

**Preliminary report of bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Twin Holy Days  
celebrations in the United Kingdom, 21-22 October 2017**

Reports from more than **180 communities** in the United Kingdom, received by the end of Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> October, indicate that more than **11,000** people participated in a great variety of activities and events to mark the Bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Birth of the Báb. Included in this number are almost **6,000** friends of the Faith.

**London**, the largest cluster in the UK, reported some 29 celebrations across the cluster (with many smaller ones taking place), involving more than 1,700 participants, half of whom were from the community of interest. Meanwhile, **Greater Manchester**—another thriving cluster that has recently joyously reached 100 core activities—had many beautiful local celebrations, with around 16 different community or neighbourhood gatherings taking place over the weekend. Seven hundred participated in these gatherings with more than 300 from the wider community. In most of these celebrations, a viewing of the film *Light to the World* featured in the programme; viewers were very moved, including a few friends of the Faith sharing that they recognised Bahá'u'lláh.

The film was shown at numerous events across the UK, and reports make it clear that it was a source of great inspiration, stimulating much discussion on who Bahá'u'lláh was and the purpose of His mission. One community in **Camberley, England**, shared some comments from guests which included the remarks:

- *The film highlights the scale of the Bahá'í Faith. Camberley community is quite modest so it's very powerful to see it's part of something so global*
- *You could feel the presence of God in the room.*

**Godalming, England**, humorously reported that they were the first community in the UK to show the film *Light to the World*, which indeed they were. (Godalming was also the first town to have electric light, in 1881!)

Reports indicated that believers across the UK had been engaged over many months in reaching out to family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and strangers to have conversations about Bahá'u'lláh and to invite them to their planned celebrations. In the small town of **Magherafelt, Northern Ireland**, the handful of Bahá'ís had contacted over 130 individuals through various means, but particularly in face-to-face conversations resulting in some 80 guests attending their event. In particular, one family visited every single neighbour in their street that led to hour-long discussions. A report from the London borough of **Westminster** told of one person, who had only been met on the street a few days earlier, enthusiastically attending a celebration. From **Stoke-on-Trent, England**, one of the friends reported that she decided to inform all her work colleagues about the bicentenary event and through these efforts some 36 souls heard about the Faith, some of whom are continuing their enquiries.

In a very small Scottish village of **Laurencekirk**, a delightful account was received from an isolated couple who had been living there for just two years. They describe their celebration as “miraculous.” Thirty people attended, many of whom had never heard of the Faith. They were invited to a talk with cake and coffee, and a screening of *Light to the World*. At the end of the film everyone broke into spontaneous applause and stayed on for an extra hour's conversation. A devotional has now been arranged and the village hall has been booked as so many people are expected.

In, **Trefonen, Oswestry, England**, another small rural village, one of the friends decided to have an open house day on Saturday. Sending out and personally delivering some 80 invitations to friends and neighbours, more than 40 of his neighbours visited his home.

Gatherings ranged from a handful of friends to many hundreds, held in venues such as hospitals, community centres, church halls, homes, Bahá'í Centres, universities, schools and so forth. One of the largest gatherings was in **Solihull, England**, where more than 1000 invitations were issued, resulting in 400 people attending, nearly 300 of whom were friends of the Faith. Two of the individuals invited said following the meeting: "the message that was received through the programme and the event has given them much to ponder upon."

A number of reports have been received from neighbourhoods where friends are intensively focussing on community building. One example is the new neighbourhood of **Leith, Scotland**, just opened a few months ago, where families and children were met through outreach in recent weeks and a children's class was started swiftly with 10 children. The children's class had its own celebration for the birth of Bahá'u'lláh, to which mothers, siblings, youth and others were invited. There were 18 friends of the Faith, of which five were mothers, 11 were children, and two were youth. Another example is in **Sheffield, England**, those that came to the gathering included children from an existing children's class and junior youth who were part of a recently formed junior youth group in the focus neighbourhood. These children and junior youth were involved in a video that had been created especially for the gathering, giving a glimpse into what was happening with respect to spiritual education in Sheffield.

**Gibraltar** held an event at which some 60 friends of the Faith attended. In the **Faroe Islands** the small community held two events in Torshavn and Toftir, with a total of over 80 participants more than 50 of whom were not Bahá'ís. Events took place also on the islands surrounding Great Britain. **Isle of Man**, which is striving to establish its programme of growth, celebrated the bicentenary with a gathering with 27 friends of the Faith who viewed *Light to the World* with question and answers following. In **Levenwick, Shetland**, 19 friends of the Faith attended a presentation on the life and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Invitations had been personally hand-delivered to every home in the village: more than 70 households.

The diverse ways in which communities celebrated is remarkable. In **Aberdeen, Scotland**, the theme of their five-hour celebration was international food, music and dance. In **Pendle, England**, the event was inspired by a concert by a celebrated Bahá'í pianist. In the London borough of **Hammersmith & Fulham**, there was a performance sharing episodes from the life of Bahá'u'lláh through prayer, shadow puppets, stories and song, as well as a video showing activities in their community to demonstrate how Bahá'u'lláh's message is being put into practice locally. In **Newbury, England** a banner was hung in the main street with the sign "Who is Baha'u'llah" several days prior to their bicentenary event. Other creative ways of expressing love for Bahá'u'lláh, and those who attend meetings, was in preparing and serving beautifully presented and delicious food, baking special bicentenary cakes, and planting trees. Special locally-made exhibitions on the life and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh featured in many of the reports received.

The arts and creativity were evident in most events. For example, in **Oxford, England**, in the Oxford University Divinity Hall more than 100 people gathered to hear a talk and the world premiere of *Daystar*, a setting of the names of Bahá'u'lláh and sacred texts for Soprano, Violin and Piano by British composer Richard Leigh. Divinity Hall, built in the

1420s, was home to Parliament during the Civil War, and is the oldest surviving building built for university use. Mr. Leigh repeated the performance on following days in **Wellingborough, Brighton and Richmond.**

Choirs were also a feature of a number of celebrations. In **Chippenham, England**, for example, a local choir group, the Lingmara World Music Choir, was invited to join their celebration event and perform a selection of their music. None of the choir members were Bahá'ís but some were friends of the Faith. Twenty-eight of them turned up to perform! They chose nine pieces of choral music from around the world in different languages, which uplifted the spirits and brought much joy and excitement to the event. In **Sheffield, England**, there was a performance by a choir, that was the outcome of weekly gatherings where anyone who wanted to sing together came to learn songs from each other. It performed at their bicentenary event. In **Lanarkshire, Scotland**, a musical evening and screening of the film *Light to the World*, included 30 or so friends from a Jewish choir with which one of the Bahá'ís sings. Much interest was generated with one of the choir members asking, "How do I get from here, to where you are?"

Many communities put on art exhibitions such as in **Watford and Bristol, England** and **Stirling, Scotland** which invited several artists, both local and from the surrounding area to exhibit and included photography and calligraphy. In **Chester, England**, the spouse of a local Bahá'í, who is a sculptor, produced a nine-pointed star sculpture especially for the bicentenary which was displayed, and will be installed in the Bahá'í garden in the city's main park in the coming weeks. In **Dundee, Scotland**, an art exhibition celebrating the bicentenary will run for one week.

In the London borough of **Hackney**, the central event organized in the community was a week-long art exhibition in a high-street gallery, on the borough's main thoroughfare. There was a daily evening programme to accompany the exhibition so that community could welcome new friends to the event(s) from 10am-10pm every day for six days. In the months leading up to the exhibition, hundreds of artists across the world saw the artists call out; the brief for art proposals being these words from Bahá'u'lláh: "So powerful is the light of unity, that it can illuminate the whole earth"

In **Cambridge, England**, a dramatic presentation on the encounter between Professor Edward G. Browne, the Cambridge Orientalist, and Bahá'u'lláh was very well received. More than 250 people attended the presentation, which included a specially commissioned piece of music. The grand-daughter and great grand-daughter of Professor Browne also attended.

The diversity of the participants was quite striking in many reports. For example, in **Bangor, Wales**, where there were some 40 participants at their event, including young and old from countries as diverse as Colombia, China, Egypt, Ireland, Finland, Greece, Mauritius, Northern Ireland, Iran, Venezuela, Wales, and the Caribbean.

Individual initiative was evident also. One example was in the London Borough of **Richmond**, where two Bahá'í families hosted a gathering of some of their friends to celebrate the Bicentenary with afternoon tea at a hotel by the river Thames. Some 100 guests, of which 68 were community of interest, the majority of whom were attending their first Bahá'í gathering. The programme included a short presentation on 'Who is Bahá'u'lláh?' as well as music composed for the Bicentenary. The setting included

exhibition panels on 'the Life of Bahá'u'lláh', 'the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh' and 'the Bahá'í Community'. The film *Light of the World* was screened while people had tea. The guests also received a beautifully designed gift of quotations from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

It was found that many who are not Bahá'ís wanted to acknowledge the significance of the bicentenary of the birth of Bahá'u'lláh. For example, the **Women's InterFaith Network**, hosted a special reception in honour of Bahá'u'lláh with more than 100 guests. The chair of this organisation in her opening remarks commented "Bahá'ís are working the world over to make the vision called for by Bahá'u'lláh a reality and at the heart of Bahá'í endeavours is community building founded on this principle of the oneness of humanity". The 200th anniversary of birth of Bahá'u'lláh was also announced in **Truro** cathedral in Cornwall. At most gatherings there was a significant presence of notables from the village, town or cities at the celebration – mayors, councillors and others.

In addition to the many thousands of friends who attended events, it is estimated that up to two million more citizens of the United Kingdom were potentially exposed to news about the bicentenary via national, regional and local media. In **Wales**, the regional ITV channel, broadcast a piece on their evening news programme about the bicentenary event in **Cardiff**. Also on the morning of the birth of Bahá'u'lláh, a Bahá'í was interviewed about Bahá'u'lláh on BBC Radio 4's *Sunday* programme. *The Times of London*, which has a circulation of more than 1 million papers daily, published an excellent article about the Faith in its Saturday edition. The article quoted extensively from Bahá'u'lláh's own Tablet to the Times, thus reaching its intended audience more than a century after it was revealed. In the Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh calls upon *The Times* to report accurately on the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran, which is exactly what happened!

Of course children and junior youth engaged in activities as well as their families were a particular focus of many events. **Richmond** hosted a coffee morning for all the participants of their children and junior youth activities in the different neighbourhoods with some 50 friends of the Faith attending. A special video of their local endeavours was shared as well as a poem written for the occasion by a youth and performed by two Junior youth. In **Guildford, England**, of the 40 attendees more than half were children and so the event was child-centred. Thus, for example, the event started with a short devotional, followed by a treasure hunt to piece together the story of the life of Bahá'u'lláh, which was then read to the audience. Adults watched a video while the real action took place amongst the children, who made "Buckets of Dreams", delightfully decorated containers for collecting good deeds and kind actions. In **Wellingborough, England**, the children and junior youth hosted a family unity festival, attended by around 60 friends. One of the activities asked visitors to think about what elements are needed to create peace in our communities and then creating aromas in potion bottles made up of the required virtues. A new children's class is likely to start, made up of children who attended the festival.

Other events took place in the homes of families. In **Swansea, Wales**, the event in a family home was lovingly prepared, with the home being beautifully decorated using the visual arts; displays, photos, quotes and a colouring wall created by members of the community and their friends. More than half of the 50 participants were children who presented a song prepared during their children's class.

The **Trafford, England**, community during this year of the bicentenary, created and offered a one-hour presentation about His life and His sublime Mission in a number of classes in different primary schools. Around 900 pupils have received this presentation already.

It is difficult to get across in such a preliminary account, the wonderful spirit that comes from the stream of reports that flowed into the National Assembly during the evening of 22 October. Perhaps these few words from **Hammersmith and Fulham, England**, give a small glimpse of this:

A highlight of the evening was the common theme repeated in comments from friends of the Faith about the positive and welcoming atmosphere—the sense of community, unity and light they felt around them. There were rich conversations after the programme and interest shown in joining core activities.

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