

"Blessed is the spot..... where mention of God hath been made"

TEACHING NEWS BULLETIN

ISSUED BY THE NATIONAL TEACHING COMMITTEE

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DEVOTIONAL MEETINGS.

The Significance.

In the short obligatory prayer it says, "I bear witness that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee." From these words it becomes apparent that the initial recognition of God, and the Acceptance of Baha'u'llah as the Manifestation of God for this age, is actually only the first half of one's spiritual responsibilities in this life. To turn towards God in prayer and dedication constitutes an equally important aspect of religious belief. In our teaching work, therefore, it is our responsibility not only to acquaint our contacts with the principles and tenets of our Faith, but also to instill into their hearts the desire for prayer and meditation, the spiritual foundation of a radiant and dedicated Baha'i life. It is during devotional meetings, in which the contacts directly participate, that this vital objective is in large part accomplished. As individual Baha'is, or as Baha'i Communities collectively, we should ourselves learn the significance and value of devotion and prayer, and by careful and patient efforts transmit that understanding to our contacts, people who come out of the world of material values and who are perhaps at first unable to grasp the full significance of the spiritual core of Baha'i life.

The Purpose.

The purpose of a devotional meeting is, of course, essentially that of collective turning toward God in praise and prayer. But when thinking in terms of teaching techniques, the purpose of such a meeting takes on innumerable other important aspects. For one thing the devotional meeting gives the contact an all important opportunity to glimpse for himself the wealth of spiritual sustenance contained within the Revealed Word of God. At a purely practical level, it allows him to witness the Baha'i method of devotion, having as it does no rigid form or dogma. A devotional programme can, by its very content, teach the contact new things about the Faith. But of all things that a devotional meeting accomplishes, that of opening the heart of the enquirer so that the light of God can flow in, is, without doubt, the most significant and profound. For it is only when the heart is charged by the vibrating influence of the Word of God, that the seeker can truly be said to be confirmed in his belief.

Atmosphere.

If the devotional meeting is to fulfil its purpose, a spirit of quiet and peace should prevail. Conversation among the attendants should, as much as possible, be discouraged in a gentle and kindly way. The use of appropriate music will often satisfactorily accomplish this end. The spirit of devotion can be accentuated by the use of beautiful flowers and greenery, and by a softer-than-usual lighting of the room, if possible. It is often helpful to think of the atmosphere which envelopes the shrines at Mt. Carmel and to endeavour to recreate such serenity and tranquillity as would penetrate a devotional meeting held in that place.

The Method.

(For full details of devotional meetings, refer to page 20 of the Teaching Manual. The Teaching Committee will also provide, on request, copies of two

programmes developed and presented by the Northampton Assembly). In the type of teaching activity outlined in the bulletins of this series, it is suggested that devotional meetings be held either in conjunction with a confirmatory fireside, or with one of the lessons on the Covenant, preferably the last session, and before the closing meeting, titled "What It Means to be a Baha'i". The teacher should take care to select prayers and readings which will fit the current subject-matter of the course, yet also fulfil the spiritual receptivity of the contacts. A devotional meeting too heavily weighted with intensely deep readings may easily cause spiritual indigestion for the contact.

Helpful Hints: Readings from the Writings of other Faiths, particularly those to which the contacts belong, will provide evidence that Baha'is recognize the divine origin of all Scripture. Choose the readers to fit the readings, including non-Baha'is as well as Baha'is. The effect of a beautiful voice and good reading will enhance the programme. Prepare the readings in such a way that all of the readers have an opportunity to study their particular reading a little ahead of time so that all questions on pronunciation can be clarified before the meeting begins. Give the readers clear instructions as to when they should read so that there is no disturbance between readings, and no speaking except the prayers and Writings themselves. A too hastily prepared devotional programme, punctuated throughout by instructions to the readers from the host, will not produce the spiritual atmosphere desired. The devotional meeting requires the most careful planning and the smoothest execution if it is to fulfil its purpose. Such a programme can well provide a spiritual background for a musical evening, the showing of the Temple slides, or those of the Shrines, a talk on the meaning of prayer, a confirmatory fireside, and, of course, for the commemoration or celebration of a Baha'i anniversary.

In Conclusion.

Baha'u'llah emphasized the spiritual significance of prayer and the reading of the Writings, as well as giving us an insight into the dynamic influence exerted on the hearts of men by the Revealed Word, when he wrote:

"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 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."

NATIONAL TEACHING COMMITTEE.