

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

September 25, 2020

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

Dearly loved Friends,

Reports of your energetic pursuit of the aims of the Five Year Plan have continued to reach us since we wrote to you for the last Feast. While the pandemic has restricted us all from many forms of activity, you are clearly doing what you can to press on with our vital work of building spiritually vibrant communities—welcoming and embracing ever-larger numbers of people from all walks of life and offering them Bahá'u'lláh's healing message for society's distressing ills.

In particular, the friends in clusters across the country are thinking deeply about how to respond to longstanding racial injustice employing the Plan's concepts and methods—as we were challenged to do in the Universal House of Justice's July 22 message to the American Bahá'í community. Some of these efforts are currently featured on our Race Unity Action website (at www.bahai.us/race-unity-action), which in the past month has received well over 3,000 unique visits. One report tells the story of a family devotional gathering in St. Paul, Minnesota, focused on the theme of “uprooting racism,” which began two years ago and has continued online since the outbreak of the pandemic. The report demonstrates how the creation of a spiritual atmosphere can open the way to healing conversations that can, in turn, lead to meaningful action:

There is a period of sharing prayers, scripture, and other writings from a variety of religions and secular sources, all related to racial harmony and justice. We then watch a video or read an article related to historical and current manifestations of racism, followed by discussion. A beautiful group of Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Asian, and white friends attend. Below is some feedback we have received:

“This devotional is a healing forum and safe space for Peoples of Color to share with whites their pain and trauma, and hopes. It's a space where whites listen and learn, and then take action on what they have learned. As an Indigenous Grandmother, I am grateful for this hard work.”

“[It's] a soul cleansing evening . . . I look forward to the next one. I sincerely thank you and everyone in the group for holding space for me to express my feelings that have been buried for so long. My deepest gratitude. May all of us stay on the path to learn, grow, and heal. When each one of us heals, we all heal together.”

“It really allowed me to go deeper into my own issues with race and how I can recover from such a traumatic experience since I've been on this planet as a person of color. Please keep having these meetings. . . . [A friend] and I were talking about how we are feeling hopeful because of your meetings. I look forward to see what's to come in the future.”

“It was an honor to be there. . . . It's important work. . . . Those of us who've been raised to be white have a lot of work to do to unlearn the lies that have been planted deep within us and make room for the truth. That's something we need to do for the sake of our own souls and for everyone in the world. I know God is moving in this world to take away 'stony' hearts and give us all real hearts.”

“I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off my heart.”

Another report describes the efforts of the Spiritual Assembly of Gladstone, Oregon, to contribute to local public discourse in the wake of recent racial violence. Although Gladstone is a predominantly white town, the members of the Assembly were impressed by the volume of correspondence seen on a local community e-bulletin board expressing indignation with continuing racial injustice and recent incidents that have involved an indefensible loss of life. The Assembly offered to host an online discussion of racism and what the community could do to find solutions. The report describes what happened. Here is an excerpt:

Several people took us up on our offer. Soon we were meeting every two weeks, with 9–12 people participating. The Gladstone Antiracism Facebook page arose from the first meeting, and it continues to facilitate discussions regarding racism in the community. . . .

Very soon a Gladstone City Councilman joined our biweekly group. With his insight we were able to petition the City Council to hold an online town hall meeting about racism in Gladstone. Initially reluctant, the Council eventually arranged it, and 57 people participated. Two youths, one Black and one Latina, who had graduated the previous year from the local high school, shared their frequent experiences of being singled out for racist bullying at the school. The city is now mandating diversity training for all its employees. We have a school board member who is joining our discussion group. . . . The local Bahá'í community feels that this has been a successful approach to join with our neighbors in addressing this issue, and an approach that might be easily replicated.

Dear friends, we feel certain many activities like these are taking place in Bahá'í communities across the country. Your reports about them are ever welcome, whether they be about your efforts in teaching, social action, or engagement in public discourse. Through these efforts—propelled by our continuing engagement in institute training and by advancing our clusters to the farthest frontiers of growth—we will, with time, lend a distinctive contribution to the eradication of racial prejudice from this nation.

We ardently pray that the triumphs still to be achieved in the months that separate us from the conclusion of the current Plan will bring great joy to the heart of our beloved Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and attract His abundant confirmations and blessings.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

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Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary