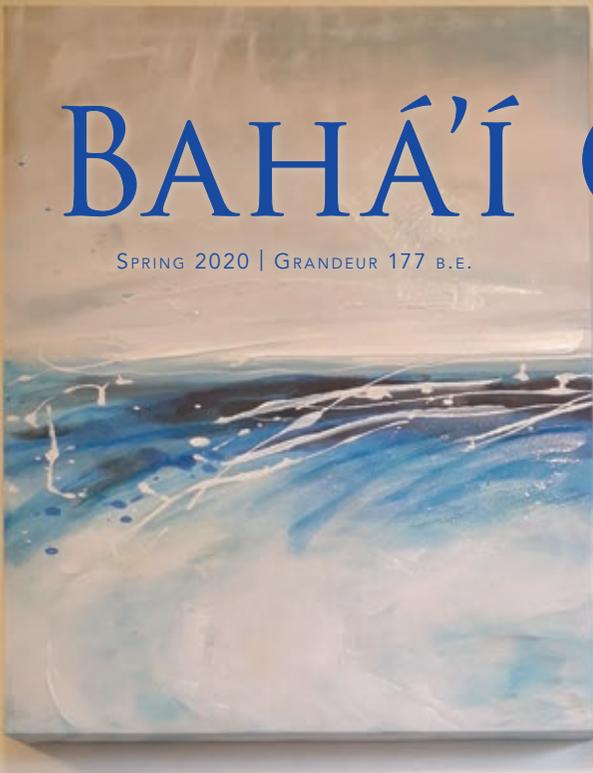


# BAHÁ'Í CANADA

SPRING 2020 | GRANDEUR 177 B.E.

VOL. 33 No. 2



The final year of the Plan

# From the Writings

Unto Thee be praise, O Lord my God! I beseech Thee by Thy Most Great Name Who hath been shut up in the prison-town of 'Akká, and Who—as Thou beholdest, O my God—hath fallen into the hands of His enemies, and is threatened by the swords of the wicked doers, to make me steadfast in His Cause, and to direct mine eyes continually towards His court, in such wise that nothing whatsoever will have the power to turn me back from Him.

I testify, O my Lord, that He hath surrendered His life in Thy path, and hath wished for Himself nothing but tribulation in the love He beareth to Thee. He hath endured all manner of vexations that He may manifest Thy sovereignty unto Thy servants, and exalt Thy word amidst Thy creatures.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, pp. 70–1.

CHILDREN OF MEN! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, p. 52.

Know thou, moreover, that We have been cast into an afflictive Prison, and are encompassed with the hosts of tyranny, as a result of what the hands of the infidels have wrought. Such is the gladness, however, which the Youth hath tasted that no earthly joy can compare unto it. By God! The harm He suffereth at the hands of the oppressor can never grieve His heart, nor can He be saddened by the ascendancy of such as have repudiated His truth.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 42.

Living flame of heavenly love! Thine heart hath been so fired with the love of God that from ten thousand leagues afar its warmth and radiance may be felt and seen. The fire lit by mortal hand imparteth light and warmth to but a little space, whereas that sacred flame which the Hand of God hath kindled, though burning in the east, will set aflame the west and give warmth to both the north and the south; nay, it shall rise from this world to glow with the hottest flame in the realms on high, flooding with light the Kingdom of eternal glory. Happy

art thou to have obtained so heavenly a gift. Blessed art thou to be favored with His divine bestowals.

The glory of God rest upon thee and upon them that hold fast unto the sure handle of His Will and holy Covenant.

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 214–15.

Wherefore must the loved ones of God, laboriously, with the waters of their striving, tend and nourish and foster this tree of hope. In whatsoever land they dwell, let them with a whole heart befriend and be companions to those who are either close to them, or far removed. Let them, with qualities like unto those of heaven, promote the institutions and the religion of God. Let them never lose heart, never be despondent, never feel afflicted. The more antagonism they meet, the more let them show their own good faith; the more torments and calamities they have to face, the more generously let them pass round the bounteous cup. Such is the spirit which will become the life of the world, such is the spreading light at its heart: and he who may be and do other than this is not worthy to serve at the Holy Threshold of the Lord.

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 320.

I myself was in prison forty years—one year alone would have been impossible to bear—nobody survived that imprisonment more than a year! But, thank God, during all those forty years I was supremely happy! Every day, on waking, it was like hearing good tidings, and every night infinite joy was mine. Spirituality was my comfort, and turning to God was my greatest joy. If this had not been so, do you think it possible that I could have lived through those forty years in prison?

Thus, spirituality is the greatest of God's gifts, and "Life Everlasting" means "Turning to God." May you, one and all, increase daily in spirituality, may you be strengthened in all goodness, may you be helped more and more by the Divine consolation, be made free by the Holy Spirit of God, and may the power of the Heavenly Kingdom live and work among you.

This is my earnest desire, and I pray to God to grant you this favor.

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 111–12.

Never lose thy trust in God. Be thou ever hopeful, for the bounties of God never cease to flow upon man. If viewed from one perspective they seem to decrease, but from another they are full and complete. Man is under all conditions immersed in a sea of God's blessings. Therefore, be thou not hopeless under any circumstances, but rather be firm in thy hope.

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 205.

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**ON THE COVER** During the festival of Rīḍván, a family connects for an online devotional gathering. Photo: Kyle Schmalenberg

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# Contents

Universal House of Justice	4
Regarding pilgrimage	
Naw-Rúz Message 177	
Rīḍván Message 2020	
National Spiritual Assembly	7
Regarding fund contributions	
Election of the National Spiritual Assembly	
The Right of God	8
A brief history of the development of the institution of Ḥuqúqu'lláh	
About this Issue	12
From the History of the Faith	13
"Remember My days"	
Feature	16
National institutional meeting fosters a collective vision for growth	
From Across Canada	19
Enhancing institutional capacity: Some initial insights gained by the Spiritual Assembly of Toronto	
Collaborative initiatives stimulate the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community	
Insights from <i>Initial Impulse: The first branch course of Book 5</i>	
Our life-changing time as pioneers	
Group visits to the Shrine in Montreal	
Information	32

# Regarding pilgrimage

From the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 12 March 2020.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has been following closely the evolving global health crisis caused by the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), and for some time the Department of Pilgrimage has been advising prospective pilgrims and visitors about the rapidly changing restrictions being imposed on travellers by the government of Israel. The current situation and the escalating measures being taken by governments

and airlines have now necessitated the suspension of pilgrimage and brief visits to the Holy Land until such time as circumstances permit them to resume.

The House of Justice regrets that many friends who were planning to visit the World Centre of the Cause will be affected by this suspension, but it hopes that they will, before long, be able to fulfil their hearts' desire.

Kindly assure the friends in your communities of the supplications of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that Bahá'u'lláh's unfailing assistance and strengthening grace may surround them as well as their compatriots and that all those affected by this outbreak may be sheltered beneath the canopy of His watchful care.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,  
Department of the Secretariat

# Naw-Rúz Message 177

From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

Dearly loved Friends,

We feel compelled by current events to write to you at this time and not wait until Ríḍván. As you will be all too aware, over recent weeks and months, an apprehensive world has been coming to terms with a rapidly evolving health crisis affecting the people in many countries, the consequences of which for society cannot yet be estimated with any certainty. We are sure that you, like us, have felt great concern for the well-being of humanity, especially for those who are most vulnerable. Seldom has it been more evident that society's collective strength is dependent on the unity it can manifest in action, from the international stage to the grassroots, and we know that you are giving your support to the essential efforts being made in this regard to protect the health and welfare of all.

Inevitably, the current situation will have an impact on the administration of the Cause of God in many

places, and in every case the relevant National Spiritual Assembly will advise on the appropriate measures to be taken. In some countries this will include cancelling National Convention, with arrangements being made for the National Assembly to be elected by other means. Similar arrangements might also need to be made, in certain places, for the election of Local Spiritual Assemblies. However, in circumstances where even this proves unfeasible, it would be permissible this year for the existing membership of a Local or National Assembly to continue on into the next administrative year. Naturally, any National Assembly giving thought to approving such a step will seek the advice of the Counsellors at an early stage.

At a time of another crisis, 'Abdu'l-Bahá offered these words of counsel: "In a day such as this, when the tempests of trials and tribulations have encompassed the world, and fear and trembling have agitated the planet, ye must rise above the horizon of firmness and steadfastness with illumined faces and radiant brows in such wise that, God willing, the gloom of fear and consternation may be entirely obliterated, and the light of assurance may dawn above the manifest horizon and shine resplendently." The world stands more and more in need of the hope and the strength of spirit that faith imparts. Beloved friends, you have of course long been occupied with the work of

nurturing within groups of souls precisely the attributes that are required at this time: unity and fellow feeling, knowledge and understanding, a spirit of collective worship and common endeavour. Indeed, we have been struck by how efforts to reinforce these attributes have made communities especially resilient, even when faced with conditions that have necessarily limited their activities. Though having to adapt to new circumstances, the believers have used creative means to strengthen bonds of friendship, and to foster among themselves and those known to them spiritual consciousness and qualities of tranquillity, confidence, and reliance on God. The elevated conversations that have occurred as a result, whether remotely or in person, have been a source of comfort and inspiration to many. Such efforts on your part provide a valuable service at this hour when many souls are perplexed and dismayed, unsure of what will be. However difficult matters are at present, and however close to the limits of their endurance some sections of societies 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.

This is not the moment in which to describe in any detail the accomplishments of the Bahá'í world over the past year, or the extraordinary progress made in multiplying community-building activities worldwide and strengthening programmes of growth, work which continues in earnest wherever circumstances permit. Suffice it to say that, four years into the current Plan, the tireless supporters of the Cause have brought the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh to the strongest position in which it has

ever been in its history. Everything you have done and are now doing is preparing the global Bahá'í community for the next stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan.

For now, our thoughts and our prayers are focused on the health and well-being of all the friends of God and all those among whom you dwell. We pray earnestly, also, for the Almighty to bestow upon you assurance, stamina, and staunch spirits. May your minds be ever bent upon the needs of the communities to which you belong, the condition of the societies in which you live, and the welfare of the entire family of humanity, to whom you are all brothers and sisters. And in your quiet moments, when no course of action other than prayer seems possible, then we invite you to add your supplications to our own and ardently pray for the relief of suffering. We turn to these words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Whose whole existence was an example of selfless commitment to the well-being of others:

O Thou Provider! Assist Thou these noble friends to win Thy good pleasure, and make them well-wishers of stranger and friend alike. Bring them into the world that abideth forever; grant them a portion of heavenly grace; cause them to be true Bahá'ís, sincerely of God; save them from outward semblances, and establish them firmly in the truth. Make them signs and tokens of the Kingdom, luminous stars above the horizons of this nether life. Make them to be a comfort and a solace to humankind and servants to the peace of the world.

– The Universal House of Justice



Benches at the Riḍván Garden. Photo: Bahá'í International Community

# Ridván Message 2020

From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

Dearly loved Friends,

**T**wo emerging realities have prompted us to address these words to you. The first reality is the growing consciousness around the world of the looming and appalling dangers carried by the coronavirus pandemic. In many countries, despite valiant and determined collective efforts to avert disaster, the situation is already grave, creating tragedies for families and individuals and plunging whole societies into crisis. Waves of suffering and sorrow are breaking over one place after another, and will weaken different nations, at different moments, in different ways.

The second reality, one that is daily more apparent, is the resilience and undiminished vitality of the Bahá'í world in the face of a challenge which has no likeness in living memory. Your response has been outstanding. When we wrote to you a month ago at Naw-Rúz, we were keen to stress the impressive qualities being demonstrated by communities whose normal pattern of activity had been disrupted. All that has transpired in the intervening weeks, during which many friends have had to comply with increasingly stringent restrictions, has only deepened our feelings of admiration. Learning from the experience gained in other parts of the world, some communities have found safe and creative ways to raise awareness of public health requirements within populations. Special attention is being paid to those who are most at risk from the virus and the economic hardship arising from its spread; the initiatives featured on the Bahá'í World News Service in this regard are but a mere handful of the countless number under way. These are being complemented by efforts to examine, promote, and cultivate those spiritual qualities which are most needed at this time. Many such efforts are necessarily taking place in family units or in solitude, but where conditions allow or communication tools make it possible, a sense of extraordinary solidarity is being actively nurtured among souls sharing similar circumstances. The dynamics of community life, so important for collective progress, will not be subdued.

Our spirits have been lifted by seeing how capably National Spiritual Assemblies, the unflagging generals of the Army of Light, have guided their communities and shaped their response to the crisis. They have been strongly supported by the Counsellors and their auxiliaries who, as always,

have heroically raised aloft the standard of loving service. While staying well informed about the often rapidly changing conditions in their countries, Assemblies have made the necessary arrangements for administering the affairs of the Cause, and in particular for conducting elections, where these remain feasible. Through regular communications, institutions and agencies have offered wise counsel, comforting reassurance, and constant encouragement. In many instances, they have also started to identify constructive themes that are emerging from the discourses opening up in their societies. The expectation we expressed in our Naw-Rúz message that this test of humanity's endurance would grant it greater insight is already being realized. Leaders, prominent thinkers, and commentators have begun to explore fundamental concepts and bold aspirations that, in recent times, have been largely absent from public discourse. At present these are but early glimmerings, yet they hold out the possibility that a moment of collective consciousness may be in view.

The comfort we take at seeing the resilience of the Bahá'í world manifest itself in action is tempered by our sadness at the consequences of the pandemic for humanity. Alas, we are conscious that the believers and their associates also share in this suffering. The distance from friends and relations that, owing to the requirements of public safety, so many people in the world are now maintaining will, for some, give way to permanent separation. At each dawn it seems certain that more agonies will be endured before the set of sun. May the promise of reunion in the eternal realms offer solace to those who lose loved ones. We pray for the relief of their hearts, and for the grace of God to surround those whose education, livelihoods, homes, or even their very means of sustenance are being put at risk. For you, and for those you cherish, and for all your compatriots, we supplicate Bahá'u'lláh and beseech His blessings and favour.

However long and arduous the road that must be travelled, we are supremely confident in your fortitude and your determination to see the journey through. You draw from stores of hope, faith, and magnanimity, putting the needs of others before your own, enabling those who are deprived to be spiritually nourished, those who increasingly thirst for answers to be satisfied, and those who long to work for the betterment of the world to be offered the means. From the devoted followers of the Blessed Perfection, how could we expect less?

– The Universal House of Justice

# Regarding fund contributions

From the National Spiritual Assembly to all Local Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá'í Councils, and Registered Groups, 23 March 2020.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

In accordance with public health guidelines, the Bahá'í National Centre will be closed to visitors for the time being. Nonetheless, we wish to assure you that the National Centre is functioning and we welcome your letters, emails and phone calls.

Many friends have been inquiring about how to make contributions to the funds of the Faith, as well as payments to the Right of God, since the Feast, as one way to contribute, is not being celebrated face to face in many communities. The friends living in Assembly areas will of course draw on their Local Spiritual Assembly for advice and guidance. In addition, the online contribution system can be accessed at <https://bahaifunds.ca/Login.aspx> and contributions to all the funds of the Faith and payments to the Right of God can be made there. Cheques may be also sent to the Bahá'í National Centre at 7200 Leslie Street, Thornhill, ON L3T 6L8, with any earmarking clearly indicated.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,  
Karen McKye, Secretary

# Election of the National Spiritual Assembly

From the National Spiritual Assembly to all Local Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá'í Councils, and Registered Groups, 28 April 2020.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

It is with joy and gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for His unfailing assistance that we share the results of the election of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada this year, under circumstances that may well never be repeated. Since the Convention had to be cancelled owing to public health guidelines related to the current health crisis, delegates mailed in their ballots or made arrangements to phone them in, safeguarding the confidentiality of the voting process and achieving 100% participation.

The names of those called to serve on the National Spiritual Assembly for the coming year are, in alphabetical order: Mehran Anvari, Deloria Bighorn, Zelalem Bimrew Kasse, Hoda Farahmandpour, Gerald Filson, Judy Filson, Ciprian Jauca, Karen McKye and Elizabeth Wright.

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

In addition, the following results of the election of the officers were shared on 7 May 2020.

The National Spiritual Assembly is pleased to convey the results of the election of its officers: Chairman — Deloria Bighorn; Vice-chairman — Ciprian Jauca; Treasurer — Mehran Anvari; and Secretary — Karen McKye.

Fountain detail at the Riḍván Garden.  
Photo: Bahá'í International Community

## A brief history of the development of the institution of Ḥuqúqu'lláh

The following article, adapted from several sources by the Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh in Canada, describes the gradual implementation of the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh and the lives of those appointed as its Trustees.

**H**uqúqu'lláh, the Right of God, is a law initiated by the Blessed Báb, and revised and enacted by Bahá'u'lláh. When the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* first reached the friends in Iran and they became familiar with its contents, their understanding was limited to the routines and traditions of the past. They believed that Ḥuqúqu'lláh was the renewal of religious practices such as giving alms or other benevolent donations, or a way to collect funds for the promulgation of the Faith and the material needs of the growing community. Since then, understanding has developed and

we are gradually becoming aware that Ḥuqúqu'lláh is not a simple set of laws merely to provide funds for the Faith, but rather a multifaceted divine ordinance touching on many aspects of human life, both individual and collective.

Bahá'u'lláh revealed the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in Akká, some 20 years after He received His mission in the Síyáh-Chál. After its revelation, Bahá'u'lláh did not send it immediately to the friends; He kept it for some time and only later dispatched the Book. The friends gradually became aware of its contents, including the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh. It is believed that one

of the reasons for the delay in the dissemination of the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh was Bahá'u'lláh's reluctance to have the proceeds returned to Him as the only recipient of the Right of God and as the Focal Point to Whom everyone must turn. Therefore, He did not give any explanations beyond what was revealed in the Book.

Later, when the friends in the Cradle of the Faith wanted to observe this law, they raised some questions. One of the devoted Bahá'ís of that time, Jináb-i-Zayn, asked for some clarification relating to the law's application. Bahá'u'lláh's response came in the form of a booklet, entitled

led “Questions and Answers,” which was appended to the injunctions of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Beyond this, He did not provide any further guidance and referred the legislation of the Divine Commandment to the Universal House of Justice, writing, “There is a prescribed ruling for the *Ḥuqúqu’lláh*. After the House of Justice hath come into being, the law thereof will be made manifest, in conformity with the Will of God.”

Similarly, during His ministry the beloved Master did not elaborate upon the details of *Ḥuqúqu’lláh* and was content to explain briefly the high station of this law and its effects on the enlightenment and spiritual growth of humanity. The approach of the beloved Guardian was the same. He refrained from focusing the attention of the worldwide Bahá’í community on this law while the Faith was at the inception of the Formative Age, occupied with the implementation of the Administrative Order and the establishment of National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, the primary steps for bringing into being the Universal House of Justice. During this time, the law of *Ḥuqúqu’lláh* remained applicable only to the Iranian Bahá’ís living at home and abroad.

Historically, the friends in the West who responded to the material needs of the Faith during the ministry of the Guardian became accustomed to contributing to the Bahá’í International Fund instead of observing the law of *Ḥuqúq*. Since both the Bahá’í International Fund and the Right of God are under the direction of the Universal House of Justice, the friends generally felt that the choice of contributing to one or the other was at the discretion of the individual believer. As we now know however, *Ḥuqúqu’lláh* and contributions to the Bahá’í International Fund are separate and independent. Observation of the law of *Ḥuqúq* is not a choice but the responsibility and obligation of every adult believer.

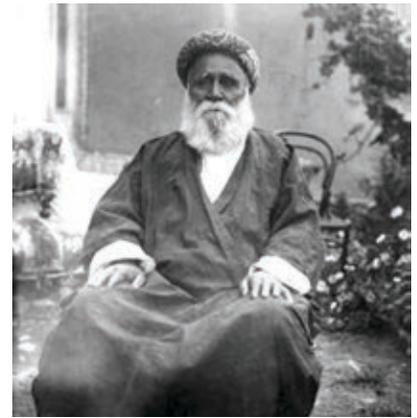
To receive the *Ḥuqúqu’lláh*, Bahá’u’lláh brought into being one of the

great institutions of the Faith, the Trusteeship of *Ḥuqúqu’lláh*. The first Trustee of *Ḥuqúqu’lláh* to be appointed was Jináb-i-Sháh Muḥammad, who eventually received the title of Amínu’l-Bayán (Trustee of the Bayán). He embraced the Faith in its early years and had the bounty of entering the presence of Bahá’u’lláh in Baghdad. The fire of love kindled in his heart made him impatient to offer his services to the Threshold of his Beloved and surrender all his material belongings in this path—an undertaking he followed until the last moment of his life.

Encompassed by hardship, danger and lack of means, in journey after journey, Amínu’l-Bayán would carry the friends’ payments of *Ḥuqúqu’lláh* and their petitions to the Sacred Threshold and, in return, bring them news and Tablets from the Blessed Perfection. One of the most sacred tasks entrusted to him was to travel to Iran to receive the Báb’s remains and transfer them to a safe hiding place, where they lay concealed until the time they were transferred to the Holy Land to be laid in their permanent resting place on the slopes of Mount Carmel.

Amínu’l-Bayán was drawn to the rare qualities of nobility and detachment of one believer, Hájí Abu’l-Hasan Ardakání. They became close companions and Amínu’l-Bayán chose Hájí Abu’l-Hasan as his assistant and confidant in his services as the Trustee of *Ḥuqúqu’lláh*. The two were among the first group of pilgrims who visited Bahá’u’lláh in ‘Akká. After their return to Iran they made numerous journeys together. On one, in 1881, they were attacked and caught during a Kurdish revolt and Amínu’l-Bayán was fatally wounded. Bahá’u’lláh then instructed that the office of Trustee of *Ḥuqúqu’lláh* should be conferred upon his loyal assistant and companion, Hájí Abu’l-Hasan, subsequently entitled Amín (the Trusted One) or Jináb-i-Hájí Amín.

Hájí Amín served the Cause as the Trustee of *Ḥuqúqu’lláh* for 47 years—from 1881 to 1928—with eagerness and zeal, showing mag-



Hájí Abu’l-Hasan-i-Ardakání,  
known as Hájí Amín.

Photo: International Board of Trustees of  
*Ḥuqúqu’lláh*

nanimity, courage and incredible steadfastness. Twice during the Ministry of Bahá’u’lláh he was imprisoned. During his second imprisonment, his legs in fetters and a chain around his neck, he suffered gravely. His jailers, in order to torment him, would add castor oil to his food. With manifest resignation and submission, he would neither complain nor refuse the food, eating as though nothing were amiss.

He was a symbol of detachment, with no worldly possessions, home or shelter of his own. His habitation was in the hearts and souls of the Bahá’í friends who would receive and entertain him with warmth and love. Each one would impatiently await his arrival, to enjoy the sweet melody of his prayers and chanting of the Tablets, and the glad-tidings and encouragement he would bring. Every day he would bid goodbye to one family to spend the night in another household, illumining another gathering with his presence.

Hájí Amín was continually on the move, travelling to most Iranian cities and being the trusted adviser of many Bahá’í friends in their personal affairs. During his long life he witnessed the last 11 years of the Ministry of Bahá’u’lláh, the 29 years of the Ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and seven years of the Guardianship of Shoghi Effendi. Towards the end of his life he became ill and frail and was confined to bed, living in the home of his friend and assistant, Hájí

Ghulám Ridá, who, at the express desire of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, had been appointed his successor as Trustee of Ḥuqúqu’lláh. Upon Jináb-i-Hájí Amín’s passing in 1928, he was named a Hand of the Cause of God by the beloved Guardian.

The third Trustee of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, Hájí Ghulám Ridá, entitled Amín-i-Amín (Trustee of the Trustee), was born into the wealthy merchant class of Tihrán and brought up to enjoy the comfortable life associated with it. During his youth, the urge to discover spiritual realities led him to study comparative religion and, while engaged in his business, he ventured to search out and associate with followers and leaders of religion. Disappointed in what he found, he sought more information about the Bahá’í Faith and was soon engaged in serious study of the sacred Tablets and Writings. His heart became illumined with the light of Faith and at the age of 32, he gave up trade to devote himself fully and freely to its service, developing a special attachment to Jináb-i-Hájí Amín and becoming his constant assistant.

Eventually, in a Tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá urged him to emulate Jináb-i-Hájí Amín and appointed him as Trustee of Ḥuqúqu’lláh. While ever mindful of the responsibilities of his new position, he took the utmost care of Jináb-i-Hájí Amín until his passing. During his time as Trustee, his home became a centre for the gatherings of the friends. It was during this period that initial steps were taken for the registration of Bahá’í properties and endowments in Iran. In 1938 he fell ill and passed away the following year.

After Amín-i-Amín’s passing, Shoghi Effendi appointed Valíyu’lláh Varqá, the third son of Varqá the martyr, as the Trustee of the Ḥuqúq. Valíyu’lláh Varqá was born in Tabríz in 1884 and, after the martyrdom of his father and brother<sup>1</sup>, was brought up from early childhood by his grandmother, a staunch and fanatical Muslim who did her utmost to sow the seeds of enmity to the Faith in

<sup>1</sup> Varqá and his son Rúhu’llah were martyred in 1896 for being Bahá’ís.

his heart. When he was 16 years old, his uncle managed to remove him from this agonizing atmosphere and took him to his home where he introduced him to the Bahá’í Faith and its teachings. These opened a new world to him and so afire did he become with love for the Faith that, without any preparations, he decided to go on pilgrimage in the company of a close friend. The Local Spiritual Assembly, however, did not approve of this, and guided him, instead, to go to Tihrán to join his elder brother. When his schooling was finished, his longing to make his pilgrimage was finally fulfilled and he came into the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Afterward, he attended the American University in Beirut and deepened his knowledge of the Bahá’í teachings during summer vacations under the guidance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. At the behest of the Master, he made a journey to Iran, and later accompanied Him, as interpreter, on His historic journey to Europe and America. He returned to Iran, rendering invaluable services on the Local Spiritual Assembly of Tihrán, in many Bahá’í administrative agencies, and ultimately on the National Spiritual Assembly.

His loyal and dedicated service as Trustee of Ḥuqúqu’lláh was to follow, occupying him for 17 years, during which time the observance of the law of Ḥuqúqu’lláh was spread throughout Iran, so that ever more of the friends fulfilled this obligation. In 1951, Valíyu’lláh Varqá was among the first contingent of eminent believers elevated by Shoghi Effendi to the rank of Hand of the Cause of God. This opened new opportunities for him to meet with the friends. After fulfilling a long-cherished desire to visit the beloved Guardian, on his return to Iran a previous ailment grew worse, and he was forced to go to Germany for treatment. Alas, it was unsuccessful, and in November 1955, his noble life drew to a close. In the cable announcing his passing, Shoghi Effendi wrote, “His mantle as Trustee Ḥuqúq now falls on ‘Alí Muḥammad, his son...Newly



Dr. ‘Alí-Muhammad Varqá.  
Photo: Bahá’í International Community

appointed Trustee Ḥuqúq now elevated rank Hand Cause.”

Just two years following the appointment of ‘Alí-Muḥammad Varqá to this onerous task, he and his fellow Hands of the Cause of God were confronted with the heart-breaking and soul-stirring events associated with the passing of the beloved Guardian, and carried the entire Bahá’í world to the victorious conclusion of the Ten Year Crusade, bringing into being, at Riḍván 1963, the Universal House of Justice.

The period following the election of the Universal House of Justice saw storms of tribulation and persecution afflicting the Bahá’í community in Iran, causing immense problems to be wrestled with in relation to the safeguarding and sale of properties donated for the Ḥuqúqu’lláh as well as a multitude of other historic tasks that have fallen to the lot of ‘Alí-Muḥammad Varqá in his capacity as a Hand of the Cause of God. The successive teaching plans caused an outflow of pioneers from Iran to all corners of the world, requiring the Trustee of Ḥuqúqu’lláh to appoint Deputies and Representatives in a growing number of countries until the institution was represented in every continent on earth.

In 1984, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States reported that the delegates present at National Convention that year expressed their desire for the law of Ḥuqúqu’lláh to be applied to all believers in the United States.

Although the Universal House of Justice felt it was “not yet timely to apply this mighty law in the West,” it sent the believers in the United States, as well as other Western countries, an English translation of a compilation of texts that would allow them to familiarize themselves with the subject of Ḥuqúqu’lláh. This was the first step in the process of applying this law of God to Western Bahá’í communities, the beginning of a period of widespread education.

Ḥuqúqu’lláh was the first law of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*—beyond those already applied prior to 1963—to be universally enacted by the Universal House of Justice when it announced in its Riḍván 1991 message: “With humility before our sovereign Lord, we now announce that as of Riḍván 1992, the beginning of the Holy Year, the Law of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, the Right of God, will become universally applicable. All are lovingly called to observe it.”

Later that same year, on the Day of the Covenant, the House of Justice further announced: “The Office of Ḥuqúqu’lláh has been established in the Holy Land under the direction of the Chief Trustee of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, the Hand of the Cause of God ‘Alí-Muḥammad Varqá, in anticipation of the worldwide application of the Law of Ḥuqúqu’lláh next Riḍván.” The Office facilitated the functions of the Trustee of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, under whose direction and supervision it operated.

The long-anticipated appointment of the International Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh was realized in

early 2005. In its Riḍván message that year, the Universal House of Justice announced: “[T]he time is propitious to bring into being an International Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh to guide and supervise the work of Regional and National Boards of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh throughout the world. It will operate in close collaboration with the Chief Trustee, the Hand of the Cause of God Dr. ‘Alí-Muḥammad Varqá, and will be able to benefit from his knowledge and counsel in carrying out its duties.”

This International Board of Trustees consisted of three members. In 2007, after the passing of the Chief Trustee of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, Hand of the Cause of God Dr. ‘Alí-Muḥammad Varqá, the International Board of Trustees carried on his work as Chief Trustee of Ḥuqúqu’lláh. Its work continues to be facilitated by the Office of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, which communicates on its behalf with Deputies and Representatives; ensures proper procedures are followed for receipting, custody and remittance of funds; prepares reports; and refers to the Universal House of Justice questions of the application of the law requiring elucidation.

Four years ago, in May of 2016, the Universal House of Justice announced to all National Spiritual Assemblies that the membership of the International Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh would rise from three to five members, indicating that the change “represents another significant step in the evolution of the institution of Ḥuqúqu’lláh. It is an indication of the growing capacity

of the Bahá’í world to implement this mighty law of Bahá’u’lláh.”

In connection with the rapid and dynamic expansion of the organization of the institution of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, its roots throughout the world have been strengthened as a network of Boards of Trustees at the regional and national levels and Deputies and Representatives of Ḥuqúqu’lláh developed across the globe. Membership of the institution of Ḥuqúqu’lláh has risen from a few Deputies and Representatives in January 1987, when the first conference on Ḥuqúqu’lláh was convened in the Holy Land, to over 1,000 in 2020. Currently, there are 33 Regional and National Boards of Trustees worldwide. The Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh in Canada, established in January of 1992, consists of five Deputy Trustees. There are 45 Canadian Representatives of the Right of God, each of whom serves a specific region of the country.

Bearing in mind that the Right of God contains mysteries and benefits beyond our comprehension, the main goal of the institution of Ḥuqúqu’lláh is to increase understanding of this multi-faceted law and to arouse a more profound consciousness of its significance. Development of this weighty institution will continue into the foreseeable future as it expands and flourishes in the centuries to come, providing “material resources essential for the advancement of the human race.”<sup>2</sup>

2 From the Universal House of Justice to the Deputies and Representatives of the institution of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, 14 February 1997.

This article was compiled using the following sources:

Ma’ani, Baharieh Rouhani, *The Evolution of the Institution of Ḥuqúqu’lláh*,  
Institution of Ḥuqúqu’lláh website, February 2020.

Varqa, Dr. Ali Muhammad, *Ḥuqúqu’lláh, The Right of God*, talk given during the  
Ḥuqúqu’lláh Conferences in Barcelona, Spain and Hofheim, Germany, October 1999.

*The Development of the Institution of Ḥuqúqu’lláh* prepared by the Research Department  
at the request of the Universal House of Justice, February 2020.

# About this issue

The cover of this issue will be a familiar image to many as the coronavirus pandemic has necessitated alternative means of connection while conditions of physical distancing are being observed. The House of Justice released two stunning messages amid this crisis – at Naw Rúz and Riḍván – acknowledging both the widespread suffering caused by the virus and “the resilience and undiminished vitality of the Bahá’í world.”<sup>1</sup> It brought special attention to the qualities required of this time, including “unity and fellow feeling, knowledge and understanding, a spirit of collective worship and common endeavour.”<sup>2</sup>

We shared several stories of resilience on bahaicanada.bahai.ca as the friends adapt their activities, use creative means to communicate hope and offer service to those in need. Of course, feelings of confinement and separation are among the unexpected challenges being faced. The article “Remember My days,” inspired by Bahá’u’lláh’s counsel in the Tablet of Ahmad, reminds us of the suffering the Blessed Beauty willingly endured and includes a selection of first-hand accounts from those who were honoured to attain His presence.

## *In this issue we reflect on some of the experience of the Canadian Bahá’í community over the last four years...*

It is in this context that the Bahá’í world enters the final year of the Five Year Plan. In this issue we reflect on some of the experience of the Canadian Bahá’í community over the last four years – experience that is vital to the work ahead. “Suffice it to say that,” the House of Justice wrote, “four years into the current Plan, the tireless supporters of the Cause have brought the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh to the strongest position in which it has ever been in its history.”<sup>3</sup>

Before the current crisis, the National Assembly brought together the Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members, regional agencies and collaborators for an institutional meeting that focused on sharing insights and lessons learned in the teaching field, the diffusion of which is critical to advancing the work of the Plan. Our feature article, “National institutional meeting fosters a collective vision for growth” shares more from this inspiring gathering.

1 From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the World, Riḍván 2020.

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

3 *Ibid.*

In formulating this issue, we considered how each of the three protagonists of the Plan – the individual, the institutions, and the community – has advanced over the last four years. This prompted us to invite the Spiritual Assembly of Toronto to reflect on the development of its own capacity during this time. The article, “Enhancing institutional capacity: Some initial insights gained by the Spiritual Assembly of Toronto,” conveys the unique perspective of a Local Spiritual Assembly.

Additionally, in the article “A brief history of the development of the institution of Ḥuqúqu’lláh,” the Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh in Canada adapted several sources in order to provide an overview of how this law has been gradually introduced and implemented, in parallel with the development of the Trusteeship, from the time of the Báb until the present day.

The article, “Collaborative initiatives stimulate the intellectual life of the Bahá’í community,” contributed by Eric Farr, shares experience from the Association for Bahá’í Studies as it endeavours to accompany groups of friends in various fields to correlate certain discourses with Bahá’í concepts and our experience as a community. How fitting that in its Riḍván message the House of Justice observed that, as a result of the health crisis, “Leaders, prominent thinkers, and commentators have begun to explore fundamental concepts and bold aspirations that, in recent times, have been largely absent from public discourse.”

“Insights from *Initial Impulse: The first branch course of Book 5*” conveys several developments with regard to the junior youth spiritual empowerment program in light of a recently released unit of a branch course of Ruhi Book 5. Youth are also at the forefront in the article “Our life-changing time as pioneers,” as two sisters, Kalila and Chandyn Hamilton-Bachiu, both high school students, tell the story of how they pioneered to Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. to initiate the junior youth program, helping the cluster advance towards the conditions necessary for an intensive program of growth.

We hope that the article “Group visits to the Shrine in Montreal,” which shares the reflections of several neighbourhood groups that visited the Shrine over the past year, will inspire the friends to turn their thoughts toward this blessed house as their prayers intensify during this time. We look forward to continuing to follow the stories of your resilience and creativity as “The dynamics of community life, so important for collective progress, will not be subdued.”<sup>4</sup>

4 From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the World, Riḍván 2020.



The Riḍván Garden, located outside the city of 'Akká, was rented and prepared by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for Bahá'u'lláh's USC. Photo: Bahá'í International Community

## “Remember My days”

Conditions being imposed on people across the globe bring to mind Bahá'u'lláh's counsel to  
 “Remember My days during thy days...”

As this issue of *Bahá'í Canada* was being prepared, people across the globe were struggling to learn new terms and new behaviours – social/physical distancing, self-isolation, going into quarantine. With more and more workers, school children, caregivers and the elderly confined to their homes in response to public health advisories, many faced wholly unexpected challenges and needs, some feeling frightened, even ‘imprisoned,’ by these new conditions. Amidst them, Bahá'u'lláh's counsel from the Tab-

let of Ahmad seemed especially compelling: “Remember My days during thy days, and My distress and banishment in this remote prison.” So, too, the closing words of the Fire Tablet: “... thank thy Lord for this Tablet, whence thou canst breathe the fragrance of My meekness, and know what hath beset Us in the path of God, the Adored of all the worlds...”

After His imprisonment in the Siyáh-Chál in Tīhrán, Bahá'u'lláh was exiled successively to Baghdad,

Constantinople, Adrianople and finally the prison-city of 'Akká. In Baghdad attacks against the Blessed Beauty and His followers rained down from outside the community. In Adrianople a devastating crisis erupted from within. In 'Akká the onslaught was both external and internal. “‘Know thou,’ Bahá'u'lláh, wishing to emphasize the criticalness of the first nine years of His banishment to that prison-city, has written, ‘that upon Our arrival at this Spot, We chose to designate it as the “Most Great Prison.” Though

previously subjected in another land (Tīhrán) to chains and fetters, We yet refused to call it by that name. Say: Ponder thereon, O ye endued with understanding!”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the first year of their confinement in ‘Akká, the band of exiles were forcibly separated, forbidden to associate either with one another or with local residents. Only Bahá’u’lláh’s wives and children were permitted to be with Him. For nearly a decade, the Guardian states, He did not pass beyond the city walls, His sole exercise pacing, “in monotonous repetition, the floor of His bed-chamber.”<sup>2</sup> Bahá’u’lláh was gradually allowed some freedom of movement within ‘Akká and later outside its walls to Mazra’ih and Bahjí though He remained nominally a prisoner to the end of His life. Slowly the Bahá’í community grew and pilgrims gained access to the Object of their hearts’ desire. Shared here are excerpts from published accounts by some of those privileged to be with Bahá’u’lláh, offering a glimpse of His days through the eyes and hearts of those fortunate ones.

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“Describing His confinement in the Siyáh-Chál, the Blessed Beauty recalled: ‘The weight of the chain placed about Our neck was difficult to bear [The heaviest chain used weighed over 50 kilos], but having the thumbs of both hands bound together behind the back was even more aggravating. The royal guards were unyielding, but the executioners would show us kindness. One even offered Me tea and some grapes, but as I was freighted with chains and My hands were bound, I was unable to accept them.’

Continuing His recollections Bahá’u’lláh said: ‘To whatever place We were banished, difficulties ensued similar to those experienced after Our arrival in ‘Akká. Now, however, the situation is reversed so that people here are inclined towards meekness. It has been like this

*Throughout the first year of their confinement in ‘Akká, the band of exiles were forcibly separated, forbidden to associate either with one another or with local residents.*

wherever We have dwelt. At first the Cause of God was unknown and We were engulfed in tribulations. But now, praise be to God, the people of these regions are manifesting their humility and respect towards Us.”<sup>3</sup>

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“To see His Father, the Blessed Beauty, after so many years of hardship and suffering, resting under the mulberry tree by the little stream in the beautiful Riḍván Garden would rejoice the heart of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The fragrant, profuse and multi-coloured flowers and shrubs, the splashing fountain, the freshness of the air, and especially the presence of Bahá’u’lláh uplifted the souls of all who were privileged to accompany Him.

The greatest joy of the children of the Holy Family was to go with Bahá’u’lláh for occasional picnics in the Garden. For them He was like another Father, and to Him they carried their small difficulties.

The Blessed Beauty was interested in everything concerning the children, particularly their cleanliness, order and discipline. All their treats and happiness came from Him during those often monotonous days. When boxes of sweets were brought to Bahá’u’lláh, He would humorously say, ‘Set aside some for the children,

otherwise the Master will give them away’, and sometimes He would send for them and distribute the sweets.

Often at bedtime, despite their parents’ wish not to disturb Bahá’u’lláh, He would always welcome them with loving words. And when He would tell them, ‘Tomorrow, children, you shall come with Me to the Garden of Riḍván,’ they were so filled with joy they could scarcely sleep.”<sup>4</sup>

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The following are summarized extracts from the recollections of Hand of the Cause, Taráz’u’lláh Samandari, who, at the age of 16, attained the presence of Bahá’u’lláh. He stayed in ‘Akká for six months before the Ascension of Bahá’u’lláh in May 1892 and for one month afterwards.

“It was in the House of ‘Abbúd that Mr. Samandari first entered the presence of Bahá’u’lláh. This is his description of that visit:

‘[When I entered His room], the Blessed Beauty was seated on a divan. As I bowed before Him, the fez I was wearing tumbled from my head. With His blessed hands, Bahá’u’lláh placed it back on my head, and said, “Marhabá!” [Welcome!]. My trembling and shaking were uncontrollable. He bade me be seated, and an attendant, at the request of Bahá’u’lláh, offered me some tea. But I was shaking so much that I could scarcely hold on to the cup.

“‘Bismilláh! Bismilláh!’ [Please!] Bahá’u’lláh repeated several times, inviting me to drink my tea, but I was still unable to do so. He enquired about the health of my father, and following this, I was granted permission to leave.”<sup>5</sup>

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“Since two weeks had passed during which time I [Taráz’u’lláh Samandari] had not been in the presence of Bahá’u’lláh, I decided one day to go to the Mansion of Bahjí. I asked a young girl, the

1 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, Chapter XI  
2 *Ibid.*

3 *Stories of Bahá’u’lláh*, compiled by ‘Alí-Akbar Furútan, #142, p. 108.

4 *Ibid.*, #141, p.107.  
5 *Ibid.*, #129, pp. 97-8.

daughter of a resident who happened to be there, whether or not anyone was in the presence of the Blessed Beauty at that moment. She replied that He was alone, and that He was walking and pacing to and fro. I said to her, 'Go and say to Bahá'u'lláh, "It has been two weeks since Taráz has attained Your holy presence and he seeks permission to visit."' The young girl delivered my message and returned with the reply that Bahá'u'lláh says, 'Bismilláh! Bifarma'id!' [Enter]

In a state of mind that I cannot easily describe, I entered His presence. 'Marhabá! Taráz Effendi' was the greeting of the Blessed Beauty. He then approached me, and, patting my head and face, enquired about my health. After a few moments, He added, 'Behold! You have made complaint that you have not entered Our presence. Do you not visit Ghusn-i-A'zam [the Most Great Branch] in the city?'

I replied that day and night I attained His [Abdu'l-Bahá's] presence. Bahá'u'lláh then stated: 'For what reason, then, did you utter this complaint?' He then remarked, 'Your first place of residence is here! Permission to come is yours whensoever you desire, and for your comfort, we have prepared the guest-home.'

Afterwards, He offered me some sweets and granted me permission to leave."<sup>6</sup>

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"Now there remained only three nights until the end of my [Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí] pilgrimage, and I was summoned to the presence of Bahá'u'lláh. He spoke of His exiles and emphasized the fact that should the people ponder carefully on these different stages of His banishment, they would know that every step had been taken according to the Will of God. 'The hand of God is over all, and His might and power overwhelm the worlds of creation. Consider the case of those persons who, fearing the loss of their

temporal powers, condemned Us to the Most Great Prison. Where are they now? What has befallen each and every one of them? God brought them down from their places and consigned them to their graves. Their names are never mentioned. But your Lord is established in this Mansion through the power of God, His might, and His sovereignty.'

He then asked someone to chant parts of the two Tablets addressed to the sultan of the Ottoman Empire and to the shah of Persia. After that, the pilgrims were dismissed.

During our dinner someone brought sweets sent to us by Bahá'u'lláh. He also sent a message concerning me: 'Tell him to eat the sweets and say to himself, "I must go home."' This time I got ready to go and did not plan to ask the beloved Master to intervene on my behalf or to guarantee me. The sweet memory of His loving wit that I should tell myself, 'I must go home,' remains fresh in my heart, and even more as I surrender my will to that of God.

The next day we had torrential rains. In the afternoon of that same day, I went to see Him. The moment I entered His room, He said, 'It seems that you expect the rain to intercede for you.' This tender joke helped to change all my despair into joy. When I returned to the Pilgrim House and reported my interview to the friends, they were all of the opinion that the next day there would again be rain, and the Bahá'u'lláh would not send me away.

But the day dawned with splendid sunshine, and I went to His room in the Mansion of Bahjí. He spoke about teaching. He said: 'A kindly approach and loving behavior toward the people are the first requirements for teaching the Cause. The teacher must carefully listen to whatever a person has to say – even though his talk may consist only of vain imaginings and blind repetitions of the opinions of others. One should not resist or engage in argument. The teacher must avoid disputes which will end of stubborn refusal or hostility, because the

other person will feel overpowered and defeated. Therefore, he will be more inclined to reject the Cause. One should rather say, "Maybe you are right, but kindly consider the question from this other point of view." Consideration, respect, and love encourage people to listen and do not force them to respond with hostility. They are convinced because they see that your purpose is not to defeat them, but to convey truth, to manifest courtesy, and to show forth heavenly attributes. This will encourage the people to be fair. Their spiritual natures will respond, and, by the bounty of God, they will find themselves recreated.'

'Consider the way in which the Master teaches the people. He listens very carefully to the most hollow and senseless talk. He listens so intently that the speaker says to himself, "he is trying to learn from me." Then the Master gradually and very carefully, by means that the other person does not perceive, puts him on the right path and endows him with a fresh power of understanding.'

When the final moment approached and I bade farewell to my Beloved, He approached the door and whispered in my ear, 'I have entrusted you to the hands of the Master.' Though these words were spoken with the utmost sweetness, and were a sign of His sublime consideration and love, they filled my heart with dark clouds of sorrow. They seemed to me to indicate clearly His imminent departure from this world.

Next I went to 'Akká, to the presence of the Master. There was no end of His love. He had written a letter to Bahá'u'lláh requesting that I be permitted to stay, even outside the city of 'Akká, because the sea had been rough and agitated. His letter had been returned with one sentence on the top: 'It is better for him to go; God is the Protector – rest assured.'<sup>7</sup>

7 Stories from the *Delight of Hearts: The Memoirs of Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí*, Translated and abridged by A. Q. Faizi, pp. 108-10.

6 *Ibid*, #140, pp. 105-6.



Participants enjoy a plenary session at the national institutional meeting. Photo: Louis Brunet

## National institutional meeting fosters a collective vision for growth

A national gathering brought regional institutions together to share experience and deliberate on strategies to win the goals of the Five Year Plan.

The Universal House of Justice described institutional meetings as a space where the friends “come together in a meeting of consultation to reach a common vision for the growth of their community and discuss strategies for action. These ‘institutional meetings’ help to steer the friends away from thinking merely in terms of the mechanics of projects and to infuse their plans and subsequent action with the spirit of the Faith. They do much to reinforce the confidence of the institutions in devising the teaching strategies that will best serve the needs of their respective regions and in mobilizing the support of the Local Assemblies and the believers.”<sup>1</sup>

From 15-17 February, the National Spiritual Assembly held a national institutional meeting for over 100 attendees including the Counsellors, Regional Bahá’í Councils, institute boards, Auxiliary Board members and collaborators from across Canada. The aim of the gathering was to consult and clarify understanding around questions being faced in the teaching work, disseminate lessons learned from each region and strengthen a collective vision as the Canadian Bahá’í community enters the final year of the Five Year Plan.

The last gathering of this kind was called just before the Plan’s launch over four years ago – cycle zero, it was called – and focused on

thinking about how clusters could be grouped together and how these groupings might support each other so that the strongest clusters could become true reservoirs of experience and human resources, allowing for the movement of each of Canada’s clusters along a continuum of growth. And what a distance we have come.

The community-building endeavour is stronger than it has ever been. The last statistical report submission, just days before this gathering, reported some 20,000 participants in 3,900 core activities – an increase of almost 3,000 participants from the time of the biannual survey in October 2019, and an increase of some 500 core activities. The junior

<sup>1</sup> The Universal House of Justice, *The Institution of the Counsellors*, 29 January 2001, p. 12.

youth program has the highest number of participants ever. This was an extraordinary moment that the friends registered together.

Yet as the House of Justice said at the Plan's beginning, writing a letter addressed jointly to the Bahá'ís of the United States and the Bahá'ís of Canada: "You have already accomplished that which is worthy of the gratitude and admiration of the entire Bahá'í world, but your mission is far from complete. After a century of resolute action, you should, more than ever before, be able to discern the straight path traced by heavenly inspiration across the many stages of the Divine Plan since its systematic execution began in 1937, and thus grasp the full implications of the latest stage about to open."

Midway through the gathering, the institutions from each region had an opportunity to reflect on letters they had written to 'Abdu'l-Bahá four years ago, indicating their pledges to meet the goals of the Plan by the centenary of His Ascension in 2021. Each region felt assured and rededicated to reaching these goals. What also became clear from all those present was that offering this gift to 'Abdu'l-Bahá would require the contributions of every believer and friend of the Faith.

The materials studied at the gathering solidified the friends' identity as one country, part of one North American continent set on learning to work together to meet the goals of the current Plan. They were reminded of the spiritual legacy of North America, a community that throughout history has repeatedly turned with ever greater devotion to the Head of Faith, attracting immense victories.

For instance, in 1948, just a few months before Riqdván, the community in North America was struggling to win its goal of establishing 175 Local Spiritual Assemblies. Shoghi Effendi wrote to the friends in America expressing his confidence that the community would "yet emerge triumphant



Auxiliary Board member Nabih Ardekany delivers a panel presentation during the national institutional meeting. Photo: Louis Brunet

over the prevailing crisis" which would in turn serve to "strengthen the attachment and reinforce the brotherly affection of its Guardian."<sup>2</sup>

Only a few months later, after intensive effort, the community exceeded its goal, raising almost 200 Local Spiritual Assemblies – an "heroic feat" coupled with other "brilliant achievements" that transcended the "fondest hopes" of the Guardian. One of these achievements was the establishment of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada that same year.<sup>3</sup>

It is this spiritual legacy that must now inspire these next steps. The North American community is like a tuning fork, resonating to the vibrations of the voice of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. Now is the time for His summons to reach each soul to contribute to these final months of the Plan, to advance significantly towards the goal of universal participation in a sustained, coordinated and unanimously supported endeavour.

The National Spiritual Assembly expressed its confidence that during the next year, Canada's remaining first milestone clusters will pass the second milestone, with an expanding nucleus evident in each. Those with already-established intensive

programs of growth will continue to move towards the third milestone, with an expanding nucleus beginning to grow in a neighbourhood or neighbourhoods. Many will join the 14 clusters that have passed the third milestone and are now advancing towards the frontiers of learning.

All the institutions left with conviction, faith and love that their communities would arise to meet these goals, setting before them a calendar of teaching conferences, reflection gatherings, intensive campaigns, seminars, home visits and devotionals to extend what has been learned to the whole community. As a country it was clear that we have generated enough learning to achieve these goals; it is now only a matter of extending this experience to cluster after cluster.

To achieve the aims of the gathering, the consultation focused on five themes. As well as exploring the spiritual legacy of North America, participants discussed fostering a unified vision of growth, seeing how all believers and friends of the Faith can contribute a share in the development of Bahá'u'lláh's Cause. Further themes explored include an expanding nucleus of friends, the training institute as an instrument of limitless potentialities and mutual support among a group of adjoining clusters.

<sup>2</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p. 48.



Representatives from regional agencies in Quebec consult during a breakout session. Photo: Louis Brunet

Friends from each region delivered panel presentations, including photos and, in some cases, videos sharing some of the strongest experiences of growth in the country, providing clarity on the path forward for other clusters. Each shared their communities' narratives, including the obstacles and victories they had experienced and highlighting the capacities they developed in achieving growth.

What was apparent almost immediately among all those participating was the progress every region has made. Questions that seemed mysterious in 2015 were made clearer as each region offered what they had learned. Every experience from the regions benefitted the consultation as a whole and aided in showing a picture of how the country has progressed. Examples from coast to coast brought joy and hope; it was particularly encouraging to hear profound examples emerging from the young friends in the gathering.

By next *Riḍván*, an army of tutors – some of them mobile tutors who are assisting from outside the cluster, some from within – will have assisted every cluster past the first milestone to find youth and draw them into the institute. Every milestone two cluster will have advanced towards a basic junior youth spiritual empowerment program that engages 50 to 100 junior youth, beginning with the first step, the establishment of one group. In

some clusters, a trickle of youth will have become a flow, in others the flow a mighty river: a movement irrepressible.

Devotional gatherings in a myriad forms – candles and quiet, on a soccer field, with a few friends and in families – will have become sustained beacons of light that will have connected countless – truly countless – numbers of diverse Canadians with their Creator and drawn them into the study of the Revelation in children's classes, junior youth groups and study circles.

Now, of course, this vision is being pursued in a different fashion than was imagined as the friends gathered in the meeting, in a completely changed landscape that has since emerged as a result of the global health crisis. This challenge has released an astonishing creativity on the part of the friends, who have moved teaching conferences and institute seminars online, who have nurtured a connection to the Creator not only by intensifying prayer in their families but by reaching out to their neighbours and friends to include them in inspiring virtual spaces. In neighbourhoods where the community-building work has involved the families of children and junior youth, parents are even more engaged in actively supporting their children in this new environment.

Central to the consultations that weekend was a consciousness that the North America we seek to

spiritually illumine is not the same as it was when 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed the Tablets of the Divine Plan. The peoples of the world have been drawn to its shores, often in tragic circumstances. It is they who are becoming we, in neighbourhoods across the country, who in the beauty of our diversity will carry aloft the banner of Bahá'u'lláh, who are equipped to accelerate the movement of clusters towards the farthest frontiers, "to usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi at the start of your collective exertions, when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society."<sup>4</sup>

At the close of the gathering, the National Spiritual Assembly determined to raise a call to the friends, including for the material resources and properties that will be needed to support this mighty movement. With the Counsellors, they pledged to be at the side of all those who arise, including in intense prayer at every meeting and in their individual devotions. "This, with all the mysterious love that He casts into our hearts, and with absolute confidence in His grace and your capacity, we promise."

4 From the Universal House of Justice to the chosen recipients of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Bahá'ís of the United States and the Bahá'ís of Canada, 26 March 2016.



An aerial view of downtown Toronto. Photo: Mwangi Gatheca

# Enhancing institutional capacity:

## Some initial insights gained by the Spiritual Assembly of Toronto

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The Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Toronto reflects on its experience during the course of the current Five Year Plan.

Toronto is a single-Assembly cluster with about 1,850 registered believers. It is one of some 300 in the world that are learning about building the capacity to sustain 500 to 1,000 core activities. Serving as a continental site for the dissemination of learning for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, the cluster has developed the capacity to sustain some 430 core activities with more than 2,300 participants. There are currently four neighbourhoods that are a focus of intensive activity in the cluster.

In reflecting on the development of its institutional capacity over the course of the current Five Year Plan, the Toronto Spiritual Assembly is happy to share some insights gained. While its members are acutely aware of their own inadequacy and shortcomings, they carry out their work as an act of service to Bahá'u'lláh. In particular, the Assembly is moved to state three things; first, that any development of the Assembly's institutional capacity does not occur in isolation, but is inextricably connected to the advancements being made by the individuals in the cluster, as well as the community as a whole. Second, that the work which the Assembly carries out is only a part of a wider, coherent whole, where any advance and progress is a result, to a large extent, of collaboration and consultation with other institutions and agencies serving the cluster at various levels of Bahá'í administration. Finally, that our Assembly seeks to discipline its mindset towards fostering processes and building on strength.

There are a number of challenges encountered in a large community like Toronto, with no easy solutions, formulas or shortcuts to resolve them. Institutional capacity, in this context, includes drawing on the spiritual resources of hope and optimism and appreciating the dynamic interplay of crisis and



A bicentenary celebration in the St. James Town neighbourhood in Toronto. Photo: Liam Dousti

victory, ever conscious of the aid of the hosts of the Celestial Concourse. The current Plan has brought a heightened awareness that unity within the Assembly has an effect on the community; that the institution works towards advancing constructive processes rather than problem-solving, and that “even the most perplexing and thorny situations”<sup>1</sup> can become stepping stones for progress.

### Creating an environment in which all feel encouraged to contribute to the community's common enterprise

During the current Plan, the Assembly has been learning about how everyone, according to their diverse and unique circumstances, can contribute to the advancement of the cluster. It is conscious that learning about how to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to our individual and collective lives is not confined to those formally enrolled in the community. Constructive contributions by those who are increasingly taking their share in the various activities and educational processes that the Bahá’í community has initiated should and are being welcomed. Additionally, the involve-

ment of members of the Assembly in the framework for action assists the Assembly in its work and consultative process.

The sphere of the Assembly’s direct influence is, at this stage in our collective evolution, primarily applied to how the Nineteen Day Feasts are celebrated and Holy Days are observed. There is a growing awareness that the institution of the Nineteen Day Feast is an arena where the three protagonists of the Plan – the individual, the community and the institutions – come together and can fortify a spirit of learning and collaboration. The Assembly has been developing the capacity to directly influence the quality of this important institution of the Faith. Feasts have been decentralized in Toronto for many years now, and an Assembly report is sent to all locations at each Feast. The report is not necessarily lengthy, and its primary focus is on helping the friends to understand the conditions in the cluster and to study and apply the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

During this Plan, the Auxiliary Board members and the Area Teaching Committee have often collaborated with the Assembly on the content of these reports. Another advance during the current Plan has seen the Feast frequently being used for reflection and planning purposes in relation to the cycles of growth

that are underway in the cluster. This was particularly accelerated by the bicentenaries, during which the Feast served as such a space on an ongoing basis for both the planning of celebrations and the follow-up with participants. The Assembly encourages all to share their experiences from the teaching field at the Feasts, to learn from each other and to find opportunities to collaborate.

With regards to Holy Days, the Assembly has been developing the capacity to broaden our collective vision of how these special occasions can be observed. It seems natural that the friends will draw on the rich experience they gained by bringing people together in diverse settings during the two bicentenary celebrations and the Assembly has attempted to articulate this experience. It has conveyed its ardent hope that the friends continue to use every Holy Day as an opportunity to make a list of contacts and engage them in conversations about the life and teachings of the Twin Manifestations and their vision for humanity. As more and more households and neighbourhoods observe Holy Days “that uplift hearts and kindle spirits,”<sup>2</sup> these occasions facilitate participation and an outward-looking orientation. They draw confirmations and allow

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

2 From the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 1 June 2018.

for multiple learning opportunities pertaining to such concepts as dignity, reverence, hospitality, modesty and inclusiveness.

The engagement of youth, junior youth and children seems more focused when Holy Day observances are held in multiple venues in the intimate setting of a home or a neighbourhood. Here, the younger generation can fully participate in the planning process, increasing the quality of these occasions. For example, a child may tell a story of one of the central figures of the Faith that they learned in a children's class. Artistic expression can also become much richer in these settings, where those of diverse ages and cultures can contribute. And, perhaps most importantly, multiple spaces can be created through individual initiative to study guidance and make plans together – where the constructive contributions of all are appreciated, both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not.

As stated at the outset, institutional capacity does not occur in isolation from the advancements made by individuals and the community. The personal involvement of the members of the Assembly in the range of activities of the Plan – from serving as study circle tutors and children's class teachers to participating in teaching campaigns – has helped to advance both the institution and the community. Here, the capacity being developed relates to the kind of leadership that protects the learning taking place in the cluster, not by exerting power or serving the Cause in whatever way one wishes, but rather, by contributing, through both word and deed, to an environment conducive to the participation of growing numbers in collective action. It is, after all, personal experience that provides Assembly members with a better understanding of the process of growth itself, the transformative impact of the institute, and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

## **Fostering the development of interacting processes at the local level**

A capacity that the Assembly has continued to develop during the current Plan is to think in terms of process. Regarding the all-important topic of universal participation, for example, the Assembly has avoided the tendency to rely much on ad-hoc educational events, campaigns and projects that rouse excitement and may result in a surge of activity that usually quickly diminishes. What is called for, rather, is a fundamental raising of consciousness among all three protagonists of the Plan. Therefore, the Assembly has consistently urged the friends to engage with the institute process, recognizing that the approaches, methods and instruments of the Five Year Plan foster a profound transformation in understanding and attitudes, which leads to the sustained, long-term commitment on the part of ever-growing numbers.

During the current series of global Plans, the House of Justice stated that “those who serve on Spiritual Assemblies will necessarily undergo intense periods of learning in the years ahead.”<sup>3</sup> One of the areas that has demanded intense learning and capacity building is the spirit of collaboration between the Assembly and the cluster agencies. There has been a conscious effort to appreciate the interconnectedness of the lines and areas of action that comprise the work of the two, and to avoid the tendency to define a territory of operation that needs to be defended based on static impressions and assumptions about the Administrative Order. This collaboration has been so clear that the Assembly has been asked by community members to explain how the Assembly and the Auxiliary Board members are collaborating.

To answer that question briefly, the Assembly has noted that the flow

of information and communication has increased significantly between these two arms of the administration over the last few years, as well as the spaces of consultation and reflection together. Moreover, the two arms now consult on a much broader area of topics, as the various systems and processes that are patiently being built and strengthened in the cluster form an interconnected whole that requires a high degree of coherence and are of equal concern to both institutions. It has been instructive to consider the broader context of the evolving relationship between the Assembly and the Board members, as expressed by the House of Justice, where it states that it is

confident that as experience and the capacity for learning increase, a greater measure of coherence among activities related to the expansion and consolidation of the Cause will be achieved, the complementary nature of the roles of the institutions of the Faith will be more clearly understood and the collaboration that is to take place among them will become more effective. It is important to keep in mind that we are in the early stages of a vast evolutionary process of development that will, in time, lead to a transformation in all aspects of the life of the Bahá'í community and the functioning of its institutions...<sup>4</sup>

## **Providing material resources and other assistance for initiatives and events being organized in the locality**

A capacity that the Assembly has been developing over the current Plan is to facilitate the services of many by promoting individual initiative and channeling energies into the teaching field. The priorities of the Assembly's internal functioning are such that its organizing principle – from its agenda, to correspondence, to prioritization of time, to conf-

3 From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors, 27 December 2005.

4 From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 30 September 2008.



A junior youth group meets in a park in the Roywood neighbourhood in Toronto. Photo: Anita Sadeghi

idental cases – is “to ensure that the requirements of the Five Year Plan are adequately met”<sup>5</sup> in the cluster. The Assembly itself cannot “do” everything for the community, but rather encourages, guides and supports individual initiative within the framework of the Plan.

The two bicentenary celebrations during the current Plan offered the Assembly an opportunity to learn to assist the friends relative to where they are at on a spectrum of experiences, understanding and inclinations. The Assembly did so by providing communications to the community that were focused, elevated, aligned to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and with a certain level of depth. To complement this community-wide approach, the Assembly also facilitated meetings of consultation with specific individuals and teaching teams that were grappling with specific questions or challenges about their specific initiatives for the celebrations.

A need that clearly emerged during the current Plan was to strengthen the systems and processes that are required to sustain and systematize the level of activity in the cluster. The Assembly authorized the use of the Toronto Bahá’í Centre to be fully dedicated and prioritized for the institute process, including projects and campaigns. This allowed for the appointment of a full-time coordinator and program team to work on the coordination, including logistics, of the many campaigns taking place in the cluster and the development of a system of logistical

support that can serve the cluster in an ongoing way. Commensurate with these advances, the Assembly brought to the community’s attention the urgent needs of the Local Fund, needs that continue to be crucial: for youth to offer a period of service; for pioneers to settle in neighbourhoods and learn to release the powers of entire populations; and for the acquisition of properties that serve the requirements of these populations, including capacity for overnight accommodations during intensive institute campaigns.

## Building systems and processes

The advances being made during the current Plan have resulted in a higher level of complexity which has prompted the Assembly to give greater attention to the development of its administrative systems and processes. As an initial step the Assembly has started developing the capacity to organize information in such a way as to enable it to retrieve and refer to past decisions, guidance, precedents and directives. Related to this has been the capacity to accurately and precisely describe the Assembly’s current systems of operation around some areas of its work, such as expansion and consolidation, the celebration of Nineteen Day Feasts and the observance of Holy Days. This allows the Assembly to study its systems and describe their state with associated and relevant data. Similar documentation has been developed around responses to recommendations from individuals and the community, with the desire to support the community in its

systematic learning. The overall aim is to support a higher level of consultation within the Assembly, as well as to build strong enough systems that they do not depend on any particular individuals to carry out the required work.

In terms of describing the current and envisioned future state of a system, the Assembly has made the most progress to date in relation to its financial systems, in collaboration with the Ontario Bahá’í Council and the Auxiliary Board members. The budgeting process itself is undergoing profound changes, with the starting point being the yearly plans developed at the grassroots in centres of intense activity. As these plans are formulated, in consultation with the cluster agencies, their financial requirements emerge relatively quickly for the Assembly to review and consult on with the Regional Council and institute board. There are other areas that are being examined carefully, such as the overall flow of funds within the cluster and the development of a sound and secure accounting system, as well as educational efforts and reporting that are needed at different levels. This work is gradually becoming more systematized.

In conclusion, it is important to note that administrative arrangements evolve in response to growth and an expanding framework of activity, accommodating ever greater complexity. Circumstances and realities that Assemblies encounter differ, of course, from place to place, and it would be premature to define a specific pattern to be followed based on this Assembly’s experiences during the current Plan. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the insights offered in this article about some developing institutional capacities, although preliminary in nature, will enrich their own reflections.

– The Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Toronto

<sup>5</sup> From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the World, Ridván 2010.



Participants in the law working group seminar in 2018.

## Collaborative initiatives stimulate the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community

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Eric Farr, who serves as a working groups coordinator with the Association for Bahá'í Studies, describes some initial learning as small groups of friends endeavour to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society.

The various fields and disciplines of human knowledge, the professions and academic studies to which we dedicate sizeable portions of our lives, will all be recast through the influence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Whether someone is a lawyer or a science teacher, a cabinet maker or an historian, he or she can strive to contribute to the development of that field in light of the Bahá'í teachings and the growing experience of the Bahá'í community.

Guidance from the Universal House of Justice states, "Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present."<sup>1</sup> In the last few years, the Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) has set in motion a number of learning processes to assist

growing numbers to analyze their professional and academic fields, and to contribute meaningfully and with a level of systematic rigour to the discourses that shape them. This brief article is intended as an overview of how ABS has been approaching this work, what it has been learning and what questions it currently faces.

Since the 1970s, the Association for Bahá'í Studies in North America, an agency of the National Spiritual

<sup>1</sup> From the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 24 July 2013.

Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, has contributed in various ways to Bahá'í community life. Its annual conference and the publications that it oversees have, among other things, served as forums for Bahá'ís to share scholarly work and to correlate the Bahá'í teachings with contemporary thought. In 2013, guidance from the Universal House of Justice encouraged the Association to conceive of its activities and the specialized settings it creates as a means to “promote learning” and “enhance the abilities of the friends” to contribute to the prevalent discourses of their academic and professional fields. The Association was directed to “explore fresh approaches” to fostering intellectual inquiry with “some simple steps that can grow in complexity.”<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean to contribute to professional and academic discourses? The fields in which we work and study are shaped, at least in part, by ideas. Ideas about the purpose of education and the capacity of children, for example, might inform how a teacher approaches a struggling student, while ideas about secularism and the role of religion in public life might inform the work of an academic in a university's department of religion. These ideas are formed and discussed in a variety of “spaces,” from influential books to casual conversations among colleagues. We can understand contributing to a discourse as contributing to the evolving way a community of people in a field think and talk about a given topic, which can in turn shape corresponding social practices.

As people inspired and motivated by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, we can learn to analyze these ongoing discourses that shape our professional or academic fields, to identify particular currents in the prevailing conversations that seem especially constructive or conducive to the advancement of society and to participate in spaces where



A breakout session from the media working group seminar in 2019.

Photo: Esther Maloney

these promising currents move and evolve. In these spaces, we can, “as occasions permit, offer generously, unconditionally and with utmost humility the teachings of the Faith and experience in applying them as a contribution to the betterment of society.”<sup>3</sup> To do so with increasing coherence and effectiveness, we must learn together by making systematic effort and reflecting on our actions in light of the guidance.

Since receiving the 2013 letter from the House of Justice, the Association has fostered a variety of endeavours in order to stimulate such a learning process among a “wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines.”<sup>4</sup> All of these efforts remain quite nascent and any insights drawn from the experience so far are tentative. Initially, small groups of people in fields such as economics, law and health were gathered at the annual ABS conference and began analyzing certain prominent discourses in their fields together. Over the next two years, these groups read books and articles, met online or in person to discuss their

insights and identified key debates and questions animating their fields. Some attended academic or professional conferences together, and some prepared presentations to share at the annual ABS conference.

Once a level of shared understanding was reached in these small groups, some individuals collaborated to plan a number of seminars. While they varied in size and content, these seminars sought to respond to the guidance from the House of Justice, which indicated that “a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts.”<sup>5</sup>

Over the last three years, seminars have convened several hundred people into ongoing conversations about how to draw on insights from the Revelation and from the accumulating experience of the Bahá'í community to participate in significant discourses of their field. For example, in a seminar organized by friends who work

2 From the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 24 July 2013.

3 From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, 4 January 2009.

4 From the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 24 July 2013.

5 *Ibid.*

in media, presentations and discussions explored the role of commercialization in shaping contemporary journalism and film. In a seminar organized by a health working group, the discourse on aging and dying was explored by a panel of health professionals.

The development of a few collaborative research initiatives, as well as the experience with seminars, has also led naturally to changes in the structure and program of the annual ABS conference. Last year, small thematic seminars, one on “Liberalism and the Bahá’í Faith” and another on “Propaganda,” took place during the two days leading up to the annual conference. Participants read several hundred pages of pre-assigned material in order to begin discussions with some common background knowledge. The results were encouraging. Both spaces cultivated a rigorous and explorative consultative environment that allowed for a sustained and in-depth consideration of two prevalent discourses. Based on the promise of this experience, several more seminars are being planned.

All of these efforts, although still fledgling, share a set of common characteristics that we can learn from. First, they attest to the value of small teams learning systematically together over an extended period of time in pursuit of a project with more or less clear objectives. Whether that project is the ongoing analysis of the discourse on global economic inequality or the preparation of an article on intellectual property law, these small teams often have a clear body of literature with which they are engaging. In their analysis, they may ask some of the following questions: What are some issues of enduring importance in this field, and how are people thinking about them? How are different schools of thought organized? Where do they agree and disagree with each other? Can we identify some theoretical or philosophical underpinnings of

*These groups, then, are oriented outwards to existing discourses in the wider literature of their fields and work to correlate aspects of these discourses with Bahá’í concepts and our experience as a community.*

these debates? What assumptions and concepts are at play? How are key perspectives and debates being framed? How does our own conceptual framework allow us to navigate these assumptions, concepts, perspectives, and debates, identify problems and suggest questions that can frame lines of learning?

These groups, then, are oriented outwards to existing discourses in the wider literature of their fields and work to correlate aspects of these discourses with Bahá’í concepts and our experience as a community. This practice of correlating avoids two extremes of, on the one hand, reading only the Bahá’í Writings on a given topic and thus fostering an internal discourse in the Bahá’í community inaccessible to the wider society; and, on the other, reading only literature from the wider society, which can

lead to the unconscious adoption of its underlying assumptions and concepts. This outward orientation is important because our objective is not simply to read, discuss and learn, but to develop over time the capacity to articulate substantive and constructive contributions to the pressing issues facing humanity today in a language that is understandable to the wider society. The ongoing practice of writing in order to consolidate the learning of the group, clarify its thinking and articulate a possible contribution to the discourse is also important.

The Association for Bahá’í Studies is still in the very early days of learning systematically about these collaborative projects and initiatives. Yet, we have seen in the Bahá’í community’s other areas of activity the power of many individuals acting and learning within a common framework. The fundamental concepts and convictions that comprise this framework gain greater shape, depth, and clarity as we study the messages of the Universal House of Justice and engage in the work of the Plan. A generation of young people across the country are learning to analyze the content of their university studies in light of this framework through the annual seminars organized by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. There is reason to be hopeful. Anyone who wishes can take part in these efforts of ABS, perhaps pulling together a few friends in your field to read a key text and analyze it in light of the Revelation. If you do, share your experience with the Association in an email so that we can learn alongside you. These nascent efforts may lead in future generations, God-willing, to thrilling new intellectual movements and fields of knowledge that will contribute to building the civilization envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh.

– Eric Farr



A cluster animator gathering at the Toronto Bahá'í Centre in February 2020.

## Insights from *Initial Impulse: The first branch course of Book 5*

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Junior youth animators reflect on their efforts to implement learning from a recently released branch course of Ruhi Book 5.

In July 2019, the Ruhi Institute released a unit titled “A Moment for Reflection,” meant to be studied by those who have completed Ruhi Book 5: *Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth* and are now serving as animators. It is the first of two units that will make up a book titled, *Initial Impulse: The first branch course of Book 5*. The book aims to help animators consolidate insights they gained during the first few months of their service, and focuses on several practical aspects of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program: expanding the membership of groups, strengthening the study of the texts and developing strong bonds of friendship with the families of junior youth.

Canada is blessed to have two sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth empowerment program: Toronto and Vancouver. Before the current health

crisis, many animators gathered to study the first unit of this book – informally referred to as 5A. Carrying out the related practices has led to an improvement in the quality of the program in many communities.

The unit builds capacity in animators to assist junior youth to take ownership of the growth of their groups. During a camp in the Rowntree neighbourhood of Toronto this past winter, animators helped junior youth invite their friends to join the group. To prepare to have conversations about the program, each junior youth made a booklet containing information about the group, quotations from the text they were studying and descriptions of key concepts they had learned about at the camp. The junior youth wrote everything in their own words, which helped them to easily refer to the booklet.

“This was a great practice for the junior youth,” shared Nahid Iseyas, an animator living in Rowntree, “because in the past, when they tried to invite their friends, the conversation would remain at a superficial level. The junior youth would say, ‘we play games,’ ‘we read a book,’ ‘we play basketball.’ The booklets helped to guide their conversations...and explain the true aims of the program. It also helped them to be more confident...” Many junior youth who had declined to join the group when the animators had approached them alone expressed a desire to participate when invited by their peers.

Book 5A has also helped animators reflect on strategies to become deeply involved in the life of society. In the Mid-Island cluster on Vancouver Island, B.C., this has involved collaborating with the Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre (NAC) that serves the neighbourhood, in-



Junior youth from the Mid-Island cluster on Vancouver Island, B.C., sort food donations to be distributed to organizations that pass them on to families in need.

cluding the housing manager and a tenant support worker. This close collaboration has strengthened the junior youth program there, providing many opportunities for outreach. The team introduced the institute process, and the NAC allowed its spaces to be used for study circles and junior youth groups. The NAC and neighbourhood team have also collaborated on service projects that focused on the health of residents. For example, in the fall of 2019, they discovered that many people in the community needed vaccinations. In partnership with the Vancouver Island Health Authority, the junior youth visited everyone and collected forms for people who needed to be vaccinated and a health official administered them.

Book 5A also prompts animators to reflect on their relationships with the families of the junior youth in their groups. In many places, strong bonds of friendship between animators and families have proved to be a source of strength for the program. The Hillsborough neighbourhood in Charlottetown, P.E.I., usually carries out home visits with families on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. All the members of one of the junior youth groups are older siblings, Dylan Crone, who serves as an animator of the group, explains, “This makes the home visits really special.” Through carrying out home visits, entire families have come to know the animators. The younger

siblings, who are perhaps the future participants of the program, are welcoming and friendly with the animators.

Learning about the lives and cultures of families has allowed for stronger bonds of friendship. Families and animators come to rely on one another, providing service opportunities. The Hillsborough animators discovered that many newcomer families require assistance with small tasks such as setting up the home printer or signing their children up for soccer, which they are eager to help with.

Through these friendships, parents develop a strong trust in the program and animators. Some parents and families have become protagonists of the program. In Hillsborough, the islander families, who have been living in a geographically isolated area for several generations, know one another well. “This has been a huge help for the spread of the program,” said Mr. Crone, “some parents vouch for it and this makes other parents comfortable with sending their own children to the group.”

Out of the current group of 13 junior youth that Mr. Crone animates, four were invited to attend by the animators. The rest of the participants were met through the junior youth themselves, or through connections that their families have with other families in the neighbourhood.

In the Mid-Island cluster, a few parents have been helping with activities on a weekly basis. One mother has begun helping with math during homework help sessions in the neighbourhood. In another group, a parent helps the junior youth with the organization and planning of service projects.

Another notable source of strength for the program in several communities is the practice of catching junior youth up on missed lessons from the texts they study. The Rowntree neighbourhood has been learning about the practice, encouraged in Book 5A, of keeping an attendance chart. The chart helps them to track any lessons that junior youth miss. This way, they can carry out home visits to study these lessons, which helps the junior youth to see the centrality of the texts to their group.

Mr. Crone explains that one of the junior youth in the Hillsborough neighbourhood did not tend to participate during the text study and was more interested in the other activities that the group did together. When the animators started implementing the practice of catching him up on missed lessons, this junior youth started to participate more during the study of the lessons when the group met as well. Therefore, this practice informed his participation in the group. From this Mr. Crone learned that junior youth come to see the importance of the text when the animators persevere with this aspect of the program.

Although junior youth activities cannot continue as before due to public health requirements, capacities advanced through Book 5A – developing in junior youth an appreciation of the centrality of the texts, strengthening bonds of friendship with families – have equipped animators to advance the work during this crisis through creative means, often online. The learning that has been generated will not be forgotten once restrictions are lifted.

# Our life-changing time as pioneers

Sisters Kalila and Chandyn Hamilton-Bachiu, aged 16 and 17 years old, recount their experience as pioneers in northern Ontario as they endeavour to win the goals of the Plan.

On a warm August afternoon, our family was eating dinner on the deck after an eventful week at Rainbow Bahá'í School, which took place in our hometown of Sudbury, Ont. It was then that our mother shared that the Algoma cluster – the major city of which is Sault Ste. Marie – needed youth pioneers experienced with starting a junior youth group. As the reservoir cluster for northern Ontario, friends in Sudbury had been consulting on how to support neighbouring clusters like Algoma to reach the second milestone of growth.

We soon realized that our mother was directing this idea at us, and we started to laugh because we thought she was joking. When we understood that she was not, we assumed our entire family would be moving three-and-a-half hours away to “the Sault.” However, she suggested that she and our father were needed to support the activities in Sudbury, whereas we could temporarily live with a Bahá'í family and, with the assistance of the Bahá'í community in the Sault, start a junior youth group as we did two years ago in Sudbury. Of course, our mother suggested this without any expectations and expressed that they would support our decision either way.

We would like to draw attention to the reality of the northern communities we have served in, as there are always a number of challenges facing the believers. In northern Ontario, we have found isolation to be a significant obstacle to overcome. Distances between northern communities are vast and driving between them is not always a possibility due to weather conditions. Apart from that, the north has always been remote from the



As a service project, junior youth from Sudbury, Ont. rake their neighbours' leaves.

great momentum and learning being generated in the southern cities of Ontario.

So, about three years ago, at the ages of 13 and 14, we decided to visit one of these cities to learn how to initiate the junior youth program in a focus neighbourhood. We attended a 17-day Ruhi Book 5 intensive campaign in Waterloo, Ont. called “To Form a Mighty Sea.” There we gained the tools and strategies to form a junior youth group in Sudbury. In order to share this knowledge, once back home we held a similar campaign with the northern youth, outreached to meet interested junior youth, and there began the program present in Sudbury today.

We were able to sustain the junior youth program for the next few years, during which time we were also absorbed in the activities of typical high school students: academics, sports and music. We also continued our study of the main sequence of courses and were part of an online study group with several youth reading *The Dawn-breakers*.

Although we were surprised by our mother's idea to pioneer to the

Algoma cluster, our initial reaction was an enthusiastic “Yes!” However, our parents suggested that we take time for personal meditation, prayer and reflection. After six days, we were still firm in our decision. For both of us, a huge part of this was inspired by the actions of the youth from *The Dawn-breakers*. We figured that, if those early believers could sacrifice their very lives for the Faith, then we could sacrifice one year of what we considered to be normal.

Another 10 days of vigorous consultation with the institutions of the Faith ensued – the Pioneering Committee, the Sudbury Local Spiritual Assembly, Counsellor Shabnam Tashakour and the Auxiliary Board members – to finally reach the united conclusion that we would indeed be pioneering to Sault Ste. Marie for one year.

After this decision was made, logistics needed to be organized. We needed to find accommodation in the Sault, and we wanted to make sure that the team of youth we served with supported our decision. There was a concern that if we left Sudbury, the momentum that had been built over the last few years

would dwindle. However, we soon realized that leaving would bring forth new opportunities for others to arise and serve.

We saw this in our dear friend Renée Desbiens, who said that she would be willing to continue animating the Sudbury junior youth group. In the Sault, Louisa and Frank van Lith, close friends of our parents, said that they had already bought a bed and prepared a room for us in their house. They told us that they had consulted as a family and resolved to dedicate their efforts more than ever in service to the Cause, and so they opened their home to two teenage girls for one year.

With everything in order, merely 22 days after our mother shared the idea with us, and only five days before school was to begin, we moved into our new home in the Sault. We said a temporary goodbye to our parents, our dog, our little sister and our friends, and chose to attend a high school close to the focus neighbourhood in Sault Ste. Marie.

It was challenging at first. At our new school we knew no one except each other and were banned by provincial regulations (due to the move) from participating in the sports we both excelled at and enjoyed. Apart from that, home life itself was an adjustment. We were living with a different family in a different city, and as could be expected there were new routines and habits to adjust to.

After we had settled into our new life, our mother drove a vanload of youth from Sudbury to the Sault to aid us, along with a few members of the Sault Ste. Marie Bahá'í community, in the outreach process. We identified an elementary school within the neighbourhood that we thought would be a good meeting place. Initially we had trouble securing the school as a gathering place, but the weather was still nice, so we decided to hold the groups at a near-by park on Tuesdays and Fridays from 5:30 to 7:30p.m. until we could relocate to the school.



A winter camp includes junior youth from both Sudbury, Ont. and Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

We found a receptive population in the Syrian families that had recently settled in the neighbourhood. However, this presented its own set of challenges. Many of the families had been in Canada for less than a year and spoke little English, so there was a language barrier to overcome. At first, the girls in the families were not interested or allowed to attend, and so the participants were predominantly 11-year-old boys.

Challenges aside, within a few months 40 participants were engaged in the process and there was a core group of consistent attendees. In December, one youth and three junior youth from the program travelled to Sudbury for a winter junior youth and youth camp. The members of the Sault community helped by serving as adult supervisors, provided snacks for the junior youth and kept the group in their prayers.

As of right now, the Sault Ste. Marie community has engaged over 30 junior youth and 18 youth from the neighbourhood. The mothers of the Syrian families expressed the need for English classes, a service Louisa is happily providing. The junior youth group has grown so much that we are feeling the need to break it into two groups, and the beginnings of a children's class is starting to form. The community is very close to attaining the second milestone; the last step needed is to engage youth regularly in the institute process.

We have learned that a big part of staying motivated while serving in a rural northern city is the essential

connection with youth serving in the more advanced clusters down south. We have attended several Ruhi study circles with these youth and always leave the sessions with increased vigour and enthusiasm, bringing some of their momentum back with us.

Looking back at our life before this year, we have both reflected on the worries and occupations we used to have and how they now seem frivolous and superficial. Our mindsets have shifted greatly in the past few months and we feel we have broken the false dichotomies that separated the rest of our lives from service. Although this year posed many challenges, it has also borne much fruit. It taught us the importance of prayer and reliance on God. We have now formed bonds of love with the junior youth and their families, and this process has reinvigorated the Bahá'í community in Sault Ste. Marie.

The combination of two high school aged youth with a local Bahá'í family formed a strong and united team, conducive to winning the goals of the Plan. However, this experience would not have been possible without the support of our parents; their conviction that we had the ability to serve in this way strengthened our own resolve. We pray that other youth might have the opportunity to serve Bahá'u'lláh like this, for it has been life changing.

– Chandyn and Kalila Hamilton-Bachiu

# Group visits to the Shrine in Montreal

Two groups of friends describe how visiting the Shrine in Montreal strengthened their inner spiritual lives as well as their dedication to transforming their communities.

In its 6 April 2018 message to the Bahá'ís of Canada, the National Spiritual Assembly announced that it would be launching “a special program of visits to the Shrine in Montreal, blessed by the footsteps of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1912 and referred to by Him as His home.” During the past year, more than a dozen neighbourhood and community groups across the country undertook an organized visit to this Shrine, with many likening it to a pilgrimage.

These friends planned their visit with the close aid of the Shrine Group Visit Team, appointed by the National Assembly to coordinate the program. Each group is welcomed at the reception centre by a pair of volunteer guides. There, they view a video about the Shrine and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to Montreal, are given pertinent information about visiting the Shrine and prepare themselves for their visit. In addition to spending precious time together in prayer and meditation within the walls of that blessed house, they hear stories about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit and its significance, shared by a second pair of guides.

Groups were also given information about and encouraged to visit local



A group of families from the West Island of Montreal visit the Shrine in Montreal.

sites associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit – for instance St. James United Church, where He gave a talk – and the nearby resting places of Hands of the Cause William Sutherland Maxwell and Siegfried Schopflocher.

It was the first time some friends had ever visited the Shrine; for others, it was their first time visiting with friends from their community. These visits galvanized neighbourhood teams as they were able to pray for their teaching efforts, friends, and family and developed a strong personal connection to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Jegmal, a youth from the Upper Don Mills neighbourhood in Toronto, Ont., shared, “This past year, I gained a better understanding of who I am and what my true purpose is in this world because of the Bahá’í Faith.” He explained that visiting the Shrine was the most spiritual experience of his life, enabling him to feel closer to God.

Kimmisha, another youth from the Upper Don Mills neighbourhood, described the time she spent praying

in the Shrine itself. “The short time I spent crouched down in prayer beside ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s bed were the most memorable to me,” she shared, “I felt as though my prayers were heard and my soul was at ease.”

Mena, a youth serving as an animator from the same neighbourhood, remembered a story one of the volunteers at the Shrine told their group, which helped the space to come alive. “One morning, at the top of the stairs through the window, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá watched the milkman make his deliveries,” she related.

Some visiting friends were also privileged to attend activities organized by Montreal Bahá’ís for the visiting groups. For instance, one group participated in a devotional gathering, and another group attended a storytelling evening organized by two youth in the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood of Montreal.

After one or two days, the friends made the trip back to their own communities feeling thankful to their Montreal hosts. Kimmisha



Friends from the Upper Don Mills neighbourhood in Toronto visit the Shrine in Montreal. Photo: Kimisha Thompson

said, “After I returned from the Shrine, I took my animating even more seriously. I made a goal to teach the junior youth with the hopes of one day taking them to the Shrine.”

Mena explained that, upon her return home, she shared her experience with her friends at high school. She discovered that none of them had been to a shrine before. “I thought it would be a great idea to invite them...hopefully sometime this year with an even bigger group of wonderful people.”

A group of Chinese families who live in the West Island of Montreal and who are studying the sequence of courses also took the opportunity to undertake a visit to the Shrine in Montreal this past year. Leyla Shodjai, who serves as their tutor, said, “We prepared for our visit to the Shrine in the study circle. Arrangements were made for a guide who spoke Chinese to welcome us at the reception centre so that people could be orientated in their mother tongue...there was a dignified and

reverent atmosphere throughout the visit.”

Lily (Yiqi) Wang, shared “[My husband] and I took both our children under the age of three along with us. You can imagine, that was a bit of a challenge, but I was still able to enjoy the love and serenity of the Shrine. Even our two-year-old seemed infused with feelings of reverence and worship at the sight of a portrait of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He stopped squirming and babbling and stared at the portrait in awe.”

“My visit to the Shrine had a huge impact on me,” her husband, Angus (Feng) Han shared, “Before I went there, I had not yet surrendered to God. I wasn’t sure. But when I got there, I felt so calm...Within just a couple of weeks of my visit, I declared as a Bahá’í.”

Ying (Chengying) Zhao, another member of the group, commented, “I got to know the history of the Bahá’í Faith through visiting the Shrine, how precious it is for humanity to receive God’s teachings

from the Manifestations and the Master and how They sacrificed their lives for the sake of peace and the development of the human race. It motivates me to do my part to spread the teachings.”

Another friend, Min Xu, shared, “The Shrine is a place that is definitely full of spiritual power. It’s where my heart is.”

Motivated by their experience at the Shrine in Montreal, this group intends to make another, much farther, trip. “My family is now making plans to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land with several other friends from the Montreal area,” Angus said, “I highly recommend that all the friends – those who can –visit the Shrine in Montreal!”

The Shrine Group Visit Team also coordinates visits from groups from the wider community. Some of these visitors have also been profoundly impacted by their experience. For example, on hearing a prayer of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for children recited in the Shrine, a university student studying education confided to a guide, “That prayer was so beautiful! I don’t know why I am crying...”

Some students in a large group of visitors from a French-speaking high school in Montreal, upon hearing explanations about the Faith at the reception centre, were so enamored by the teachings that they exclaimed that they felt they were Bahá’ís.

A group of youth from the Ismaili community told the team beforehand that it wanted to hear about what kind of service Bahá’ís render to society and so a presentation on the core activities was planned as part of their visit to the Shrine.

The program for group visits continues to allow for a variety of needs to be met as more and more friends become acquainted with the Shrine in Montreal, taking their portion of this gift to Canada.

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# 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.

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