

UK BAHÁ'Í

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The Dawning Place

How “worship and meaningful service are being woven into the fabric of the lives of Bahá’ís everywhere”

A RELEASE OF DIVINE POWER

Generating and channelling spiritual energy for the well-being of all.

DEVOTIONAL GATHERINGS

From family-friendly prayer meetings to Scottish stone circles.

MOTHER TEMPLE OF SOUTH AMERICA

Dedication of the last continental House of Worship.

LEARNING TO PRAY

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s lesson for an early believer.



Welcome to *UK Bahá'í*

With this edition of *UK Bahá'í*, we are embarking on a new approach to the magazine. Each issue will focus on a particular theme, to be explored through articles, quotations and prayers from the Bahá'í writings, and artistic expression. It is hoped that each of the themes will capture an aspect of the UK and worldwide Bahá'í community today and be a source of inspiration and information for all readers. To this end, we encourage you to share *UK Bahá'í* with friends, family members and those who are attending your gatherings. The next issue will focus on the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and we would be delighted to receive any creative responses that have already been produced in anticipation of this important event.

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introduction

The Dawning Place of the Remembrance of God

From vision to reality

IN ORDER FOR the human race to establish and sustain a much longed for era of peace and prosperity, new habits and practices based on universal values and spiritual principles are required. Thus, in His Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh specifically ordains institutions that harmoniously blend the spiritual with the physical administration of society. Among such institutions, He calls for “Houses of Worship” to be erected, “throughout the lands in the name of Him Who is the Lord of all religions.”¹ Defined in Arabic as *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* (“Dawning-place of the remembrance of God”), the doors of these Temples would be open to all. “Then, with radiance and joy, celebrate therein the praise of your Lord, the Most Compassionate.”²

Within the century and a half that followed its birth, the Bahá'í Faith spread to every country on the planet, and such Houses of Worship began to appear on continent after continent as expressions of the oneness of God and the oneness of religion. With the dedication in October 2016 of the final continental House of Worship—in Santiago, Chile—the Bahá'í world is now engaged in the task of raising up the first two national, and the first five local, Houses of Worship.

In broad terms, the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* is defined as any building—in a city, town or village—that is dedicated to the praise of God. Specifically, however, Bahá'u'lláh envisaged a new structure of society where the life of a community would begin each day with the recitation of, and reflection upon, the revealed Scriptures of the world's great

religious traditions. Daily worship in the Temple, established at the spiritual and physical heart of community, would then be translated and transfused into service to the surrounding society. To this end, essential dependencies would emerge, situated around the House of Worship, each of them dedicated to social, humanitarian, educational, and scientific pursuits.

Bahá'u'lláh called for the House of Worship to be “as perfect as is possible in the world of being.”³ In their design, function, beauty and refinement, these Temples are in essence a physical reflection of the harmony of the spiritual realms, as well as a vehicle by which the power that the Word of God possesses to transform human hearts and behaviour can be made accessible to many, inspiring a new pattern of life.

In Bahá'í communities throughout the United Kingdom and all around the world, the nascent stages of the institution of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* are becoming increasingly evident. The “holding of regular meetings for worship open to all and the involvement of Bahá'í communities in projects of humanitarian service are expressions of this element of Bahá'í life and a further step in the implementation of the Law of God.”⁴

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. K. 31, p. 29.

² *ibid.*, K. 31, p. 29.

³ *ibid.*, K. 31, p. 29.

⁴ Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World*, 28 December 1999.

featured article

A release of Divine Power through Bahá'í Houses of Worship

Adapted from *The Forces of Our Time*

by Hooper C. Dunbar

THE BAHÁ'Í HOUSE OF WORSHIP, a divinely ordained institution that instils spiritual power into human affairs, is one of the greatest gifts of Bahá'u'lláh to the world in this day. Called the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* or 'Dawning Place of the Remembrance of God', the House of Worship, according to Bahá'u'lláh's injunction, is a nine-sided place of prayer and meditation, surrounded by dependencies that supply the community's needs for education, health and social well-being.

Spiritual forces converge upon and radiate out from the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, and the 'higher the degree of our renunciation and self-sacrifice, the wider the range of the contributing believers, the more apparent will become the vitalizing forces that are to emanate from this unique and sacred Edifice . . .'¹

Visitors to the Houses of Worship occasionally ask why funds have not been used instead to address poverty. While a valid question when considered in the short term alone, the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* represents the sole enduring solution to the ills of humanity – namely the coming together of all humanity (regardless of race, rank or gender) in loving devotion to its common Creator and, radiating out from and based firmly upon this common recognition, the establishment of structures and agencies that can then address the socio-economic needs of humanity.

The essential activities of worshipping God and serving humanity coalesce in the House of Worship complex in a powerful way. Shoghi Effendi has written that, 'Nothing short of direct and constant interaction between the spiritual forces emanating from this House of Worship centring in the heart of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, and the energies consciously displayed by those who administer its affairs in their service to humanity can possibly provide

the necessary agency capable of removing the ills that have so long and so grievously afflicted humanity.' He tells us that prayer, by itself, produces the fruits of pious worship and the exaltation of the soul; but to have an abiding effect in the world and to transform the conditions of mankind these inner benefits have to be tied to organized service. In other words, in order to accomplish anything we need to have the spiritual forces which come from the Word of God, combined with practical action in service to humanity. This combination alone will succeed.

For it is assuredly upon the consciousness of the efficacy of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, reinforced on one hand by spiritual communion with His Spirit, and on the other by the intelligent application and faithful execution of the principles and laws He revealed, that the salvation of a world in travail must ultimately depend.

Another letter written on the Guardian's behalf addresses the effect of group prayers: 'He does not believe any radiations of thought or healing, from any group, is going to bring peace. Prayer, no doubt, will help the world, but what it needs is to accept Bahá'u'lláh's system so as to build up the World Order on a new foundation, a divine foundation . . .' Prayer is important but a new divine foundation must also be created.

We see above that the Guardian emphasized the necessary

Bahá'í Houses of Worship shown opposite left to right from the top; Kampala, Uganda. Chicago, USA. Santiago, Chile. Tiapapata, Samoa. Ishaqábád, Turkmenistan. Sydney, Australia. Panama City, Panama. Delhi, India. Frankfurt, Germany.



interaction between ‘the spiritual forces emanating from this House of Worship’ and ‘the energies consciously displayed by those who administer its affairs in their service to humanity’. There is a pulsing interaction between the spiritual power of the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár*, the divinely-ordained House of Worship where believers are enjoined to gather at dawn to remember and praise their Lord, and that unseen power’s outer manifestation through the worshippers’ work in the everyday world, especially via the future dependencies of the House of Worship.

Spiritual communion creates a tremendous power which is channelled and released through the House of Worship. Sometimes we feel this in large conferences of believers; the excitement of many souls turning towards God together; the interplay of spirits, the light upon light of the souls of the friends reflecting off each other. Communal worship in the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár* will generate this spiritual energy and channel it for the well-being of the community at large.

Shoghi Effendi in one of his communications referred to the forces that the American House of Worship, ‘this mighty symbol of our Faith’, was ‘fast releasing in [the] heart of a sorely tried continent’.

Systematic and sustained effort in teaching is required for the forces released by the House of Worship to be utilized in worthy and effective ways. He further states that the ‘completion of the Temple should . . . release tremendous and unprecedented forces of spiritual energy, destined to be wholly consecrated to the teaching tasks’. The ‘creative energies’ unleashed by the completion of a House of Worship are ‘incalculable.’

The Houses of Worship are concrete expressions of the power of the Faith, taking unique form upon the diverse continents of the planet. Each one of them, as with the buildings of the administrative arc on Mount Carmel, demonstrates and channels divine energy.

¹ Letter of Shoghi Effendi, 6 December 1928, in Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration*, p. 154 *ibid.*, K. 31, p. 29.

² Letter of Shoghi Effendi, 25 October 1929, in *ibid.* p. 186.

³ Letter of Shoghi Effendi, 25 October 1929, in *ibid.* p. 186.

⁴ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 6 June 1948, in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 432, no. 1416.

⁵ Letter of Shoghi Effendi, 25 October 1929, in Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration*, p. 186.

England

Family-friendly devotionals

A retiree and a mother of two have been working together to create mother and baby devotionals in London.

ABOUT A YEAR AFTER having my second child, I was approached by one of the Bahá'ís in my neighbourhood, who asked if she could support me in any way in serving the Faith. She had recently retired and wanted to dedicate her time to service. I saw it as a great opportunity as I wasn't working full time either so there was an opportunity to start a morning devotional with mums and babies in my home. I met Himali at a mum and baby playgroup and we hit it off straight away. She assisted in a service project I was running in an East London school at that time and we talked with excitement about youth empowerment and transformation among other topics! It seemed natural to invite her to a devotional and I remember her saying 'that sounds fun!' Her background is Hindu and she was keen to give her son the same kind of spiritual upbringing that she had herself. We met weekly and before long Himali was also hosting the meeting in her own home. We now have two families regularly attending and the children are now age 2-3. We have also introduced the Family Virtues Guide and we read about a virtue every week after prayers. One of the key things about our devotionals is that they are 'family

Bahá'í toddlers with their mothers at a family-friendly devotional gathering.

friendly'. We only do a couple of prayers and readings, so it is short, but beautiful. We have toddlers after all! It took me a while to come around to the idea that our devotionals are just as powerful and important as those that are more elaborate and lengthy. My friends have testified to just how important these meetings have been in their lives, giving them strength and a loving environment at a time when life is challenging. There is a strong sense of love between the participants and it is very special - a simple but very real foundation for community building.

England

Young people and prayer

An animator of a group involved in the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme for 12-15 year olds was happy to see how one of the young people in the group was being transformed by prayer.

ONE OF THE junior youth in my group really enjoys prayer, and always likes to say several prayers at the beginning of the group (many times the long healing prayer!) Because of his love of prayer, I gave him a prayer book and encouraged him to share it with his siblings and family. We even made a little programme for a devotional within his family. However, it seems he didn't get the support he needed at home and it didn't really happen. One day as I was visiting his mother to register her son for the junior youth camp, I took the cards with the various quotes and prayers from the junior youth and



children's class material with me. With the family we spoke about the importance of prayer, including why we pray, and I suggested we share prayers together. The junior youth then divided the cards between his siblings and mother, each one read their quote and we started singing songs and chanting prayers. The mother was amazed by her child as she hadn't seen this side of him before, praying loudly and confidently, and encouraging his younger siblings to pray. We spoke about this becoming a regular space. I realised that my initial encouragement was with words only, but that through a simple gesture of being there physically to accompany the junior youth in his home, the seed of a family devotional was sown.

England

Inspiration in a museum

A local Bahá'í community has been experimenting with public devotional gatherings in the town's museum.

IN ORDER TO find more people to promote a devotional spirit in the Northamptonshire market town of Wellingborough, the local Bahá'í community has been experimenting with public devotional gatherings in the town's museum. Posters and flyers are posted around the town, friends and family members are invited, and an article appeared in the local newspaper. The first two devotionals were wonderful, spiritual occasions which deeply touched all present, including many new friends, amongst

whom were some who responded to the newspaper article. Some have since been visited in their homes, and neighbourhood devotionals are among the plans for following up the contact.

Scotland

Prayers in a stone circle

Five millennia after it was built, an ancient Scottish monument offers a peaceful spot for a devotional.

ON A GENTLE HILL SLOPE, one mile west of Inverurie in north-east Scotland, stands an ancient circle of nine stones. Created between four-and-a-half and five thousand years ago, it's not known how they came to be there or what their purpose was; there are some 200 such stone circles in the region. The name of this particular site, however, suggest that this has always been a sanctified place – it's known as Easter Aquhorthies, which in Scottish Gaelic means 'field of prayer'

The atmospheric site has become a favourite place for Bahá'ís and their friends to visit for devotional gatherings. When they were considering how to mark the twin Holy Day celebrations of the Births of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in October 2016, the stone circle came to mind and a devotional held within it became part of a weekend-long programme of festivities and commemorations.

"It was a bit chilly, huddled together," said local Bahá'í Andrew Goodwin, "but it has a special atmosphere of unity. The kids particularly loved it."

The Goodwins host a devotional gathering in their home every



Friday morning and now often take their friends up to the stone circle for prayers.

“There aren’t many other places you can go to, where you can touch something that was built so long ago,” said Andrew, “and you think of all the people that have been there.”

“It’s very calm and peaceful.”



Northern Ireland

Breaking down barriers

Bahá'ís join with their Roman Catholic neighbours in an inclusive prayer gathering.

WHEN EDWIN AND MAHVASH GRAHAM first moved into their house in Gawley’s Gate, Craigavon, they were told by their neighbours the significance of the house’s name, ‘Lisieux’. It honoured one of the most popular of saints, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Known as ‘The Little Flower’, she is revered by Roman Catholics for the simplicity and practicality of her approach to a spiritual life. The Grahams were told that a previous owner of the house in the 1950s held regular devotional gatherings there in honour of Saint Thérèse, and that’s also how the house got its name.

“We live in a very close-knit community,” said Edwin, “and the implication was our neighbours would not appreciate changing the name of the house to anything overtly Protestant!”

The Grahams feel that their devotional life and their service in the neighbourhood are inextricably linked, so – following in the footsteps of their house’s previous owner – they decided to host their own devotional for the neighbours, and enlisted some of them to help in the planning.

Music and the arts constitute a significant part of Baha'i devotional life around the world. Here, in Manurewa, New Zealand, a group of young people sing and play music at a recent community gathering.



As they arrived, the guests were asked if there was anyone in particular who they would like to remember in their prayers. One friend's husband had been recently killed in a farm accident.

"We share with Catholics a belief that the soul continues to progress," said Edwin. "She found it incredibly helpful and supportive."

Being sensitive to the strong Roman Catholic character of the neighbourhood, the devotionals include extracts from the Bahá'í writings, as well as Christian prayers and readings, and much Irish music.

On one occasion, an interfaith choir, including Hindus and a Sikh, joined the programme.

"We always make a point to make it as wide and as open as possible," said Edwin. "In the writings we choose, we are careful not to have anything that could appear to be exclusive."

Wales

Joy and inspiration from devotionals

Devotionals are held regularly across South Wales. At our last count there were 14 happening on a regular basis with approximately 54 participants involved.

IN BLAINA, GWENT, a monthly devotional is held, called a 'Tranquillity Zone'. People from Blaina come, along with other friends from further afield. The evenings are generally well attended. Readings and music around a theme are chosen and occasionally a short video is shown afterwards, or something creative is explored to help people think about the readings. Often during refreshments, people naturally gather in smaller groups and converse on different topics, spiritual and practical.

A married couple in New Inn host a weekly devotional mid-week, come rain or come shine. They often serve dinner if they know a group is able to join them. A monthly devotional is held in Abergavenny by a couple who live quite far from the rest of the community. These friends are the beacons of light in their part of the world.

The Local Spiritual Assembly of Newport hosts two public devotionals a month and there are two other devotionals hosted by individual families. The community is learning how to invite friends and contacts to join them, which can sometimes be a struggle. One devotional in Newport has been particularly successful in attracting friends of the Faith, creating an environment full of laughter and connecting with the arts including music and craft work. One of the participants at these devotionals has since declared and is an active teacher of the Faith, bringing two friends of hers into the Welsh Bahá'í community.

Regular devotionals have been held for years in Morryston in Swansea. These provide a space in which souls can 'experience the sweetness of prayer', and for some this has been the start of a longer journey. At this time, the friends are focused on an expanding children's class and junior youth group, which in turn is raising the possibility of a more intense involvement in the neighbourhood. Right now the devotionals, held every week or so, provide a space of calm for those who are working so hard to sustain the wider process.

In Abercarn, the 'Valleys Hub Devotionals' provide a fortnightly space for reflection on the community building efforts in the Valleys. Participants pray for healing, say powerful prayers for community building in South Wales and then are then the space to speak about the 'meaningful and distinctive' conversations they have had in the previous two weeks and other efforts to bring friends and contacts closer to Bahá'u'lláh. Reflection happens and much encouragement is given. Everyone goes away feeling uplifted, empowered and supported by each other and the spiritual forces that surround us.

Wales

Anywhere His Praise is Celebrated

Following a request by the National Spiritual Assembly for the friends to hold devotional meetings during the period of the dedication of the final Continental House of Worship in Santiago, Chile, friends were invited to a devotional at a Bahá'í home in Maesteg, South Wales.

THE BAHÁ'Í COUPLE who hosted the devotional were encouraged and inspired by a message from the National Assembly, along with suggested appropriate readings and stories for a devotional programme. They felt moved to read that Bahá'u'lláh stated a *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* is anywhere His praise is celebrated. The Universal House of Justice confirmed (Dec 2015) this when they said, 'by convening a gathering for worship at which adults and children of any background are welcome, the spirit of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* is evoked in any locality'. Seven friends attended from across South Wales. This was the first devotional meeting hosted by the married couple and they felt it was an important milestone in their renewed efforts to become more actively involved in promoting the Faith in their local area. So, while the House of Worship was being dedicated in Chile, the friends felt that this humble home in Maesteg was also being dedicated for the praise of Bahá'u'lláh.



featured article

The dedication of the Chile Temple

Temple hailed as a 'transcendental gift'
to Chile and the continent

LOCATED IN THE FOOTHILLS of the Andes in Santiago, Chile, the Bahá'í House of Worship of South America opened its doors on 19 October 2016. This House of Worship joins the other continental houses of worship as a meeting point that promotes unity through free participation in acts of prayer and service while in a serene environment, free of rituals or ceremonies.

Other than being a place for prayer and meditation, the Temple is a place where individuals and groups carry out diverse community activities. Participation is open to all those who are interested in contributing to the progress of society.

When Bahá'í Temples are raised, the practice of prayer and service gradually cause individuals to join in harmony, and their hearts to flourish with unity and affection.

Attending the first of a series of opening ceremonies were some 500 guests from Chile, including senior figures from the government and civil society, as well as representatives from South, Central, and North America and the Caribbean, and further afield. The ceremonies also brought more than 5,000 Bahá'ís from 110 countries beneath the House of Worship's soaring dome.

Opening the dedication ceremony, Felipe Duhart – secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Chile – said that the desire of the Bahá'ís is that 'the House of Worship will become the heart and nerve centre for this whole community', and 'a refuge for prayer'.

The representative of the President of Chile, Minister Secretary General Nicolás Eyzaguirre, emphasised the role of the House of Worship as a 'transcendental space that looks for unity and respect for all religious backgrounds'.

'It is a Temple which makes our landscape a more beautiful one,' he said. 'It will become an icon and it will remind us how important it is to find the unity between the city and nature.'

The Temple is located outside Santiago in Peñalolen, a commune whose name in the local language means 'reunion of brothers'. As the site for the final continental Bahá'í House of Worship, there could be no better name, and no better location.

The assembled guests—many of them attired in traditional costume—ascended the steps up the mountainside for the first devotional programme to be held in the House of Worship, in which welcoming remarks were made by the representative of the Universal House of Justice, Mrs Antonella Demonte, and prayers and holy scriptures were recited and sung by a 60-strong choir made up of singers from Chile and Bahá'í communities from the rest of the world.

One prayer for unity was sung in the indigenous Mapuche language of Chile by Berta Blanco, who was among the first of her people to join the Bahá'í community more than 40 years ago.

'I think the Temple is going to bring a lot of changes for my family, for my community, for my people, for the tradition I come from,' she said.





Cambodia/Colombia

Construction progresses on Cambodia and Colombia Temples

Excitement is stirring as anticipation builds for the completion of the first local Baha'i Houses of Worship.

IN BATTAMBANG, Cambodia, scores of inhabitants have been galvanized to offer service to their communities, as well as at the Temple site, where hundreds of shrubs and flowers have been planted since the initiation of this historic endeavour.

Additionally, construction of the central edifice and surrounding buildings has advanced rapidly, and recent aerial video footage captures the beauty of the emerging



structure and the surrounding land.

In Norte del Cauca, Colombia, a steady stream of developments continues to unfold as the community prepares for the completion of its local Bahá'í House of Worship.

Although this area of the country has experienced decades of rich developments in the spiritual and material advancement of its people, the announcement in 2012 of plans to construct a House of Worship there have inspired surrounding communities to reach new heights of service, enrich the devotional aspects of community life, and strengthen the bonds of fellowship and unity.

Construction work began in January 2017. Foundational work for the surrounding auxiliary structures has also been initiated. In time, these buildings will be painted in the bright colours traditional to buildings of the region.

Top left: Cambodian Temple construction.

Bottom Left: Foundational work for Colombian House of Worship.

West Africa

African High Chief inspired by oneness and equality

In the West African country of Benin, a chief of the Fula people is focusing on the unity of the diverse populations of his land.

THE FULA ARE widely dispersed across North Africa. They are regarded as the largest nomadic pastoral community in the world—although in more recent times many have settled and now work as farmers, merchants, and artisans, among other occupations. A predominantly Muslim community, it was the Fula people who spread Islam across West Africa, and traditionally, Fula chiefs have been Muslim.

For the first time, this position of moral and customary authority for the approximately 100,000 Fulani living in the area is held by a Bahá'í. High Chief Djaouga



Abdoulaye, a 76-year-old retired school teacher, was enthroned in July of last year. He became a Bahá'í in the 1980s when the Faith initially came to Benin.

This change in leadership signalled a new precedent, which was at first met with reservations by certain members of society. However, High Chief Djaouga's example, and in particular his commitment to unity and oneness, have contributed to harmonious ties between local clergy and tribal leaders in the region.

His enthronement ceremony was a vibrant and joyful gathering that attracted 5,000 people and reflected the principle of unity in diversity. The event was also broadcast on national radio and television.

Speaking about the influence of the Bahá'í Teachings in his life, High Chief Djaouga said that the principles of the oneness of humanity and the equality of men and women, guided by a high moral standard, have inspired his understanding of leadership.

'Since I became a Bahá'í, I have begun to understand the standard of excellence put forth in the Bahá'í Writings,' he said.

His commitment to justice and hope for strengthening unity comes through in his decisions. The High Chief's court has emerged as a place his subjects can turn to for the resolution of conflicts, where the wealthy will not receive special favours, where bribery has no place, and where one's social position will not influence the decision.

featured story

Learning to pray

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in New York,

He called to him an ardent Bahá'í and said

“If you will come to Me at dawn tomorrow, I will teach you to pray.”

DELIGHTED, MR M arose at four and crossed the city, arriving for his lesson at six. With what exultant expectation he must have greeted this opportunity! He found 'Abdu'l-Bahá already at prayer, kneeling by the side of the bed. Mr M followed suit, taking care to place himself directly across. Seeing that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was quite lost in His Own reverie Mr M began to pray silently for his friends, his family and finally for the crowned heads of Europe. No word was uttered by the quiet Man before him. He went over all the prayers he knew then, and repeated them twice, three times – still no sound broke the expectant hush.

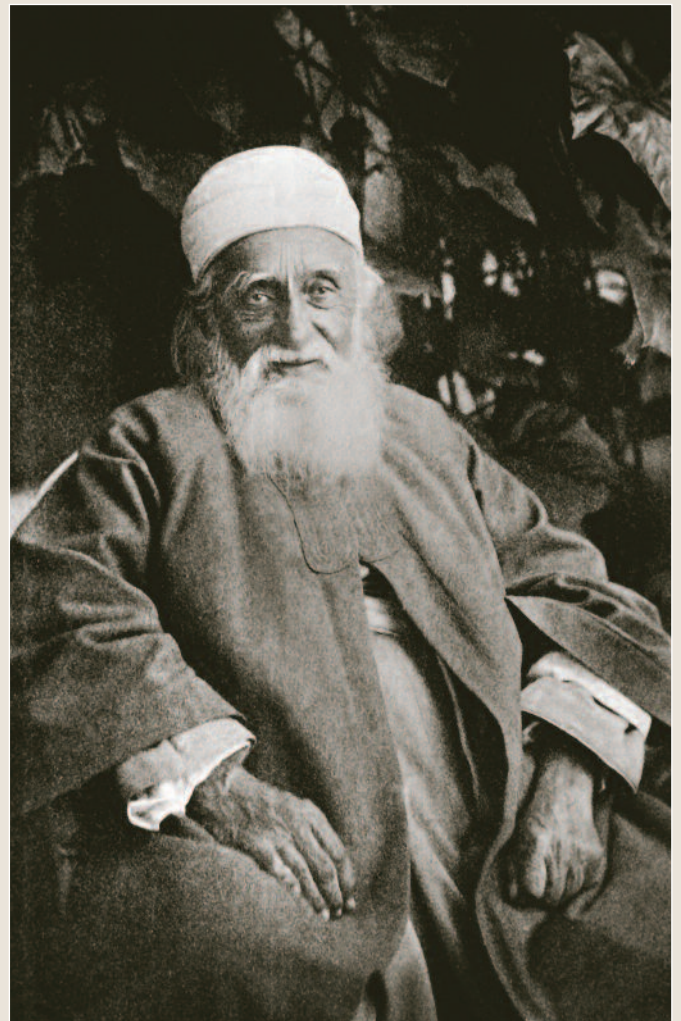
Mr M surreptitiously rubbed one knee and wondered vaguely about his back. He began again, hearing as he did so, the birds heralding the dawn outside the window. An hour passed, and finally two. Mr M was quite numb now. His eyes, roving along the wall, caught sight of a large crack. He dallied with a touch of indignation but let his gaze pass again to the still figure across the bed.

The ecstasy that he saw arrested him and he drank deeply of the sight. Suddenly he wanted to pray like that. Selfish desires were forgotten. Sorrow, conflict, and even his immediate surroundings were as if they had never been. He was conscious of only one thing, a passionate desire to draw near to God.

Closing his eyes again he set the world firmly aside, and amazingly his heart teemed with prayer, eager, joyous, tumultuous prayer. He felt cleansed by humility and lighted by a new peace. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had taught him to pray!

The “Master of Akka” immediately arose and came to him. His eyes rested smilingly upon the newly humbled Mr M. “When you pray”, He said, “You must not think of your aching body, nor of the birds outside the window, nor of the cracks in the wall!” He became very serious then, and added, “When you wish to pray you must first know that you are standing in the presence of the Almighty!”

(Annamarie Honnold, *Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 27, p 131-32)



Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá can be obtained direct from the publisher, George Ronald Publisher Ltd (goo.gl/wQE4N6) or from Bahá'í Books UK (goo.gl/tEisSy)

Music

Distinguished composer casts light on prison poems

At a recent major international music festival, one composition stood out in particular for its portrayal of faith and spiritual transformation under great oppression.

WELL KNOWN, Norwegian composer Lasse Thoresen was inspired by the poetry of Mahvash Sabet, a Bahá'í imprisoned in Iran for her faith. His musical composition, *Prison Poems*, shares the title of the volume of Mrs Sabet's poetry, adapted into English from Persian.

For Mr Thoresen, what inspired him most about the poems is the story of transformation brought about through suffering and the potential of the human spirit to transcend external conditions and meet hatred with love.

"Mahvash Sabet has been held in prison under terrible conditions for nearly ten years. She has endured torture and abuse," Mr Thoresen said. "We often think of those who are subjected to such treatment as victims. But there is nothing in Mahvash Sabet's poetry indicating that she sees herself as a victim."

"We are dealing with spiritual resources that first unfold in critical situations," he continued. "We get to follow Mahvash Sabet on her journey into the darkness and suffering of prison, through the shattering of her identity, and finally to her ascent into a state of luminous love."

Mrs Sabet was arrested in 2008 and jailed along with the six other members of the Yaran, an informal council of seven Bahá'í individuals in Iran responsible for managing the affairs of the Iranian Bahá'í community. After 1983 when the government had

dissolved the national and local Bahá'í administration, the Bahá'í community established this informal arrangement with the full knowledge of the authorities.

Mrs Sabet and the other six members of the Yaran were held without charge for over a year and a half. Before their trial began in early 2010, they had received only about one hour's access to their legal counsel and had undergone appalling treatment in prison. After a trial characterized by lack of due legal process, they were convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison for, among other things, espionage, propaganda against the regime, and spreading corruption on earth.

When that initial sentence was met with international condemnation, the appeals court revoked three of the charges against them and reduced their sentences to ten year terms.

Throughout the course of her incarceration, Mrs Sabet, an educator by profession, has been writing poetry. The quality and volume of the poems she has produced is an astonishing feat considering the harsh conditions of her imprisonment. Journalist Roxana Saberi who shared a cell in





Evin prison with Mrs Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi, another member of the Yaran, has previously described the cell they were kept in, a room four by five meters in size with no beds or pillows. A piece written for the *Washington Post* recalls that the two women were permitted one pen between them, which they highly cherished.

On the fifth anniversary of Mrs Sabet's imprisonment, a collection of her poetry was adapted into English and published. The volume, *Prison Poems*, has attracted widespread acclaim both for the literary quality of the poems and its moving portrayal of the sufferings of Iran's Bahá'ís and Mrs Sabet's fellow prisoners in Iran's notorious Evin and Raja'i Shahr prisons.

For Mr Thoresen, the intensity of the poetry was such that he did not want to put the words themselves to music, but rather to create a "sound scenography" around the poems. "I didn't want to have the texts sung," he explained. "They are too naked, too pared down. They are so authentic that I didn't want to embellish them."

The resulting piece creates a striking audio backdrop for selected poems which are read by Bahiyih Nakhjavani, a renowned author living in France, who adapted Mrs Sabet's poems into English. It also features an intricate solo flute melody representing the emotional content of the material, as well as recordings of prayers being chanted by Mrs

Kamalabadi, to whom many of Mrs Sabet's poems are dedicated.

Roxana Saberi's recollections of the kindness shown to her by these two imprisoned members of the Yaran—Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi—illustrate the compassion and love infusing Mrs Sabet's poetry, compassion that extends to her fellow inmates and even her captors.

In one of her poems, she writes:

*The shriek of birds at dawn confirms
that it's long since nightingales sang
in this garden.*

*But though we say nothing, our
silence affirms*

*That we weep for the violets hidden
among these thorns.*

*I have written a message on a
nasturtium leaf*

and hung it on my door, like a charm.

*It says: 'There's a warm heart
waiting here,
and a mother's open arms.'*

Mr Thoresen's piece premiered at the Oslo International Church Music Festival in March 2017. The concert also coincided with the release of a Norwegian translation of *Prison Poems*. Both the concert and the publication received widespread national and regional media coverage, including three major newspapers and two radio programs in Norway.

Film

Artists in the UK join the 'Prison Poems Project'

As the 'Yaran', the seven Bahá'ís in Iran who have been unlawfully imprisoned since 2008, entered their tenth year of incarceration, a campaign all over the world began, bringing attention to the plight of these Bahá'ís and calling for their immediate release.

FROM INDIA, to the United States to South Africa to the United Kingdom, the hashtags #ReleaseBahai 7Now and #NotAnotherYear are being used across social media to highlight the efforts made.

In the United Kingdom, in response to this campaign, a number of artists have come together to participate in the *Prison Poems Project*, a series of short film clips that give voice to the poems of Mahvash Sabet, one of the seven prisoners. These videos can be viewed at: goo.gl/WOVSSK

Ishqábád, Turkmenistan

A Rich Pattern of Life

How the early Bahá'ís of 'Ishqábád understood the dynamic interaction between worship and endeavours to uplift the spiritual, social, and material conditions of society.

IN THE CITY of 'Ishqábád, a devoted band of believers who settled from Persia, and who, for a time, found peace and tranquillity in Turkistán, bent their energies towards the creation of a pattern of life that would reflect the exalted spiritual and social principles enshrined in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. In a span of a few decades, this group, originally consisting of a handful of families, was joined there by others and grew to a few thousand believers. This community, fortified by ties of camaraderie and animated by unity of purpose and a spirit of faithfulness, was enabled to reach a high degree of cohesiveness and development, for which it gained renown throughout the Bahá'í world.



These friends, guided by their understanding of the divine Teachings, and within the bounds of the religious freedom they were accorded, toiled to create the conditions that would lead to the founding of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, that "crowning institution in every Bahá'í community". On a befitting tract of land in the centre of the city that had been obtained some years before with the consent of the Blessed Beauty Himself, facilities were built



for communal well-being—a meeting hall, schools for children, a hostel for visitors, and a small clinic, among others. A sign of the notable achievements of the Bahá'ís in 'Ishqábád, who in those productive years became distinguished for their prosperity, magnanimity, and intellectual and cultural attainments, was their attention to ensuring that all Bahá'í children and youth were literate in a society with rampant illiteracy, especially among girls. Within such an environment of unified endeavour and progress, and fostered at every stage of development by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a magnificent House of Worship emerged—the most prominent edifice in the area. For over twenty years, the friends

experienced the heavenly joy of having realized their lofty aim: the establishment of a focal point of worship, a nerve centre of community life, a place where souls gathered at daybreak for humble invocation and communion before flowing out of its doors to engage in their daily pursuits. While the forces of irreligion eventually swept through the region and thwarted hopes, the brief appearance of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád is an enduring testament to the volition and effort of a body of believers who established a rich pattern of life deriving its impetus from the power of the Creative Word.

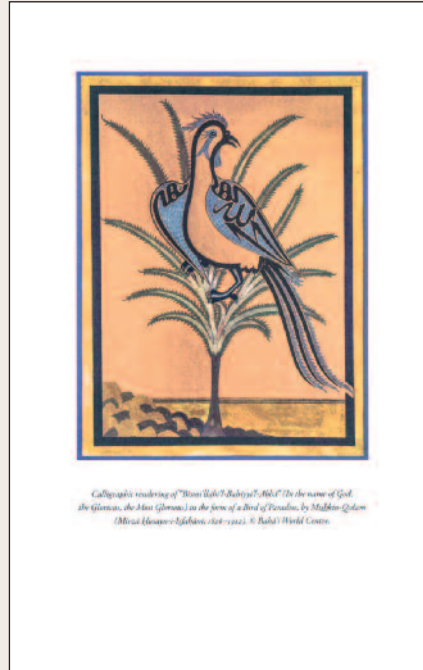
(The Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World, 1 August 2014)

New publication of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings released

*Days of Remembrance —
Selections from the Writings of
Bahá'u'lláh for Bahá'í Holy Days*

A **NEW VOLUME** of Bahá'í sacred texts, *Days of Remembrance: Selections from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh for Bahá'í Holy Days*, was released in January, making available to the world a selection of newly translated Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

Days of Remembrance offers forty-five selections revealed specifically for, or relating to, the nine holy days annually commemorated by the Bahá'í community. It has been published in anticipation of the celebration of the two hundred-year anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and



the Birth of the Báb in 2017 and 2019 respectively, for which Bahá'í communities across the planet are currently preparing.

The observance of holy days is an important feature of every religion, and the upcoming bicentenary commemorations, the first of which will occur in October 2017, will bring together communities through gatherings open to all, in villages, towns, and cities around the world.

These sacred events are being planned at a time when Bahá'í communities are learning about the enrichment of the devotional aspects of community life and about the relationship between worship of God and service to humanity.

Regarding the commemoration of holy days, the preface of the new volume states:

'This remembrance has both a personal dimension, providing a time for reflection on the significance of these events, and a social dimension, helping to deepen the identity and foster the cohesion of the community.'

Days of Remembrance is available on the Bahá'í Reference Library (reference.bahai.org)

The book can be obtained from Bahá'í Books UK: goo.gl/3dFvPx



A touching gift from Norah Crossley

When Norah Crossley, a penniless young Bahá'í living in Manchester in the early part of the 20th century, heard that the first Bahá'í Temple in the West was being built in the United States, in Wilmette, Illinois, she longed to share in its construction.

NORAH HAD no money to give. Instead, she cut off her long, beautiful hair and sent it to Dr John Esslemont, one of Britain's leading Bahá'ís at the time, to be sold for the Temple. She wrote to Dr Esslemont:

You may think mine a very strange share, but I am very poor and cannot afford to send money, so I have cut off my hair.... It has been a sacrifice I admit, for it was the only beauty I possessed, but it is nothing compared with what the Master has given me.... I will even give my life, if need be....

Dr Esslemont sent Norah's letter on to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to Norah:

O my well-beloved daughter of the Kingdom! The letter thou hadst written to Dr Esslemont was forwarded by him to the Land of Desire [The Holy Land]. I read it all through with the greatest attention. On the one hand, I was deeply touched, for thou hadst sheared off those fair tresses of thine with the shears of detachment from this world and of self-sacrifice in the path of the Kingdom of God. And on the other, I was greatly pleased, for that dearly-beloved daughter has evinced so great a spirit of self-sacrifice as to offer up so precious a part of her body in the pathway of the Cause of God. Hadst thou sought my opinion, I would in no wise have consented that thou shouldst shear off even a single thread of thy comely and wavy locks; nay, I myself would have contributed in thy name for the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. This deed of thine is, however, an eloquent testimony to thy noble spirit of self-sacrifice. Thou hast, verily, sacrificed thy life and great will be the spiritual results thou shalt obtain. Rest thou confident that day by day thou shalt progress and wax greater in firmness and in constancy. The bounties of Bahá'u'lláh shall compass thee about and the joyful tidings from on high shall time and again

*Blessed is the spot, and the house,
and the place, and the city,
and the heart, and the mountain,
and the refuge, and the cave,
and the valley, and the land,
and the sea, and the island,
and the meadow where mention
of God hath been made,
and His praise glorified.*

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Further Reading

The website of the worldwide Bahá'í community, www.bahai.org, has excellent sections on Devotional Life – goo.gl/9TYNuZ, on Mashriqu'l-Adhkár – goo.gl/kjL3N6, and Devotional Meetings – goo.gl/rNPN3Z.

A number of books explore the Bahá'í approach to prayer, the devotional life and the Houses of Worship. These include:

Prayer: A Bahá'í Approach – William & Madeleine Hellaby

Meditation – Wendi Momen

The Devotional Gathering – Wendi Momen

Reflections: Verses from the Bahá'í Teachings – Akwasi O. Osei

An Earthly Paradise: Bahá'í Houses of Worship around the World – Julie Badiee

All of these books, and other relevant titles, are available from <http://www.bahaibooks.org.uk>.

be imparted unto thee. And though it be thine hair that thou hast sacrificed, yet thou shalt be filled with the Spirit, and though it be this perishable member of thy body which thou hast laid down in the path of God, yet thou shalt find

the Divine Gift, shalt behold the Celestial Beauty, obtain imperishable glory and attain unto everlasting life.

(Letters quoted in Gloria Faizi, *Stories about Bahá'í Funds*, p.5.).



*There is nothing sweeter
in the world of existence
than prayer. Man must
live in a state of prayer.*

*The most blessed
condition is the state of
supplication and prayer.*

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ

Front cover: The Mother Temple of South America, in Santiago, Chile, shines as a beacon of light at night.

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