

Applying the capacities built by the celebrations of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh to the movement of clusters

After the worldwide celebrations marking the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, the Universal House of Justice stated in its Ridván 2018 message that “the global Bahá'í community now in view is not the same as when it embarked on the first six cycles of the current Plan” and described an unprecedented surge in its capacity. Believers and their friends arose with vitality and determination to speak about the Blessed Beauty and His teachings, invite a significant number of people to celebrate His life, and inspire neighbourhoods and villages into unified endeavour.

The capacities strengthened by the bicentenary celebrations led to a remarkable movement of clusters around the world along their path of development. Now, ever more conscious of its mission, the Bahá'í community worldwide is resolved to build on the momentum gained so that the spiritual energies released by every effort made to honour the Blessed Beauty can be channelled to fulfil a considerable portion of the goals of the Five Year Plan during the remaining cycles leading up to the two hundredth anniversary of the Birth of the Báb.

This issue of *Reflections on Growth* shares a few stories of how communities, in a variety of locations and circumstances, are moving towards and past the second milestone.

Drawing on the lessons learned in preparation for the bicentenary, these friends are using clear and tested strategies, combined with sustained effort and focus, to nurture growth in communities and to help them envision the opportunities for their own spiritual progress. These stories also show how a spirit of fellowship and cooperation, the ability to see beyond obstacles, and an attitude of perseverance greatly contribute to establishing a long-term pattern of growth in a cluster.

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Raising up an expanding group of individuals in neighbourhoods and villages with support from friends in advanced clusters

In the following two accounts, tutors from a more advanced cluster contributed to the swift progress of a neighbouring community, enabling it to advance beyond the second milestone. The first depicts how a nucleus of friends was supported by resources from a more advanced cluster to raise capacity in a neighbourhood and reinvigorate the programme of growth in their cluster. In the second, an individual pioneered to a nearby cluster to introduce the residents to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, bringing large numbers into the widening embrace of Bahá'í activities.

BELGIUM

In the city of **Namur**, situated in the **South cluster** in Belgium, a group of friends came together to examine their reality with the support of visiting believers. They participated in reflection gatherings where guidance was studied and experiences and insights from more advanced clusters were shared. This assisted the local friends to gain a deeper understanding of how to translate the elements of the Five Year Plan into daily and weekly efforts to connect a widening circle of people to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. As a result, the pace of the cluster's

development increased noticeably. Below are some highlights of how the friends were able to intensify their pattern of action and advance this cluster beyond the second milestone:

During the last Plan, we had around four or five core activities scattered across the three cities and villages of the South cluster; in the city of Namur itself we had one or, at times, two core activities under way. Over a year into this Plan, there were around 15 core activities, and though concerted efforts were made, the believers struggled for some time to increase participation beyond this level. To stimulate growth, an initiative was launched in collaboration with the Auxiliary Board member to send three experienced travelling tutors from Brussels—a more advanced neighbouring cluster. Additionally one youth moved from Brussels to dedicate a period of service as a pioneer in a promising neighbourhood.

Together we decided to launch an intensive, three-week campaign for expansion and training. Our objective was to reach out to the inhabitants of one of Namur's more densely populated neighbourhoods to raise local resources from within the community. Two weeks were dedicated to teaching, and one week to intensively training the newly met friends in the institute courses. As we met new contacts, we found that they wanted to start the first book of the sequence of institute courses immediately and even participate in the next day's teaching efforts.

After this three-week period, the team of visiting tutors continued to travel to Namur every week to accompany the local friends in opening and consolidating new core activities. They also established a weekly meeting where all those involved could look over lists of friends, make phone calls, and plan the next steps in their various activities.

Within one month, the newly raised local resources were taking part in daily study which led to their completing the first few books in the sequence of courses, opening devotional meetings, viewing the film *Light to the World*, holding firesides with their families and neighbours, and exploring how to start more groups within their networks of acquaintances and friends to study Book 1, *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*.

After experiencing this initial wave of friends entering the sequence of courses, we realized that there was a need for a venue in the heart of the neighbourhood where the friends could continue their training and welcome a wider circle of people into the institute process.

With these efforts, there were now 20 people facilitating 20 activities, including three junior youth groups and a children's class. As the local friends completed their training, they also began to open core activities of their own.

Through this experience we learned how to start and maintain a pattern of action in a growing community. First, we learned that forming a group and working intensely through daily or weekly efforts exerted in small settings, with continuous support from experienced friends, can propel the emergence of an intensive programme of growth. We saw that essential to this process was learning how to plan simple yet rapid steps that can contribute to a great distance travelled within a short period of time.

From there, we identified the importance of closely accompanying the expanding nucleus of local friends, while continuing to welcome more interested individuals to the community-building efforts. As the process of growth unfolded, new groups of youth, mostly university students, expressed a desire to dedicate their time to serving the Cause. One local youth, met during the teaching campaign in Namur, joined the Faith and, within a month, was dedicating a significant portion of his week to service together with another Bahá'í youth.

We also learned the value of drawing upon help and experiences from the more advanced cluster of Brussels. In addition to all the support that was given at the start of this endeavour, the youth from Namur participated in a summer-long intensive training in Brussels with youth from all over the country. The aim of this training was to raise up a cadre of children's class teachers, animators, and tutors. It is envisioned that the youth from Namur will quickly build their experience by working in the more advanced cluster throughout the summer, then take this experience back to their community, and thus also contribute to a culture of mutual support among the youth at the forefront of this process.

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The village of **Tshiabobo** is situated in a cluster which bears the same name in the **Eastern Kasai** region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 2017, the Faith was introduced there by a pioneer from the neighbouring cluster of Mwene-ditu. Below is an adaptation of an account which describes how the process of growth unfolded in the village with the help of the pioneer and a visiting tutor.

Once in the village, the pioneer began naturally engaging the residents in conversations about Bahá'u'lláh and His Mission. When it became clear that there was interest and receptivity in this population, a mobile tutor joined the pioneer in his efforts. This collaboration allowed more individuals to come into contact with the Faith and enabled the formation of two study circles and subsequently the establishment of two devotional gatherings. A children's class was also initiated with approximately 25 children.

This community held a celebration for the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, with the friends working together to host more than 600 people over two days. Among the participants were the head chief of several villages, a number of neighbourhood chiefs, a police inspector, and a leader of the Muslim community in the village. As a result of the celebrations, many of these guests came to embrace the Faith, and the Bahá'í community began to grow.

After the bicentenary celebrations, there were notable signs of transformation in the community, and the Bahá'í activities gained a greater presence in the collective life of the village. The community's devotional character was strengthened with daily morning gatherings for prayer wherein a large part of the population of the village participated. Every night, in each neighbourhood, a town crier would go through the streets calling the inhabitants to attend the gathering in the morning. Even the head chief would participate, as did the other chiefs of the village.

The children's classes were now overflowing with participants, with families sending more than 400 children to take part. As a response, some of the local friends were trained to assist with the classes.

With the help of an assistant to the Auxiliary Board member, the village elected its first Local Spiritual Assembly at Ridván 2018.

The two friends who helped start the community-building process in Tshiabobo have continued to serve alongside the people of the village to hold study circles and raise capacity in the local population.

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Channelling the creative energy of individuals into plans prepared by the institutions

The following story illustrates how a believer answered the call of the Regional Bahá'í Council to return to his home cluster and engage in conversation with the members of his community to explore together how the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and the process of community building could respond to their aspirations and concerns. In just two cycles, this cluster moved significantly along the continuum of development, and the friends are now engaged in an intensive programme of growth. Regional and national institutions were vital in providing impetus for growth and continued support.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

During the periods before and after the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, tremendous effort was made to draw hearts closer to the Blessed Beauty in Papua New Guinea. Regional institutions prepared special plans to which individuals contributed with enthusiasm and creativity. One of the believers serving the region narrates how the entire process began in the **Lovongai** cluster:

A meeting was held for friends serving on regional institutions and agencies to devise strategies for each of the goal clusters in our region. It was decided that the Regional Bahá'í Council would ask friends indigenous to these clusters to visit their homes to raise awareness about the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and put into action a strategy for each cluster; in Lovongai the aim was to establish a study circle for Book 1, start a devotional meeting, and hold a youth gathering.

Once I arrived home, I attended a community meeting to become more familiar with the reality of the village. The challenges faced by the young people were discussed, and local leaders were looking for ways to involve youth in the life of the community. Naturally, this presented an opportunity for me to introduce the idea of a youth gathering and explain its purpose. I spoke about the themes explored in the youth conference materials, such as the period of youth, early adolescence, and mutual support and assistance. I explained that right after we hold a youth gathering we could start the study of Book 1 with the same participants so that they could learn to engage in prayer and nurture the devotional character of the village. I shared that both these programmes are based on the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and spoke about its Founder, Bahá'u'lláh. The local leaders and the community were supportive of this idea.

Together with the Secretary of the Regional Council, I met with the village planning committee chairperson, the village leader, and a local pastor, and we spoke at more community meetings to identify young people whom we could invite to the gathering. More conversations took place during home visits to the parents to seek their

permission for the youth to take three days off from their village chores to attend a youth gathering. We also shared with them about the materials studied in youth gatherings and the themes of the units of Book 1. Through this process a number of youth were identified to be trained as facilitators of the gathering. Twenty-four young people attended the gathering, after which two Book 1 study circles were formed.

After they finished studying Book 1, the tutor accompanied the participants in carrying out acts of service. Two members of the regional institute board came to facilitate a study of Book 3, *Teaching Children's Classes, Grade 1*, and another study of Book 1. As with the first study circles, the participants were assisted to carry out the related practical components, initiate an act of service, and begin studying another book in the sequence. Within two cycles the cluster went from having one devotional meeting and no resident Bahá'ís to 17 devotional gatherings with over 200 participants, 10 children's classes, 11 junior youth groups, and 3 study circles. A number of these participants have also declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh, and at Ridván 2018 the community elected its first Local Spiritual Assembly.

One of the challenges the friends initially faced was opposition from a local church, which took steps to stop the children from attending the classes. However, after several consultations with the religious leaders to clarify the purpose of the Bahá'í Faith and the community-building endeavours, youth were allowed to meet as a group and serve as teachers of children's classes and animators of junior youth groups.

We have observed how these youth have transformed through the study of the institute courses, especially the young men who abandoned the destructive habits of drinking alcohol and taking drugs. Young women and men built bonds of friendship and supported one another in working for the betterment of their village. As the parents observed changes in their children, they began to see their own role in supporting the community-building efforts. We have heard the youth say: "We now know God and have a relationship with Him, and we also know ourselves better."

In time, the youth participated in an institute seminar to continue their training in the sequence of courses and to deepen their understanding of the framework of the Five Year Plan. Accompanied by members of the training institute board and the Regional Bahá'í Council, as well as an Auxiliary Board member, they also practised serving as tutors with the aim of lending support in the future to neighbouring villages.

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Conversing about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation and bringing friends into contact with the community-building process

This story of a small community shows how initial endeavours in the spirit of teaching can be nurtured with love and commitment, with systematic effort and a clear vision, so that a growing group of friends can establish a pattern of growth to advance their own spiritual progress and contribute to the betterment of their community.

ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

In the small village of **Owia** in **St. Vincent**, one of the many islands spread across the Caribbean, a flourishing of community life emerged from seeds that were planted by a believer and lovingly nurtured by visiting friends through carefully planned steps that bore visible fruits in a short amount of time. This narrative is an example of how a community can be opened to the Faith and a pattern of action can quickly be established through sustained focus on fostering a capacity-building process in a local population.

The first spark of teaching occurred when a believer from Barbados returned to visit Owia so he could thank the officers at the police station for the kindness that was shown to him some 37 years earlier, when he had found himself lost on the island. During his stay, he took the opportunity to share with whoever crossed his path about Bahá'u'lláh and His Mission. Inspired by the openness and receptivity of the people in this village, he returned some months later together with a small team to continue teaching and provide support in starting the activities of the institute process. The following is adapted from a report shared by the regional institute coordinator; it describes how the seeds that were planted began to grow:

Before our arrival, we contacted the two youth who had accepted the Faith during the first visit and asked them to help organize a gathering on the first day of the Bahá'í month. To our amazement, some 40 people gathered, and after prayers and songs, we had a fireside where the Teachings were shared and many questions were asked, resulting in several more people joining the Bahá'í community by the end of the evening. The next day, we had further conversations with the participants, giving particular attention to framing a vision for the community's development and well-being. Everyone agreed that within two days the team should start a study circle for Book 1.

On the day of the first meeting, the team agreed to divide into smaller groups by activity, holding a study circle for Book 1 for the adults simultaneously with a youth gathering and a children's class, while the visiting teacher continued to converse with more and more people about Bahá'u'lláh and the activities that were occurring.

The women participating in the study circle had some difficulties with reading, but their spirits were so uplifted that this did not become an obstacle. Instead, they helped one another to write the answers, and there was much discussion, which led to laughter and joy. They said that it would not be easy to do some of the things presented in Book 1, but nevertheless they were willing to try to apply the spiritual principles, little by little, each day. At first they had a hard time memorizing, but with creativity and determination, it became much easier, and they celebrated their achievements. Music also played an important role in helping the women to memorize the prayers, demonstrating the efficacy of the use of the arts in the institute process.

The youth studied a portion of the materials prepared for the youth conferences in 2013 and watched some of the videos from those gatherings. This inspired further discussion on their distinct role in the community. The next day they started their study of Book 1.

From the outset, the team was conscious to maintain a vision for the long-term progress of the community, seeking to accompany its movement through the sequence of courses, deepen its understanding of the principles and spiritual themes of the Faith, and nurture a sense of ownership so that the villagers could soon establish their own activities.

Even at this early stage in the village's initial steps on the path leading to Bahá'u'lláh, there was an atmosphere of unity and a desire to learn and progress together as a community. On the final day of our visit, many people asked what was going to happen after the team left. We encouraged the youth by sharing with them the idea of advancing through the institute process, so that they themselves could arise to serve their community from within by having children's classes and junior youth groups as well as spaces to pray together and reflect on what they were learning. In response, the youth planned to meet twice a week to discuss the concepts they were learning about in Book 1 and to memorize the quotations. What a promising example of the youth taking ownership of their own growth and progress!

We felt an urgent need to maintain the momentum in the community, and we therefore decided that the support team would visit Owia every month.

Over the next few months, meaningful change could be observed not only within each participant in the activities, but also in the dynamics of community life.

It was apparent to everyone that a new spirit had entered the community, with adults and youth serving together to cook for some of the days of the study sessions, praying together, and singing together—all experiences that we were told were previously not normal occurrences in their day-to-day community life.

One sign of positive change brought about by the institute process was the increasing sense of reverence towards the Sacred Texts. In the beginning it was a struggle for everyone to maintain a respectful attitude during prayers. However, after studying the unit on prayer in Book 1, the adults encouraged one another to make a greater effort to stay focused. We observed the deepening of their understanding of prayer as a conversation with God.

Another sign of the transformation that was occurring as a result of their collective study of the revealed Word was the women's increasing sense of ownership of their own progress. One of them took it upon herself to visit and bring together the others, which helped start each study session in a timely manner. Another offered her home for a devotional meeting. The development of bonds of spiritual friendship was evident in the study circle, particularly when participants were helping one another with reading.

The youth also continued to be committed to their study and looked forward to carrying out their own acts of service.

Because study and action must go hand in hand for real movement to occur, a major outcome of the consultations during the study sessions was for each participant to visualize their path of service in the community.

Some of the youth visited and shared prayers with one of the adults, who had lost a friend in a tragic accident. Others had expressed a desire to work with children, so they helped organize activities for the young ones during an Ayyám-i-Há party. When they reflected afterwards, they said that they had had a wonderful experience and would like to do something like this again. One of the youth conveyed that the Bahá'í teachings had helped her think about how she could set an example for those younger than her. Another expressed interest in working with junior youth.

Over the course of the visits, one of our team members took on the training of three youth in the first unit of Book 3 and helped them start using a few lessons from the materials. After the children's class was established, these youth conveyed how rewarding it was to be able to teach the class together and that this only made them more interested in the spiritual education of children. We worked with a fourth youth to begin the study of Book 5, *Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth*, and of a few lessons from the first junior youth text, *Breezes of Confirmation*, and together we were able to form a junior youth group. Like the others, this new junior youth animator was excited about starting his own group; he shared that his new-found love of working with this special age group had doubled once he put what he had learned into practice.

What a joy it was to see and feel the significant changes within the community in terms of an overall increase in the friends' desire to learn and acquire more knowledge through study in order to serve their village. It was also evident that they were striving to apply what they learned within the context of their daily lives.

All the while, there was an ever-increasing love for Bahá'u'lláh and curiosity about His life among youth and adults alike, and evenings were often devoted to conversations on this topic.

There were many questions about the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, and they wanted to hear stories about His life. In response to this, the community got together one evening to view the film *Light to the World*. The next day, during the study circle, the youth had a discussion on progressive revelation arising from a question that was asked about the Manifestations of God.

Four monthly visits, each lasting a week or longer, were dedicated to assisting this expanding group of individuals to begin to develop a vision for the future of their village within the framework of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and to take steps to translate that vision into action. The process that cultivated a new sense of agency and purpose in these individuals gave rise to the establishment of regular activities by the youth and adults and created conditions for the election of a Local Spiritual Assembly.

Recently, Owia elected its very first Local Spiritual Assembly. There was a wonderful celebration of the First Day of Ridván, which was attended by almost two dozen members of the community. Just before the election, the friends prayed

together, studied and consulted on quotations from the Guardian on the spiritual nature of Bahá'í elections, and discussed some aspects of the role of the Local Assembly. The adult Bahá'ís, who were voting for the very first time, spent a long time praying before carrying out this sacred duty. Many of them moved out of the small house where the election was being held and found dark corners outside, using the light of their cellular phones to complete their ballots. The energy generated during that meeting contributed to a historic moment for the community of Owia.

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