

BAHÁ'Í CANADA

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An accelerating pace

From the Writings

By the righteousness of God! Justice is a powerful force. It is, above all else, the conqueror of the citadels of the hearts and souls of men, and the revealer of the secrets of the world of being, and the standard-bearer of love and bounty.

– Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 32.

God's grace is like the rain that cometh down from heaven: the water is not bounded by the limitations of form, yet on whatever place it poureth down, it taketh on limitations—dimensions, appearance, shape—according to the characteristics of that place. In a square pool, the water, previously unconfined, becometh a square . . . The rain itself hath no geometry, no limits, no form, but it taketh on one form or another, according to the restrictions of its vessel. In the same way, the Holy Essence of the Lord God is boundless, immeasurable, but His graces and splendors become finite in the creatures, because of their limitations . . .

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 139, pp. 169-70.

Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will that pervadeth all created things. Say: The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth. Whoso hath tasted of its sweetness will refuse to barter it for all the dominion of earth and heaven.

– Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 63–64.

Mortal charm shall fade away, roses shall give way to thorns, and beauty and youth shall live their day and be no more. But that which eternally endureth is the Beauty of the True One, for its splendour perisheth not and its glory lasteth for ever; its charm is all-powerful and its attraction infinite. Well is it then with that countenance that reflecteth the splendour of the Light of the Beloved One! The Lord be praised, thou hast been illumined with this Light, hast acquired the pearl of true knowledge, and hast spoken the Word of Truth.

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 175, p. 204.

Now must the lovers of God arise to carry out these instructions of His: let them be kindly fathers to the children of the human race, and compassionate brothers

to the youth, and self-denying offspring to those bent with years. The meaning of this is that ye must show forth tenderness and love to every human being, even to your enemies, and welcome them all with unalloyed friendship, good cheer, and loving-kindness.

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 12, p. 31.

OSON OF SPIRIT! The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.

– Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words, From the Arabic #2*.

Grieve not if worldly possessions should pass from thy hands, for thy luminous heart is the greatest treasure, inasmuch as every heart that is confident in the grace of its Lord and is illumined by the light of its Creator is one of the treasures of the Kingdom, overflowing with heavenly riches and divine bounties. This is the greatest wealth!

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas* (New York: Bahá'i Publishing Committee, 1915, 1940 printing), vol. 2, p. 294.

They that have hearts to understand, they that have quaffed the Wine of love, who have not for one moment gratified their selfish desires, will behold, resplendent as the sun in its noon-tide glory, those tokens, testimonies, and evidences that attest the truth of this wondrous Revelation, this transcendent and divine Faith.

– Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqan*, pp. 232-33.

It behoveth the people of Bahá to die to the world and all that is therein, to be so detached from all earthly things that the inmates of Paradise may inhale from their garment the sweet smelling savor of sanctity, that all the peoples of the earth may recognize in their faces the brightness of the All-Merciful, and that through them may be spread abroad the signs and tokens of God, the Almighty, the All-Wise.

– Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 112.

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ON THE COVER Youth in St. James Town, in Toronto, Ont., enjoy an outdoor activity during an institute campaign.

Photo: Golbon Singh

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To all National Spiritual Assemblies

From the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 9 May 2020.

Dear loved Friends,

As will by now be all too apparent, the Five Year Plan's final year has brought challenges different to those of the preceding four. The world is caught in the grip of a fast-spreading virus that has claimed many thousands of lives and severely disrupted a large share of humanity's social and economic activity. Yet the Bahá'í community has remained composed and has acted swiftly to meet the immediate demands that confronted it. It has found ways to ensure the continuity of community life, while also striving to play its part in meeting spiritual and material needs in society more widely—a fitting response to an emergency situation. We commend all the action that has been taken so far. Now, however, we wish to explore more fully what the coming year might entail. Your efforts to stimulate the advancement of the Plan in its final months will inevitably be shaped by your pressing responsibility to guide the friends in their response to an evolving global crisis. These unique circumstances require that we address you directly; you may share this letter with your communities, in whole or in part, as you deem appropriate.

When we expressed our desire to see five thousand intensive programmes of growth established by the end of this Five Year Plan, we were keenly aware of the magnitude of the undertaking this implied, but the condition of the world demanded it. We called for the work of strengthening programmes of growth to accelerate everywhere. We were gratified to see how the supporters of the Cause were galvanized into action, exerting unprecedented levels of effort. In the space of four years the Bahá'í community doubled both the number of core activities occurring worldwide and the number of their participants. To have brought hundreds of thousands of individuals into the embrace of the community's activities in such a short period is an advance in capacity that has no parallel in any of the previous Plans in the present series.

Much, then, has been accomplished, and this is a clear indicator of the strength and confidence of the Bahá'í community. But, as you already appreciate, the current crisis has altered the context in which the Plan is being pursued. We have been impressed by how many

communities have taken great strides in adapting to this new reality. Far from viewing the present period as simply a hiatus to be endured with patience, they have recognized that the state of the world has made the need to render meaningful service to humanity more urgent. Naturally, the activities undertaken must suit the prevailing conditions, but there should be no doubt that this is a time for noble aims, high resolve, and intense endeavour. As is well known, the activities of the Plan are intended to cultivate a thriving community spirit, through which resilience to mighty challenges is also strengthened. Educational efforts aim to raise up a growing number of souls who can contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of a community; devotional meetings nurture the spirit of service as it blossoms, rooting it in a culture of collective worship. In short, the promotion of the Plan implies building capacity to walk the path of service in every time and season—which must surely include moments of acute peril in the life of humanity, such as now. It is essential, then, that the steps being taken to learn how to apply the Plan's framework for action to the current circumstances of the world continue in earnest; in all likelihood, the global health crisis will have a direct impact on Bahá'í activities, to a greater or lesser degree, for months or even years, and the task of adapting to the situation cannot be postponed. In this regard, the Continental Counsellors and their auxiliaries, ably guided by the International Teaching Centre, have shown impressive determination in their efforts to spur on the friends and orient them in their approach to the work at hand; they will doubtless do the same over the coming four cycles and beyond.

We appreciate, of course, that some activities have had to be suspended, and particular strategies or methods that are unsuited to current conditions have had to be set aside for a time. However, while certain possibilities have been temporarily closed, others have opened up, and new means have emerged for strengthening existing patterns of activity. Flexibility has proven to be an asset, but so has vigilance in ensuring that the primarily local character of community activities is not diluted; efforts to nurture flourishing communities within neighbourhoods and villages and across clusters must continue. In some cases, present conditions have created unexpected opportunities for widening community participation in devotional meetings and study circles, conducted with safety in mind. Many parents whose families have been confined to home surroundings have welcomed support that has helped them to move from the position of observer to protagonist in the spiritual education of their children. Junior youth and groups of youth have discovered the

power of simple acts of compassionate service carried out with wisdom. Nevertheless, it would be understandable if you determine, in some instances, that plans that require the movement of pioneers, mobile tutors, or visiting teachers will have to be postponed, and this should not give you cause for concern; you can re-evaluate the situation in the months ahead. The coming One Year Plan could afford an opportunity to fulfil any goals or objectives that may in the end remain out of reach during the present Plan.

We recognize that continuing to function in the course of this crisis will, in many cases, put you under financial strain, and the economic hardship being experienced by many in the community may limit the resources upon which you can draw. Be assured that we stand ready to support you. Let there be no doubt or equivocation in this regard: it is essential that the institutions of the Faith maintain their operations throughout this period and not be obstructed by lack of resources in the discharge of their core duties. Unquestionably, the whole company of the faithful in each country will rally around you, and in particular, we are confident that believers with means will come forward to aid you.

As you are aware, there is considerable unevenness in the ways that different societies are coping with the difficulties arising from this crisis; consequently, the challenges that confront different National Assemblies are not the same. And these challenges will change over time. This will call for tremendous agility as local, regional, and national institutions seek to read their reality and stay alert to new developments. We wish to impress upon you that your collaboration with the Counsellors will be of paramount importance: it should be committed and sustained, an almost constant exchange of information and insight, to ensure that you are responding swiftly to the needs of your community, anticipating problems before they emerge, seizing opportunities that open up, and supporting promising initiatives. Exactly what measures should be taken by Bahá'í institutions will naturally depend on the relevant circumstances. But in every place, the friends will need clear and timely guidance; special attention must be given to those who are most at risk from the virus itself, or from the economic impact of its spread; and creative approaches will be required to sustain the collective spirit of the community during difficult times. Networks of various kinds comprising families, neighbouring households, or other groupings are offering valuable support to many; you should be confident in the resourcefulness of your communities, and seek to draw on their talents and energies to the fullest. As grave as conditions have already become in some places, National Assemblies in countries that have so far been spared the more severe consequences of the pandemic must keep in mind that there is the potential for worse to occur, and any preparations that can be made now for that eventuality, before the introduction of further restrictions hampers such efforts, should commence at once—without alarm, but without delay. Local Spiritual Assemblies in

particular should consider what means might be within their power to prevent, relieve, or mitigate suffering in the wider society of which they are an integral part.

When society is in such difficulty and distress, the responsibility of the Bahá'ís to make a constructive contribution to human affairs becomes more pronounced. This is a moment when distinct but interrelated lines of action converge upon a single point, when the call to service rings aloud. The individual, the community, and the institutions of the Faith—inseparable protagonists in the advancement of civilization—are in a position to demonstrate the distinctive features of the Bahá'í way of life, characterized by increased maturity in the discharge of their responsibilities and in their relationships with each other. They are summoned to a fuller expression of the Faith's society-building powers. Agencies and projects dedicated to social action may have to adapt their approaches in order to meet expanded needs; efforts to do this are sure to infuse ongoing programmes with deeper meaning and purpose. Further, Bahá'í contributions to discourses newly prevalent in society are generating heightened interest, and there is a responsibility to be discharged here too. At a time when the urgency of attaining higher levels of unity, founded on the incontestable truth of humanity's oneness, is becoming apparent to larger and larger numbers, society stands in need of clear voices that can articulate the spiritual principles that underlie such an aspiration.

You are of course ever conscious that your responsibilities reach beyond those of administering the affairs of the community and channelling its energies towards the fulfilment of noble goals: you seek to raise awareness of those spiritual forces that are available to every confirmed believer and which must be marshalled at the hour of need. It is these forces which endow the community with resilience, ensure its integrity, and keep it focused on its divine mission to serve humanity and elevate its vision of the future.

It is not possible to foresee the extent to which this pandemic will influence the movement towards unity among the nations. But there is no doubt whatsoever that, for the endeavours of the Bahá'í community, the months ahead will be consequential. Indeed, it could hardly be otherwise. This final year, of the final Plan, in a series spanning the final quarter of the opening century of the Formative Age, will seal the foundation upon which will rest the next series of global undertakings. It is the concluding act in a captivating drama whose end is yet unwritten.

Not a moment passes when you are not in our thoughts. All our trust and confidence in your capacity to face this challenge comes from our knowledge that your ultimate supporter and helper is the Abhá Beauty Himself. In our entreaties at the Sacred Threshold, we implore Him to make you pure channels for the flow of His grace to humankind.

– The Universal House of Justice

Regarding racial prejudice and the American Bahá'í community's distinctive contribution to its eradication

From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the United States, 22 July 2020.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

A moment of historic portent has arrived for your nation as the conscience of its citizenry has stirred, creating possibilities for marked social change. It holds significance not only for the destiny of America anticipated in the Sacred Writings, but also for the mission entrusted to your community by the hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who cherished you dearly and called you to a path of sacrifice and high endeavor. We are pleased to see that, led by your National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, you are seizing opportunities—whether those thrust upon you by current circumstances or those derived from your systematic labors in the wider society—to play your part, however humble, in the effort to remedy the ills of your nation. We ardently pray that the American people will grasp the possibilities of this moment to create a consequential reform of the social order that will free it from the pernicious effects of racial prejudice and will hasten the attainment of a just, diverse, and united society that can increasingly manifest the oneness of the human family.

Sadly, however, your nation's history reveals that any significant progress toward racial equality has invariably been met by countervailing processes, overt or covert, that served to undermine the advances achieved and to reconstitute the forces of oppression by other means. Thus, whatever the immediate outcome of contemporary events, you need not be deterred, for you are cognizant of the “long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls” described by the Guardian that still lies ahead. Your commitment to tread this road with determination and insight, drawing upon what you have learned in recent years about translating Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into reality, will have to be sustained until the time, anticipated by Shoghi Effendi, when you will have contributed your decisive share to the eradication of racial prejudice from the fabric of your nation.

The principles and exhortations that guide your steps are well known to you from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. The concepts and approaches for social transformation developed in the current series of Plans that can be utilized to promote race unity in the context of community building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society have been set out in our messages. Every believer, as the promulgator of Bahá'u'lláh's central principle of the oneness of humanity, should deeply meditate upon it and weigh its demanding implications for the profound alteration of thought and action required at this time. “The American Bahá'í Community, the leaven destined to leaven the whole,” the Guardian admonished, cannot hope “to either escape the trials with which this nation is confronted, nor claim to be wholly immune from the evils that stain its character.” “A tremendous effort is required by both races if their outlook, their manners, and conduct are to reflect, in this darkened age, the spirit and teachings of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh,” he also stated. “Let neither think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved.” “Each one should endeavor to develop and assist the other toward mutual advancement,” 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained. “Love and unity will be fostered between you, thereby bringing about the oneness of mankind.”

The change required is not merely social and economic, but above all moral and spiritual.

Racism is a profound deviation from the standard of true morality. It deprives a portion of humanity of the opportunity to cultivate and express the full range of their capability and to live a meaningful and flourishing life, while blighting the progress of the rest of humankind. It cannot be rooted out by contest and conflict. It must be supplanted by the establishment of just relationships among individuals, communities, and



Continental Bahá'í House of Worship of North America at dusk. Photo: MichaelDPhotos

institutions of society that will uplift all and will not designate anyone as “other”. The change required is not merely social and economic, but above all moral and spiritual. Within the context of the framework governing your activities, it is necessary to carefully examine the forces unfolding around you to determine where your energies might reinforce the most promising initiatives, what you should avoid, and how you might lend a distinctive contribution. It is not possible for you to effect the transformation envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh merely by adopting the perspectives, practices, concepts, criticisms, and language of contemporary society. Your approach, instead, will be distinguished by maintaining a humble posture of learning, weighing alternatives in the light of His teachings, consulting to harmonize differing views and shape collective action, and marching forward with unbreakable unity in serried lines.

Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds

to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity's age of maturity. You are channels for this divine love; let it flow through you to all who cross your path. Infuse it into every neighborhood and social space in which you move to build capacity to canalize the society-building power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. There can be no rest until the destined outcome is achieved.

Ahead of you lie times of trial and promise, of hardship and progress, of anguish and joy. Under all conditions, the Master is your solace and support. For those who aspire to lasting change, His example guides the way—tactful and wise in His approach, penetrating in utterance, indiscriminating in fellowship, unflinching in sympathy for the downtrodden, courageous in conduct, persevering in action, imperturbable in the face of tests, unwavering in His keen sense of justice. And to all who arise to emulate Him, He offers this unflinching assurance: “that which is confirmed is the oneness of the world of humanity. Every soul who serveth this oneness will undoubtedly be assisted and confirmed.”

– The Universal House of Justice

To the Bahá'ís of Canada and those working at their sides

From the National Spiritual Assembly to the Bahá'ís of Canada and those who are working at their sides,
10 July 2020.

Dearest Friends and Co-workers,

With love and admiration, inspired by your response to the perilous conditions humanity has been facing and aware of the potential for even greater contributions to the healing of the world, we are moved to write to you and raise a call to action.

First, however, we must pause. Who could have imagined the changes that have overtaken humanity in these last months? While waves of suffering and sorrow continue to surge from a sustained global health crisis that has re-shaped daily life for the inhabitants of the planet, voices long-unheeded are now raised in a discourse long-neglected about justice and the scourge of racism. From every side, trials are afflicting and awakening humankind. Yet, in spite of the rapid disintegration around you, you have kept your sights fixed on the world you wish to build, confident that humanity will pass through this ordeal, persevering in your service while subject to exactly the same forces that are affecting the communities of which you are an integral part.

... we now raise a call for the friends across the country, young and old, to rise as one in an equally unprecedented wave of prayer, establishing a regular devotional gathering in every household associated with the Greatest Name in Canada.

Story after story has reached us of the ways that you have been stirred to action within the current, necessary constraints. You have vowed to understand more deeply the root causes of the injustices in our society, and learn to address them in your own lives, in searching of soul and in conversation within families. You have extended the circle of friends, mourned the grief of God's children, suffered with them and consoled them. You are attentive to the most vulnerable in society, including the elderly in your midst. You are continuing the education of the young and supporting the youth whose future hopes have been so jeopardized. In this work, you are drawing on powerful constructive spiritual forces to forge a new collective life, reconnecting souls with a Creator from Whom they had become estranged, changing fear into calm, doubt into confidence, despair into hope.

Seeing this strength against the backdrop of an unprecedented crisis of health and spirit in our nation, we now raise a call for the friends across the country, young and old, to rise as one in an equally unprecedented wave of prayer, establishing a regular devotional gathering in every household associated with the Greatest Name in Canada. We especially hope that in addition to gatherings that welcome all, every family will consider ways to strengthen the pattern of devotions within the home.

Several regions have already begun a movement towards this inspiring goal: let the entire country join them. In some parts of the nation, current restrictions will continue for some time and these prayers will take place only in family units or through remote technology. Yet even in today's altered context, whatever the circumstances, this campaign of collective worship will serve to increase consciousness of spiritual forces and allow them to penetrate daily conversation in new ways. In its 9 May 2020 letter, the Universal House of Justice stated: "Naturally, the activities undertaken must suit the prevailing conditions, but there should be no doubt that this is a time for noble aims, high resolve, and intense endeavour. As is well known, the activities of the Plan are intended to cultivate a thriving community spirit, through which resilience to mighty challenges is also strengthened. Educational efforts aim to raise up a growing number of souls who can contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of a community; devotional meetings nurture the spirit of service as it blossoms, rooting it in a culture of collective worship."

If you already have established a devotional gathering, you have naturally begun to think about the next steps. How can these spaces provide an opportunity for elevated,

meaningful conversation among family members or a group of friends? How can the community-building work and the instrument of the training institute be introduced in a meaningful way? How can conversations with new participants lead to the study of the new version of Book 1, and how can these conversations be enriched by the sequence of concepts explored therein? How can all those who wish to arise to serve be aided to do so? How, in the current circumstances and in line with current public health guidelines, can you collaborate with others in learning together and building capacity to walk the path of service in every time and season?

While in most parts of the country the limitations imposed by the health crisis are gradually easing, conditions vary from region to region and even locality to locality. The challenge before us is to apply what we have learned to the current circumstances. We cite this powerful statement of the Universal House of Justice – the international body that unites our worldwide efforts to build strong, vibrant communities – on the painful condition of humanity, the grip that prejudices of all kinds continue to hold, and the work ahead:

While it is true that, at the level of public discourse, great strides have been taken in refuting the falsehoods

that give rise to prejudice in whatever form, it still permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness. It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized.¹

It is our prayer that through this united effort, the fire of the love of God will become a mighty blaze across the country, draw tens of thousands of souls into contact with the Word of God, inspire their service to humankind, and hasten such a blessed day.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

¹ From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 28 December 2010.

Water flowing to Niagara Falls, Ont. Photo: Sidra Saeed



About this issue

While activities this summer have had to be adjusted, the pace of the work of the Plan has been steadily increasing. This has been reinforced by an influx of guidance, starting with the 9 May 2020 letter from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, which provides a charter for the way forward as we learn “to apply the Plan’s framework for action to the current circumstances of the world” given that “the current crisis has altered the context in which the Plan is being pursued.”

In its 10 July 2020 message, the National Spiritual Assembly raised a far-reaching call to action: “[F]or the friends across the country, young and old, to rise as one in an...unprecedented wave of prayer, establishing a regular devotional gathering in every household associated with the Greatest Name.”

The feature article in this issue, “Devotional gatherings underscore resilience,” focuses on how the friends have drawn on the power of prayer to strengthen the institute process, particularly in response to this call to action. From coast to coast to coast, friends are uniting in prayer and making the path wide for others to join them, as “devotional meetings nurture the spirit of service as it blossoms.”¹

In the “From the History” section, we share an excerpt from the book *Fires in Many Hearts*, by Doris McKay, who was taught the Faith by Howard Colby Ives and became a long-term pioneer to Charlottetown, P.E.I. In the excerpt she describes her journey towards the Faith, learning that “service is prayer”; this consciousness influenced her throughout her life.

The article “Newsletter connects community during pandemic” tells the story of how a group of youth and junior youth created a positive resource for those who they felt were most vulnerable as a result of physical distancing, particularly children and the elderly. Through challenging circumstances, they were able to persevere in staying connected as a group, taking every opportunity to serve others.

In its 9 May 2020 message, the House of Justice wrote, “[T]here should be no doubt that this is a time for noble

aims, high resolve, and intense endeavour.” The article “Children’s classes thrive despite distance” describes how in two clusters, through carefully reading reality and seeing others as potential protagonists, the number of friends taking responsibility for the spiritual education of children grew.

In May, the Office of Public Affairs launched a podcast entitled *The Public Discourse*, which explores “aspects of the national public conversation in a new way, by focusing on the role of values and principles.”² The podcast began with a mini-series that explored the theme of resilience given the coronavirus pandemic. In this issue, we share a transcript from the episode called “The power of religion.”

The article “The community-building work in Victoria-ville” looks at the development of a locality over a period of six years, charting how systematic effort led to the cluster reaching the second milestone during the course of the current Five Year Plan. Their story highlights how the love and unity that bind an expanding nucleus of friends serve as conditions for growth for the core activities.

As many friends will be aware, over the last few years the Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh in Canada, in collaboration with the National Spiritual Assembly, has been offering, as a gift, a copy of the compilation on the Right of God to every Bahá’í home. In the story “Gifting compilations on Ḥuqúqu’lláh,” a representative of Ḥuqúqu’lláh describes the immense love and care through which this task has been undertaken, and which did not stall despite challenging circumstances.

We are now well into the final year of the Five Year Plan. As the House of Justice writes, this, “the final Plan, in a series spanning the final quarter of the opening century of the Formative Age, will seal the foundation upon which will rest the next series of global undertakings. It is the concluding act in a captivating drama whose end is yet unwritten.”³ The ink of the Canadian Bahá’í community and all those who serve at their sides – their high resolve, sacrificial effort, and resilience – inspires us as we endeavour to shed light on this drama.

2 “Office of Public Affairs launches new podcast with a mini-series on coronavirus,” 12 May 2020. news.bahai.ca

3 From the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 9 May 2020.

1 From the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 9 May 2020.

Submitting stories to *Bahá’í Canada*

The *Bahá’í Canada* magazine and website are spaces where we can continue to gain insight into the profound communication taking place between diverse individuals, communities and institutions. We invite people from across the country – from large cities to small towns – to submit stories and reflections about the efforts being made to translate the Writings of the Faith into action, the insights these actions are generating and the myriad questions that are arising. Send news, photos, insights, reflections and more to bahaicanada@bahai.ca.

Fires in many hearts

Doris McKay and her husband, Willard, pioneered to Prince Edward Island in 1943, with the goal of assisting to establish a Local Spiritual Assembly in Charlottetown and thus contribute to winning the Seven Year Plan goal of establishing a Local Assembly in every province of Canada and every state in the United States. They both remained at their pioneer post, where they laid down their bones, following lives of rich service and great sacrifice, Willard in 1966 and Doris in 1992. Their service took them far from their farmhouse home in upstate New York, where they embraced the Faith, throughout the United States where they travel taught and embarked on race amity work.

In P.E.I., the McKays bought a farm in Vernon Bridge and Willard farmed while Doris taught art in the schools in Charlottetown to support their family. Life was difficult, but they persevered. Through the decades, that farm became a refuge, a spiritual oasis, and almost a site of pilgrimage for people young and old – from nearby communities and the far reaches of the earth, veteran believers and eager seekers and the merely curious. To each was dispensed the remedy appropriate to his or her spiritual condition.

It was evident to everyone who met her that Doris lived with one foot in the spiritual realm, which is clear in the description of how she and Willard first encountered the Faith, taken from her memoir, *Fires in Many Hearts*, which is dedicated to Howard Colby Ives, her spiritual father, whom she described as “a lighter of fires in many hearts.” Throughout almost 70 years of living “in the Paradise of Abhá,” she never lost her sense of the wonder of it – a wonder that she was able to share vividly with others as a bearer, in her turn, of the undying flame. May the spirit that shines through her words kindle ours with a spark from that flame as we read her memories here.

– Ann Boyles



Doris McKay in August 1964. Photo: Canadian Bahá'í Archives

It seems to me that my chief distinction in the Bahá'í Faith is that I have lived so long. At this writing (1983¹), I have lived fifty-eight years in the Paradise of Abhá which is, for me, the knowledge that the Chosen One of God has, in the ascended Glory of the Sun, revisited the earth.

Throughout the years this certainty has been the cause of rapturous joy, my charm against disaster, my password to the hearts of others. This is the reason for the little smile that I wear on my lips at the thought of my treasure, my talisman, “my phoenix egg” that I carry in the warmth of a symbolic hand.

Was it an accident that someone had given my father a book of Persian poems when I was fifteen, and that when he saw I was in love with it, he had given it to me? The book went with me through high school, teachers college, and art school and after that out into my teaching world. I grew up, then out, with my perceptions widened and coloured by the songs of Omar Khayyam, Hafiz, and Jal'u'din Rumi. I drew illustrations in the margins. I wore the cover off the book.

I asked a young friend of mine, a great pioneer in the far reaches of the world, “What would have happened if you had not heard the Name, Bahá'u'lláh, on the boat that day?”

She replied, “I would have been lost. This is literally true.”

Yes, people do get lost in the Valley of Search. I, too, walked in that Valley with a pack of “isms” on my back when I was young. Like my friend, I travelled alone seeking I know not what, until, by a miracle, I grasped the meaning of that Word. I, too, was lost.

Lost, yet I thought I was found when I met Willard McKay and we fell in love and were married in June 1923. After the years of teaching and living in different places, I started

a new life on that beautiful fruit farm in the Finger Lakes country of western New York state. There dwelt love and compatibility, and, for a setting, there was the old house with its antiques, and the lavish plantings of roses and flowering shrubs on the grounds. The nook by the brook was planted with violets, bloodroot, hepaticas, bluebells; sweeping arbour-vitae hedges sheltered the orchards. Family and friends were nearby and there was an inner atmosphere of conversation, music, and books. Every deep wish seemed granted.

The remembrance of my early marriage has remained, floating in memory like an iridescent soap bubble. It seemed that we were at the peak of fulfilment and security. I wrote a poem in those days which conveys my deep sense of satisfaction then: “THIS IS ENOUGH!”

With a mild sense of nostalgia I have taken out the diary of our first year. It began in January 1924. Here are the pages of a life we would later leave behind – a life bent on pleasure exclusively, an almost pagan excitement with Nature. Thronging through the pages are many casual friends with whom we played cards, picnicked, skied and crouched around fireplaces and discussed our “isms”. Each day in the diary tells of the weather and what we had to eat.

Did I really say, “This is enough!” I ask myself today, “This?” The romantic bubble is burst. Any Bahá'í who has lived more than half a century in the altitude of spirit would have suffocated with boredom with that life of 1924!

In the late fall of that year there was a slight erosion in the pattern. We felt flattered to be invited to join two older couples on Sunday nights to read a newly published book called Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era by Dr. J. E. Esslemont, a book left by someone named Howard Ives.

The two or three evenings were social; stimulating because they gave us an opportunity to talk about our religion or lack of it. And

the talk was so interesting with the Doctor and his wife (both orthodox Christians), the Collisons (atheists) and Willard and I, discussing “New Thought”. Actually, we did not open our minds to the book, although we were curious about the title.

But there came the day when three words that we read stayed with me. I did not welcome them, but they persisted to crowd my consciousness. They were: “Service is prayer!”

On an Indian summer day Willard and I climbed the hill at the back of the farm and looked down over the cherry orchards to Seneca Lake. The trees were drab now, the cherries picked, and the sixty or seventy Italian pickers paid off. I spoke timidly on a subject we had avoided. “Everything seems so heavenly the way it is, but in our lives we have no service and we have no prayer... So, if service is prayer, as the book said, perhaps we should invite your mother and sisters to move out here with us.”

How gladly Willard assented, as if he had been waiting for me to say this! Thus it happened that, before Christmas, the farm truck came out from town, riding high above the frozen ruts in the lane with Willard's dignified and erudite mother in her wheel chair. Our family, including Marguerite and Christine, would now be increased to five.

The old house looked very welcoming. Fireplaces in two rooms were crackling with blazing apple wood. Candles were burning in their sconces and the lamps with golden and rose china shades were alight. Our old furniture, given to us by my mother, had been accepted as an addition to the beautiful antiques of the McKays. A baby grand piano had found its wall in the bookroom. The wide planked floor was painted orange with dark blue borders. Every surface was polished bright. Kim, the old sheepdog cum collie, went rushing out to meet the truck.

1925

Thaya, a Bahá'í teacher, writes today, “How to convey to those unbelieving

¹ This book was six years in the writing, and Doris celebrated her ninety-fifth birthday just a few weeks before it was completed (September 29, 1990).

souls out there, the wonder of being a Bahá'í!"

My story begins with that wonder – a wonder that was given to us on an evening in January 1925. The seven of us who were invited to meet Howard and Mabel Ives that night were like a handful of travellers, strangers to one another who had met on a bus. Actually, we were taking off for a whole new world together, although, had we known it, we would have resisted that very thought and perhaps have left the bus. We had in common that all of us were adults who had found a certain pattern in our lives. We were people with strong opinions and curious minds.

I suppose the others were feeling as Willard and I were feeling, excited for some deep reason, but resolved to be critical and wary. Sales resistance we could call it today. All of us would appear to have been among those who were least likely to become Bahá'ís.

We Meet Mr. and Mrs. Howard Ives

The call had come soon after New Year's day. "Would you like to come to a baked bean supper at the Collisons' tomorrow night and meet the Ives?" Tomorrow was Sunday, and late that afternoon Willard and I stepped into our Model A Ford and charged down the lane to the main road. In fifteen minutes we were stepping into the fire-lit room.

Over handshakes we caught the message of Howard Ives' eyes. Most eyes are veiled at first contact, the first meeting. Perhaps some are veiled always. But these eyes spoke. They said, "My dears, this is a meeting of souls. We cannot hide from one another." The moment passed and we saw his eyes to be deep set and brown under bushy brows. They were set in a lined face with strong features. He had a mobile, speaker's mouth. The man was spare, a little bent. Close to him stood his wife, Mabel, his physical opposite, not very tall, exceedingly pleasing and pretty with blue eyes and dark curly



Mabel and Howard Colby Ives.

Photo: bahaimemories.com

hair. She looked both merry and wise.

We began to enjoy ourselves. The aura of the two guests enhanced the atmosphere of the room, imparting an expansion of mind to a level above the merely rational. It was an unfamiliar elation, a response to a sense of intimacy – a sense of somehow being known and cherished. There was laughter, and stories were exchanged. We made a semi-circle around the fireplace, with plates of Mary's baked beans on our knees. It could have been the food of kings!

The Bahá'í Message

We sat away from the fire and became quiet and expectant as the Ives' were introduced to speak. We were to see the skilled operation of an experienced team of husband wife. Mabel spoke first on the world aspects of the Bahá'í Faith, stressing its call to universality. She listed and explained the Bahá'í principles derived from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh – revealed over a century ago. Among these were a list of concepts. In those early days they were challenging, even explosive – far reaching in their call, not to a locality, but to the whole world. For example, mankind is one, the religions are one, all racial, national and religious and class prejudice must be abandoned. There must come universal education, a universal language, a world court,

a world administrative body. By eliminating the roots of dissention, she said, universal peace would ultimately follow.

"How can we achieve such a state of mind?" somebody asked.

"By still another Bahá'í principle," she responded. "The independent investigation of truth."

There was a thoughtful silence. We had all been seekers, each in our own way. We had remained cool to the insistent dogmas of the church, the weird statistics of psychical research, the egoistic goals of the modern cults into which we had probed. Had we perhaps been perishing for a firm belief in something reasonable, some scientific, and at the same time something warm?

Mabel's strong confident voice laid every treasure before us in dazzling array, and somehow, truth could never again be piecemeal. In our minds a new thought exploded: the concept of oneness – a concept to be loved as a reality, for itself! In that flash of illumination we accepted the integration of our ideas and of our world.

Speaking quietly, Howard told us of an Entity, veiled in light, whom he called "the Manifestation of God". This being had borne the name of Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Christ, Mohammed, and, in recent times, the names of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Their words were the Messages of the Holy Spirit made vocal, each in its own day.

In their dual station, the Manifestations or chosen Intermediaries between God and Man were men – and yet, more than men. Their messages were from one Source: God – the Unknowable Essence. All taught the singleness of God, Whose laws they brought. All taught the love of God and love of "thy neighbour". They brought the laws and ordinances of God that differed with the changing times. Now, at the summit of the long cycle of human history and evolution and in a time of great danger to the human race through world strife, not one, but two exalted

Beings had appeared. The Message for this day was Justice, and through World Order, peace.

Here, indeed, was a new idea, a Christ returned! “Like a thief in the night,” said Howard. When he invited questions, our instinctive need was to relate to our previous beliefs the supreme fact that he had revealed. But how could his answer be reconciled to such a group as were gathered before him? The agnostic and atheistic scientists, the churchman, the searchers in the humanistic cults.

Sometimes it seemed as if Howard had left us when, with open palms and head thrown back, he sat in silent prayer. Then he would rise up, his deep eyes flashing, his white mane vibrant on his head, and the answers would come through an electrified atmosphere.

He told us, “Instead of giving up Christ you will find Him. Yes, God spoke through His prophets. Did He not say to Moses, ‘I am the Lord, thy God.’ Yes, this is in fulfilment of prophecy. The prophecy of all the prophets foretold this Day.”

“Science?” asked Rex Collison.

“Science and religion will enhance and prove each other. How can one truth contradict another truth?”

“Reincarnation?” That was my question.

“It is true that we are born again after leaving this world, but not in the sense of reincarnation. In the next world we will continue to advance into higher stations, if we so desire. Births will be necessary to attain to these, just as tonight a new world and a new birth lie before you. Your first birth was from the womb. Even in this world, a “second birth” is available to the awakened soul.”

“Proofs of the prophet?” Here is the challenge to investigate the truth, Howard told us. “The life of the Prophet and His Teachings are the unassailable proofs.”

“How do we know that They were sent by God?”

“Whence came that dynamic power to uplift humanity of the world religions that bear their names?”

His voice stopped as did our questions. We sat silent, amazed by another and personal proof. We had beheld a man communing with an Unseen Power. We had watched him being inspired, reasonable, and acceptable answers back from another realm.

Such was the power in the room, our eyes, too, were suddenly opened to it. A place of spirit had, somehow, signalled us. The man, Howard Ives, had become a part of his message, had become something more than the flow of words, the voice, the movement of hands in prayer. More than his eyes looking into ours with a compassionate comradeship. Our defenses dispersed. The Message flowed into our separate worlds like a sudden flood. I believed. We all believed.

It has been a happening. There are different ways of saying it. For example, a boat on a sluggish, weed-hampered stream enters a main current that effortlessly speeds it along. A painting, obscured by dust, is restored to the artist’s original colours. A fish, floundering on the beach, is returned to the sea by a kind of ninth wave; a half-dead person is revived by oxygen. Many times when the early Bahá’ís were with us, our spirits were to feel this release. Tonight, this night with Howard and Mabel, had been our first.

I had one last question for Howard as he held my hands in a goodbye: “How does one pray?” Howard and Mabel exchanged the look of conspiring parents.

He said, “Dare I?”

She nodded, and he slipped into my hands his own worn prayer book to take home.

I tried to sleep that night, but I had to give it up because I found myself spiritually awake for the first time in my life. Of course I had had lovely thoughts before, induced by some book or other that I was reading, but these had been passing thoughts that had made me feel comfortable, like a church service does for some people.

I asked myself, “What had I learned from contact with the passionate sincerity of Howard’s words?” That there was a world of spirit and that there was an Essence there – a knowing and responsive ENTITY. That Howard had addressed this Being and had been inspired in the answering of our questions. That it followed that we, too, could pray, establishing a kinship with this Power, with Bahá’u’lláh as an intermediary.

Yet, marvelling at this new dimension of my understanding, I was miserable. The intonations of Howard’s voice seemed still to ring out, “Mankind is one! All prejudices must be abandoned.” How could I, with my own two or three choice prejudices, qualify as a Bahá’í? In the searchlight of these teachings, how ugly my faults were! Were the doors closing? For a few hours I had thought that I belonged to “the new creation” mentioned by my teachers. Now I was a little less secure.

I arose and lit a candle, turned the pages of Howard’s prayer book and prayed, almost with fear, that these hindrances might be removed.

My prayer was answered overnight. In the morning I awoke with a free, unsullied soul. This I knew through an experience of faith – a positive knowledge of things divine.

Mary Collison telephoned to ask, “Are you still up in the air?”

“Yes, I am,” I replied, “and I never want to come down!” Neither Mary nor I ever did come down.

– From *Fires in Many Hearts*,
by Doris McKay (Nine Pines
Publishing) pp. 1 – 10.



An outdoor devotional gathering in Halifax, N.S.

Devotional gatherings underscore resilience

Over the course of the summer, and particularly since the National Assembly released its 10 July 2020 message, friends across the country have been drawing on the power of prayer to build community.

In its 10 July 2020 letter, the National Spiritual Assembly called for an “unprecedented wave of prayer” and the establishment of “a regular devotional gathering in every household associated with the Greatest Name in Canada.” Many friends, of course, are already holding a regular devotional gathering. “The challenge before us,” the National Assembly continues, “is to apply what we have learned to the current circumstances.” It further calls on us to draw on “powerful constructive spiritual forces” and allow them to “penetrate daily conversation in new ways.”

During the current perilous conditions, it seems that prayer, often in the context of devotional gatherings, has been an undercurrent of the continued progress of the Plan. Across the country, there are countless examples of individuals and families who have strengthened their own patterns around prayer, as well as friends who have found opportunities to extend spiritual conversations to newly awakened souls. Here are only a few examples that illustrate this movement.

In **Halifax, N.S.**, the call from the National Assembly came right after a devotional workshop was held

in the community to encourage participants to think about how they could expand their nucleus of friends through initiating devotional gatherings. During this time, 11 devotional gatherings took place with 46 participants, including five friends of the Faith. The cluster now has two regular devotional gatherings, one of which is for children. These devotional gatherings led to two new Ruhi Book 1 study circles as well as a Ruhi Book 2 study circle with friends of the Faith.

Devotional hosts in Halifax have also been meeting monthly to reflect



A musical devotional takes place outdoors as part of an institute campaign in Charlottetown, P.E.I.

Photo: Paul Vreeland

together. This has allowed them to adapt to changing conditions. For example, the devotional gatherings were happening online, but since some restrictions were lifted on outdoor gatherings, one has taken place at a host's home in her yard, respecting physical distancing guidelines.

Gathering to pray when circumstances permit can help to overcome the forces of lethargy that are often the result of social isolation.

Gathering to pray when circumstances permit can help to overcome the forces of lethargy that are often the result of social isolation. In **Abbotsford, B.C.**, the friends began to experience some limitations with shifting their monthly devotional gathering online, particularly with regards to parents with young children. They began to hold the devotional gathering in a park, keeping in mind social distancing, and participation increased. As a result of this adjustment their devotional has become much more frequent and now takes place on a weekly basis.

In **Toronto, Ont.**, a friend held a desire for some time to converse and pray regularly with her neighbours. Because of the conditions of the moment, a conversation about prayer

arose very naturally when she bumped into her neighbour while both were out for a morning walk. While wearing masks and keeping at a safe distance, they prayed together outside and have now committed to meeting one morning a week for a walk and prayers. Both are thinking

about what other neighbours they can invite to join them.

Institute campaigns are also a time of intensive prayer. In **Charlottetown, P.E.I.**, about 20 participants, mostly youth, came together while complying with public health guidelines. They studied Ruhi Books 1, 3, and 7 in the mornings, and worked in nearby neighbourhoods in the afternoons. Many homes were visited (safely) and at least two new children's classes were established. As part of their campaign, the friends gathered for a musical devotional outdoors, keeping the required distance from each other.

In its 10 July message, the National Assembly also commented on the Bahá'í community's attention to

the most vulnerable in society. A recreation manager for a retirement community in the **Mid-Island cluster in B.C.** saw the opportunity to hold a devotional gathering for residents when the pandemic led to restrictions on visitors and churches were closed. The devotional gathering was described to residents as a space for everyone to offer prayers regardless of their religious background.

The first day of the devotional gathering, the manager placed 15 chairs in a circle to allow for social distancing. To his surprise, the room was filled. He played a Bahá'í song and then the residents said prayers together. Many residents expressed thanks for the gathering, and they decided to hold a devotional meeting every two weeks. One gentleman told the manager that he was afraid of coming because he did not know what to expect, but he was glad he did and liked how simple it was. After a few more devotional meetings this man asked for a Bahá'í prayer book so that he could read the prayer for protection every day. Another resident asked for a copy of the Prayer for America. Eight residents now attend the devotional gathering regularly.

A family in the same cluster had been saying prayers together daily for a long time, but recently decided to dedicate a day and time in the



week for a more formal devotional gathering. This formal space has created an opportunity for the family to engage in more intimate and meaningful conversations with an international student living with them. It has also created a time for the family to connect with their extended family who join them for prayers online, and they also read the Writings and scriptures from other faiths together.

In **Winnipeg, Man.** one friend had a strong desire to follow the call to action from the National Spiritual Assembly yet felt nervous about sharing prayers with others. To overcome these feelings, he decided to practice with a Bahá'í friend to grow more comfortable with the idea of sharing prayers with other friends in the future. Another example from Winnipeg demonstrates how devotional gatherings can be initiated from natural encounters. When a friend of the Faith shared the news of the birth of her first grandchild, her Bahá'í friend asked if she could say a prayer for the baby. The offer was accepted, and the grandmother became attracted to the words of the prayer, so it was sent to her through a text message. This led to the sharing of prayers between the two friends on a regular basis.

In northern Canada, the friends have united in a wave of prayer. In the **Yukon**, they initiated a



Cheryl Fennell, Kiera Dawn Kolson and Özgür Öner celebrate unity in diversity at the Unity Fair held on the shores of Great Slave Lake in Yellowknife, N.W.T. Photo: Michael Gannon

weekly pan-territorial devotional online, including the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, which recently encouraged an Inuit friend of the Faith to participate. A weekly devotional near Great Slave Lake, in the **Northwest Territories**, fuelled the organization of a unity gathering. During a teleconference call, friends in **Nunavut** studied the 10 July letter from the National Assembly and reflected on the openness of Inuit to talk about God. During this

call, an Inuit friend in Baker Lake recited a prayer in Inuktitut from this geographic centre of Canada, signalling a fresh wave of spiritual energy that will set ablaze this region with love and the desire to serve and teach the Cause of God.

Newsletter connects community during pandemic

The members of a junior youth group created a series of newsletters to bring hope to their community during a time of physical distancing.

In late March, at the beginning of the pandemic, the St. James Town team quickly took steps to continue engaging those in the educational process and families and networks around them. An animator endeavoured to continue her junior youth group online. For the first few meetings, it was just herself and one of the junior youth who had already been part of the group for several months. In the month before the pandemic, the group had expanded and there were many new participants; however, for a variety of reasons, only this junior youth was able to continue online.

Every day the animator called that junior youth and they studied a lesson from *Glimmerings of Hope* together to help one another stay hopeful during a difficult time. They also tried daily to contact and engage other friends and children, making a list of names and using a variety of approaches (email, Instagram, text, phone calls and notes at their doors). After a week or



A children's class meets in the park in the St. James Town neighbourhood, in Toronto, Ont. Photo: Golbon Singh

two, the animator was able to reach a second junior youth, who was previously unavailable because her phone had broken. This youth was very happy to have the opportunity to participate in the group. The animator consulted with the youth's parents, who agreed that it would be a good use of her time. They started studying *Walking the Straight Path* and *Habits of an Orderly Mind* together. The expanding group continued to consult about how to reach other junior youth. Each time they identified a number of setbacks to be overcome, prayed and were encouraged to keep trying.

During the group session, the junior youth reflected on the situation in their community and what steps they could take to help people. Being very connected to the children in the neighbourhood children's classes, their thoughts naturally turned to them. They wanted to share good news as well as activities that would help them learn during this time of physical distancing. They decided to

create a newsletter with various activities for the children and families in their neighbourhood, further inspired by the Ridván message which referenced identifying "constructive themes that are emerging from the discourses opening up in their societies."¹

They thought the stories and themes they were studying together could bring hope during these difficult times. They chose a theme and stories from the book they were studying and the accompanying questions. One created a word search of virtues; another had a couple of drawings from one of her younger siblings to share and each wrote a short paragraph about the theme they chose. The junior youth also added materials to assist readers to learn more about the junior youth program. For example, they selected a discussion question from one of their books: "Why is it important to develop good habits?" and wrote

1 From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2020

their responses to it, then shared them in the newsletter.

The newsletter also contained short quotations from recent messages of the Universal House of Justice, such as “However difficult matters are at present and however close to the limits of their endurance some sections of society are brought, humanity will ultimately pass through this ordeal, and it will emerge on the other side with greater insight and with a deeper appreciation of its inherent oneness and interdependence.”² The animators assisted the junior youth with compiling the newsletter, as they did not have the computers and programs to create it themselves.

The newsletter, entitled *Southeast, 6* (“The 6” is a popular nickname for Toronto) was shared online and physical copies were delivered to a number of families. It was hoped that it would be a means of connecting the community with those who they could not physically see anymore.

They had to think creatively about distribution, given the circumstances. The junior youth were not allowed to leave their homes, so they decided to distribute the newsletter electronically. They emailed it to people they knew, shared it on social media and posted it in their Google classrooms for their teachers and classmates to see. The junior youth had the vision of trying to share it with hundreds of people. Three junior youth shared it by email with over 60 friends and family members, over 90 classmates and about 300 friends on social media. The animators also assisted them to create a website to facilitate sharing the newsletter. They helped them to print physical copies and mailed them to 60 families in the neighbourhood who had junior youth or children.

One of the junior youth shared the newsletter with a friend, who immediately became very excited to participate in the effort. While before she was unable to participate in the group since her mother did not want

her to show her face online, they came up with a way to address her concerns and allow her to participate. She emailed the animator to confirm her participation. Her email read: “I would love to join. Again, thank you so much for allowing me to join and be part of this fantastic JY (junior youth) group.”



The front page of an edition of the newsletter *Southeast, 6*.

For the second issue of the newsletter, a few more junior youth in another group participated, this time encouraged by their animators who created space for them to write within one of their group meetings. The group was touched by a lesson in *Walking the Straight Path* about joy and difficulties, particularly passages such as, “We all have our share of difficulties, but we should not be defeated by them. And when fortune visits us, it is best not to become attached to it. Throughout our lives, joy and sorrow come and go, one after the other.”

In April, when the group of junior youth learned that the residents and staff at long term care facilities throughout the country were isolated and in difficult circumstances, they were moved to see how they could help the seniors in their community. Over the years the junior youth had connected with the seniors to share art, games and conversation, so they considered reaching out to the Re kai Centre, a nearby assisted living facility where they had previously carried out service projects.

They had to think creatively due to social distancing requirements. They had the idea to work remotely, but together, on dedicating an issue of the digital newsletter they started in March to those living or working in long term care homes. This special edition of *Southeast, 6* contains notes and sentiments that the junior youth put together to bring hope and joy to friends at the centre. They wanted to convey to the residents that they are important members of the community and that they are thinking of them during these challenging times. They chose the theme of universal participation to highlight that a community needs the contribution of all generations in order to progress.

The junior youth took ownership over every element of the process and discussed the newsletter every time they met. They reached out to children, junior youth and adults to gather submissions. One of the junior youth wrote: “This time is really tough for all of us and it is sad to not see your loved ones all the time. So we made this newsletter for you to keep close to kids who care about you.” More than 20 community members were involved in creating and delivering the newsletter. In consultation with the Re kai Centre, 80 printed copies were delivered.

Currently the St. James Town team is meeting daily, carrying out institute campaigns, study circles, junior youth groups and children’s classes. The junior youth group is working on a fourth edition of the newsletter on the themes of unity and the oneness of humanity to respond to the current discourse amongst their friends and community.

Issues of *Southeast, 6* can be found online at: <https://issuu.com/sjtcommunity>.

² From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Naw Rúz 177.

Children's classes thrive despite distance

In two neighbourhoods, parents and older siblings of children have been taking increased ownership of the educational process, expanding the nucleus of friends "who are working and consulting together and arranging activities."¹

¹ From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors, 29 December 2015.

In the North Port Coquitlam (North Poco) neighbourhood in Port Coquitlam, B.C., and the Springdale neighbourhood in Brampton, Ont., both the number of children's classes and the participants involved increased during the health crisis. The neighbourhood teams developed strong relationships with the families involved, who took on aspects of teaching the classes when it was no longer possible to meet in person.

When the pandemic hit, the team of children's class teachers in the North Poco neighbourhood realized that their efforts to systematically home visit families over the years had built a strong foundation for community development. Additionally, opening their neighbourhood centre in the summer of 2019 had further formalized the classes, providing many opportunities to converse with parents about the nature of the process that they were engaged in. In the fall of 2019, after a period of further expansion, there were seven classes in the neighbourhood with over 60 participants.

Although activities could no longer take place in the neighbourhood centre during the pandemic, children's classes continued online. During this time, the team of teachers decided to show the sincerity of their friendship to the families. After much consultation, they reached out to families, both those whose children currently attend the classes as well as those who they had not heard from in several months. Yeganeh Dadkhah, the cluster



A group of young children's class teachers in the North Poco neighbourhood in Port Coquitlam, B.C., gather for an outdoor study circle. Photo: Cathy Borsa

children's class coordinator, said that they wanted "to ensure they were safe and that the families knew they could reach out to the team for any sort of help at any time."

The team made packages to deliver to families that included activities from their children's classes as well as a heartfelt letter from the teachers. "This led to many conversations with families that the team had not seen for a few months," says Ms. Dadkhah, including some families who the team had met only a few times in the distant past. There were many challenges, but the sincerity and love of the teachers created spiritual conditions for the classes to continue, as the teachers stayed in touch with the parents throughout the physical distancing regulations.

From the beginning of their service, this team of teachers has had regular collective spaces for the study of messages from the Universal House of Justice. When the Ridván 2020 message was released, the team studied it together and consulted about how a sense of hope

could become more present within the neighbourhood as well as the individual lives of the families involved with the children's classes.

The teachers decided that they would begin accompanying parents to carry out certain aspects of the classes within their own home environments. They also hosted online gatherings for parents to consult about the spiritual and material needs of their children. Ms. Dadkhah explains, "These gatherings empowered parents with the language to describe the purpose of the program and reflect on the transformation of their children."

"The development of this capacity," she went on to say, "naturally enabled the parents to invite other families with whom they had connections." This led to the registration of 20 new children in the classes which were taking place online. There are also plans in North Poco to organize devotional gatherings for parents, which was something the team had planned but did not have the chance to carry out prior to the pandemic.

In the Springdale neighbourhood in Brampton, Ont., parents and older siblings of children are also becoming part of the expanding nucleus in the community. After a series of consultations among a group of four children’s class teachers about continuing the classes during the pandemic, they realized that in some cases, the classes would need to become further decentralized. Martharoot Malungu, one of the team members, shares, “Rather than trying to gather large groups of children on a Zoom call, we decided to see how we could carry out the classes in the context of the home.”

Like in North Poco, the team made a list of all the families they could



In the North Poco neighbourhood, in Port Coquitlam, B.C., the team prepared and delivered packages to their children’s class participants.

Photos: Diba Taghvai



“Making the lessons accessible online and providing simple instructions for carrying them out allowed for new friends to arise to serve...”

reach out to. Then, the teachers had conversations with these families about how important it was for children to continue their spiritual education and stay connected with friends at a time when prayer and a sense of hope would be vital to weathering the crisis ahead.

Out of the 28 homes that they reached out to, 19 agreed to continue with the classes. “We saw this as an opportune time to build capacity within many individuals to learn how to teach elements of the children’s classes,” Ms. Malungu continues. Lesson planning “was not limited to those who had completed Ruhi Book 3, but became the work taken on by parents, youth and junior youth who were thinking about the spiritual education of their children and younger siblings,” she explains.

The team used several online platforms to upload lessons and hold classes, while many other classes were conducted by parents, youth and junior youth directly inside their own homes. After the first week of operating in this new context, they reflected with the families on

their progress. Ms. Malungu says, “We noted that most households were taking an active role in helping children memorize prayers and quotations; the habit of praying in each home had strengthened.”

It was clear, she continues, that “Making the lessons accessible online and providing simple instructions for carrying them out allowed for new friends to arise to serve as children’s class teachers and take ownership of this process. Calling each family to check in also provided the children’s class teachers with a way to have elevated conversations with the families and build meaningful connections.”

When the teachers realized that most of the classes were studying the Grade 2 children’s class materials from the Ruhi Institute, they decided that it was time to expand the program so that they could also offer Grade 1 classes. They realized that if they asked each of the 20 families engaged in the process to reach out to five additional families with children, there was potential for the classes to engage 100 new families.

They shared this vision with all the families so that collectively they could try to attain this goal. They were able to bring 75 new families into conversation about children’s classes. Of the 75 new families, 18 have been able to study a lesson with the children in their home or participate in one of the available online classes. “We are beginning to see how children’s classes are no longer primarily involving children but are slowly involving the family unit,” says Ms. Malungu. Several mothers who had started studying Ruhi Book 1 before the pandemic are continuing alongside these other activities.

This growth in their neighbourhood has made it essential for the team in Springdale to increase the intensity of their prayers to attract Divine Assistance for their efforts. They have set aside a time every day to pray together. In both North Poco and Springdale, using creative means to work within challenging circumstances has allowed for family members of children to become a part of the expanding nucleus in these communities, who “maintain, with those around them, a sustained focus on nurturing growth and building capacity,” and “reflect on action and learn from experience.”¹

1 From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the world, Riqvân 2018.

The power of religion

This past spring, the Office of Public Affairs launched a podcast entitled *The Public Discourse*, which began with a mini-series exploring resilience in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. The following transcript is from episode two, "The Power of Religion," and has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Delaram Erfanian (Communications Manager, Office of Public Affairs): I am so happy to have with me today Hannah Marazzi, Eric Farr and Esther Maloney. To start us off, I wanted to ask you each to introduce yourselves and share a little bit of your background with us.

Hannah Marazzi (Stakeholder Officer, Cardus):

My name is Hannah Marazzi and I am a stakeholder officer at Cardus, which is Canada's only faith-based think tank. I'm also a board director at a local refugee shelter and furniture bank called Matthew House Ottawa.

Eric Farr (PhD Student, University of Toronto):

My name is Eric Farr. I'm a PhD student at the University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion. I'm also involved in a number of educational initiatives that the Bahá'í community organizes.

Esther Maloney (Director, Illumine Media Project):

My name is Esther Maloney. I'm a mom to an active three-year-old and the founding director of Illumine Media Project, which is a grassroots initiative working with youth in Toronto neighbourhoods thinking about narrative content that can be uplifting. We draw our inspiration from the efforts of the global Bahá'í community.

Delaram: Wonderful. Thank you all for taking the time today. To start us off, Hannah, I know you have worked in the area of community building with faith-based organizations, most recently with Cardus. How do you



The COVID-19 podcast mini-series includes seven episodes.

think religion is helping people to approach this crisis?

Hannah: It's a great question. As a think tank, we've recently done some research with the Angus Reid Institute on how COVID-19 is affecting Canadians, particularly from a faith-based perspective. Just before our call I took a look at the research, and it was very interesting to see that one in five Canadians say they personally or someone close to them has been supported by a faith institution since the coronavirus began spreading. Among Canadians who pray, which is about 59 per cent of the population overall, more than one in five say that they are turning to prayer more since the pandemic

gripped the country. For those who are steeped in faith, prayer has been a very important source of relief and comfort in dealing with feelings of isolation, depression and uncertainty.

I know, personally, I've noticed that the people around me are revisiting what it means to be human. So, when I look around me, when I listen to those that I have phone calls with, I'm beginning to see a return to really important questions like: What do I put my hope in? What responsibility do I have towards my neighbour? How can I reorient my life according to what deeply matters?

Delaram: Esther, you work with a media project that helps young people produce narratives that relate spiritual concepts to their daily lives. How are you seeing religion and spirituality help people close to you – your neighbours, your friends – to live in this new reality?

Esther: When I think of the work around Illumine, one of the things we were doing before COVID-19 was to be in schools and in contexts where we could have meaningful conversations with young people about their lives. The content that we've been sharing is rooted in spiritual themes. One of the things we always championed is having face to face conversations about media content rather than be isolated on our screens as we tend to be when we're taking in narrative content.

When COVID-19 hit, there was a real surge of people saying: "We need uplifting content, we need media that's going to help connect us, that's going to support our mental health, that's going to bring us together." We had the content, so we were able to say: "Why don't we come online together and watch something and have a meaningful discussion?"

For example, one of the first episodes is about this idea that humanity is at a critical point in history where we are going through our collective maturity, even though there are so many signs of suffering and crisis. It felt like a very rich conversation to have with young people. I think in that way, spiritual concepts allowed us to go a little bit deeper than, you know, How are you guys doing? Are you scared? Are you washing your hands? To being able to access something a bit more profound: How do we understand the trajectory that humanity is on?

In terms of my own neighbourhood or my own community, there's a group of friends who are also mothers, and I think many of us felt initially quite overwhelmed with being at home with our children full time, and also managing responsibilities at work. It's a wonderful gift to be with your family so much, but of course it



Episode two features a conversation between (clockwise from top left) Hannah Marazzi, Delaram Erfanian, Esther Maloney and Eric Farr.

brings new tests and challenges. So a few of us felt like we were wanting to come together. Once a week, after the kids go to bed, we just gather over an online platform and have the chance to say some prayers together.

Delaram: Eric, you are a graduate student in religious studies, and you're thinking a lot about how religion informs the way we are approaching the present moment. A time of crisis like this allows us to think about ourselves and society in new ways. What role do you think religion has in helping us to imagine the world in a different way?

Eric: We can think of religion's contribution in a couple of ways. On one level I think religion provides humanity with language and concepts and ideas that allow us to understand our purpose and to articulate our purpose in light of changing circumstances of history. It allows us to identify problems that we experience, to recognize injustice and call it by its name. It allows us also to identify possibilities – new possibilities – because it situates us in a context in which the immediate material surroundings that we live in are actually not the only – and not even the most important – context that we live in.

So, you think about the kind of the role that suffering plays in many of the great religious traditions of the

world. Suffering is given a generative function in human beings' lives. If I think of my own life, those moments in which I experienced the most personal growth, that gave me kind of the depth of understanding that I didn't have before – it was those moments in which I went through the greatest challenges of my life.

Religion also helps us see history as having some sort of direction: some sort of moral arc or some sort of trajectory that is forward moving. And not forward moving in the sense of unending material progress, but that there is meaning to history. These crises that humanity is facing in this global pandemic, What are some of the capacities that humanity is being called to develop? What are some of the gross inequities and injustices that have been there all the time? Somehow this crisis is accelerating those inequities or revealing them in a new kind of way. So that is a powerful thing that I think religion can provide.

In addition to ideas and language and concepts, religion also provides concrete structures to learn about these things. It doesn't just give a bunch of abstract concepts that then you need to negotiate on your own, but it creates communities, it creates institutions. Of course, not all religious communities function this way; this is sort of an ideal of how many

religious communities see their existence. It creates a space in which we can learn what the translation of these spiritual concepts and ideals looks like in reality.

So, these new conditions of social distancing, which include great fear of death and of loneliness, kind of expose the loneliness that has been there all the time. Religions are learning in new ways how to respond to these challenges. At its best, those are some of the things that religion can contribute to help us navigate a crisis like this one.

Hannah: I just want to say to Eric that you put such generous parameters of language around how religion can help us navigate this time. I'm very grateful for that. As a Christian I would say: I believe I come from God and I am returning to God. I believe that God gives me all that I have, and it is never really mine, but it is something for me to steward while I am here on earth. So I can say that, but I think COVID-19 has provided me with an opportunity to embody that: to recheck in with myself to say, does my life, do my actions, do my words, do my prayers, and do my thoughts reflect what I say I believe, and what I have been taught to believe, and what I'm being invited to engage in a little deeper?

I want to return to how should we be thinking about the most vulnerable at this time. I'm on the board of a refugee shelter and furniture bank named Matthew House, which is located here in Ottawa. Our vision and mission are rooted in my Christian faith tradition. There's this verse in the Bible, Matthew 25:35, that reads: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in." So, my faith has provided me a wonderful blueprint of how to be thinking of, and serving, and accompanying and learning from the most vulnerable.

This is a wonderful invitation to re-establish a consciousness – but in reality, it should be a consciousness

we have all year round. It shouldn't be prompted by a pandemic. I know that this time will eventually come to an end, so I'm asking myself, I'm asking my community of faith, I'm asking my neighbours and family to think: If this is an enduring call on our faith, how can we retain and extend this consciousness beyond this pandemic?

Delaram: Yes, I think we're all asking ourselves that because it has brought up these questions and also the awareness of all of these things around us. Esther, in your neighbourhood, what opportunities are you seeing to find new kinds of connections with people? How are you seeing the role of the community emerge in response to this crisis?

“What we want is a new normal, and that is such a tremendous prompt in our collective history.”

Esther: I live in what is essentially an artists' co-op, so there's an awareness that everyone in this building is an artist. I have a neighbour who lives above me and our balconies overlap in such a way that our two toddlers can speak to each other from the balconies. We are thinking of installing a bell where they can call each other out and just have their social moment, but at a distance.

Another thing that happened is that there is an opera singer in our building. She's phenomenal, and she decided to do 19 concerts for COVID-19, for 19 days in a row. She stood on her balcony and started singing. These are beautiful arias. She's incredible. We are living in a high-rise type of neighbourhood, and a lot of the buildings are quite new. So, you can imagine this is also a very different income bracket: the

building we are facing, and then you have these artists on the other side. When she comes out, she has this beautiful poster that says: "you are not alone." It's very striking to see all of these condo owners also coming out on their balconies, and everyone facing one another on their balconies across the street, and cheering for each other. I think she was inspired by what she saw in Italy.

So, I think we can also see how worldwide, resilience is contagious and communities themselves can catch this sense that not everything is shut down and there are many ways that we can care for one another. As Hannah said, there is always that hope that this will change, it will evolve. Many people are saying: we don't want to go back to normal. What we want is a new normal, and that is such a tremendous prompt in our collective history. What should this "new normal" be? And, God-willing, this moment, this crisis we are passing through, is shaping that desire of people in very deep ways.

Eric: Can I say something about that? It's so helpful to hear such concrete examples of this community – this small geographic area – looking into itself for the resources that it needs to survive this pandemic. In a way, the COVID-19 situation is giving us an opportunity to mine the depths of communities that we already live in. We are very used to going all the way across the city for entertainment or food – whatever it is. We go all over the place to get the things we need. But often, those things that we need are right in the next apartment. And it allows our needs to be shaped less by whatever we want at any particular moment, and ask, What are the resources that are there? How do I shape the things I actually want by what's available, and What are the talents and capacities of the people in the community I live in?

Hannah: I would just like to ask my conversation partners: Do you feel that the needs that are being expressed are almost being released and have been held for a long time? I feel sometimes when I'm listening

to people finally admit what they need, I wonder if subconsciously they have had that need for a long time and they have wanted to ask it but the conditions haven't been right. The social norms have not allowed them to be conscious of the fact that they want to ask for a need. I'm so curious about other people and other communities, and I want to know about the nature of their requests that you are seeing. Are they immediate, are they sudden, are they onset, are they enduring?

Esther: I think it's a really insightful question. My sense is that a lot of the time these material needs we have are portals to deeper spiritual needs that are about connection. If I suddenly get to bring you your groceries every week, then we are in a dialogue, and we can make jokes about how all the milk was gone again, and whatever weekly mundane things come up around that task. I don't say that to minimize the material need. The material need is very real. But sometimes I wonder if when we have the guts to say I need some help, there is always a deeper need, a spiritual need for connection.

Eric: There are many elements of this society that feel like an illusion. There's the illusion of stability, the illusion of security, and you just see in a moment like this, that it just reveals how precarious so many people's economic lives are. It reveals how unsustainable the way food is distributed across a city. These are things that we already know. But somehow the urgency of this particular moment casts them into starker relief, and gives us an opportunity to reflect, and hopefully imagine a new normal, as Esther was saying. It's helping us to see through some of these illusory aspects of our everyday lives that are hidden for many of us. Of course, many people live their everyday lives very much aware of these challenges. But there is something about society that paints over them for a lot of the population.

Delaram: Esther, you were saying that we don't want to go back to

normal, but we want to have a "new normal," so I would like to ask each of you one last question. What are your hopes for society as we emerge from this crisis, and into this new world, as you called it?

Hannah: While in no way do I want "happiness-wash" (a term I learned the other day) the immense difficulty and sorrow that COVID-19 is bringing to so many, I am also seeing this beautiful return to front-porch living, neighbourhood care, consciousness for the earth, the immense concern and care for the most vulnerable in our midst. I am seeing people check in regularly with the elderly, on our health care workers.

I hope that we can return to conversations about what we believe, and how we believe that implicates us and obligates us to care for and accompany those with whom we are surrounded, to honour and glorify God, and to remember that from Him I come and to Him I am returning. I hope that we can collectively begin to recover a sense of how our faith can provide a source of hope and purpose, and a blueprint, a framework, a scaffolding, for how we can better belong to one another.

Delaram: Thank you Hannah, that was beautiful. Esther, would you like to go next?

Esther: I think I would go back to this idea of illusion, which Eric brought language to – about how we have been living in a world that has had a number of illusions, or veils up, about what is actually going on.

It seems like this global crisis is burning away a lot of those veils and allowing us to see what was behind the curtain all along. My hope is that this collective crisis will be a burning of that veil and will allow us to shed our illusions about what is actually going on here. I hope that all humanity can be empowered to contribute towards a civilization we would all want to be part of.

Bringing that down to a very practical, day to day, level – I think about the education of children.

There has been a lot of really interesting conversations amongst communities, amongst parents thinking about young people and what it means to go to school, and how to replace that at home and what that looks like. Is true education having a child hooked up to a computer all day long and saying, "Well, they did what the teacher asked, and this is what the school board has asked"? Or, is true education to live in the rhythm of their family for that day, and discover things along the way? Is true education rooted in community, is it rooted in service? All of this is coming to light through this crisis, and there seem to be opportunities even at the level of policy, say, around education, for people to look at this and say: What illusions have we burnt away here? What is really helping young people to advance? And, to contribute, and to gain knowledge about how they can help their societies. So, I hope that those illusions will kind of dissipate and we can come home to our actual oneness.

Eric: I think my hope for society is that this crisis allows us to see ourselves more accurately as one. That it somehow brings home to us the oneness of humanity: how we are all, regardless of where we live or what our circumstances are, that our fates are bound up together, our lives are bound up together. I hope we can draw on, both individually and as a society, the resources of our spiritual and religious traditions in order to not have that just be a passing realization but to allow it to exercise a concrete influence on the structures of society. That would be my hope.

Delaram: It has been a true pleasure to have this conversation with all of you today. I have learned so much from your experiences and insights. Thank you.

Listen to episodes of The Public Discourse podcast here: <https://opa.bahai.ca/podcast/>.

“Relier les cœurs” shares music, art and prayers for Quebec

A new website shares French-language resources for devotional gatherings.

The Regional Bahá’í Council of Quebec has launched a new website called “Relier les cœurs” featuring music, prayer compilations and artwork.

“We are excited and happy that the Council decided to create such a resource in French for the whole population of Quebec,” shared one of the team members responsible for creating the website.

The Regional Council was reflecting on how to help the community access more materials and resources in French, with the hope that it would assist in increasing the spaces open for devotional gatherings and meaningful conversations amongst different communities across the province.



The site’s name “relier les cœurs,” which in English means “binding the hearts,” came from the idea of binding the hearts to the Creator and each other, through prayer.

In thinking of creative ways to support this goal, they decided to create a website as a resource to foster the development of devotional gatherings. They reached out to a team of friends with artistic and technical capabilities, who were able to launch a visually appealing website in the first week of June.

The site’s name “relier les cœurs,” which in English means “binding the hearts,” came from the idea of binding the hearts to the Creator and each other, through prayer.

The team was mindful to include different types of art and ensure resources were easily accessible. Artists from the region submitted their art pieces to be used on the site, matching each visual art piece to the various themes presented.

An introductory video¹ was produced representing different places and people in Quebec. “The world is going through a challenging and questioning period,” says one per-

son. “It is a period of time that invites reflection and turning toward the Creator,” says another.

The hope is to continue adding new content to the website, as well as encourage the friends to participate by submitting musical pieces and other valuable resources.

So far, the response has been very positive. Friends have shared how pleased they are to be able to easily share this resource with whoever is interested in uplifting their spirit and conversations with others.

This article originally appeared on the Canadian Bahá’í News Service website: news.bahai.ca. The “Relier les cœurs” website, including the introductory video, can be viewed at <https://relierlescoeurs.org/>.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWVjeYul-4E&feature=emb_title

The community-building work in Victoriaville

A team of friends in the town of Victoriaville, Que., including several pioneer families, intensified their pattern of action over a number of years, contributing to the cluster's movement from the first to second milestone during the current Five Year Plan.

The work of community building can be compared to a seed developing into a tree: a labour-intensive start as it bursts through its shell, followed by steady growth as the new plant roots itself into the soil and stretches its stem upwards towards the sun. This process is sometimes interrupted but, when properly nourished, continues until the tree matures.

We are convinced that growth in Victoriaville occurred not only through our own efforts, but as the cohorts of the Celestial Concourse, like a revitalizing rain, strengthened and confirmed us, even in times of difficulty. And when conditions are right, trees can bear fruit.

Victoriaville has a population of about 45,000, the vast majority of whom are Francophones of Quebec origin, with a growing immigrant population from West Africa, South America and the Middle East. Bahá'ís have lived in Victoriaville for years, working diligently to establish a rhythm of Bahá'í community life, including gathering for Holy Days and Nineteen Day Feasts. The Bahá'í community reached out to those in the wider community through organizing firesides and holding devotional gatherings and children's classes. The community's efforts were characterised by sustained effort and a spirit of hospitality.

Among the longstanding believers were a young couple who had previously lived in a large Bahá'í community, and some friends who were experienced as pioneers. In 2013, a young primary school



Friends in Victoriaville, Que., enjoy a community walk.

teacher joined the community, and together the friends continued to hold children's classes and study the courses of the Ruhi Institute. The community also consulted from time to time with friends in other localities in the cluster to share learning about growth, particularly Drummondville and Sherbrooke.

In the summer of 2015, a couple and their two children moved to Victoriaville in response to the regional needs identified by the Regional Bahá'í Council of Quebec. This pioneer family had been fortunate to live and serve in an advanced cluster from 2011 to 2013. There, they gained experience with a systematic approach to community building, where a process of action, reflection, and consultation in the context of three-month cycles propelled growth.

The arrival of the pioneers gave new life to the Victoriaville community. The community began to think of

itself as a neighbourhood, as it only takes about 15 minutes to drive from one end of the city to the other by car. They made connections to families through school networks as well as through outreach. The community was further reinforced in 2017, when an adult Bahá'í who was able to support the teaching and consolidation activities moved to the community.

In the space of four to five years, through systematic effort, sincere friendship and tenderly nurtured activities, the number of those participating in community-building activities grew. By 2019, the Bahá'í community consisted of 17 adults, three youth, five junior youth and six Bahá'í children. These friends supported five study circles, one junior youth group, two children's classes and several devotional gatherings. Five friends of the Faith participate in regular reflection meetings and are advancing through the sequence

of institute courses, expanding the growing nucleus of friends taking ownership of these activities.

The following is a description of how the various core activities in Victoriaville developed over time, in harmony with other elements of Bahá'í community life. Of course, there were crises and victories. We must try, fall, pick ourselves up and learn to read reality with ever-greater clarity, respecting the capacities of each person and the pace at which they wish to advance.

Devotional gatherings

In July 2015, two Bahá'í friends decided to start saying dawn prayers together, an initiative that was soon adopted by the community. These friends decided to gather twice a week and made a pact to continue this pattern. Since then, the circle has naturally widened: between two and seven adults meet at dawn to pray from 6:30 to 7:00 a.m. every Monday and Thursday. The location rotates between five different homes.

The host prepares a circle of chairs and armchairs, a simple candle in the centre and a few books on the table. The friends enter quietly and sing or recite the Writings and prayers of their choice, dedicating some prayers to people in need. Friends who can, stay a few minutes for coffee or tea and then all move on to their day's activities. Keeping it as simple as possible has allowed many households to become involved.

These regular meetings, which have been a rhythm in Victoriaville for five years now, have spiritualized the community, creating stronger and more intimate bonds between families. Starting the day together gives the feeling of being a united team working together. Prayer and service become an integral part of our lives that support the regular efforts to nurture other core activities.

During the pandemic, the devotional gatherings continued online, and the friends decided to meet every day with one time slot at 6:30 a.m. for those who still had to go to work, and another at 8:00 a.m. The online



The junior youth group in Victoriaville, Que.

format allowed for the participation of more families, as those involved in the core activities were keen to stay connected and spiritually uplifted despite the necessity of physical distancing.

Junior youth groups

One month after the dawn prayers began, while consulting about growth, the idea of forming a junior youth group took shape, and a team began to exert effort toward this end. Initially, this core group of friends consisted of four people between the ages of 38 and 71, which is perhaps older than the ideal age for junior youth animators. But they were convinced that a junior youth group should be started in the locality, if only for the three children in the Bahá'í community approaching 11 years old and the 14-year-old.

It was challenging to find a suitable venue, so a couple offered their apartment for the group's meetings. Two facilitators travelled to Montreal to participate in a junior youth reflection meeting including all the island's animators. They returned inspired and ready for action. The institute board of Quebec also connected the community with an

experienced individual in Montreal who could assist through telephone consultations when the need arose.

Only one participant came to the first meeting of the junior youth group. We relied on prayer, and the confirmations were not long in coming. The following week, five motivated junior youth, four of whom were not from the Bahá'í community, participated. In the following few weeks, the group expanded further to seven participants. Since the winter of 2015, the group has been sustained, with several changes in membership, but a stable number of participants, despite fluctuating levels of motivation.

That same year, the institute board invited the Victoriaville community to host the Quebec regional winter camp for junior youth and youth. During the camp, almost everyone in the community supported a group of 23 junior youth, youth, animators, and coordinators in their activities, gaining further experience with the program. The talents and skills of several local friends were put to good use to ensure the success of the camp. Hosting the camp proved to be a unifying endeavour, energizing

the community as we experienced the vitality that youth bring.

There has not been a significant expansion of the junior youth program yet. How to build on the strength of this group remains a question for the community, which will require consultation and an even greater degree of teamwork. We also need to learn to make the transition from a junior youth group to a movement of young people who enter the sequence of courses and arise to serve. Currently, there is a rising group of older youth involved in the institute process, who will be key to these efforts.

Children's classes

Another core group of friends decided to devote themselves to children under the age of 11. Over the past four years, the format has been regularly adapted to meet the needs of the participants. Currently, there is a group of nine to 11-year-olds who are studying the Grade 3 materials from the Ruhi Institute. This group will soon progress to a new junior youth group, accompanied by four adult Bahá'ís. Steps are being taken to gain access to a room in a primary school.

Before the health crisis, one of the mothers of a children's class participant was injured in an accident, further confining her to the home. She was, however, able to attend the online devotional gatherings each morning, and shared that starting her day with prayers greatly aided her sense of joy and recovery. A few families from the children's class also attended the Quebec Bahá'í summer school, which was very confirming for them. The friends in Victoriaville have observed how the core activities reinforce one another, along with other elements of community life, to build a life of service.

Study circles

Over the last four years, study circles have naturally multiplied. A series of monthly firesides, aimed at couples and parents of young children,

including members from the wider community, and using William Hatcher's talks, created a space for elevated conversations about the challenges we faced in raising children. Some of these friends expressed the desire to study Ruhi Book 1: *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*. Other study circles emerged from the dawn prayer gatherings and among parents connected to the children's classes and junior youth group. The majority of Bahá'í community members participate in a study circle and a growing number have also completed Ruhi Book 7: *Walking Together on a Path of Service* to serve as tutors. Their advancement through the sequence of courses has helped them to gain the requisite attitudes, qualities and capacities to sustain growth.

Community life

The Nineteen Day Feast has, over the years, been transformed. It has become a space to consult about all of the activities that are happening, and to share and celebrate victories. The enthusiasm at these gatherings is palpable, and the unity in service the friends feel is contagious. Children and young people are active participants in the celebrations.

The community has also rallied together during times of crisis. Regular 'Oasis of Peace' gatherings were organized as a response to the Quebec City mosque shooting in 2017. To promote harmony and an appreciation of diversity, some Bahá'í friends, alongside a group from the wider community, initiated a series of monthly family gatherings to reflect on the Sacred Writings of all the major religions, as well as engage in the arts and promote fellowship. These meetings have been taking place for three years now and are supported by the City of Victoriaville. The gatherings usually attract between 30 to 40 people, although as many as 120 have attended. Several individuals met through these gatherings have also become participants in the Bahá'í community's dawn prayers and have gone on to study the sequence of

courses and declare as Bahá'ís.

Social occasions are also important. Celebrating a friend's birthday with an evening by a fire, gathering in a park to pray and sing together, are all moments that nourish joy. Promoting the arts and a sense of creativity has further strengthened community life.

A culture of learning

One believer shared that, in his opinion, the dawn prayers and the gradual systematization of activities made all the difference. All the ingredients were there, but he had never experienced the systematic approach of action, reflection, and consultation among a core group of friends, with a regular rhythm.

There are several principles that emerge from these years of learning. An irrepressible movement can begin with two souls motivated to learn. Avoiding thinking in terms of success or failure allows us to move forward together. It is also important to read our reality to identify and respond to needs at the grassroots level. We must support each other and listen. The guidance from the Universal House of Justice gives us a common vision and framework which we learn to adapt to our local reality.

Something that characterizes our community of friends, including the friends of the Faith, is that each one is engaged in a process of personal transformation, which invites us to cultivate a detachment from all but God. Friends dare to share their questions, concerns, and challenges. We support each other practically through meals, help with renovations, and support for sick friends. At the end of the day, it is not only the number of activities that counts; it is the spiritual process of community building and friendship, which is organic.

– Véronique Duval

Gifting compilations on Ḥuqúqu'lláh

A representative of the Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh in Canada describes recent efforts to distribute a compilation on the Right of God to every Bahá'í home.

The Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh in Canada, in collaboration with the National Spiritual Assembly, has a special gift for every Bahá'í household. It is the most recent edition of a compilation on the subject of the Right of God, including extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as well as letters written by and on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. The compilation is available in French, English and Persian and bears a blue cover and a striking image of the fountain found in the Garden of Ridván. It is a gift of true love.

For over two years, representatives of Ḥuqúqu'lláh from across the country have been using creative means to deliver the compilation to friends. In collaboration with Local Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, through emails, text messages, phone calls and Zoom gatherings, connecting with fellow Bahá'ís has been at the heart of this service. Representatives have delivered the compilation by hand after a long visit full of heart-to-heart conversations, sent it by post, electronically, and, more recently, through 'contactless' delivery in a Ziplock bag with gloved hands. We have been honoured to convey such a precious gift, whether after driving for many hours, with young children in tow, at Nineteen Day Feasts or during specially organized deepenings.

Recognizing the priceless guidance contained in the compilation, some of the representatives have been adorning the gift with handmade sealskin bookmarks or travelling very long distances to spend an entire day or two in the company of



Friends receive their copy of the compilation on the Right of God.

Bahá'ís. Other representatives have offered special prayers every day to seek divine assistance with this work.

One representative prayed for a way to add significance and meaning to the act of giving the friends their copies. She thought of the many yards of beautiful fabric that she had recently discovered tucked away in a long unopened box that could make for beautiful covers, but she soon realized the impossibility of the task considering what time she had at her disposal.

During the course of her prayers, a certain friend came to mind. The next morning, she called this friend, who exclaimed that she had dreamed that she was visiting the home of the representative and

that room upon room of the house was filled with people. When the representative explained what had occurred to her during her prayers and her idea of the cloth covers, everything came together. Although not always as outwardly evident, the same powerful force of love is present every time a compilation has been given.

Believers in far-flung regions, twice isolated by geography and the coronavirus pandemic, have expressed feeling the love of the National Spiritual Assembly and a particular closeness to this institution, despite the tyranny of distance. For those representatives meeting Bahá'ís for the first time, distributing this gift has been a meaningful way to begin friendships and imbue conversations with the love that

characterizes this Law, described as “the source of grace, abundance, and of all good.”¹

The process of distributing the compilation is further encouraging representatives to reach out at a time when many friends feel isolated and conversations bring more of a sense of connection than ever before. When a friendship is already established, the conversations between the friends

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Huqúqu'lláh – The Right of God*, p.5.

and the representatives have been filled with such trust and intimacy, that they have been able to share the troubles and challenges in their lives and look at their circumstances through the bounteous blessings that Húqúqu'lláh provides.

One family, after receiving their copy of the compilation, said that they felt as if they were living in the early days of the Faith and that they

were like those believers who were visited by someone who had been in the presence of the Blessed Beauty or 'Abdu'l-Bahá, someone who had travelled a long distance to deliver a Tablet to them. With each copy they entrust into the hands of the friends, representatives of Húqúqu'lláh across the country feel that way too.

– Sonjel Vreeland

If you would like to receive a copy of the compilation on Húqúqu'lláh, please email bot.huquq.canada@gmail.com before 30 September 2020.

It is also accessible online at: <https://bahaicanada.bahai.ca/the-right-of-god/>.

Vancouver media project creates music for youth empowerment

During a series of seminars, a group of friends has been creating uplifting music.

A group of friends in Vancouver has been organizing a series of seminars with youth to learn how music and lyrics can promote uplifting concepts that foster a desire to contribute to the betterment of the world.

This project's name is Media for Transformation and it takes place in Vancouver, B.C. The group has organized five seminars to date. In each seminar they meet for two consecutive weekends where they carry out sessions to study texts, write lyrics and music, and produce original songs aimed at adolescent and youth populations.

On the first weekend of a seminar, the group studies together a number of texts, including those used in the junior youth spiritual empowerment program. The group reflects on the use of language in the texts and how narratives can be built from some of the core concepts. On the following weekend, participants join



A group of friends gathers for a seminar in Vancouver, B.C.

a writing and recording process, where they spend a lot of time reflecting in small and big groups.

Marie-Celeste Kennedy, an elementary school teacher and participant, reflected after attending the semi-

nars: “The team of facilitators have taken the learning generated in each seminar and applied it to the next. They have been very conscious of creating an environment that could contribute to the most unified approach, especially because of the small amount of time the group has together.”

When a song is written, it is shared with a group of youth for their feedback. They ask the youth: “what do you remember from the song?”, and “what do you understand from this song?” With that feedback, they make all the necessary modifications to reach the final version of the song, which then is recorded and later produced and disseminated.

Ms. Kennedy continued, “everybody’s voices were very valued, even with the younger youth... everybody was just rejoicing in each other’s progress.”

The group strives to invite new faces to each seminar in order to provide the opportunity to develop this capacity in more animators. They are also starting to think about producing music for children.

Since the pandemic, they have been creating tutorial videos on how to learn the songs and sharing them on their Instagram page¹ and Youtube channel.² The hope is to continue

finding creative ways to advance the project, despite current restrictions.

“Everyone had a part to play in it, as it serves a greater purpose... beyond us,” shared Shadi Toloui-Wallace, one of the facilitators. “I have never been in such an inspiring creative process.”

This article originally appeared on the Canadian Bahá’í News Service website, news.bahai.ca. The Media for Transformation website can be accessed at <https://www.mediafortransformation.org/>.

1 <https://www.instagram.com/mediafortransformation/>

2 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnJ7sSyS44Go2NKIQmr8eIA/>

Service de distribution bahá’í - Canada
An agency of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada

Messages au Canada

Shoghi Effendi



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Messages au Canada is the first French-language edition of a collection of 278 letters and cables written by, and on behalf of, Shoghi Effendi and addressed to Canada over the course of his Guardianship (1921-1957). These messages are addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly, as well as Local Spiritual Assemblies, groups, committees, and individual believers.

The collection also offers a glimpse into the lives of several Knights of Bahá’u’lláh, through whom the Faith grew tremendously during the Ten Year Crusade (1953-63). Considered authoritative guidance, these letters are part of an enduring legacy that the Guardian has left to the world and that will continue to enrich future generations.

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librairie.bahai.ca

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Contribute to the Funds of the Faith through the Treasurer of your Local Assembly, the Regional Bahá'í Council in your area, or online at www.bahaifunds.ca. You can also donate through the National Spiritual Assembly. In this case, kindly make your cheque payable to "Canadian Bahá'í Fund" and mail it to:

The Treasury Department, Bahá'í National Centre,
7200 Leslie Street Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8.

The major Funds of the Faith to which one can make contributions are:

The Local Fund (only through a Local Spiritual Assembly or online)

The National Fund

The Wilmette House of Worship Fund

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GENERAL INFORMATION

To purchase **Bahá'í books in English, Persian, Chinese or Spanish**, visit bookstore.bahai.ca

Or contact:

University of Toronto

Press Distribution

Phone: 1-800-565-9523 or 416-667-7791

In the event that the title you are looking for is not available, contact the Bahá'í Distribution Service

Email: bds@bahai.ca

Phone: 1-800-465-3287 or 905-889-8168

To purchase **Bahá'í books in French**, contact the Service de distribution bahá'í-Québec (SDB-Q)

75 d'auteuil Street, Québec, QC, G1R 4C3

Email: sdbc@bahai.ca

Phone: 418-692-2402

Website: bookstore.bahai.ca

To travel teach or pioneer within Canada or internationally, contact the Pioneer Desk at pioneer@bahai.ca or 905-889-8168.

To change your address, please notify your Local Spiritual Assembly, Regional Council or the Records Department of the National Spiritual Assembly, providing your name, old address, new address and your Bahá'í ID number to: Records Department, Bahá'í National Centre, 7200 Leslie Street, Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8; Phone: 905-889-8168; Fax: 905-889-8184; Email: records@bahai.ca.

To request international credentials from the Bahá'í National Centre when planning to visit countries other than the United States, contact the Records Department: 7200 Leslie Street, Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8; Phone 905-889-8168; Fax: 905-889-8184; Email: records@bahai.ca.

Pilgrimage requests (nine-day pilgrimage or three-day visit) are to be made directly to the Bahá'í World Centre through the Bahá'í Pilgrimage Website <http://pilgrimage.bahai.org> or by post or fax: Office of Pilgrimage, PO Box 155, 3100101, Haifa, Israel; Fax: 011-972-4-835-8507.

Getting married? A Bahá'í wedding cannot take place without the authorization of a Local Spiritual Assembly. Please contact, as early as possible, the Local Assembly in whose jurisdiction the wedding will take place. The Records Department at records@bahai.ca can provide you with the necessary contact details.

Submit news, photos, etc. to Bahá'í Canada through email bahaicanada@bahai.ca or mail to 7200 Leslie St., Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8. Items submitted to *Bahá'í Canada* are considered for publication online and in the magazine.

The Right of God ~ Ḥuqúqu'lláh

"Ḥuqúqu'lláh is indeed a great law. It is incumbent upon all to make this offering, because it is the source of grace, abundance, and of all good. It is a bounty which shall remain with every soul in every world of the worlds of God, the All-Possessing, the All-Bountiful." – Bahá'u'lláh, Ḥuqúqu'lláh – *The Right of God*, p.5.

ḤUQÚQU'LLÁH PAYMENT INFORMATION

In response to guidance from the International Board of Trustees, the Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh in Canada has set up a centralized system of receipting and recording of payments at the Treasury Department of the Bahá'í National Centre. Payments of the Right of God (Ḥuqúqu'lláh) are not processed through individual Deputies or Representatives.

Payments should be sent directly to the Ḥuqúqu'lláh Treasury at the Bahá'í National Centre, 7200 Leslie Street, Thornhill, ON, L3T 6L8. The Ḥuqúqu'lláh Treasury will issue one receipt, which will serve both as an acknowledgment receipt and as an official tax receipt. It is up to the individual to determine whether or not she/he wishes to use the receipt when filing her/his income tax return. Cheques, bank drafts, bank and/or postal money orders should be made payable to "Canadian Bahá'í Fund" earmarked "Ḥuqúqu'lláh" or "Right of God." Payments to the Right of God can also be made utilizing the <www.bahai-funds.ca> Online Contribution System. The individual's Bahá'í identification number must be provided on all payments.

Payments should not be made through a Local Spiritual Assembly.

Inquiries regarding the law of the Right of God (Ḥuqúqu'lláh) should be directed to your nearest Representative or Deputee Trustee.

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