

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

December 10, 2016

To the American Bahá'í community
for the Feast of Masá'il

Dearly loved Friends,

Word continues to reach us of a high tide of discussion in the community about the intensely partisan political discourse agitating the nation. These reports not only reflect the friends' wish to understand how to respond to the situation as Bahá'ís. They also tell of their strong desire, in a deeply troubled time, to answer their friends' and neighbors' concerns, offering a positive and hopeful perspective consistent with our Faith's paramount goal of unity.

Essential to providing such a response is the kind of conversations we engage in, mindful as we are that an attitude of love, inclusion, and reliance upon the powers of the Spirit will do far more to heal the ills of our society than an aggressive, adversarial approach. At the heart of the current series of Plans is a process that seeks to build our capacity to engage in such meaningful conversations with our fellow citizens. As the Universal House of Justice explained in its letter to the Boards of Counselors meeting in the Holy Land as the year 2015 drew to a close:

Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the individual and collective transformation effected through the agency of the Word of God. . . . As a person cultivates the habit of study and deep reflection upon the Creative Word, this process of transformation reveals itself in an ability to express one's understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance. . . . Such distinctive conversations gradually attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community activities. Themes of faith and certitude surface naturally, prompted by the receptivity and experiences of those involved.

Across the country, valuable experience is accumulating in clusters where the friends are learning how to respond positively to the conditions they encounter. In northern California, young people in urban areas had been making headway in talking with their peers about the negative forces in our society and exploring various ways to combat them. In one rural cluster, however, residents saw this as a criticism of a town in which they took great pride. In response, the Bahá'í youth reversed the flow of their conversations: They focused on the town's potential and talked with its young people about how they could help the community continue to progress. The circle of their activities widened.

In Nashville, two mothers reflecting on a local devotional gathering decided that the topic of "spiritual parenting" might be of interest to mothers and fathers whose children were attending a regular class. Conversations focusing on selected excerpts from the Bahá'í writings led to discussions on the theme of worship and service, and parents were invited to begin study of *Ruhi Book 1, Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*. The two mothers explained that the course's topics include spiritual qualities, the betterment of the world, prayer and meditation, and life after death. A group of four mothers began participating. The group gradually deepened its understanding of how worship and service are intertwined. Wonderful acts of service naturally evolved. During their study of Book 1, they visited Bahá'ís in their homes to share prayers. Though many initially felt anxiety about this, they left those visits filled with joy and a desire to continue them. Later on, they prepared baskets for the homeless and planted a garden.

Recently, the group decided to organize the devotional gatherings in three-month blocks, each centering on a particular topic that combines spiritual qualities and service. One such block was dedicated to justice and literacy. For the service project, the group partnered with a high school

teacher who is building small free libraries in “book deserts.” To assist the teacher, they raised money, donated books, and helped sort them.

In New York City, a team of friends who had decided to start a regular fireside has found that beginning each gathering with a brief introduction to the Bahá'í Faith centered on Bahá'u'lláh, His person, and His life is being well received and is providing seekers with an opportunity to connect their hearts with the Blessed Beauty. The fireside itself consists of discussions sparked by readings of the Word of God. Handouts are provided with excerpts from Bahá'í writings on a given topic—such as the dynamic relationship of crisis and victory, true friendship, and marriage and family life—together with discussion questions. One or two facilitators, often members of the teaching team, are identified ahead of time. Those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith are always informed that the materials are not comprehensive, but have been selected to serve as a starting point for focused conversation. From the third fireside on, the group invites attendees to join the institute process and build their capacity for service, and a number have joined a new study circle in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn. Looking ahead, the team will undoubtedly learn more about reaching large numbers and involving their friends in various facets of community life.

These and other examples of meaningful conversations will be featured in the upcoming edition of *The American Bahá'í*. Taken together, they are a testament to the power of a positive, unifying approach to current problems, the receptivity of those who yearn as we do for a society based on strong spiritual principles, and the possibility for the steady progress of our vision. As our beloved Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, counseled:

Walk, therefore, with a sure step and engage with the utmost assurance and confidence in the promulgation of the divine fragrances, the glorification of the Word of God and firmness in the Covenant. Rest ye assured that if a soul ariseth in the utmost perseverance and raiseth the Call of the Kingdom and resolutely promulgateth the Covenant, be he an insignificant ant he shall be enabled to drive away the formidable elephant from the arena, and if he be a feeble moth he shall cut to pieces the plumage of the rapacious vulture.

Endeavour, therefore, that ye may scatter and disperse the army of doubt and of error with the power of the holy utterances. This is my exhortation and this is my counsel. Do not quarrel with anybody, and shun every form of dispute. Utter the Word of God. If he accepteth it the desired purpose is attained, and if he turneth away leave him to himself and trust to God.

Such is the attribute of those who are firm in the Covenant.

You are ever in our hearts and in our prayers for the great success of your faithful services.

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



Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary