

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

October 14, 2016

To the American Bahá'í community
for the Feast of 'Ilm

Dearly loved Friends,

With nearly two cycles of the current Five Year Plan now complete, we continue to receive encouraging reports from all corners of the country testifying to the devotion and vigor with which the community of the Greatest Name is pursuing its aims. We take special delight in accounts of the efforts being made by intrepid souls who have moved beyond comfortable, established patterns of service to form friendships with people living in neighborhoods where receptivity to the Bahá'í teachings has been demonstrated.

In its December 29 message last year addressed to the Continental Boards of Counselors, the Universal House of Justice noted both the importance of such service and its challenges:

Therefore, a significant task facing you and your auxiliaries at the outset of the coming Plan will be to assist the friends everywhere to appreciate that, for existing programmes of growth to continue to gain strength, the strategy of initiating community-building activities in neighbourhoods and villages that show promise must be widely adopted and systematically followed. Individuals serving in such areas learn how to explain the purpose of those activities, how to demonstrate through deeds the purity of their motives, how to nurture environments where the hesitant can be reassured, how to help the inhabitants see the rich possibilities created by working together, and how to encourage them to arise to serve the best interests of their society. . . . What is required from those involved, however, is long-term commitment and a yearning to become so familiar with the reality of a place that they integrate into local life and, eschewing any trace of prejudice or paternalism, form those bonds of true friendship that befit companions on a spiritual journey. The dynamic that develops in such settings creates a strong sense of collective will and movement.

A believer in the Northwest recently wrote about her experiences—in partnership with a friend who lives there—launching children's classes in a receptive neighborhood. She began by describing her initial hesitancy in taking such a step:

See, I taught classes at the Bahá'í center here and there. But that felt "safe," "contained"; there were very clear boundaries. But going into Esther's neighborhood scares me. It actually overwhelms me. One thing is to read about the wonderful experiences that others are having in the focus neighborhoods. The other thing is to actually step in. So, full of caution I decide to start teaching classes in the neighborhood for Esther and some friends. I am conscious that this is not just a children's class. It is just the first step into the neighborhood. Personal questions arise as I try to juggle my family, work and what I foresee will be my home away from home.

Over time, she and her friends successfully established a class and began to form friendships with parents in the neighborhood. This strengthened her connection with all its residents:

I am aware that the connection with Lily's family is important. Not so much because I know exactly how we can help each other build capacity and learn in the neighborhood, but because I feel emotionally connected to King Street now. Or should I say, more connected. Talking to Lily about life, children, bills, food, God ... is just something that happens as we build our relationship during every Tuesday class. I feel less of an "intruder" now at King Street. Thanks to the friendship with Lily, it all feels more natural. I am not an "uninvited guest" anymore. Or at least that is what I feel. Lily's friendship keeps me connected to King Street. My heart has a big space for King. My thoughts start being, more and more often, about my friends at King.

Gradually, others became involved through a natural process that began with meaningful conversations, then led to opportunities for shared service:

We are nearly in June when I meet Farida. I have seen her outside near the picnic tables where we have the class now that it is sunny again. She catches my attention. We smile at each other. She is Muslim. I talk myself into introducing myself to her finally. I try to pray and not be afraid to talk to her about children's classes. She has heard about the Bahá'í Faith. She likes the idea of building community. She and her two girls join the class. She tells me she wants to come to class only to practice her English. But little by little she starts to help the little ones with the art activities and the games. She proposes to do a craft with the group. She tells us she loves art, and since she recently has learned how to do some Indian henna [designs] she will bring it to the class and do [them] with the children. Farida, beautiful Farida, makes me laugh. Her past in Iraq is full of sadness but also courage and faith.

I have now two beautiful friends at King Street. With Farida we study for her driving test. We cook together and enjoy each other's company. She tells me she wants to also help a family from Ethiopia get acquainted with all the resources in the neighborhood like free child care, free English classes, etc. She wants their children to come to the class as well.

From these beginnings more and more genuine friendships, founded in love and expressed in service, were formed. Now our writer's entire family has also become involved:

My children are also in the activities in the neighborhood. My family now has friends at King. So ... we say we have two homes. Because these friends are our home, too. They live in our hearts. So day by day we stop by King: one day to see whether Mrs. Nattoli's cold is better, others to celebrate John's birthday, others to have the children's class and others to drop off my daughter for her junior youth group.

One year and a half has passed since that cold Tuesday when our first class with Esther took place. It has been a journey! Thank God for the opportunity.

As we marvel at the effect these first tentative steps taken by a committed believer have already had on this neighborhood, we can envision with assurance what will come of the activities of the little group they gave rise to, as they continue to serve with such joy and determination!

The full narrative will appear in the upcoming edition of *The American Bahá'í*. We hope that this abbreviated version will inspire you to consult on how the model of service it presents can be translated into the community-building work taking place in neighborhoods in your cluster.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES



Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary