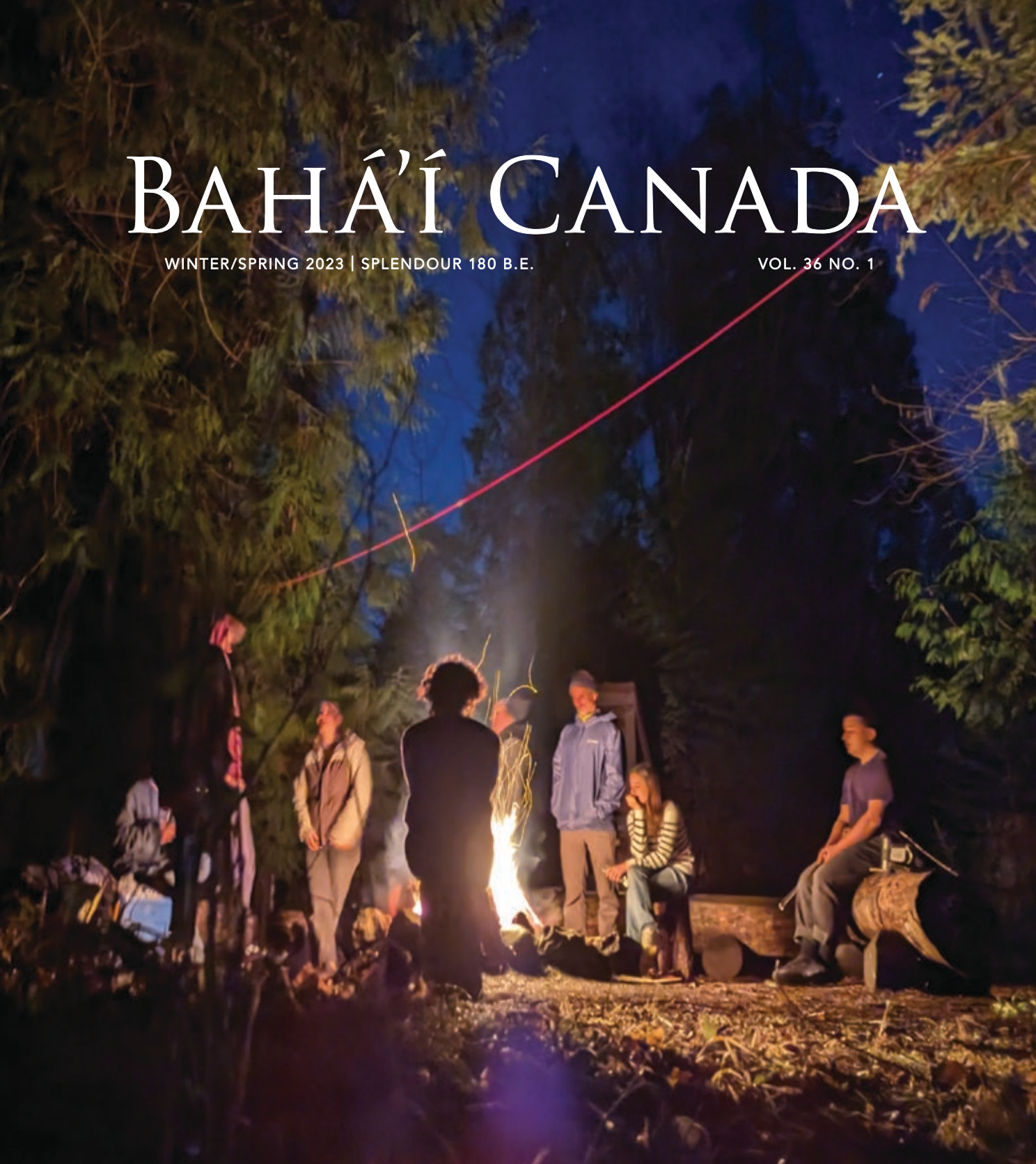


BAHÁ'Í CANADA

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Widening the embrace

From the Writings

The beginning of magnanimity is when man expendeth his wealth on himself, on his family and on the poor among his brethren in his Faith.

Verily, Thou art the Sustainer, the Helper, the Generous, the Bountiful, the Ever-Bestowing.

– Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 156.

OAFNÁN, O thou that hast branched from Mine ancient Stock! My glory and My loving-kindness rest upon thee. How vast is the tabernacle of the Cause of God! It hath overshadowed all the peoples and kindreds of the earth, and will, ere long, gather together the whole of mankind beneath its shelter. Thy day of service is now come. Countless Tablets bear the testimony of the bounties vouchsafed unto thee. Arise for the triumph of My Cause, and, through the power of thine utterance, subdue the hearts of men. Thou must show forth that which will ensure the peace and the well-being of the miserable and the downtrodden. Gird up the loins of thine endeavor, that perchance thou mayest release the captive from his chains, and enable him to attain unto true liberty.

– Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 92.

Nothing that existeth in the world of being hath ever been or will ever be worthy of mention. However, if a person be graciously favoured to offer a pennyworth—nay, even less—in the path of God, this would in His sight be preferable and superior to all the treasures of the earth. It is for this reason that the one true God—exalted be His glory—hath in all His heavenly Scriptures praised those who observe His precepts and bestow their wealth for His sake. Beseech ye God that He may enable everyone to discharge the obligation of Ḥuqúq, inasmuch as the progress and promotion of the Cause of God depend on material means. If His faithful servants could realize how meritorious are benevolent deeds in these days, they would all arise to do that which is meet and seemly. In His hand is the source of authority and He ordaineth as He willeth. He is the Supreme Ruler, the Bountiful, the Equitable, the Revealer, the All-Wise.

– Bahá'u'lláh, from the compilation *Huqúqu'lláh—The Right of God*.

O my God! Let the outpourings of Thy bounty and blessings descend upon homes whose inmates have embraced Thy Faith, as a token of Thy grace and as a mark of loving-kindness from Thy presence. Verily, unsurpassed art Thou in granting forgiveness. Should Thy bounty be withheld from anyone, how could he be reckoned among the followers of the Faith in Thy Day?

Bless me, O my God, and those who will believe in Thy signs on the appointed Day, and such as cherish my love in their hearts—a love which Thou dost instill into them. Verily, Thou art the Lord of righteousness, the Most Exalted.

– The Báb, *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 62-3.

The newly born babe of that Day excels the wisest and most venerable men of this time, and the lowliest and most unlearned of that period shall surpass in understanding the most erudite and accomplished divines of this age.

– The Báb to His disciples, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 94.

Every imperfect soul is self-centred and thinketh only of his own good. But as his thoughts expand a little he will begin to think of the welfare and comfort of his family. If his ideas still more widen, his concern will be the felicity of his fellow citizens; and if still they widen, he will be thinking of the glory of his land and of his race. But when ideas and views reach the utmost degree of expansion and attain the stage of perfection, then will he be interested in the exaltation of humankind. He will then be the well-wisher of all men and the seeker of the weal and prosperity of all lands. This is indicative of perfection.

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 73.

O ye beloved of the Lord! In this sacred Dispensation, conflict and contention are in no wise permitted. Every aggressor deprives himself of God's grace. It is incumbent upon everyone to show the utmost love, rectitude of conduct, straightforwardness and sincere kindness unto all the peoples and kindreds of the world, be they friends or strangers. So intense must be the spirit of love and loving kindness, that the stranger may find himself a friend, the enemy a true brother, no difference whatsoever existing between them.

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 13.

While the children are yet in their infancy feed them from the breast of heavenly grace, foster them in the cradle of all excellence, rear them in the embrace of bounty. Give them the advantage of every useful kind of knowledge. Let them share in every new and rare and wondrous craft and art. Bring them up to work and strive, and accustom them to hardship. Teach them to dedicate their lives to matters of great import, and inspire them to undertake studies that will benefit mankind.

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 136.

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ON THE COVER Participants in an institute campaign in Sooke, B.C. held a "Mystic Night" devotional gathering on New Year's Eve. Photo: Neil MacMillan

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Contents

Universal House of Justice 4

Regarding the aim of the Bahá'í community to promote the oneness of humanity and overcome all obstacles, including ethnic prejudice

Regarding the membership of the Universal House of Justice

Regarding travel to the Holy Land

National Spiritual Assembly 10

Message to unit conventions

Regarding the membership of the National Spiritual Assembly

About this issue 12

From the history of the Faith 13

The spiritual motherhood of May Maxwell

Features 18

Learning to work with groups of families

From across Canada 22

Ḥuqúqu'lláh workshops engage families

Increasing the institutional capacity of Area Teaching Committees

Coherence in the lives of young people entering work

Information 32

Regarding the aim of the Bahá'í community to promote the oneness of humanity and overcome all obstacles, including ethnic prejudice

From the Universal House of Justice to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1 November 2022.

Dearly loved Friends,

The Nine Year Plan is now in motion. The outstanding achievements that you bring to this new stage of the Divine Plan place your community in the very front ranks of the worldwide Bahá'í community. Before you stretches a path of great possibilities, and we are confident that you are primed to surpass all you have to this point attained.

Your country is blessed with remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity. How happy we have been over the years to witness the receptivity of its peoples to the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Yet, alas, your nation has time and again suffered from conflict among some of its peoples. As a part of Congolese society, you are, of course, not immune to the forces that generate and drive conflict. What this demands is vigilance by all the believers in ensuring that divisions, especially those related to ethnicity, do not take root in your community. Such divisions can impede your efforts to develop your community and to foster the spiritual and material progress of your nation. Your duty as Bahá'ís is to act as true champions of the oneness of humankind, and to promote unity in your communities and in the life of your nation. It is about this vital duty that we wish to address you.

Each of the hundreds of ethnic groups in your country has a long history, and each has gradually been shaped and reshaped by encounters with other groups and cultures over periods both of peace and of conflict. Such a pattern is, of course, not unique to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is the story of the peoples of the world, a reality on which the Bahá'í conception of history sheds much light. As a distinct organic unit, humanity has passed through evolutionary stages that are similar to the stages of infancy and childhood in the lives of its

individual members. The divisions and conflicts that have marked relationships among and within various peoples are tendencies of humanity's childhood. Inexorably, however, humanity has been moving forward along the path of its maturation. On this path, it has, from one age to the next, received impetus from successive Divine Revelations sent by God to progressively educate and civilize it. Humanity is now in the concluding period of its turbulent adolescence and is going through a period of transition. Standing at the threshold of a long-awaited coming of age, its needs are no longer served by the ideas and behaviours of prior stages.

Bahá'u'lláh has appeared to humanity in this period of its adolescence, when it is in need of maturation. As you are well aware, He has provided the means for establishing the unity of humankind, the hallmark of a mature world. What will bind the hearts of all people together is the power of the Word of God. That Word has generative power which in every age has provided the means for refining human character and reordering human affairs. The mission of the Bahá'ís is to learn to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in their individual and collective lives and in the life of their society. Through well-ordered efforts and in collaboration with many others who are dedicated to bettering the world, Bahá'ís bring the principles suited to humanity's age of maturity to bear on the conditions of the world's peoples. They strive for the transformation of the inner and outer realities of human life, and for the cultivation of spiritual and social conditions that will give rise to a new kind of people and a new society founded on unity.

Bahá'ís undertake this work with instruments and means that are conducive to creating a unified world. They are ever conscious that unity is not only the goal they seek but the primary means for creating a new and mature society. They thus labour together in "serried lines", "one locked to the next, each supporting his fellows". They are equipped with pure intent, righteous motives, sincere aims, and faithful hearts. They "associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance", with the assurance that "consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord". They strive to rid their actions of

any animosity or hatred and seek always to “hold fast to the cord of kindness and tender mercy”. They are above all cognizant that “the religion of God is for love and unity” and should never be made the cause of enmity or dissension, and that “the means of order” should never become “the cause of confusion”, or “the instrument of union an occasion for discord”.

It is only as a united community that you can thrive as promoters of the oneness of humanity. It is important, then, that you continue to enrich your understanding of how obstacles to unity appear in society. We would like to discuss two such obstacles: the distortion of human identity and the spread of prejudice, in particular, ethnic prejudice.

*

At the heart of the divisions in society today is a crisis of identity. The way people think about who they are and how they see their place in the world determine how they relate to others and what they regard as their individual and collective purpose. For Bahá’ís, it is the Manifestation of God, the Voice of God to the world, who defines human nature and purpose. Bahá’u’lláh describes the purpose of human life as essentially spiritual in nature. An individual’s true self is to be found in the powers of the soul, which has the capacity to know God and to reflect His attributes. The soul has no gender, no ethnicity, no race. God sees no differences among human beings except in relation to the conscious effort of each individual to purify his or her soul and to express its full powers. In God’s sight, all human beings are as one and have the common duty of knowing and worshiping Him and contributing to advancing civilization. This truth is directly related to another—that humanity is one family. A loving Lord has “created all humanity from the same stock”. He has “decreed that all shall belong to the same household”. “Since We have created you all from one same substance”, Bahá’u’lláh has stated, “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.”

The powers of the human soul have throughout history and across the planet been manifested in many forms of custom, knowledge, and culture. This diversity endows the human family with richness. Just as differently coloured flowers enrich a garden, diversity gives society natural beauty and strength. “Consider”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty.” “In like manner,” He adds, “when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection

will be revealed and made manifest.” Unity in diversity, not uniformity, is thus the watchword of Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings.

But consider what a grave obstacle to the unity of the human family is presented by failure to understand the truth of its essential oneness! Any sense of unity that comes from the shared identity of a group becomes the basis of contest with those perceived as “other”. Humanity is split into competing interest groups, many locked in a fight for dominance. Conceptions of conflicting interests inhibit the collective capacity to transform social conditions and address challenges for the benefit of all. In the religious, social, political, and economic spheres of life, conflict driven by narrow self-interest is deemed natural and inevitable. Rivalry between groups harms all, obstructs justice, and suppresses the potentialities of individuals and groups, whose contributions are necessary for the betterment of society.

The responsibility Bahá’ís bear—the work you are carrying out in your localities, clusters, and nation—is to assist all peoples to recognize their shared identity as members of one human family and thus join together in building spiritually and materially prosperous societies that manifest unity in diversity. Every people has a part to play in this enterprise. Each brings the best aspects of their culture to broader social interactions and places them at the service of all, even as they discard aspects uncondusive to the common good. In this light, the diversity of ethnic origins and traditions that distinguish the peoples of your country is a treasure that enriches your nation and the world. What a blessing is theirs—each and all—when they widen their loyalty to embrace the best interests of their entire nation and the whole of humanity so that they can, as members of one family, prosper and flourish.

*

The crisis of identity is directly related to the spread of prejudice. Today, prejudices of all sorts are surging around the world, infecting the consciousness of millions and despoiling them of their energies. They are polarizing societies at a time when unity is most vital to resolving local, national, and global challenges that seem intractable.

The statements in the writings of the Faith about the harm that prejudice inflicts on individuals and on society are most emphatic. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated that human beings are degraded when they become captives of their own illusions and suppositions. Prejudice stains the human spirit, debases both its perpetrator and its victim, obscures perception and understanding, and prevents the achievement of that lofty standard of justice proclaimed in the writings to “see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others,” and to “know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has also made it clear that prejudice is “destructive of the human edifice”, “a

destroyer of the foundations of the world of humanity”, and the cause of “the world’s sickness”. Until prejudice is removed, “the world of humanity will not and cannot attain peace, prosperity and composure”. “The world of humanity cannot be saved from the darkness of nature and cannot attain illumination except through the abandonment of prejudices and the acquisition of the morals of the Kingdom.”

Our particular concern here, as we have stated, is ethnic prejudice. To distrust, fear, hate, or discriminate against another person or a whole group on the basis of ethnicity is a spiritual disease. It is also a scourge that infects social structures and causes instability. In this light, eradicating ethnic prejudice requires transformation at the level of both the individual and the social environment. “We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us”, Shoghi Effendi stated in a letter written on his behalf, “and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.”

For the individual, striving to be free from ethnic prejudice is a profound spiritual duty that no one who claims to be a loyal follower of Bahá’u’lláh can neglect. To discriminate against anyone because of ethnicity grievously violates the spirit that animates the Faith. “If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated,” Shoghi Effendi stated, “it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favour of the minority”. Whatever the strength of public opinion, a Bahá’í should never act in a way that would alienate anyone. “Let them see no one as their enemy, or as wishing them ill,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines.”

An individual’s efforts in this respect must begin with earnest striving to develop attributes of the soul such as love, truthfulness, kindness, justice, and generosity; to purify the heart of selfishness, envy, and hate; and to align the mind with Bahá’u’lláh’s principles of unity. By striving to rid his or her thoughts, words, and actions of ethnic bias, an individual upholds his or her own nobility and the nobility of all of God’s children. Freedom from prejudice must then manifest itself in all aspects of an individual’s life—in private and public life, in the Bahá’í community, and in the wider society. The home environment must be free of attitudes, tendencies, expressions, and associations that give room for prejudice.

In the Bahá’í community, God forbid that a loyal believer’s participation in the electoral processes of the Faith be swayed by narrow ethnic interests or that service on committees, agencies, and institutions be tainted by partiality and favouritism. In society, a believer’s freedom from prejudice must be evident in all the social spaces he or she enters—the school, the workplace, the cultural association, the professional organization. A believer’s duty at all times is to demonstrate the unifying power of Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings by associating with diverse peoples with a spacious heart, an all-embracing love, and a spirit of true friendship. As was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s injunction, “Let those who meet you know, without your proclaiming the fact, that you are indeed a Bahá’í.”

As for the social environment, ethnic prejudice can pervade many aspects of collective life and, at its worst, be manifest in recurring cycles of violent conflict. Ethnic

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prejudice is often driven or exacerbated by prevalent negative social factors, and the friends must seek to obtain a mature understanding of these factors if they are to contribute meaningfully to eradicating its effects. Consider, for instance, the effects of ignorance and how it blinds people to the truths that all human beings share the same spiritual essence, are members of one human family, and are inhabitants of one common homeland. Where people are uninformed of the historical processes that have shaped their society, they can tenaciously cling to divisive identities that may have had their roots in an oppressive past. Political partitions between or within countries, which are but human inventions, become bases for the irrational distrust and fear of other groups. Consider also the consequences of a tendency to blindly imitate and uncritically perpetuate

divisive ways of thinking, speaking, and relating. Skewed historical accounts transmitted by one generation to the next are employed to propagate narrow notions of belonging, to advance claims of exceptionalism, to stir old rivalries, or to stress past events that evoke a sense of victimhood. Language is flippantly used to entrench negative stereotypes that stigmatize and malign others.

Consider as well how at the service of narrow self-interest—whether political or economic—divisions are stoked, rivalries started, and conflicts sustained, how, in essence, ethnicity is employed as an instrument in pursuit of political power and economic advantage. Consider, too, how materialism widens the extremes of wealth and poverty and how economic injustice produces rifts that intensify prejudice, even among similarly marginalized peoples. Competition for limited resources sullies personal and collective motives and generates hostilities and jealousies that embitter relationships.

These are among the factors that create social environments in which ethnic prejudice proliferates. All well-meaning people have a duty to increase their consciousness of such factors and to strengthen their capacity to counteract them. The influence of culture also has to be borne in mind. Each culture has many salutary elements that are conducive to promoting unity in diversity, which must be reinforced, as well as negative aspects that contribute to breeding prejudice, which must be gradually abandoned. Meaningful interactions among people hailing from different human groups foster an environment within which advances in culture can occur. To retain and promote customs and traditions that generate animosity is a grave obstacle to the betterment of society. A Bahá'í community is robbed of its ability to promote unity in diversity if the friends, knowingly or unknowingly, reproduce in their interactions and their association with society the same tendencies that foment prejudice.

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What is the work before you then? How are you to strengthen patterns of interaction that promote unity in diversity and eliminate prevalent social factors that drive prejudice? How is this objective related to your current efforts to build vibrant communities and, more broadly, to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of your society?

Shoghi Effendi called on the friends to “scale nobler heights of heroism as humanity plunges into greater depths of despair, degradation, dissension and distress”. The global Plans seek to build capacity in every human group to counter negative social forces by contributing to social well-being through the application of the teachings of the Faith. As the Plans steadily unfold, their processes will gradually realize their potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another and for the perpetuation of conflict and contention. This is central to the work you are carrying out within your own communities. Your efforts in the fields of community building, social action, and public discourse represent ways of awakening the energies latent in the human soul and channelling them towards the betterment of society.

Your endeavours to reach different social groups with the message of the Faith foster profound interethnic and intercultural association. They make cooperation and mutual assistance among people of many backgrounds a distinctive characteristic of Bahá'í community life. You seek, in this, to demonstrate that vital Bahá'í attitude of being truly outward looking, sincerely open to all, and resolutely inclusive. Your attention to strengthening capacity to study the writings of the Faith enables ever-larger numbers to forge relationships that reflect Bahá'í standards and principles. This reinforces in all participants the desire and ability to offer acts of disinterested service to society and to purify their motives as they learn to sacrifice for the progress and well-being of all. Your dedication to a mode of operation centred

on ongoing study, consultation, action, and reflection helps to free individuals and communities from blind imitation and to anchor unfolding efforts in learning to establish “new bases for human happiness”. The energies you give to the spiritual education of children and the spiritual empowerment of junior youth help the younger generations lay the foundations of a noble character, shield them from the taint of prejudice, and incline their burgeoning powers towards service to society. The focus you place on the family transforms that fundamental unit of society into a space where young people can imbibe the spirit of unity and shun all dispositions that breed division. Your endeavours to build capacity for applying spiritual principles and scientific knowledge to the improvement of social and economic conditions help populations address economic injustice through unified action and without resort to conflict. Your contributions in multiple spaces where conversations on various social problems occur strengthen collective capacity for elevated dialogue and help diverse actors achieve unity of thought and action by drawing on insights from the Bahá'í teachings and experience. The centrality you give to consultation increases capacity for collective investigation of truth, frees decision-making processes from contest and adversarial tendencies, and enables people from diverse backgrounds to transcend differences and harmonize perspectives. The electoral and administrative processes you foster shape thought and conduct that free leadership and governance from self-interest and the associated corruption. By striving to broaden the base of participation in all aspects of the life of your communities, you cultivate conditions in which individuals from various social groups honour their common humanity, recognize their mutual interests, and envision their shared future. Such participation strengthens social bonds as souls serve side by side for the betterment of society. Whether large or small, your community-building efforts are directed at raising the nucleus and pattern of a new World Order by establishing the kind of relationships called for by Bahá'u'lláh. And emerging among all who are labouring together is a language that elevates all and maligns none, a language with the potency to bind hearts with the indissoluble bond of love and the power to unite minds in common pursuit of a society that can truly be as a garden bursting with flowers of every form, every colour, every fragrance. It is in all these ways that you are creating new communities that can serve as a model and relationships that enable you to act as leaven in the life of your nation.

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Beloved friends in that great African nation! We know that the conditions of societal conflict under which you labour are at times disruptive and dispiriting. Your brothers and sisters in many other lands also face similar conditions. Though it may sometimes appear as if hope for a truly united society grows dimmer day after day as conflicts borne of prejudice recur and resurge, your mission must remain ever clear, your outlook ever



Eagle statue near the entrance to the Mansion of Bahjí. Photo: Bahá'í International Community

confident, your dedication ever firm. You possess the means for unifying thousands upon thousands of hearts. You who are raising the song of unity in diversity must be, in word and deed, its very emblems. If your actions mirror the tendencies widespread in society, if you are negligent of the fundamentals of your belief, what then will be left? The salt will have lost its savour. Set aside all obstacles, mental and otherwise, and thus deliver to a loving Lord during these nine years a true victory for the oneness of humanity.

In closing, we now address the youth: The future is in your hands. Make no mistake, you are raising an edifice that will be a haven for your peoples upon the foundations your mothers and your fathers have laid. Continued progress will depend on your dedication to building true unity and on the extent to which you strengthen your practice of those spiritual disciplines enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh that help you polish the mirrors of your hearts to reflect the attributes of God. We hope that you will foster among yourselves enduring spiritual bonds that resist the forces of prejudice. Let the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá be your guide—how He lived His life as a daily sacrifice to the cause of the oneness of humanity, how He embraced with selfless love all people who crossed His path, how He saw reflected in each soul the image of a loving God. So, too, are you to see all your compatriots. “In this illumined

age”, He stated, “that which is confirmed is the oneness of the world of humanity. Every soul who serveth this oneness will undoubtedly be assisted and confirmed.” We cherish the hope that in your efforts to find life partners you will resist every influence to give primacy to ethnicity, that you will build homes in which every soul would be welcome, and that you will raise children who will become champions of oneness. We are confident that in the life of your nation, you will shine as well-wishers of all, as servants of all, as unifiers of all. Let your deeds write the next chapter of your country's history, one that is free of prejudice and conflict. Thus will your peoples, each as a powerful tributary, stream into one mighty river, whose surging waters will gush forth into the ocean of one human family.

We will supplicate the Blessed Beauty at the Sacred Threshold of His Shrine that He may bind the peoples of your much cherished nation ever more firmly in love.

– The Universal House of Justice

Regarding the membership of the Universal House of Justice

To all National Spiritual Assemblies,
7 November 2022.

Beloved Friends,

In view of the heavy burden of work borne by members of the Universal House of Justice, Mr. Stephen Birkland and Mr. Stephen Hall have, after prayerful consideration as to the best interests of the Cause and in light of their advanced ages, requested permission to relinquish their membership on the Universal House of Justice in accordance with Article V.2.(c) of its Constitution.

The House of Justice has, with deep regret, accepted the resignation of these dearly loved members, who were first elected to the Body in 2010. They will continue to serve on the institution until the date of the completion of the election of the Universal House of Justice at the Thirteenth International Bahá'í Convention to be held at Riḍván 2023.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

– The Universal House of Justice

Regarding travel to the Holy Land

To all National Spiritual Assemblies,
1 January 2023.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

In light of the security situation in the region and the related experience of some visitors, the Universal House of Justice has asked us to convey the following.

It is a long-standing policy of the Bahá'í World Centre that believers who reside completely or for at least part of the year in Iran, regardless of their nationality, may not come to the Holy Land for a brief visit or pilgrimage. Now, given the heightened security stance of governments in this region, it has become necessary, for a period of time, to ask all Bahá'ís who have resided in or visited the cradle of the Faith, even briefly, not to come to Israel for any reason until at least five years have elapsed since their last visit to Iran. Kindly inform the friends in your

community about this development in a manner you deem appropriate.

The disruption and disappointment that some friends will, no doubt, experience as a result of this necessary step are deeply regretted, and it is earnestly hoped that this restriction can be lifted before too long. Prospective pilgrims and brief visitors who have been in Iran in the last five years are asked to contact the Department of Pilgrimage to reschedule their visits.

As you can imagine, these restrictions have implications not only for those who have already visited Iran, but also for any friends who may be planning to visit the cradle of the Faith in the near future, who would face the same constraint upon their return.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

– Department of the Secretariat

Message to unit conventions

To the Bahá'ís of Canada, 6 February 2023.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

As you prepare to gather at the unit conventions across the country, the National Spiritual Assembly extends loving greetings to each of you. The sweetness of being in each other's presence is still new in many parts of the country, and our hearts rejoice to think of you coming together, voting for the delegates to this year's National Convention, and consulting about the progress of the Cause.

At Naw-Rúz 2020, a few short weeks into the global health crisis, the Universal House of Justice wrote to the Bahá'ís of the world: "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."

In the weeks and months that followed, waves of suffering engulfed humanity. To the fears and uncertainty of the pandemic were added the voices of those long oppressed by racism, poverty and the threat of war. In November 2020, the House of Justice referred to "a mounting realization on the part of the world's people that the decades ahead are set to bring with them challenges among the most daunting that the human family has ever had to face"¹ of which the global health crisis is but one. It was "against this background of furious storms lashing humanity that the ark of the Cause"² embarked on a series of Plans whose central aim is to release the society-building powers of the Faith in ever greater measures.

In early spring last year, Canada began to emerge on the other side of the pandemic. The Nine Year Plan was launched with global conferences that celebrated the oneness of humanity and engaged more than 30,000 souls in Canada in a conversation shaped by the materials provided by the Universal House of Justice. Now, with the first year of the Plan almost concluded and the severe restrictions of years past behind us, we invite you to consult together about how to deepen and extend this transformative conversation. In particular, we urge your reflection on what is needed to strengthen a culture of home visits where meaningful conversations unfold, ties of spiritual kinship are forged, a sense of community is strengthened, faith is deepened, and plans are made.

In particular, we urge your reflection on what is needed to strengthen a culture of home visits where meaningful conversations unfold, ties of spiritual kinship are forged, a sense of community is strengthened, faith is deepened, and plans are made.

Your consultation will undoubtedly have in mind the many effects of the isolation of the last three years, and the radical change to patterns of work and study, to social and family life. Even the normal, loving custom of visiting each other when sick, required adjustment during this period. What will it take to overcome the pull of the habits of isolation, developed out of necessity but for the most part no longer required? What elements of current culture—habits of thought and behaviour—may be obstacles to overcome? What elements are strengths to draw on and learn from?

The introductory comments in Book 2 of the sequence of courses of the Ruhi Institute, "Some Thoughts for the Tutor", explore the role of the training institute in building capabilities that enable us to contribute to meaningful and uplifting conversation. "In a world in which powerful forces are tearing communal bonds asunder, the practice of visiting friends and neighbors in their homes to explore themes central to the life of society can, if it becomes a prominent feature of culture, remedy

some of the ills engendered by increasing isolation. The ties of fellowship thus created, the unit suggests, serve to fortify the process of building vibrant and harmonious communities."

Indeed, not only Book 2, but each of the books in the sequence seeks to build this capacity for meaningful conversation on themes of universal importance. Each offers to the participant a way to drink deep of the

¹ The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world, 25 November 2020.

² Ibid

Word of God, kindle the fire of His love and share it with others. Each includes some practice that involves conversation, binds souls together and draws them closer to Bahá'u'lláh. Referring to the illustrative example of a conversation in Book 6, the House of Justice said in its 2010 Ridván message: "To the extent that the conversation continues beyond the initial encounter and veritable friendships are formed, a direct teaching effort of this kind can become a catalyst for an enduring process of spiritual transformation." In another reference, "Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity's age of maturity. You are channels for this divine love; let it flow through you to all who cross your path."³ In what ways will an orientation to teaching the Cause, and

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

a strong culture of visiting each other in our homes, help realize the full power of these conversations as channels for the love of God? What is needed for every aspect of a vibrant community life to benefit from such a culture? How might the administrative affairs of the Cause be affected by a regular, natural pattern of visiting each other?

Dear friends, in closing we turn to another subject. In its 30 December 2021 message, the Universal House of Justice stated that as the number of Bahá'ís in a locality grows and the community's capacity for managing complexity increases, "the case for implementing a two-stage electoral process becomes commensurately stronger." We are delighted to share with you that the Vancouver community has been chosen to join the Toronto and Ottawa communities in electing their Local Spiritual Assembly in a two-stage election this Ridván.

We look eagerly forward to hearing the insights that emerge from your discussions. You are in our constant, ardent prayers.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

– National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

Regarding the membership of the National Spiritual Assembly

To all Local Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá'í Councils, and Registered Groups,
24 February 2023.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Recently, two members of the National Spiritual Assembly, Ms. Deloria Bighorn and Ms. Élizabeth Wright, asked to be permitted to relinquish their membership on the National Assembly, owing to the effects of advancing years and the increasing demands of service.

Having studied guidance, and knowing that these requests have been made with the best interests of the Cause at heart, the Assembly has agreed to release Ms. Bighorn and Ms. Wright from membership with deep regret, love, and gratitude for their contributions to this institution. They will continue to serve until the election of the new National Spiritual Assembly at the National Convention, to be held 19-22 May this year owing to the International Convention at Ridván.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

– National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

About this issue

Friends across the country are continuing their study of the 30 December 2021 message, in which the Universal House of Justice lays out the mandate for the Nine Year Plan—the first year of which will soon draw to a close. Paragraphs 11 and 12, under the subheading “Learning from the most advanced clusters,” were a particular focus for friends serving in centres of intense activity as well as cluster agencies and institutions.

In paragraph 11, the House of Justice describes “the characteristics of a cluster where the friends have passed the third milestone along the continuum of growth,” noting, “To have come this far implies intense activity occurring in specific neighbourhoods or villages, but also concerted effort being made by the generality of the believers living across the cluster—in other words, a rising spirit of universal participation in the work of community building...It entails families and individual believers working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus.”

The House of Justice continues its description in paragraph 12, writing, “Within each centre of intense activity, collaborative arrangements emerge among groups of families, who organize community-building activities among themselves with a view to widening the embrace of such activities to many nearby households; an informal network of friends provides encouragement and support to the endeavours under way.”

This issue, titled *Widening the embrace*, is inspired by these paragraphs and loosely based around the theme of families. The feature article is based on a conversation during which a handful of friends working to engage entire families in Montreal, Que., Nanaimo, B.C., and Ottawa, Ont., share insights into the nature of this work. Sleepaway camps for families allow each member to progress in their study of institute materials, participate in recreational activities, and deepen friendships.

For the “From the History” section, we turned to the volumes *The Maxwells of Montreal*, by Violette Nakhjavani, to string together a series of excerpts that make up the article “The spiritual motherhood of May Maxwell.” This article looks at how a mother who was frequently away from her daughter facilitated her spiritual

education with excellence. It draws our attention to the spiritual dimensions of motherhood, highlighting how she instructed her child with a language mined from teaching the Cause and the example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Also in this issue is an article titled “Increasing the institutional capacity of Area Teaching Committees,” that sheds light on the functioning of Area Teaching Committees in two of Canada’s most advanced clusters: Toronto and Vancouver. As complexity has increased in response to the demands of growth, particularly as more friends arise to participate in the community-building process, these Committees have taken on new challenges.

As youth mature into adults, they must make decisions regarding their studies, work, and family life. The article “Coherence in the lives of young people entering work,” looks at recent guidance around the challenges that youth face and the nature of the support they require as they strive to develop capacities in light of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. It is the first in a series of articles on this topic, which will later share the experiences of several youth who have recently entered their working lives, and are, along with their peers, trying to apply the guidance of the House of Justice.

Living a coherent life also extends to one’s financial affairs. The issue also contains an article, “Huqúqu’lláh workshops engage families,” about how a series of workshops offered by the Board of Trustees of Huqúqu’lláh in Canada are involving groups of families in conversations about how the spiritual and material aspects of their lives can be harmonized. In many cases, this is increasing family unity and fostering collective action toward the goals of the Nine Year Plan.

Clearly, there is much to study and understand regarding the Nine Year Plan, and it is envisioned that many more articles will be generated as Bahá’ís and their friends across Canada “alive to the greatness of this Day and the significance of their actions, strive for the emergence of a society shaped by the divine teachings.”¹

1 From the Universal House of Justice to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 30 December 2021.

Submitting stories to *Bahá’í Canada*

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

The spiritual motherhood of May Maxwell

Through a series of excerpts from the volumes *The Maxwells of Montreal*, by Violette Nakhjavani, the following article considers what can be gleaned from the example of May Maxwell as a mother.



May Maxwell with her daughter Mary.

Photo: Bahá'í International Community

It is difficult to think of another Bahá'í family that has been explored in such intimate detail than the Maxwell family in the two volumes *The Maxwells of Montreal*, by Violette Nakhjavani, published in 2011. Although the books focus on all three members of the family¹, “bonded in their love for the Covenant and for each other,”² this article considers what can be gleaned from considering the example of May Maxwell, “the central pivot of this wonderful triad,”³ as a mother, a role

closely associated with her work as a prolific teacher of the Cause.

Once May Maxwell became pregnant, she wrote to her father describing it as a gift, like everything in her life, from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.⁴ Once she gave birth, she received a Tablet from Him blessing Mary to be the first child of the West with both a spiritual and physical mother. Part of this Tablet reads, “In the garden of existence a rose hath bloomed with the utmost freshness and beauty. Educate her according to the divine precepts that she may become a true Bahá'í, and endeavour with all thy heart that she may be born of the Holy Spirit.”⁵

1 May Maxwell, William Sutherland Maxwell and their daughter Mary Maxwell, who, after her marriage to Shoghi Effendi was given the name Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum.

2 Nakhjavani, Violette. *The Maxwells of Montreal: Early Years 1870-1922*, Vol. 1, George Ronald, 2011. p. vii

3 Vol. 1, p. vii.

4 Vol. 1, p. 265.

5 Vol. 1, p. 272.

“...however lonely you may have often been, you never suffered alone, because I was always with you, I felt for you more deeply than you can ever realize, and it is out of the pangs of this mighty motherlove that my spiritual motherhood to you has been born.”

Nakhjavani, Violette. *The Maxwells of Montreal: Early Years 1870-1922*, Vol. 1, George Ronald, 2011. p. 342.

In sharing this Tablet with a friend, May Maxwell declares, “How much more perfect I shall have to become before I can be worthy to follow this command.”⁶ However, as Nakhjavani writes, “As she moved into this new phase of life, May did not slacken her Bahá’í activities. In fact, it would seem that her Bahá’í activities had been transformed by her new phase of life. She appears to have experienced something of an epiphany; even the way she taught the Faith was metamorphosed by her becoming a mother.”⁷

Soon after giving birth—with her wet nurse and baby in tow—May left for New Brunswick, where she addressed an audience of 100 men about the Cause. She wrote to Sutherland, “[T]he thing I have dreamed of for years—longed for and prayed for was at last realized...out of the fiery suffering and supreme effort, the greatest I ever made in His Path—was born a new power—the dawn of that woman that is to be...”⁸ The sacrifice of a lower condition for a higher one also held true in her role as a mother. Indeed, the theme of human and spiritual motherhood runs through the volumes, as May Maxwell reflects that in her case, the former had to be sacrificed for the latter.

In a letter to Mary later in her life, May Maxwell writes: “Some day when you are married and know the sweetness and pain of motherhood, you will realize more fully that however often I have been compelled to leave you since you were a little child, for the sake of this great Cause in which we are united; and however lonely you may have often been, you never suffered alone, because I was always with you, I felt for you more deeply than you can ever realize, and it is out of the pangs of this mighty motherlove that my spiritual motherhood to you has been born.”⁹

Throughout Mary’s childhood, May Maxwell continued her correspondence with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who, Nakhjavani paraphrases, directed her “to distinguish between the important and the most important, to keep her focus not only on the well-being of her child but also on the teaching and expansion of the Cause of God.” In the same Tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares, “Now is the time to work with all thy heart and soul, to render service to the Kingdom, endeavour to have many spiritual children, and establish a heavenly household. For children of the spirit are dearer than physical children.”¹⁰

Mary was both her physical and spiritual child. As Nakhjavani writes, “Instead of feeling guilty about her Bahá’í services and being torn between these and her maternal duties, May tried to implicate little Mary in her journeys, to involve her in everything she did. She tried to exemplify for the child what it meant to be a follower of Bahá’u’lláh. She molded her character and instilled in her a deep commitment to the Cause by naming and defining her activities as Bahá’í.”¹¹

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá undertook his historic journey across North America, May Maxwell was among the first to greet him in New York. Nakhjavani writes, “Amatu’l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm often told the story about one of her mother’s visits to New York during ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s stay in that city. When she arrived, the Master asked her how her child was, and where she was, for May had not come into His presence with Mary. She answered that as the little one was not feeling well that day, she had left her with her nurse in the hotel room.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá looked at her in surprise.

‘Your child is ill and you did not bring her to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá?’ He asked.

May instantly returned to the hotel and returned with her child. The Master looked at her lovingly and gave May an orange.

‘Give her this and she will be healed,’ He said.¹²

Afterward, when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited Montreal, He stayed three days at the Maxwell home. Mary was only two years old. Later, Rúhíyyih Khánúm would recount several memories of this potent time, demonstrating the Master’s tenderness towards her. It seems almost every Tablet and cable ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed to May Maxwell closed with the instruction to kiss her daughter on His behalf. This love was reciprocated by Mary, as demonstrated in a note added to the end of one of her mother’s letters to Him, two years after His visit: “Tell ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that I love Him very much, and when my Daddy comes home I am going to ask him to take us to see Abdul Baha!”¹³

Due to her many responsibilities for the Cause, May Maxwell was away from her family frequently and for months at a time, even after the birth of her daughter.

6 Vol. 1, p. 270.

7 Vol. 1, p. 270.

8 Vol. 1, p. 271.

9 Vol. 1, p. 342.

10 Vol. 1, p. 272.

11 Vol. 1, p. 345.

12 Vol. 1, p. 278.

13 Vol. 1, p. 312.

Her ill health often delayed her return to her family. In fact, much of what we know about their mother-daughter relationship can be attributed to the many letters sent between them—a necessity due to the distance. The earliest surviving letter was from when Mary was not yet three. Nakhjavani explains, “May sent her letters through the intermediary of the governess long before Mary could read or write. Indeed, she may have done this to give the child an incentive to read and write.”¹⁴ These letters demonstrate how, despite this distance, May Maxwell facilitated the education—spiritual, intellectual and social—of her daughter.

In one excerpt from a letter from mother to daughter, when Mary was eight years old, May describes her teaching work: “Soon I am going to travel in Canada for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá - to tell all the people how God has sent His Messenger into the world today to save the world from darkness and destruction and bring all the people into the light, so that they may know God and love God, and serve God, and everyone be good and loving and happy. So you must pray for me - that I may help all the people by teaching them about the Blessed Báb, the glorious Bahá’u’lláh, and Our Beloved ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.”¹⁵

Her orientation toward spiritual motherhood was not by any means an aloofness to the physical and emotional needs of children. In fact, motherhood made May Maxwell more acutely aware of their requirements and vulnerabilities. When Mary was young, she began classes for mothers about the care of babies,¹⁶ and helped establish a Milk Depot, directly combating infant mortality rates in Montreal.¹⁷ In her attempts to provide a suitable education to her young daughter, she also employed a governess to help her establish one of the earliest Montessori schools of Canada in the Maxwell home.¹⁸

Mary’s intellectual growth was also prioritized, although by Rúhíyyih Khánúm’s own later admission her schooling was somewhat “irregular and unorthodox.”¹⁹ Throughout her childhood, she attended a number of schools on and off and, as Nakhjavani writes, much of her education was carried out at home: “A summary count indicates at least ten governesses were engaged by the Maxwell family between 1914 and 1927.” She adds, “[I]t might be well to remember that an only child, accustomed to private governesses and experimental methods of education, might not have readily adapted to a traditional curriculum anyway.”²⁰

May Maxwell taught her daughter to have a sound moral character. As Nakhjavani explains, “May was attuned to her daughter’s sensibilities; she knew all about her little

childish loves and hates; she was aware of her strengths and weaknesses of character. And as a mother she had to find ways of encouraging the former, gently and lovingly, even as she curbed the latter, calmly and firmly. She had to give her daughter the benefit of the doubt without indulging her egoism. It was not an easy balance to achieve. The only standard she had, the only measuring rod she could use to establish the lines of demarcation between justice and mercy, reward and punishment, was that set by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. May was always reminding her daughter of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.”²¹

For example, soon after Mary Maxwell, aged eight, unveiled ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet to Canada²² during a ceremony in New York, her mother wrote to her, “My darling, I feel that more and more every day you are becoming a real Bahá’í, a true Bahá’í—which means that the deep love for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is in your heart and you show this love to everyone around you, by being so kind and sweet, and doing everything to make others happy.”²³

There was also a balance of liberty and self-discipline in Mary Maxwell’s upbringing. Later in life, Rúhíyyih Khánúm described her mother’s “rigorous technique of spiritual accounting,” which involved an infrequent, but thorough, matter-of-fact discussion about her shortcomings.²⁴ Rúhíyyih Khánúm later wrote, “This manner of scolding—if one could call it such, was an indication of her profound ability as a teacher. She reached the inmost soul. She made you face up to your own weaknesses, a thing most of us abhor doing and indeed many of us never do at all. After it was over no trace of it remained. She would kiss me and we would go do something else—ten to one something kind and pleasant to take away the taste of the bitter pill!”²⁵

Her mother even exploited Mary’s love of animals, as she was fond of her many and diverse pets, in the interests of her moral and spiritual protection. When Mary was about 12 years old, her mother wrote to her about the importance of friendships and their influence on an individual, using the analogy of how bringing a well-bred dog who had been treated with kindness into contact with a street dog who had been treated poorly may produce a negative result on the former.²⁶

Being away from her daughter did not take away from their strong emotional bond, or from her involvement in and direction of the day-to-day material aspects of her life. As May approached the age of maturity, there was a constant stream of practical advice that poured forth from May’s letters—from the subject of sleep and physical exercise to instructions on social etiquette and acting as hostess, money management and shopping,

14 Vol. 1, p. 320.

15 Vol. 1, p. 345.

16 Vol. 1, p. 274.

17 Vol. 1, p. 273.

18 Vol. 1, p. 319.

19 Vol. 2, p. 29.

20 Vol. 1, p. 353.

21 Vol. 1, p. 347-8.

22 This was part of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Tablets of the Divine Plan*—14 letters written between March 1916 and March 1917 to the Bahá’is of the United States and Canada.

23 Vol. 1, p. 348.

24 Vol. 1, p. 361.

25 Vol. 1, p. 362.

26 Vol. 1, p. 358.

to recommendations on haircuts. The spiritual was in harmony with the material as Mary was equipped with practical knowledge and skills.²⁷

When Mary reached the age of maturity at 15, May Maxwell encouraged her to go on pilgrimage without her parents, albeit with Juliet Thompson and Daisy Smythe as chaperones. Nakhjavani writes that this was to ensure that Mary forged an independent relationship with the Covenant. On her way to the Holy Land, however, she contracted influenza, and was hospitalized in Port Said, Egypt. This intensely worried both her parents, particularly her mother, who was at that time traveling in the opposite direction.²⁸

She wrote to her daughter, "It was at that great moment of crisis, Mary, when my mother's heart so wrung with love and anxiety for you that I realized as never before how the hopes of the dear Master have been realized and that I have learned to sacrifice my human motherhood for my spiritual motherhood to you..."²⁹ Once recovered, this pilgrimage proved to be a turning point in terms of Mary's independence and maturity. In a letter to Sutherland, May wrote, "Everyone speaks of the extraordinary change in Mary since her trip to Haifa and the progress she has made and we must do everything in our power to cherish this exquisite flower of spirituality that is just blooming in her heart which is best done by showing her the utmost love at all times for that is the only all-conquering power."³⁰

Later, in a letter to Juliet Thompson, May Maxwell wrote, "You know the Master told me that I should become Mary's spiritual mother and that then I would find a great joy and the transition from my human motherhood to this new relationship has been going on ever since Mary and I were in Haifa³¹ and my human motherhood was so deep and strong that that transition was intense and painful at times but in the past year it has been consummating very rapidly and now since her return we stand in a total and new, unique and profoundly mystical relation to one another. Of course I know and have realized that she is as the stars above me, nevertheless through the bounty of those inner ties I am privileged to be eternally related to her."³²

In many ways, May Maxwell guided a generation of Bahá'í youth. Nakhjavani writes, "Although Mary was an only child and uniquely loved by her mother, she had to share her with all her other spiritual children. She was only one of the many souls who were able to pour out their hearts to May Maxwell. There were moments when she even expressed a little frustration at not having her mother to herself."³³ May's love was not restrained by such physical

As she entered her 20s, Mary was often her mother's closest collaborator in teaching the Faith.

conditions, however. In a letter to Lucienne Migette, one of her spiritual daughters, she wrote, "You and my dear daughter and Marion Holley in America are like three jewels in my heart, each one a divine pearl which radiates a celestial light through the spaces of visible and invisible worlds, that I cannot express to you... I hold you to my heart, and thus united under the wing of the Guardian, we challenge the world."³⁴

As she matured, May also encouraged Mary to come "under the wing of the Guardian," and write to him, "in all matters of personal interest and concern."³⁵ In November 1926, Mary wrote her first letter to him, asking for guidance on which subjects to study in school. This correspondence continued over the years, as he encouraged her teaching work and studies, and at one point she even wrote to him about her interest in learning to fly an airplane.³⁶

As she entered her 20s, Mary was often her mother's closest collaborator in teaching the Faith. As early as 1929, they embarked on a teaching trip for three weeks.³⁷ Back in Montreal, Mary would often meet new friends and introduce them to her mother after she had taken the conversation as far as she could.³⁸ In one letter she urged her mother to hurry home to help with a certain seeker declaring, "I can't manage him much longer!"³⁹ They also worked together on the issue of race unity which was encouraged by the Guardian.⁴⁰

By the time she was 25, Mary undertook an independent teaching trip in Germany, learning the language and further cementing her capacities as a teacher of the Cause. Writing to her mother, she said, "In fact Mother these last few months I can truly say I am living an entirely different life. First the teaching and talking in German. Then actually being called upon to give out what I have learned almost exclusively through you! to others! Then a somewhat mystical life seems to be growing. I mean I have dreams so often that guide and help me! It is astonishing."⁴¹

However there was also an incident of great sorrow for Mary during her time in Germany. In a tragic event,

27 Vol. 2, p. 6-7.

28 Vol. 2, p. 60-5.

29 Vol. 2, p. 64.

30 Vol. 2, p. 69.

31 This references a previous trip to Haifa, which mother and daughter took together.

32 Vol. 2, p. 69-70.

33 Vol. 2, p. 137.

34 Vol. 2, p. 250.

35 Vol. 2, p. 134.

36 Vol. 2, p. 137.

37 Vol. 2, p. 138.

38 Vol. 2, p. 142.

39 Vol. 2, p. 143.

40 Vol. 2, p. 184.

41 Vol. 2, p. 233.

one of her friends died in an avalanche while out climbing in the mountains. Sometime after, May was well enough to travel to Brussels, where she reunited with her daughter. From there, she wrote to Sutherland about Mary, demonstrating a depth of understanding of her needs, even as an adult: “You will be interested to know, dearest, that a couple of days ago I had a very deep talk with Mary. As I wrote you before, she has greatly developed, is much more of a woman and much more selfless than ever before, nevertheless she constantly gives me the impression of a person who has felt too much, suffered too much and whose nervous system, or sensitive brain, has suffered too great a shock. She has less power of concentration, that is, in the casual things of every-day life, although fully as much concentration when she writes or really converses, as she ever had before. Something of her girlish joyousness is overcast although she does not seem aware of it, and after our long conversation she said this, ‘Mother, I think too much, especially that awful shock in the Zugspitze, and I simply cannot get back the zest of life, the spontaneity I once had.’

I feel, Daddy, that you as her father whom she so devotedly loves, and she speaks of you constantly with great longing, should know just Mary’s state of mind. She does not want to return to America, but if she could visit Haifa in the fall such new creative energies would flow into her, such joyous enthusiasm, such peace and assurance as will wipe away all her sorrows and she will be ready to take up her life wherever her fate may be cast.”⁴²

The two of them soon spent the summer of 1936 in Germany, consolidating Mary’s teaching work and educating the Bahá’í community about the Administrative Order. Nakhjavani writes, “How wonderful it must have been for the mother to accompany the daughter again, this time to meet the souls Mary had befriended, to see how warmly she was greeted, and above all to hear their enthusiastic reception of her services and her talk, delivered, as Mary wrote in a report of her work in Germany in ‘an incorrect but very sincere German, which all the friends accepted in the spirit in which it was given and overlooked the many mistakes.’”⁴³

In the winter of 1937, when Mary was 26 years old, mother and daughter undertook what would become an historic pilgrimage to Haifa. May had been encouraging her husband to come along with them, but he was busy with work. Sometime after their arrival in the Holy Land, she urgently cabled him to come, declaring that it was in connection to their daughter’s future happiness.⁴⁴ A few months later, the Guardian and Mary Maxwell, afterward known as Amat’l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, were married on March 24, 1937.

Not much is known about the emotions surrounding this time, however on that day she wrote a letter to her parents:

42 Vol. 2, p. 238.

43 Vol. 2, p. 240.

44 Vol. 2, p. 260.



May and Mary Maxwell in Alexandria, Egypt, 1923.

Photo: Bahá’í International Community

“My dearest, dearest ones,

On this most glorious day of my life how can I ever thank you both enough and express my love to you — for the life you gave me? For all your devotion to me; the example of your own happy marriage that gave me an ideal in life; the beauty of our home which has enriched my very soul. From you both I have woven into me so many characteristics that I hope now will be of service to the Guardian and [the] Cause.

Surely no child ever had two better, more loving parents than I! And as you have always been my pride and my dearests and my joy—so in my new life you will always continue to be!

Your own

Faithful Mary”⁴⁵

Printed with permission from George Ronald, publisher.

45 Vol. 2, p. 265.



Families from the Beacon Hill neighbourhood in Ottawa, Ont. participated in a camp at the Providence Point facility in Lanark, Ont. last summer.

Learning to work with groups of families

The following article details a conversation between six friends, all working with groups of families in the context of an expanding nucleus in Montreal, Que., the Harewood neighbourhood in Nanaimo, B.C., and the Beacon Hill neighbourhood in Ottawa, Ont.

In its 30 December 2021 message, when describing the characteristics of a cluster that has passed the third milestone of growth, the Universal House of Justice indicated that “It entails families and individual believers working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus.” This winter, several friends from across the country met online to discuss how groups of families in their localities—some relatively longstanding neighbourhoods, some more recent—are beginning to form nuclei and coordinate activities.

In Montreal Que., efforts to engage Chinese families in the community-building process, primarily through devotional gatherings and study circles, have been underway for over a decade. The House of Justice refers to “steps being taken...to systematically reach out to a specific population that has shown receptivity to the Faith but is dispersed throughout the cluster,” as a “specialized form of the community-building work,” that “continues to show great promise.”¹ Ilya Shodjaee-Zrudlo, who serves

alongside this population, said that “in recent years, many more families have become involved through the junior youth empowerment program.” Leyla Shodjai, another member of the team, points out that parents’ involvement with the institute process has been key to growth.

In the Harewood neighbourhood, in Nanaimo B.C., the community-building process was also introduced about 10 years ago. Here, the population is composed of Indigenous families who live in several complexes, with about four

¹ From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors 30 December 2021.



During the fall, families from across Montreal, Que. gathered for a camp at a facility in the nearby town of Île-Perrot, Que.

families comprising the core team. “Something that became very apparent from the beginning with the Indigenous population that we’re working with is that they’re very family based and connected to family in many places,” said Angela Younessi, who serves in the Harewood neighbourhood. This is another locality where the junior youth empowerment program is firmly rooted, and through it, relationships with groups of families have strengthened, and a sense of the collective ownership of the process has emerged.

A third area, Beacon Hill, is located within the ethnically diverse suburbs of Ottawa, Ont. A Bahá’í family moved there about two years ago. One member of the family, Lua Parsa, recounted: “When we moved to this area, I thought if we are the only Bahá’ís, how can we work without a team?” They realized that their team would need to be raised up from those among their neighbours.

She said, “We came from a neighbourhood that became a centre of intense activity, where there were tons of junior youth groups and children’s classes, but it was very

difficult to form strong bonds with the parents. We thought...what if we try a new approach. Instead of going out and creating junior youth groups and children’s classes, let’s make bonds with the families.” The family tried to make connections with everyone they encountered: neighbours out gardening, people walking their dogs, families with their children out in the park, and many through a neighbourhood Facebook group.

An insight that surfaced throughout the conversation in all the localities was that to engage families, spaces need to be created that welcome entire families. Two significant spaces seem to be community gatherings and family camps. Community gatherings have been occasions for the deepening of friendships, prayer, and for families to engage in collective arts and crafts. In Beacon Hill, Ms. Parsa explains, “We started a neighbourhood gathering where the neighbours would come together, along with their children. We say prayers and eat together and socialize and have a chance to informally talk about the Faith. Slowly a few families were very interested and asked to host this as well. So, we

started rotating different homes.”

In Harewood, planning for the neighbourhood global conference was an occasion for collective action among the network of families. The Harewood team said that they had to let go of expectations that the neighbourhood conference should be planned well ahead of time, as the families were not available to come together and consult. So, they booked a space and waited. About a month and a half before the conference, they got together to plan and have lunch together. Malaika Abay, who serves in the Harewood neighbourhood, describes, “We were together for six hours because the families had so much to share and wanted to contribute to the planning process. They even asked if we could continue it on a weekly basis. So, we continued to plan the conference together, and within the last week of the conference, our registrations were much higher...” After the conference, they started to rent a school space for a monthly community gathering.

The community gatherings have been a source of joy and purpose. Ms. Younessi described, “At the last community gathering there was a

suggestion of having a collective art project...this came from the discussion of unity and how we can build this collective spirit together... we have hanging in our community space this beautiful button blanket that was created one summer during an intensive campaign that happened with all the families.”

Both in Montreal and in the Beacon Hill neighbourhoods, there is a growing experience with family camps, where entire families come together for a few days at a facility where they can stay overnight and have their meals.

Both in Montreal and in the Beacon Hill neighbourhoods, there is a growing experience with family camps, where entire families come together for a few days at a facility where they can stay overnight and have their meals. In recent years, the National Spiritual Assembly has acquired several properties that allow for this.² “The way we frame the family camps,” Mr. Shodjaee-Zrudlo explained, “we say all of us or our children are involved in weekly

regular activities that are meant to help us morally and intellectually and we are trying to build community on a regular basis. But life is full of distractions, so from time to time we are going to get together for a whole weekend and put away all our distractions and really focus on building unity and very close friendships.” He continued, “We avoid the sense that it is a product that people are coming to...they are learning to become protagonists in the community-building process.”

The family camps also help with participants’ movement through the sequence of courses, as they can cover more material during an intensive period. In cases where mothers tend to be primarily involved in community-building activities, several of the teams mentioned that fathers participate in the family camps, as Angus Han, who serves in Montreal, says they “don’t want to miss out” and this provides a great chance for families to become more united in purpose. The camps usually have about 50 participants. They also provide many opportunities for informal but elevated conversations. During a recent Montreal camp, “I spent a whole hour and a half talking with a couple of the parents about God and the existence of God,” Mr. Shodjaee-Zrudlo mentioned.

In Beacon Hill, “People are very attracted to the idea of going away for a retreat,” Ms. Parsa explained. “Strong bonds of friendship” are built, and families take part in recreational activities, such as canoeing, alongside children’s classes, junior youth groups and study circles. At the Ottawa retreat, they also had a group for babies and toddlers. “We always get lots of helpers,” she continued. These retreats are becoming a seamless element of community life. “At every camp we’ve managed to keep the groups meeting on a weekly basis, so those study circles are not lost, or they don’t have to wait three months for the next camp,” Ms. Parsa explained.

It has been very natural to invite others to take ownership of the

growth process. “I think one approach we took,” Ms. Parsa described, “because we are very few in our neighbourhood...as we became close to a family, we said ‘let’s start something together, something for the neighbourhood that will involve all the families’. I can go back to all our activities and remember which family we started that with...It’s not like us as the Bahá’í family offering the services around which everyone revolves, but the hope is that we are building this little network of families who are all eager and willing to serve their community.”

This also involved identifying any obstacles to service and using creative means to overcome them. Ms. Parsa continued, “The mothers will have time, but they have a baby always attached to them. We’ve managed to plan things around some of the retired friends near us who can come and play with the babies while we are having our study circle.” She explained that this worked well as it’s “connected members of the community together and has allowed for that space to continue consistently. And so now these retired friends have become part of our team. They understand the scope of our vision and want to contribute to it.” She goes on to say that the first group to study *Ruhi Book 3: Teaching Children’s Classes Grade 1* is almost finished, and two mothers are ready to start a children’s class. Since then, a few friends have declared their Faith.

Of course, service is for all ages, including junior youth and children. Ms. Abay describes how laying the groundwork for service early on helps junior youth later transition to serving as animators. “We help them to see themselves as animators and coordinators while they are junior youth,” Ms. Abay describes, “And that way once they get to that stage... they inherently know they can do it because we’ve been telling them they can do it from the time they were 11.” Inclusive language like “when you have your own group” and “when you are an animator” supports this, as well as inviting an

² A recent letter from the National Assembly on community properties can be accessed here: <https://bahaicanada.bahai.ca/letter-from-the-national-spiritual-assembly-regarding-properties-18-january-2022/>

older junior youth to help animate the group. This communicates “the notion of it being a continuous process,” she continues, “walking on a path of service for your life.”

In Montreal, working with the Chinese population, tutors are accompanying friends to arise to serve. Ms. Shodjai said, “We had a study circle which we started just recently and one of the friends was asked if she’s free to cotutor. First, she wanted to be part of that Book 3 and the next thing was, would you like to help tutor it? She was ready for the next step.” This friend also tutored the group independently on a day that Ms. Shodjai could not. “It’s beautiful how they take ownership,” she commented.

Mr. Shodjaee-Zrudlo continued, describing how the network of families propel the growth process: “It’s been extremely helpful to have a diverse team. We do have a handful of Chinese Bahá’ís, about six in the team, and others that are not yet Bahá’ís. Their participation has been so essential...having parents who are Chinese Bahá’ís is at the heart of the process, and they help everything advance so much. And we have a few who are incredibly outward looking. In terms of the junior youth program, the animators aren’t involved in the expansion at all. All the expansion is on the parents, they are always inviting other families into the program...” During the family camp, the parents studied entirely in Mandarin, made possible by tutors from the Chinese population.

Mr. Han, who is himself Chinese, lives in Montreal and is himself Chinese, explained, “My wife Lily and I started to engage in service comparatively late. We started shortly after the pandemic started, in 2020. We are the type of couple who prefer to spend our time at home, we don’t like to go out very much. But after the pandemic happened, we saw many people suffering, especially people in the Chinese community. Most of them are new immigrants, they came with their

family and children, and they have all kinds of difficulties. We saw these friends suffering and we also saw the opportunity for us to do service. At that time, we started to hold online meetings—study circles, firesides... We find that because we focus on the Chinese community, we’re familiar with the cultural background, we see they are in need and receptive to the Faith...this special community is getting bigger and bigger.”

*“Service is not just
a contribution to
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troubles.”*

There also seems to be a correlation between families drawing closer to the Faith and taking ownership of core activities and the growth process. Ms. Shodjai describes, “In the past, if people were joining our circle and engaged in the process, we considered it growth. But we know now that the next step is they take that ownership more seriously and adhere to the Faith. The core group is more or less those who have declared.” She described that the tutors are learning how “to have the audacity to have that heart-to-heart conversation with the friends who are ready and invite them to join the Faith.”

Mr. Han provided insight into some of these conversations: “Service is not just a contribution to the community,” he explained, “Service is actually a solution to your daily life’s troubles. Sometimes you feel like you are drowning in a busy life, you don’t go to sleep easily and get over it. If you can arrange your time more

efficiently or sacrifice something to do service, it’s a cure to your daily life. We’re trying to find opportunities to encourage more families to taste the good taste of doing service.”

“At the heart of building capacity for service is the institute, of course,” Mr. Shodjaee-Zrudlo added, “The more the concepts from the institute and the approaches and methods of the institute permeate our team at the core of the expanding nucleus, the more people around us will just start arising to serve as well. There’s just certain habits, attitudes, qualities, insights and concepts that are very helpful from the institute. Even in home visits...you can do a lot of home visits, but if your home visits aren’t infused with concepts from the institute, they become less effective...the extent that home visits build understanding has been helpful.” He said that studying lessons from the junior youth books with parents has been particularly conducive to building understanding. And when parents of junior youth see the positive transformation in their children, they are more likely to become protagonists themselves.

There have also been signs of transformation at the community level. In Harewood, “We’ve been looking at some of the challenges that have come up around unity within a complex of houses where they live very close together...So we’re learning how to bring these things up for community discussions and so forth,” Ms. Youness explained. Ms. Abay continued, “The animators have been visiting the families continuously to see where these points of contention are stemming from and how we can work together to rectify that. Our last community gathering theme was unity...to think about the importance of unity in our lives...if you see yourself as an expanding nucleus of friends, then it gives you cause to be united.”

Huqúqu'lláh workshops engage families

A series of workshops offered by Representatives of the Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh in Canada helps families advance their understanding of the dynamics of material and spiritual progress.

Deepening one's understanding of the law of Huqúqu'lláh furthers individual growth, strengthens family unity and fosters collective action in the community. Having moved from an educational approach consisting mainly of presentations, Representatives of Huqúqu'lláh in Canada now offer courses on a variety of themes to deepen the friends' understanding and appreciation of this law. The International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh has made these workshops available to Representatives around the world to assist in educating the friends about a law that will "contribute to the spiritualization of humanity

through the promotion of a new attitude to the acquisition and use of material resources."¹

Many of these workshops encourage participants to reflect on the significance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes."² Attracting God's blessings and true happiness depend on the development of spiritual qualities, such as

honesty, trustworthiness, generosity, justice, and consideration of others, both in this world and in the next. These qualities are fostered by our understanding of, and obedience to, the law of Huqúqu'lláh.

Wills and the Right of God

Family members are encouraged to participate in the "Wills and the Right of God" workshop³ together, including those who are not members of the Bahá'í community. The workshop is practical, as it assists

1 Compilation on Huqúqu'lláh – *The Right of God*, #30.

2 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 17.

3 An article titled "'Wills' workshop promotes greater understanding of the Right of God" can be found in the Fall 2022 issue of *Bahá'í Canada*.



An online 'Wills and the Right of God' Workshop with friends in Ottawa, Ont., took place last year.

participants to follow local law and write down, in a legal manner, their last wishes regarding any assets, and provides an opportunity to make them known to their beneficiaries. This is especially helpful in avoiding conflict that could emerge after a loved one has passed away.

As one participant described: “I invited my son, as my executor, to attend. His wise advice was to keep my Ḥuqúqu’lláh payments up to date so that the remainder to be paid at the time of my death would be a smaller amount involving, at most, calculations based on a year’s income. This not only would be easier for him as executor but would reduce the potential for contention.”

12 Lessons on Ḥuqúqu’lláh

The “12 Lessons on Ḥuqúqu’lláh” workshop brings together groups of friends, families, and community members to gain an overall appreciation of the law of the Right of God, emphasizing the spiritual nature of this law, while addressing its application and historical context. When extended families and groups of families take this course together, they develop a common understanding, which fosters unity and collective action.

In one case, five isolated believers from three families, all of whom live within driving distance of each other, attended a “12 Lessons on Ḥuqúqu’lláh” weekly study group online. The group provided a supportive space for these families to connect. During the sessions, participants were happy to learn that by contributing to the Right of God, they materially support the ongoing unfoldment of Bahá’u’lláh’s New World Order and participate in the global community-building process. Near the end of the last session, the group of families enthusiastically pledged to organize a global conference in their locality, which successfully occurred one month later. In addition to its transformative power on individual believers, the “12 Lessons” course has inspired,

motivated, and energized these families to begin working together in light of the goals of the Nine Year Plan.

Work, Wealth and Service

The “Work, Wealth and Service” course, developed for youth and young professionals, focuses on how individuals can contribute to the progress and prosperity of society over the course of their lives. A prominent theme is the need to leave behind attitudes centred on individualism and self-interest and adopt those of mutual aid and reciprocity. While the workshop is offered primarily to youth and young adults, experience indicates that it can impact the conversations in a family when youth take the workshop with their parents.

As one participant shared, “Recently our family joined some friends for a study of the ‘Work, Wealth and Service’ and ‘12 Lessons in Ḥuqúqu’lláh’ workshops. During the study, we became more aware of the importance of approaching our payments with the ‘utmost joy and radiance and in a spirit of perfect humility and lowliness.’⁴ As a result, we often consult together and reflect on our financial affairs as a family, which has helped us find a greater sense of unity and understanding. Numerous rich and meaningful discussions have arisen around the dinner table, when shopping, or on holidays, about how we spend our money, our time, and our energy in a way that helps us to live more coherent lives.”

Family Life and Ḥuqúqu’lláh

The “Family Life and Ḥuqúqu’lláh” material, designed for parent study groups, draws attention to the need to rear children who see their own welfare as inseparable from the welfare of others. It helps families consider the forces acting upon

⁴ “And such benefits will indeed accrue if the Ḥuqúq is offered with the utmost joy and radiance and in a spirit of perfect humility and lowliness.” From the Compilation Ḥuqúqu’lláh—The Right of God, #6.

“... as I study more deeply the law of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, I am coming to realize that this law is bound up in all aspects of one’s Bahá’í life.”

them and to identify steps they can take to create conditions within their family that will help each member develop an appropriate view of material wealth and its utilization. Participants have shared insights such as “it challenges one’s personal attitude towards money” and “it makes one think more deeply about our responsibility to our world family, not just our personal family.”

Another participant shared, “Earlier in my Bahá’í life I viewed the activities of the Faith and my personal responsibility to pay the Right of God (should I owe any) as two completely separate aspects of being a Bahá’í. Now, as I study more deeply the law of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, I am coming to realize that this law is bound up in all aspects of one’s Bahá’í life. It impacts our families, how we view the world, how we live in the world and how we understand the fundamental principle of mutual aid and reciprocity.”

As families are engaged in this educational process together, unity is fostered. The Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh in Canada invites every believer to prayerfully consider what it would look like to study the law of the Right of God with their family, and to contemplate the blessings that revert to them through the application of this law.

— Charlotte Mosleh



Friends pray together in a home in Richmond, B.C. during the Nineteen Day Feast. Photo: Arezou Nouredin

Increasing the institutional capacity of Area Teaching Committees

A description of how the Area Teaching Committees in Vancouver and Toronto have advanced to take on new challenges over the past few years.

Both Vancouver, B.C. and Toronto, Ont. are milestone three clusters, in which large numbers of individuals are arising as protagonists in the community-building process. In its 29 December 2015 message, the House of Justice describes the characteristics of such a cluster. One of these is that “the Area Teaching Committee is ris-

ing to a new level of functioning.” These Committees follow the cluster through the perspective of three-month cycles of activity, including phases of expansion and consolidation along with opportunities for all to reflect and plan. “With a Committee in place,” the House of Justice writes, “the efforts already under way to convene gatherings for wor-

ship, to carry out home visits, and to teach the Faith can now expand considerably.” This article is an attempt to articulate some of the lines of action and advances in functioning of Area Teaching Committees in two of Canada’s most advanced clusters.

The Vancouver cluster includes six localities: five with Local Spiritual Assemblies as well as the Musqueam

First Nation. The total Bahá'í population is approximately 1,200. There are three established centres of intense activity, one in each of the localities of Vancouver, Burnaby and Richmond, with three emerging centres in the cluster. Centres of intense activity are often described as neighbourhoods with more than 20 core activities, with 10s of people facilitating the participation of hundreds. The Vancouver cluster has over 180 educational activities¹ with about 938 participants. Toronto is a single Assembly cluster with a Bahá'í population of 1,800 and seven centres of intense activity. Toronto currently has approximately 228 educational activities with 1,204 participants.

Collaboration among cluster agencies

The Toronto Area Teaching Committee's pattern of functioning and planning is interrelated with the work of all the cluster agencies, including the Local Spiritual Assembly, Auxiliary Board members, cluster coordinators and resource persons for the learning site.² These agencies consult and carry out their respective initiatives with a unified understanding of the movement of the cluster. One mechanism for this collaboration is a weekly meeting.

This collaboration has considerably strengthened over the course of the last two years. When the Area Teaching Committee selects dates for the phases of a cycle or cluster-wide initiatives, it offers them as suggestions to the cluster agencies, who also weigh in. The cluster agencies also participate in a weekend-long planning meeting each cycle, in which the progress of existing strategies is assessed in detail and rearrangements made if necessary. During these meetings, the agencies and institutions reflect on the experience of the cluster in

light of the guidance of the House of Justice, particularly recent guidance, to understand where it is at in terms of its own development, what is being learned in action, and the vision or next steps that are described. For example, strategies for the cycle of growth are taken from paragraph 11 of the 30 December 2021 message. This reading of reality is enhanced by learning shared by other clusters in Canada as well as the global experience of clusters at the frontiers of learning.

In Vancouver, a highlight of last year has been the close collaboration with an Auxiliary Board member, as well as the cluster's five Local Spiritual Assemblies, with the Area Teaching Committee. Leading up to the global conferences, weekly meetings were held with Assembly secretaries, an Auxiliary Board member and some of his assistants, and representatives of the Area Teaching Committee to share information, resources, and support. These spaces continue on a bi-weekly basis, which has lent added coherence to the work of the cluster. More recently, the Committee began meeting with Assemblies during the reflection and planning phases of the cycle. Because of this, the work of the cluster feels increasingly more coherent. The agencies and institutions are working with one plan and one vision of the cluster.

Working with a network of collaborators

One question before Area Teaching Committees, particularly as the number of activities in a cluster increases, is how to keep abreast of what is occurring as a solid foundation for reading reality. In its 29 December 2015 message, the Universal House of Justice writes, "In managing the complexities involved in its own work—which includes gathering and analyzing statistical data, as well as a diversity of other tasks—the Committee draws on the help of individuals beyond its own members."³

In Vancouver, the Area Teaching Committee currently works with 23 collaborators, each from different neighbourhoods or Feast areas across the cluster. These collaborators, some of whom are assistants to Auxiliary Board members, understand the reality of their localities. They assist the Committee in gathering and reporting statistics and keep in touch with the friends, offering them support and encouragement; they provide the Committee with insight and input during preparations for reflection meetings, and facilitate consultations in these spaces.

The main mode of communication from the friends to the cluster agencies and Assemblies is currently through this network of collaborators. Collaborators check in regularly with the friends, which allows the agencies to respond to any obstacles that emerge in the context of their activities with the appropriate support. Other methods of remaining informed about the activities have included the Area Teaching Committee's participation in team spaces, as well as through regular collaborator gatherings.

The Committee also studied Ruhi Institute Book 10: *Building Vibrant Communities* with a group of collaborators last year. At the end of each study session, the group consulted about how they could apply the concepts explored to their work in the cluster.

Expanding nuclei of friends

Over the last two years, the Toronto Area Teaching Committee has been increasing its capacity to follow a continuum of expanding nuclei spread across the cluster. Referencing such expanding nuclei, the House of Justice writes, "Such groups of friends set about widening the circle of participation in their activities by engaging with the networks to which they belong—networks created through a place of work or study, a local school, or a community hub of another kind—and by accompanying others who arise to

¹ Educational activities include study circles, junior youth groups and children's classes.

² Both Toronto and Vancouver have been designated as learning sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth empowerment program.

³ From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 29 December 2015.

serve alongside them.”⁴ The continuum that the Committee and its collaborators are now able to consider consists of some 20-30 expanding and emerging nuclei. These nuclei represent a vast range of experience, from learning to support a single activity to sustaining close to 20 activities. All have a desire to learn to use the institute to effect transformation within a community.

In the context of this line of action, the Committee has engaged a number of collaborators. It now hosts orientation sessions twice a year for collaborators from each nucleus to study materials related to the growth and strengthening of an expanding nucleus. Between these larger gatherings, collaborators will be in regular communication with the Committee and the teams that they are connected to, thus providing a flow of information and learning between the grassroots and the cluster agencies. The regular occurrence of these orientation sessions will allow new collaborators to join the process as they establish relationships with the Committee.

The House of Justice’s Riqdván 2018 message states, “[T]here must emerge in many hundreds of clusters a growing band of believers who can maintain, with those around them, a sustained focus on nurturing growth and building capacity, and who are distinguished by their ability and their discipline to reflect on action and learn from experience. Raising up and accompanying an expanding nucleus of individuals in each place—not just at the level of the cluster but within neighbourhoods and villages—is at once a formidable challenge and a critical need.”

The learning process in which the Committee and the teams are engaged focuses on strengthening certain elements that have been recognized as necessary for growth within every expanding nucleus, irrespective of the number of activities or experience. Are they

acting, reflecting on guidance and experience, and consulting? Are these teams receiving a flow of learning from other expanding nuclei who are a bit farther ahead? Is there an active tutor on the team? How is the nuclei’s relationship within the neighbourhood, network, or population deepening?

In Vancouver, the Area Teaching Committee is also supporting those who are working together to make “a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus,”⁵ and is helping them to recognize that the institute process is at the heart of growth. Working with its collaborators and the Local Spiritual Assemblies in the cluster, the Committee has identified 27 expanding nuclei supporting 115 core activities. Its challenge is in coordinating visits to support and accompany these nuclei in widening the circle of participation in their activities, and in encouraging the nuclei to have a regular rhythm of reflection.

Working with specific populations

The work with expanding nuclei also involves the growth in capacity of Area Teaching Committees to nurture the work with specific populations within the cluster. In this regard, the Universal House of Justice in its 30 December 2021 message stated:

We also acknowledge, in this connection, the steps being taken in some clusters to systematically reach out to a specific population that has shown receptivity to the Faith but is dispersed throughout the cluster. This can be seen as a specialized form of the community-building work, and one which continues to show great promise.

One such population, from which the Toronto cluster has seen many nuclei emerging, is the Persian population. The needs of these teams

are, at times, unique, and therefore, their accompanying by the Area Teaching Committee is closely nurtured through constant guidance from the Auxiliary Board members. In helping these teams strengthen their work as expanding nuclei, the Committee has recognized that a space needs to be created in which these teams can consult about developing a collective goal and action plan to reach the entirety of the Persian population in Toronto. The Area Teaching Committee envisions that this collective goal will be a means through which the teams can share learning and help each other advance in their plans. One practical component involves the teams analyzing statistics on the number of Farsi-speaking people residing in Toronto, and how many Persian newcomers arrive in Toronto each year. They could also consider the current arrangements of each team and consult on approaches they could each adopt to continue to advance this goal. This is similar to the teaching work with the Chinese population being carried out in the Vancouver cluster.

Enhancing the devotional character of the community

In Vancouver, the Area Teaching Committee and its network of collaborators have focused on enhancing the devotional character of the cluster through the multiplication of devotional gatherings among Bahá’ís across the cluster. In its 10 July 2020 message, the National Spiritual Assembly called for “every household associated with the Greatest Name in Canada” to establish a regular devotional gathering. Subsequently, the Committee worked closely with Local Spiritual Assemblies to encourage families to start a devotional gathering in their homes. Supported by the cluster agencies, families holding devotional gatherings were encouraged to widen the circle of participation and adopt an outward-looking orientation for these gatherings.

4 From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 30 December 2021.

5 From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 30 December 2021.

The Committee provided spaces for the friends to explore how every devotional gathering is the seed of a future House of Worship that weaves together worship and service and, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has said, “must, at the direction of the Most Exalted Pen, be established in every hamlet and city.”⁶ The friends consulted together about the many varied and creative ways that devotional gatherings could be held. This inspired them to broaden their vision of what a devotional gathering looks like. Providing examples of the various forms that a devotional gathering could take—such as a family praying together regularly, a study circle incorporating a distinct devotional component, or two friends praying together over the phone on a regular basis—led to a significant increase in the number of devotional gatherings across the cluster.

The cluster has also been learning about how devotional gatherings emerge from existing educational activities.

The Area Teaching Committee is also supporting the friends to consider their devotional gatherings as opportunities to share Bahá’u’lláh’s vision for humanity and welcome participants to the community-building activities. Conversations quite naturally lead to invitations to study the Ruhi sequence of courses. The focus of a recent teaching project was on learning to do just that—invite devotional participants into the Institute process. The themes from the global conferences were used to share the vision and introduce participants to the community-building efforts.

The cluster has also been learning about how devotional gatherings emerge from existing educational activities. In collaboration with Local Spiritual Assemblies, the Vancouver Area Teaching Committee selected content for reflection gatherings that would assist those who host activities to think about starting devotional gatherings with the participants in their activities. The network of collaborators was asked to encourage the friends in this endeavour, and the institute coordinator assisted in identifying existing spaces that could have devotional gatherings attached to them. Over the past several cycles, the number of study circles with a connected devotional gathering has increased notably. The Area Teaching Committee is continuing to learn about how every study circle can have an attached devotional gathering, which it believes will also enrich the environment for learning. It is also striving to create a regular rhythm of bringing devotional hosts together to reflect.

Managing increased complexity

In Toronto, methods for tracking statistics around devotional gatherings have evolved over the past three years. After the National Assembly’s call for “an unprecedented wave of prayer,”⁷ Toronto saw a great rise in the number of devotional gatherings. During this time, a group of collaborators engaged in hundreds of conversations with families in the cluster about the devotional character of the community in the context of this call. These collaborators were then called on to help manage the complexity of an increased number of devotional gatherings in the cluster.

In the Fall of 2022, when the Area Teaching Committee looked at its statistics for the cluster’s approximately 700 devotional gatherings, it realized it had to develop a new system to keep track of and accompany the hosts of these devotionals. Up

until this point, the Committee had kept a spreadsheet with detailed information on hundreds of devotional gatherings. However, it was clear that with this additional increase, and to facilitate further growth, a new method for both tracking devotional gatherings and for accompanying devotional gathering hosts was needed.

The Committee decided to reach out to old and new devotional gathering collaborators and ask them to each accompany 10 hosts. The method for statistics also changed: the number of devotional gatherings is still reported to the Area Teaching Committee, however detailed information for each gathering is managed by the group of collaborators. In this way, opportunities to learn to scale and systematize efforts emerge from the demands of growth.

Strengthening the culture of home visits

In Vancouver, the Area Teaching Committee is learning to support the work in centres of intense activity by encouraging a pattern of home visits with the families of junior youth and children. Animators and children’s class teachers visit parents to discuss their children’s progress and the concepts they are learning about through the programs. Naturally, prayers and quotations are shared that inspire the heart. Some of these families are beginning to work together to plan social events and other activities. A sense of ownership is being unlocked as concepts from the institute permeate the community.

In Toronto, the Area Teaching Committee’s consultations led to a realization that the cluster needs to strengthen its culture of home visits. It noted that through home visits, Bahá’ís and their collaborators build strong relationships with their networks of friends, neighbours, and coworkers. They are an essential part of becoming acquainted with the lives and aspirations of the people they serve alongside. It is also the context that the capacity for

6 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, #55.

7 This is from the National Spiritual Assembly’s 10 July 2020 message, also referred to in the previous section.



Members of a children's class in the St. James Town neighbourhood in Toronto, Ont. hand out treats to neighbours during a service project.

Photo: Bahia Marks

meaningful conversations with others strengthens—a conversation that develops over the course of a pattern of visits and which serves to connect hearts to the Word of God.

Recognizing that this line of action takes courage on the part of the friends, especially following a long period of pandemic-related restrictions, the Area Teaching Committee began to think about how to help the friends take steps. Reflecting on the experience of the cluster, particularly the series of recent tutor seminars, it became clear that a degree of familiarity with the contents of Ruhi Books 1 and 2 helps individuals engage in meaningful conversations with relative ease. This led to a consultation with cluster institute coordinators around the study of these books. The release of the National Spiritual Assembly's 6 February 2023 message to unit conventions, calling the believers to reflect "on what is needed to strengthen a culture of home visits where meaningful conversations unfold, ties of spiritual kinship are forged, a sense of community is strengthened, faith is deepened, and plans are made,"

invites universal participation in these efforts.

Spaces for reflection

In Vancouver, experience with organizing four global conferences helped the cluster learn how to create an environment imbued with comradery, fellowship, and joy, inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Certain elements that were successful in the context of the conferences, for example, including a meal that could be shared together, as well as ensuring there are programs for children and junior youth, more than doubled participation in reflection gatherings. During the plenary sessions, friends articulate lessons from the cycle in the form of illustrative stories, with the arts featuring prominently. Through the study of paragraphs nine through 12 of the House of Justice's 30 December 2021 message, the community has also had the opportunity to reflect deeply on the spirit of teaching and how those on the threshold can move to the next stage in their journey towards Bahá'u'lláh.

In Vancouver, the addition of decentralized reflection spaces has also allowed for larger numbers of friends, young and old, to attend such gatherings. These gatherings are held at the neighbourhood level, commonly within Feast areas, and are scheduled according to the availability of the friends in that area. The decentralized character of these gatherings allows for the consultation and planning to be based on the reality of the teams and the neighbourhoods they serve. There are currently up to 23 reflection and planning spaces at the local level.

Another element that has increased meaningful participation in reflection gatherings is the electronic circulation of materials prior to the meeting. This allows all the friends to have access to the materials, even if they do not attend the meeting, which they can refer to throughout the cycle. Moreover, the objectives of the expansion phase are also extended to the Feast consultation portion. Through this space, the friends can see continuity across the cycles, which allows them to connect their experiences and learning from the previous cycle more meaningfully to their plans for the next cycle.

Area Teaching Committees are continuing to enhance their capacity to read the reality of the entire cluster in light of the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. Identifying elements of the teaching work that need to be strengthened cycle after cycle helps clusters advance to the next frontier. In Vancouver, entire families have enrolled in the Faith in recent years, and consolidating these teaching efforts is a new area of learning. As the Committees act, and through collaboration with other cluster agencies and institutions, they learn to manage greater complexity and follow multiple lines of action.

This article was written with the assistance of the Area Teaching Committees of Toronto and Vancouver



Participants at an ISGP seminar held last year at the Providence Point facility in Lanark, Ont.

Coherence in the lives of young people entering work

The first in a series, this article draws attention to guidance that many young people have been studying and applying to their lives in recent years.

Young people across Canada, alive to Bahá'u'lláh's vision of spiritual and material prosperity and informed by the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, are making efforts to live a coherent life.

The materials developed for the 114 worldwide youth conferences in 2013 shed light on the concept of coherence:

It is essential then that ever-growing numbers of those in the prime of their lives “steel themselves for a life of service”¹ to society. Naturally, many matters occupy their time and energy: education, work, leisure, spiritual life, physical health.

But they learn to avoid a fragmented approach to life that fails to see the connections among life's various aspects. Such a disjointed view of life often makes individuals fall victim to the false choices suggested in questions such as whether one should study or serve, advance materially or contribute to the betterment of others, pursue work or become dedicated to service. Failure to approach one's life as a coherent whole often breeds anxiety and confusion. Through service, young people can learn to foster a life in which its various aspects complement each other.

Youth, championing the institute process, stand at the vanguard of ser-

vice to the Cause in Canada. Yet this period is also a time when decisions about studies, work, marriage, and other important dimensions of life take shape. In its 29 December 2015 message, the House of Justice wrote, “The significant decisions they make about the direction of their adult lives will determine whether service to the Cause of God was only a brief and memorable chapter of their younger years, or a fixed centre of their earthly existence, a lens through which all actions come into focus.” Centring one's life on service, then, is linked to living a life of coherence.

Growing numbers of Bahá'í students in college and university have partic-

¹ From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world, 8 February 2013.

ipated in the series of seminars organized by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP), during which they discuss these themes. Over the course of the seminars, which accompany them annually for four years, youth seek to address the unique challenges that programs for higher learning pose for them as Bahá'ís. They explore elements of a conceptual framework for contributing to the advancement of civilization, are assisted to understand and analyze the culture in which they are immersed, and to acquire the kind of knowledge that will enable them to live productive and meaningful lives.

In thinking about how to arrange one's life, it is necessary to have a vision of what kind of person Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is giving rise to—much more than a productive worker and abiding consumer. The Universal House of Justice, in its 30 December 2021 letter to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, has offered us a vision of the kind of individual emerging through sincere and wholehearted participation in the processes of the current series of global Plans:

The enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of the Plan are seeking to gain an ever more profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings—"the sovereign remedy for every disease"—and to apply them to the needs of their society. They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large. They are loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation for making decisions. They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and

with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another. They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism. They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone. And while they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Their efforts advance to the alternating rhythm of action and reflection; setbacks leave them unfazed.

This is only the latest in a series of descriptions which the House of Justice has offered us. A constant stream of messages from the Head of our Faith has, time and again, raised our vision of the immense potential and the latent capacities of youth: from the celebrated phrase "youth can move the world"² to their characterization as "invincible champions of justice."³

In its 29 December 2015 message, also to a Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the House of Justice also spoke to the challenges youth face and the nature of the support that they require:

...The readiness youth demonstrate to take initiative, whatever lines of

“Youth also support each other in this regard, coming together in groups to engage in further study and discuss their service...”

action they choose, can obscure the fact that they need sustained support from institutions and agencies in the cluster beyond the early steps.

Youth also support each other in this regard, coming together in groups to engage in further study and discuss their service, to reinforce one another's efforts and build resolve, looking to ever extend the circle of friendship more widely. The encouragement offered in this way by a network of peers provides young people with a much-needed alternative to those siren voices that beckon towards the snares of consumerism and compulsive distractions, as well as a counter to the calls to demonize others. It is against this backdrop of enervating materialism and splintering societies that the junior youth programme reveals its particular value at this time. It offers the youth an ideal arena in which to assist those younger than themselves to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them.

And, in the same message, the House of Justice provides guidance on the dimensions of a coherent life:

While it is right to expect great things from those who have so much to give in the path of service, the friends must guard against adopting a narrow outlook on what development to maturity

2 From the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, 3 January 1984.

3 From the Universal House of Justice to the friends gathered in the Latin-American Youth Congress in Chile, 6 January 1998.

entails. Freedom of movement and availability of time enable many youth to serve in ways that are directly related to the needs of the community, but as they advance further into their twenties, their horizons broaden. Other dimensions of a coherent life, equally demanding and highly meritorious, begin to make stronger claims on their attention. For many, an immediate priority will be further education, academic or vocational, according to the possibilities before them, and new spaces for interaction with society open up. Moreover, young women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to “enter into wedlock” that they may “bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants” and to “engage in crafts and professions”. Having taken up an occupation, youth naturally try to contribute to their field, or even to advance it in light of the insights they gain from their continued study of the Revelation, and they strive to be examples of integrity and excellence in their work. Bahá’u’lláh extols those “that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.” This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities. Through their growing love for Bahá’u’lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, “commingled with their mother’s milk”, and always seek the shelter of His divine law. Clearly, then, the responsibility of a Bahá’í community towards young people does not end when they first start serving.

These are the kinds of passages that have had a profound impact on the youth and institutions that seek to assist them. Many insights have been gained through a connection both to youth serving in centres of intense activity—typically neighbourhoods



Youth arrange the words to a quotation at an ISGP seminar that took place at the Providence Point facility in Lanark, Ont.

with over 20 core activities—and those who have participated in the seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity over the past six years. For many young people, the study of the passage above opens questions of how they will be able to ensure that, once they enter a new domain of activity, they might do so in a way that retains “service to the Cause of God...as a fixed centre of their earthly existence.”⁴

Among the dimensions referred to in the guidance is that of “engaging in crafts and professions,” taking up an occupation and earning a livelihood. Whatever their material circumstances, Bahá’í youth hear both the call to maximize personal material means and comforts and the invitation to fulfill their two-fold purpose to develop spiritually and contribute to the betterment of their society and must reconcile the two. Since paid work holds a privileged position in our society, youth often contend internally with their own valuations of it. In almost

every setting they hear calls urging them to dedicate their time and energy to obtaining material wealth at a young age—as much through exhortations for fiscal wisdom and prudence as through brazen expressions of the acquisitive spirit. Thus, the conditions are created for the kind of either/or thinking that limits coherent thought and action.

This is the first in a series of articles that will explore a range of approaches that young people have taken to achieve greater degrees of coherence in their lives, particularly with regards to entering their working lives. Through sharing the life experience and reflections of a small subset of friends, offered with humility, a few insights into the concept of coherence will be illustrated. It is hoped that these articles will encourage youth, their families, and communities to take a greater and abiding interest in supporting the rising generations as they strive to respond to circumstances and generational challenges.

⁴ From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 29 December 2015.

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protège-moi, illumine la
voie de ta main.*
**Mon Dieu ! Guide-moi,
protège-moi [...]**

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un cœur qui s'illumine, tel le cristal,
à la lumière de ton amour et, par les
taux de ta main.*
**Ô Dieu compatissant!
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s'illumine [...]**

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*Ô Dieu, rafraîchis et
réjouis mon esprit [...]*

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*Ô mon Seigneur, permets
à ceux qui montent vers
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t'adjure, ô mon Dieu!
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t'adjure que tu
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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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