

LIVING NATION

The Bahá'í Council Newsletter

Dear loved co-workers:

The precious period of Riḍván – acclaimed by the Blessed Beauty as the “Festival of God” – is upon us. With humility and earnestness, we turn our hearts to the fresh outpouring of guidance from the Universal House of Justice. We read, in its message of Riḍván 2015, of the call to “carry out and support” the work that lies before the community, a call that is “directed to every follower of Bahá'u'lláh”, a call that “will evoke a response in every heart that aches at the wretched condition of the world”.

A brief twelve months now separate us from the end of the current Five Year Plan. Analysing the current progress of the Faith across the region reveals a landscape full of opportunity: There are now three clusters where there are over 200 individuals taking part in devotional meetings, children's classes, junior youth groups and study circles. In such clusters questions are arising as to how to work with larger and larger numbers and how to strengthen the rhythm of 3-monthly cycles of activity. As work continues to advance, insights that are emerging are beginning to assist clusters at earlier stages of development. Within the region, nine clusters are yet to establish a programme of growth. In almost all of these, efforts are already underway, often supported by the work of a visiting team or a pioneer.

As we contemplate the short interval that remains before the end of the Plan, our thoughts surely turn to the part that we can play in advancing this mighty enterprise. “How many times”, the Universal House of Justice reminds us this Riḍván, “have the deeds of a few believers – young or old – or of a single family, or even a lone soul, when confirmed by the power of divine assistance, succeeded in cultivating vibrant communities in seemingly inhospitable climes?”

The stories contained in these pages offer a glimpse into some of the exertions that friends across this region are making in response to the call of the Universal House of Justice. It is the prayer of the Council that all believers, inspired by these stories and others, will arise energetically in pursuing those twin tasks that lie before us before the end of the Plan: strengthening existing programmes of growth and beginning new ones.

As each of us arises to contribute our share, this promise of the beloved Master fills our hearts with assurance:

"O ye servants of the Sacred Threshold! The triumphant hosts of the Celestial Concourse, arrayed and marshalled in the Realms above, stand ready and expectant to assist and assure victory to that valiant horseman who with confidence spurs on his charger into the arena of service. Well is it with that fearless warrior, who armed with the power of true Knowledge, hastens unto the field, disperses the armies of ignorance, and scatters the hosts of error, who holds aloft the Standard of Divine Guidance, and sounds the Clarion of Victory. By the righteousness of the Lord! He hath achieved a glorious triumph and obtained the true victory."

With deepest love, prayers and affection,

Bahá'í Council for England

Teaching Stories

A youth accompanies a lone pioneer to the Isle of Man

An account of a trip with Simin, a Bahá'í lady from Nottingham, who is hoping to pioneer to the Isle of Man.



As the plane was descending into Isle of Man airport, and the thousands of tiny glowing lights below were getting closer, Simin began to weep. It appeared a swell of excitement, love, and gratitude invaded her heart.

She told me she loves adventure. She doesn't like being in a routine for too long, and going from only five days of spending time with her, I can confirm that this is true. On one of the cold

dark evenings we were there, she wanted to go for a walk on the beach. I repeat: it was a very dark, cold, and windy night in the middle of November, in a tiny island in the middle of the Irish Sea. I was in my pyjamas in bed, ready to call it a night... at 8pm. But I didn't want to dampen her spirits, so we went out. Simin was enjoying the sounds of the crashing, roaring waves. All of a sudden, as if the excitement wasn't enough, the heavens opened and rain started pelting down, verging on hail. We ran back to the hotel laughing and squealing, and had to put all our drenched clothes on the radiators to dry.



Her adventurous spirit doesn't stop there. Every day she told me stories about her experiences pioneering in China for six years(!). Those years brought her so much happiness, so many confirmations, and so much learning, that she is sure the Isle of Man will be just the same.

We explored the capital, Douglas, to see what accommodation was available for Simin and where she could find

work as a counsellor. We also did a lot of general exploring so she could get to know the area and the inhabitants and soak up more of the atmosphere of the isle. However, once she liked the feel of the place, she didn't seem too concerned with having an organised plan before moving there; she said all

she needed was a small affordable flat to live in for the moment, and Bahá'u'lláh will sort out everything else.

I wondered how and where she developed such trust in Bahá'u'lláh. She told me that losing her sight was the suffering that brought her so in touch with her spirituality, and went on to explain that suffering is the greatest tool for spiritual development if you turn to God for assistance.

We ended the lovely trip by taking one last walk to the beach to chant Bahá'u'lláh's beautiful words that define the source of Simin's unshakeable courage:

'God is sufficient unto me; He verily is the All-sufficing! In Him let the trusting trust.'

Simin visiting the three Bahá'ís that live on the island - Ruby, Tony and John.

Since this story has been written, Simin has moved to the Isle of Man and the Council and visiting teams from mainland Clusters have pledged to support her for periods of intense teaching.



The power of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár

In a recent message of the Universal House of Justice about gatherings dedicated to prayer, they quote the Beloved Master:

As to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, it is of the utmost importance....It may assume any form, for even if it be an underground pit, that pit shall become a sheltering paradise, an exalted bower, and a garden of delight. It shall become a centre wherein the spirits are gladdened and the hearts attracted to the Abhá Kingdom.

With a keenly raised consciousness that spaces for the worship of our Creator, regardless of where they occur, are the embryo of that divine institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, the friends were inspired to make efforts to raise the devotional character of London so that neighbourhood after neighbourhood, estate after estate and home after home may be moved by the Creative Word. An encounter designed to raise the quality and quantity of spaces dedicated to prayer was organised in one of the five sectors in Greater London cluster. Friends from all over the sector and beyond gathered together in the early afternoon to pray and deepen together. Conscious that, in the words of the House of Justice, devotional meetings are 'not merely activities to be multiplied but fundamental aspects of Bahá'í community life intended for all', the friends present at the encounter were all inspired to go on visits to various homes across the cluster to share a prayer.

A pair of friends had a beautiful visit to the mother of a junior youth who has just recently joined a group in London. Despite being very busy having to look after her young son and cook dinner she lovingly bade them enter her home and take a seat. They began by speaking together a little about prayer: its nature and purpose and how it is our solace in times of anguish. The mother shared her experiences of prayer and worship as she was growing up in Nigeria. She shared that it brought unity to the village and created bonds of love between its inhabitants. The visiting friends then shared a Bahá'í prayer and there followed a profound silence as all those in the room reflected on the words. She spoke a little about her husband who sadly passed away recently due to illness and then more prayers were offered for the progress of his soul in the realms beyond. It was an incredibly moving moment as all shut their eyes and supplicated God, asking that this man's soul may attain His presence. Since this visit there have been more visits to have spiritual conversations and speak about the Bahá'í Faith. She now hopes to attend one of the Bahá'í devotional meetings that occur near her home.

A second group of friends shared prayers with another junior youth and her mother. This was the second time prayers were being shared with them. During the first meeting, prayer books were given as gifts to them and during this meeting the junior youth brought one of the prayer books and chose the prayer for her mum to read. All present shared prayers. The mother was very touched by the words she heard and mentioned how beautiful these prayers are and how her younger children would also very much enjoy this. The visiting friends suggested that this could be a weekly occurrence and that the animator would be happy to join and read prayers with the family. The animator during the next visit shared a children's prayer book with the junior youth to read to their siblings. The junior youth and her mother were very happy, and the mother said she would make sure that the prayers would be read to the children. Overall, the visit was a beautiful coming together of souls to pray and meditate and no doubt planted the seeds for a regular devotional meeting.

It was clear to all of the friends who attended the encounter and went on subsequent visits to share prayers that the act of sharing a prayer with a friend, regardless of belief or background, is the most natural expression of love from one soul to another.

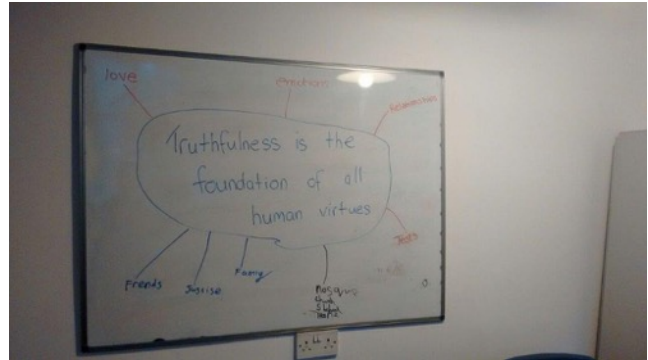
Serving full time before going to university - Youth Year of Service

The Council has noted that an increasing number of our youth offering a year of service are now deciding to stay within the UK and serve in the context of a neighbourhood, often in the city in which they then stay to pursue their university studies. The following is a report from two of our youth— who are currently on their year of service in Broomhall, Sheffield:

Broomhall lies right next to Sheffield city centre and is renowned for its crime rate in the 1990's, and its student vibe and diversity in the present day. It is now populated predominantly by Arabic and Somali families (many of which came



to Sheffield so the parents could study their PhD or Masters), as well as students of either the University of Sheffield or Sheffield Hallam. On one side of Broomhall lies a large council estate with an incredibly diverse population. At the heart lies a primary school surrounded by the homes of all the Arabic and Somali families, as well as the many students. Across the main road from the school is Broomhall Community Centre which is host to many activities for young and old, male and female alike including the famed Homework Club, Sahaja Yoga Meditation, Student Cookery Lessons and a team which dedicates time to researching the history of the area.



Cameron and I moved into Broomhall on 9th October 2014, with the aim of dedicating a year to learn about how to 'raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development.'

We began with focusing on a few questions to learn more about over the course of the

first few weeks. These were: 'how can we meet people?' 'How can we engage in meaningful conversation with these people?' and 'how can we build true friendships with them?' Since then these questions have gradually changed as we learned more about the reality of the neighbourhood and as we have begun establishing activities.

We have experimented with many different methods for meeting people - children, junior youth, youth and parents. For example, playing football in the park by the school has been useful as it has been with a wide range of ages, and often parents watch or come to pick their children up which gives us a chance to have a conversation with them about the activities. Living in the same neighbourhood has of course been vital as we are able to regularly visit families in order to consult about the activities and their involvement in it. One thing we have also found to be important is to try and meet with the children and junior youth as much as we can outside of the classes in order to build more meaningful friendships.



It has been beneficial to try to be as involved as possible with the activities already established in Broomhall, and try to work with the institutions such as the school and the people who run the community centre. I have recently started volunteering at the Homework Club, which is attended by

Council for England

The Council for England is a Regional Council that acts under the direction of the National Spiritual Assembly, for teaching and expansion in England, while working closely with the Counsellor, Training Institute and the Auxiliary Board Members in community development work

England's Regional Council is elected by members of Local Spiritual Assemblies and starts work on the Day of the Covenant each year.

Share your stories!

Please send in your stories, photos and local and cluster newsletters to bcnewsletter@bahai.org.uk

30 or 40 children from Broomhall each week. This is a chance to serve in another capacity, make friends with a growing number of children and junior youth, and get to know like-minded youth who are also volunteering and who see helping those younger than themselves as an important aspect of life.

At the moment we have a children's class running at the community centre with the support of 7 or so families, although we are due to move it into our flat now that we have gained the trust of the parents; a level of momentum has been sustained as some of the children are being accompanied to talk to their friends about it. We are currently in the process of establishing a junior youth group in the neighbourhood, with the first session due to be on 14th March. Many of the Arabic/Somali families in Broomhall have a number of children and JY so having the support of parents for the children's class has made it easier to approach them with the possibility of starting a junior youth group for their older children.

Not long ago we began a weekly Ted Talk discussion evening at our flat. The aim was to invite the students and youth in our neighbourhood in order to form veritable friendships based on meaningful conversation. Since then we have reflected on its purpose, and have decided to use this evening instead as a youth gathering in which all the youth involved in the Institute Process in Sheffield can study materials together (such as Youth Conference materials, excerpts from Book 5 and junior youth

texts and *Frontiers of Learning*), take part in creative activities, reflect on the core activities in light of the materials being studied, and really try and develop a unity of vision. The hope is that these weekly youth gatherings will ensure everyone feels part of youth movement based on mutual support, develop coherence between all the activities and be a space to which we can invite any youth we meet who have a desire to enter into the Institute Process.

We work closely with a few Bahá'í youth who live nearby, and it has been really exciting to be advancing our understanding together. One of the main things we have been learning about is how to accompany those youth we are meeting in Broomhall, and one thing that has led to growth is finding those youth who have the capacity to rally their friends. What is encouraging to know is that most of us will be here for the next few years. As a result, we are able to make long-term goals for the coming year and aim for a future in which the youth we are currently accompanying will eventually run their own core activities and accompany their friends on a path of service.

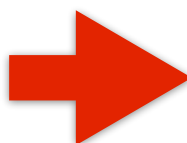
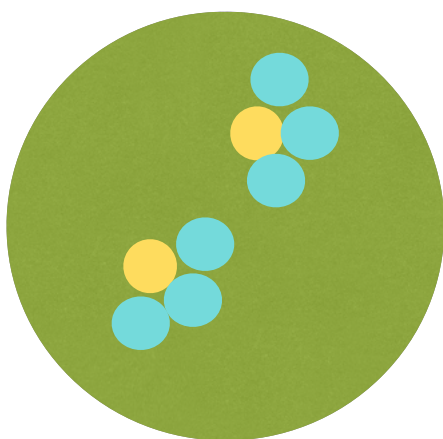
Learning about the Five Year Plan 2011-2016

“What are the *nascent* capacities that must be developed?

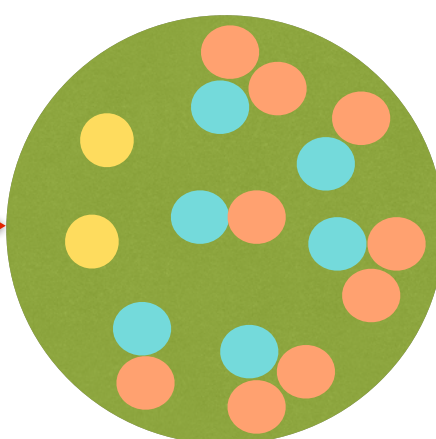
“in the document *Insights from the Frontiers of Learning*, the International Teaching Centre describe two nascent capacities that must be developed in a Cluster for growth to occur....

1st nascent capacity

One or more friends in a cluster must be able to help individuals study the institute's sequence of courses and accompany them as they initiate core activities.



2nd nascent capacity



...then these individuals must be able to attract others to participate in the core activities.