of a service project.