

February 10, 2000

Dear Friends,

During the last seven months, the Dallas Bahá'í community has received numerous inquiries concerning its newly formed devotional meetings. The Assembly has therefore authorized the creation and dissemination of this document in order to share our experiences, and assist other communities in “the holding of regular meetings for worship open to all...”

With Loving Bahá'í Greetings,

The Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Dallas, Texas

REGULAR MEETINGS FOR WORSHIP OPEN TO ALL

In the Four Year Plan message, the Universal House of Justice calls on the Bahá'ís to practice “the collective worship of God. Hence it is essential to the spiritual life of the community that the friends hold regular devotional meetings in local Bahá'í centers, where available, or elsewhere, including the homes of the believers.” Again, in their message of December 28, 1999 the House of Justice encourages “loving association among the friends in every locality, by worship as a community” and “the holding of regular meetings for worship open to all...” and states that this represents a further step in the implementation of the law of the Mashriqu'l-Adkar.

Below is an account of the initiation of this wonderful process of regular “community worship” in Dallas, Texas, which began in the summer of 1999. It is not meant to serve as a how-to manual for Bahá'í Devotions. Dallas itself is only at the beginning of learning how to worship as a community, and each community must assess the needs and resources of its locality/region in forming a devotional pattern. The purpose, rather, is to share our experiences and insights as food for thought for our sister communities.

AN ASSEMBLY DECISION

In May 1999, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Dallas decided that its adult deepenings – centering around a different speaker each week – were no longer meeting the needs of its community of several hundred. The Assembly decided to end the one-hour adult deepenings, and replace them with devotional meetings to run simultaneous to children's classes. It appointed one individual to spearhead the effort, gave some general guidelines concerning its desire that there should be music and that the writings should consist primarily of Bahá'í scripture, and that this individual could build a “team” to assist with these devotions. The Assembly further made attendance at Sunday Devotions one of its three primary goals - along with training institutes and firesides – for the final year of the Four Year Plan.

A PATTERN OF COLLECTIVE DEVOTION

A simple pattern has developed in Dallas, which, while still evolving, has offered a reasonably successful structure to meet the needs of the Dallas community. This pattern evolved, as with all progress made in the Faith, through the interplay of crisis and victory. Further, this pattern was not conceived and institutionalized during a few sessions of consultation – rather it is continually being refined based on an ongoing process of action, reflection on our experience and the Writings, and consultation.

- Unity in Diversity

“The dearest wish of this servant of Thy Threshold is to behold the friends of East and West in close embrace...” (Abdu'l-Baha: Bahá'í Prayers (US edition), page 159).

“ ... gather together these two races, black and white, into one Assembly, and put such love into their hearts that they shall not only unite but even intermarry.” (‘Abdu'l-Baha: Bahá’í World Faith*, page 359).

Unity in Diversity, the “watchword” of the Bahá’í Faith, is the organizing principle of our devotions. Dallas is a large community composed mostly of Persians and White Americans, with a number of African American believers, and a dotting of Latinos, and other ethnicities. What the community is slowly learning is that for each element of devotion there are different cultural perspectives: some groups find dim lighting and candles spiritually uplifting and some find it depressing, some feel worship of God should be quiet and reverent and some lively and spirit-filled (with clapping and audience response), some want to stand, clap, and sing, while others feel noticeably awkward with singing during worship.

In Dallas, the Assembly and the community have committed to building devotions which truly represent all its members: Persian chanting, prayers in Spanish and other languages, gospel and guitar, quiet reverence and spirit-filled gestures, are all becoming increasingly welcome at the Dallas Bahá’í Center. Special attention, moreover, is paid to the sensitivities of our minority groups: “If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority, be it racial or otherwise” (Shoghi Effendi: *The Advent of Divine Justice*, page 35). In order to make Bahá’ís and guests more comfortable with these differences, the M.C. briefly explains that “unity in diversity” is the hallmark of the Bahá’í community and Bahá’í devotions. “You should see things that feel very comfortable and familiar to you, and some that are new and different” she might say. “If there is nothing that represents your spiritual background, please let us know so that it can be incorporated into future devotions.”

This commitment to unity in diversity has produced a steady increase in overall attendance, and an especially noticeable increase in attendance among African-Americans and Persians. On a recent Sunday, for example, there were approximately 70 “flowers” in the “garden” of our devotions, with at least 12 people of African descent including three first time visitors, and 30 Iranians. In addition, there were more than 30 children and teachers in children’s classes, including 6 black children/teachers – almost 20% African-American. The Assembly was overjoyed!

- The Arts

Again in the Four Year Plan, the House of Justice stated, “In all their efforts to achieve the aim of the Four Year Plan, the friends are asked to give greater attention to the use of the arts...” At different points throughout our devotions, we have music: either we sing together, we listen to live music, or we listen to a tape/CD. The Assembly has underwritten the cost of buying several new CDs, and there are at least 10 people in the greater Dallas area who come and perform on various Sundays. We try to schedule artists well in advance, and several artists have standing dates (e.g. the first Sunday of each month). Moreover, both program coordinators can and do sing. Again, the underlying principle is unity in diversity – we have Persian, Chorale, Gospel, and other music. At

present, the hope is only that the music will set a more spiritual atmosphere – there is no requirement that it relate to the theme for the month.

- The Word of God

The devotions for each month center on a theme such as Race Unity, Love, or Life After Death, and are comprised mostly of the Bahá'í writings and prayers, with an occasional passage from the Bible. Programs are printed in advance with all the writings on them Normally, we read 8 to 10 shorter passages of perhaps 3 to 4 sentences from the writings. Then, in place of a speaker, at the end of our program, we read one of the talks given by 'Abdu'l-Baha in the West. Shorter passages were chosen primarily because of the short attention span of most Americans. While we have not been able to develop enough resources to have readers picked before Sunday morning, efforts are made to ensure the gender and racial diversity of readers.

- A Welcoming, Loving Environment

Like several other large communities in Texas, Dallas has faced difficulty creating a welcoming environment at the Center. Two simple tools have proved quite effective in building a stronger sense of community: (1) greeters and (2) nametags. Normally, two people are assigned to greet people as they arrive, give them name tags, programs, etc. They encourage all guests to sign our guest book, and make an attempt to introduce newcomers to others. Nametags have helped the friends learn one another's names, removing a sizable barrier to building community among a large number of people.

- A Master of Ceremonies (M.C.)

An M.C. helps guide the program, and serves two functions. First, the M.C. helps the program to flow more smoothly, by helping to queue the music & readers (e.g. "Next Mr. ... will read a prayer in Spanish."). Second, the M.C. subtly introduces concepts, such as unity in diversity, and explains things which may not be understood by guests (such as "Alláh-u-Abhá is a greeting often used by Bahá'ís which refers to the Glory of God.").

- Prayer

Prayer without action is futile – so is action without prayer. Successful devotions need advanced preparation – preparing programs, scheduling musicians, greeters, and MC, etc. They also require prayer for their success, particularly by those preparing the event. Without preparatory prayer, the quality of the devotions will suffer. This should come as no surprise, as community worship is after all a spiritual process and a gift from God dependent upon His acceptance.

- Orientation Toward Visitors & Teaching

We are not, of course, attempting to "copy the churches" in having collective worship – rather we are responding to the call of Bahá'u'lláh and His Institutions. However, "the

holding of regular meetings for worship open to all...” has helped the teaching work: guests can see the diversity and spirit of the Bahá’í community, the Bahá’ís have an event to which they feel comfortable bringing their friends, a new sense of excitement has developed in the Bahá’í community, and the surrounding community now sees a center parking lot packed with cars each Sunday morning.

Because there have been several non-Bahá’ís at almost every devotional meeting over the last seven months, we are trying to design programs that will not only appeal to our diverse Bahá’í community, but to newcomers. The M.C. also makes a special effort to avoid jargon and explain concepts which someone new to the faith would not understand. This “seeker-friendly” atmosphere further encourages the Bahá’ís to invite their friends.

- Limited Administrative Overhead

The devotions began with one coordinator, who met with the Assembly on one occasion for guidance. Several months ago a second coordinator was approved. Virtually all tasks have been organized by email and phone. This absence of excessive committee meetings has freed these friends to do the work of organizing and refining the devotions.

- Consistency & Systematization

Much effort has been committed to creating a framework that can produce reasonably consistent devotions. There are certainly moments where the devotions take on a special quality, and are truly superb (this often correlates with much prayer preceding the devotions). There are also occasional moments of disorganization and technical difficulties. For the most part, however, our devotions have been consistently good, and have had a spirit of joy and reverence. This consistency has resulted from building a “modular” system – modular because the devotions consist of several independent parts: the programs have no dates, names, or song titles, and thus can be reused, and the scheduling of musicians, greeters, and M.C.s can occur well in advance. When things are left to the last minute, the devotions suffer.

It is hoped that in the future, a web site (perhaps with a URL like www.bahaidevotions.org) can be created to serve as a resource to our sister Bahá’í communities. It could host a collection of devotional programs, and eventually programs for Feast and Holy Days, song books, and a section for further sharing of community experiences, MP3s to share Bahá’í music, etc....

- Food

The offering of food and refreshments are coordinated through one person, who schedules volunteer contributors for each week. Providing lunch for 100 plus who are attending devotions and children’s classes, is no small task. However, much community has been built over plates of spaghetti and Persian rice.

ESSENTIAL TO THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY

There are, of course, numerous models of collective worship which Bahá'í communities should explore and refine based on the needs, resources, and cultures of the Bahá'í community and overall population of their locality or region. Nashville, Tennessee, for example, has had wonderful success with monthly "Unity Feasts" held for their greater metro area (these devotions were, in part, the inspiration for the collective worship in Dallas). Whatever pattern of community devotion evolves in your area, however, one thing is clear: "the holding of regular meetings for worship open to all" is "essential to the spiritual life of the community," and must begin "in local Bahá'í centers, where available, or elsewhere, including the homes of the believers." There can be no turning back.