

Efforts to advance the goals of the One Year Plan (Part I)

In the twelve months serving as a momentous prelude to the Nine Year Plan, communities are reflecting on the significance of that “infinitely poignant moment when He Who was the Mystery of God departed from this world.” The Universal House of Justice wrote in this year’s Ridván message to the Bahá’ís of the World that the community “has rapidly gained strength and is ready to take great strides forward.” All that has been learned in the last twenty-five years has been hard won through the herculean efforts of the friends, and “the lessons learned will shape the community’s future and the account of how they were learned sheds light on what is to come.” Qualities of faith and perseverance are combined with a readiness to learn, shaping the advancement of the Cause in country after country, and region after region.

This edition of *Reflections on Growth* is the first in a two-part series. It features stories about how the friends are reflecting on the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the strength of the Covenant of which He was the Centre, in preparation for the centenary of His Ascension, as well as accounts of how communities of proven strength are serving as reservoirs of experience for others.

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The accounts below describe how the friends at the local, regional, and national levels are honouring ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during the centenary year of His Ascension, and are strengthening the connection of those intimately involved in the community-building process with the Covenant.

POLAND

Over the past months, the National Spiritual Assembly has been encouraging the friends to reflect on the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the strength of the Covenant, and to translate these reflections into individual and collective action; a number of different approaches have emerged which are engaging the efforts of the believers in diverse ways.

In preparation for the commemoration of the centenary of His Ascension, the institutions have organized nine online gatherings to be held over the course of the One Year Plan on the theme of “Following in the Footsteps of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”. Participants who have attended so far have expressed their joy in being able to connect with each other to study, reflect, and learn in a spirit of unity, and shared that as they learn more about the life of the Master, His mission, and the importance of the Covenant, these themes are shaping conversations with their friends.

The spirit of unified action has also been enhanced, as believers respond wholeheartedly to the requirements and opportunities of growth.

To strengthen two neighbourhoods in the **Kraków** and **Poznań** clusters, the National Assembly reflected on the 25 November 2020 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the World and made a call for some friends to arise as homefront pioneers. To reinforce this endeavour, two national prayer campaigns were held over several weeks—for the first, a prayer from the Tablets of the Divine Plan was chosen for hourly recitation, while the second called for the friends to recite the Tablet of Ahmad every day. Within a matter of weeks, nine

valiant souls arose to settle as pioneers in the two neighbourhoods. By Riđván 2021, Kraków became the first cluster in Poland to pass the second milestone.

Studies of the higher books of the sequence of courses have increased over the last year, with an unprecedented number of friends studying Book 8. Contemplating the significance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, believers across the country are relating and studying stories of His life—some newly translated into the Polish language—in community spaces, devotional meetings, children’s classes, study circles, Nineteen Day Feasts, Holy Days, and home visits:

A group of friends studied ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s book *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. The insights from these meetings continue to inspire meaningful conversations. During the Fast, each day was dedicated to one of the nineteen disciples of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and to sharing stories of their love for Him as well as of their lives of sacrificial and devoted service. In one neighbourhood, the friends took advantage of the lockdown period to share short stories on the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and sing songs together over a video conference call.

Recently, efforts to translate Bahá’í literature about the Covenant and the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá into the Polish language have intensified. The Polish Bahá’í Publishing Trust has made available a children’s story book about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which the friends are sharing with their friends and family. A translation of the 26 newly released prayers by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was published in the summer of this year, and *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* is now in the process of translation.

To highlight the unique opportunity of honouring the Master by contributing to the construction of His Shrine, the National Assembly designed a special fundraising initiative. This endeavour is visualized as a 3,183-kilometre journey from the National Hazíratu’l-Quds in Warsaw to the site of His new Shrine, with each contribution taking the friends closer to the beloved Master. Individuals are contributing wholeheartedly, and local communities are holding fundraisers; everyone is travelling the distance shoulder to shoulder.

ZAMBIA

To connect the population of the Lunda communities in Zambia, Eastern Angola, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Day of the Covenant, the National Spiritual Assembly of Zambia prepared a translation into the Lunda language of a compilation titled *Stories of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. Members of the training institute and cluster agencies in the Northwestern province are facilitating the study of this compilation at the village level, along with a recent translation of the first unit of Book 8, and this is enriching the capacity of the friends to converse about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and His life. Over the last year, meetings to deepen on the Covenant and its significance have been held across the cluster, in villages and with families, with the friends using every opportunity to pray and share stories with others and invite them to join the community-building activities.

In their visits to parents of the junior youth and children, the youth in the **Mwinilunga Central** cluster explain about the centenary commemoration, discuss the unique station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, read stories about Him, and share the importance of coming together as a family and community to reflect on His life of service. Many parents have become inspired to participate and are now thinking about how the qualities of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá can be manifested in their lives. One family shared how they are preparing for the commemoration:

We are taking this opportunity to pray together and converse about the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, both as a family and with a group of three other families. We have found it very useful to read the translated stories as they are helping us converse about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The younger ones are eager to highlight some of the qualities that He possessed and are also preparing to narrate the story of His life during the centenary commemoration. Recently, we identified another receptive family and invited them to our family devotional meetings. We have been speaking with them about the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá after our devotions. They are now eager to host and prepare the material for the next devotional meeting with our group of families.

In the **Mwinilunga East** cluster, one of the animators shared how he and his junior youth group are preparing for the commemoration. His group includes nine participants who are now studying *Learning About Excellence*, the sixth text of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme.

When I received a copy of the booklet *Stories of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, I read through it and noticed that it had nice stories to read with my junior youth. We read them and reflected on the qualities and attributes of the Master that we could apply in our daily lives. The junior youth decided to memorize at least one of His prayers to share with their parents. Upon hearing her child say, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá” after reading a prayer, one mother asked, “Who is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá?” The junior youth explained that He is the Servant of mankind and the perfect example of good deeds. He then shared some stories about the Master’s life of service and listed some of His qualities. The mother was so touched, and the next time I saw her, she asked if I could regularly visit her family to share similar stories. The junior youth have decided to prepare dramatic presentations that portray some of the qualities of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and plan to present them during the centenary commemoration.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

With the wholehearted support of the institutions and agencies, a group of women in the **Baraka** cluster recently hosted a teaching conference focused on the movement of women, particularly mothers, and their increasing participation in the community-building activities. Over 2,000 friends of all ages—women, men, and children—were welcomed from several clusters in the South Kivu region. The conference provided an opportunity to reflect on the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the significance of the Covenant, and the contribution of each person in advancing the goals set out by the Universal House of Justice. An institution member described the occasion:

Nine choral groups enlivened the three-day conference with songs and dances, which inspired many meaningful conversations. Music was especially composed for the three themes of the conference, which included the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, women and the community-building process, and contributing to the Fund. Dignitaries were also present, including the traditional chief of the Fizi territory, church leaders, and the vice-mayor of Baraka, who shared how grateful she was to the Bahá’í community for organizing such a valuable space to discuss the significant role and contribution of women in society at every level.

Stories were shared about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s service to humanity—how He served the poor and needy and taught His Father’s Faith in His travels across continents. Mothers, their families, and the youth were encouraged to follow in His footsteps

and arise to serve as pioneers, mobile tutors, and as members of teaching teams in the region. Participants spoke about the commemoration of the centenary of His Ascension, and everyone was invited to prepare themselves to welcome a growing number of families to the observances and offer gifts of service to our beloved Master. One bishop remarked that he had learned from the Bahá'ís to abandon prejudice and attachment to title, to have a spirit of devotion, and that everyone had the responsibility to teach the Faith and contribute to the Fund.

The friends also remembered exemplary women from the history of the Faith in the region who had dedicated their lives to service. There was one who completed the first seven books of the sequence of courses despite being unable to read, though she was an excellent speaker and organizer. As the conference came to a close, the members of the National Spiritual Assembly highlighted two key roles of mothers: to invite and accompany souls through the efforts of expansion and consolidation, and to organize social and economic activities to meet the needs of families and the Faith.

After all the talks, a member of the National Assembly and four Auxiliary Board members hosted a special consultation with 18 representatives of the mothers from the clusters in attendance. The women shared their understanding of the themes of the conference, their experiences of applying these themes in their life of service, and how they are raising up a new generation of mothers committed to the Faith. They also reflected on the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the ways He served His Father. Inspired by the example of the Master, they shared the following:

We need to follow the Plan and the wishes of the Universal House of Justice by studying the main sequence of courses and participating in core activities and home visits. The Bahá'í Teachings have encouraged us to propagate the Faith. Today, we first teach our families, then our neighbours, and then across our cluster and the neighbouring clusters.

The friends noted how many mothers are at the forefront of the Plan, shouldering responsibility for so many activities. Here are glimpses into their efforts:

We mothers organise weekly home visits to share about the Faith, and every Saturday we make contributions in kind or in cash to deputize others.

We visit everyone to encourage them to become involved in the training institute and to attend the Nineteen Day Feast. We also work in some of our own fields to generate funds to support the core activities.

We regularly participate in the meetings of humanitarian agencies to build relationships with the members of these organizations and state authorities, and to talk about the Faith with them. This is how we befriended the vice-mayor and were able to invite her to attend this conference. We came to know the traditional chief of Baraka when he attended the devotional meetings we hold regularly.

We work together in the fields with all the women, and hold devotional meetings before starting, including studying a quotation. Now our

friends and co-workers are sending their children to our children's classes. They and their husbands are participating in study circles, and a community school has started. I am a children's class teacher with 24 children in my class.

We were accompanied by our youth to study Books 1 and 3 of the institute courses, and then we started children's classes. We are tender and compassionate with the children and they feel valued. Today we have five children's classes taught by mothers in our neighbourhood, which is now a centre of intense activity.

We have a programme of farming together every Saturday and go to the fields. We discuss certain Writings, and we organize either a devotional meeting or home visits in the evening. This cycle, the women welcomed three new believers and one of them is here at this conference.

UNITED STATES

'Abdu'l-Bahá visited **New York City**, the City of the Covenant, during His travels to America in 1912. This year, groups of friends participating in devotional meetings and study circles, along with individuals and families, have been saying prayers at some of the locations that He visited. Participants at a recent institute camp went to the Church of the Ascension, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá delivered His first public address in America, to pray and read some stories. In addition, the Local Spiritual Assembly has organized community-service projects to help the Bowery Mission, a local Christian organization that assists the poor, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited during His time in the City. Other places where the friends are remembering the Master include: the home of Juliet Thompson; the resting places of William Hoar and Chester I. Thacher, who were both named disciples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá by Shoghi Effendi; and the Fourth Unitarian Church in Brooklyn, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed the prayer that begins, 'O God! Educate these children'.

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The following accounts are about how communities of proven strength are assisting those around them—the first story describes how advanced clusters contribute to the progress of communities within their continent; the second shows how friends from one region were supported by stronger regions around them; the third describes how believers in a cluster contributed to the movement of other clusters in their region; and the last tells the story of the Local Spiritual Assembly of one village assisting the process of growth in neighbouring villages.

EUROPE

The Continental Board of Counsellors in Europe has been giving significant attention to the systematic dissemination of learning from the most advanced clusters to those where growth has yet to intensify. Over the last five years the Board of Counsellors has initiated seminars in three advanced clusters on the continent—**Gran Canaria, Central Netherlands (Utrecht)** and, more recently, **Vienna**—to share insights and experiences with agencies and key individuals from clusters advancing towards embracing larger numbers.

In 2020, the Board of Counsellors found creative ways to hold a seminar during the pandemic. They brought together some experienced friends from the three reservoir clusters—four Auxiliary Board members and a resource person for the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme—to organize an online programme with virtual field visits. The themes of the seminar included working with families, the special contribution of mothers, the movement of youth and junior youth in the field of service, systematic training of individuals, and raising up friends that can serve as collaborators to assist cluster agencies to advance the community-building process in neighbourhoods.

Those invited to participate in the conversations during the seminar included some 320 friends from 32 advanced centres of intense activity across Europe, as well as regional institute coordinators and members of the relevant National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils. The Counsellors consulted with the training institute boards about disseminating the insights and learning from this gathering to other centres of intense activity.

While the seminar was intended to give an initial impulse to the efforts in the neighbourhoods, beyond this event, the Counsellors wanted to learn how they could draw on the assistance of teams of experienced individuals to regularly support the participants working in the various neighbourhoods. Two weeks before the seminar, the Counsellors held a meeting with the Auxiliary Board members and the organizing team to discuss the programme and their role in supporting participants before, during, and after the seminar.

In preparing for the seminar, the Board members helped the friends to read the reality of their neighbourhoods, document their insights, and formulate or refine the description of the journey of experience gained over the years; visualize with concentric circles the widening participation of people engaged in the community-building process; and identify their objects of learning.

The organizing team was also very conscious of the need to foster a spiritual atmosphere during the seminar. Each morning began with devotions on certain themes and musical contributions, which helped all to connect with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and seek His confirmations.

Over the years, the Counsellors noticed that field visits have proven to be an invaluable element of an effective seminar and they did not want to lose or minimize this component even if the seminar had to be held online. Therefore, a significant portion of the programme focused

on virtual field visits to each of the selected neighbourhoods in the three advanced clusters. The teams from these three clusters were encouraged to think about how to create an environment where participants felt as though they were visiting the cluster, so each team introduced and gave a tour of their focus neighbourhood. One of the friends from the **Gran Canaria** cluster described their tour:

To personalise the experience of visiting the neighbourhood, we arranged for one of the friends to ride around on a bicycle while holding a camera, and to broadcast a livestream at the same time as we described the reality of the neighbourhood. The participants were able to see the streets and places they would have visited and how concepts were being applied to the activities taking place there, giving them some context to our efforts. Every morning the “visitors” listened to the conversations of the teams labouring in the neighbourhoods as an example of what a week in the life of the friends looked like and how they worked towards their goals. Participants listened to the discussions and reflections of the animators, tutors, and collaborators in the field, asked questions about their process, and observed how their conversations with the local people unfolded.

Even though the tours were intended to be live, the participants from each cluster also made a pre-recorded video in case the restrictions had changed by the time of the seminar. They worked in advance to identify the insights and footage that could be shared from each neighbourhood, as well as questions for reflection to aid understanding of the principles and dynamics involved in applying the guidance.

Moreover, as part of the programme, every afternoon each nucleus met and had local activities related to the topic of the day to immediately put into practice the concepts learned. Every night, each Board member and Counsellor brought together the friends they were accompanying to reflect on what they had seen during the day, what insights they had gained and how they could apply these in their own neighbourhood, as well as ways to disseminate the learning across the cluster.

On the last day of the seminar, the participants were asked to articulate the vision for the next cycle and discuss how the friends serving in their own neighbourhoods would be accompanied as they continued their work, applied the insights they had gained to their service, and disseminated those insights to others in their clusters. They were encouraged to avoid the tendency to just copy and paste what they had seen, but rather to reflect together about what the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and the insights gained from the seminar would look like in practice within their own reality. The Board members continued to stay connected to these friends after the seminar, assisting them to prepare annual and quarterly plans and to think about the implications of these plans on day-to-day activities. They noted that the seminar had given them greater clarity about their role in supporting the efforts of the friends in these settings.

While initially perceived as a challenge, holding the seminar online offered several advantages. More people could participate as travel was not required. Whereas previously each of the three advanced clusters had held their own seminar and participants were limited to visiting only one cluster, this time they were able to “visit” all three clusters as part of the same programme and benefit from the first-hand experiences being generated. And for many, especially those serving in clusters at an earlier stage of growth, the seminar was an opportunity to see how the friends operate daily in the most advanced centres of intense activity. Reflecting on this experience, the Counsellors commented:

It was very heartening to see that all the participants were able to take significant steps after the seminar, and processes of learning were strengthened in each neighbourhood on the basis of questions explored over the course of the seminar. In collaboration with the Counsellors, a number of participants were asked to arrange similar seminars for friends serving in small settings within groups of adjoining clusters in their respective regions or countries across Europe, thus extending the pattern of intensive action in many more neighbourhoods on the continent.

UNITED STATES

With four cycles left until the end of the Five Year Plan, the friends in the **Treasure Valley** cluster in the Northern Plains region set their sights on passing the third milestone, hoping to serve as a source of experience and resources to others in the region. Until then, efforts had mainly centred around nuclei of youth in two centres of intense activity, who were engaging their local peers in the institute process. The cluster agencies recognized that reaching a higher level of intensity would require the participation of many more believers, so they reached out to friends from clusters in the neighbouring region that shared a similar reality—and that had recently passed the third milestone—to learn from them. While serving as a means to disseminate insights from one region to another, this collaboration also contributed greatly to fanning the spirit of enthusiasm and determination to move rapidly towards the goal.

The Auxiliary Board member, an assistant, and the Area Teaching Committee of Treasure Valley met with the Board members serving the Salt Lake City and Albuquerque clusters in the neighbouring region. They consulted about lines of action that could help develop the capacity of the Area Teaching Committee, expand the role it plays in the advancement of the cluster, and enable its members to increasingly serve as a source of joy, love, and support for the friends. In addition, spaces were created in which members of the Area Teaching Committees from the three clusters could share insights through video and phone calls, with the participation of the Board members and institute coordinators that support Treasure Valley.

Many of their conversations centred on the role of devotional meetings in encouraging the believers across the cluster to foster collective worship by inviting friends and family members to regularly come together to pray, especially for those impacted by the pandemic. To create the conditions of support and love which would inspire more and more friends to arise in this manner, the Treasure Valley Area Teaching Committee identified some individuals with experience in inviting friends from the wider community to their devotional meetings to serve as collaborators with other believers. These friends helped potential hosts to start simple yet spiritually uplifting gatherings for prayer. Every believer was encouraged to begin by holding devotional meetings in their homes with the members of their family, and then to extend the invitation to other receptive souls. Nineteen Day Feasts and reflection meetings provided opportunities for the friends to share what they were learning and draw inspiration from others' efforts.

The Area Teaching Committee also learned how to collaborate more closely with the Local Assemblies in fostering the devotional character of their communities. A pattern of planning and reflecting began with members of the four Local Assemblies twice a cycle, including a consultation after the cluster reflection gathering. This space provided an opportunity for the Committee and the Assemblies to clarify the vision of the Plan and develop a common understanding of the goals. In addition, the secretaries of the Assemblies met midway through the cycle to monitor progress towards the goals, share learning, and discuss

ways to overcome challenges. The Assemblies then consulted with their communities on the reports from the secretaries. The collaboration between the Area Teaching Committee and the Local Assemblies, and their commitment to supporting individuals and families to open collective spaces for devotion, raised the number of devotional meetings to over seventy. The strengthening of the devotional character and increased vibrancy within the community contributed significantly to the friends in the cluster passing the third milestone.

UNITED KINGDOM

In response to a nationwide call from the National Spiritual Assembly, several friends arose to pioneer and serve as visiting tutors to lend support to nearby clusters at an earlier stage of development. In a relatively short time, the friends in the **Solent** cluster—in one of the most affluent counties in the country—passed the second milestone.

At the start of the previous Plan, there was a small group of friends, including two families, holding just a few core activities across the cluster. They longed to intensify the teaching work and increase the number of activities. The Auxiliary Board member and sub-regional institute coordinator made several visits and, after consultation, a neighbourhood was identified as a potential area for intense teaching efforts. Several teaching projects were carried out with the assistance of a few Bahá'í youth from the local university and some friends from neighbouring localities. Consequently, the number of core activities increased and one of the families in the neighbourhood embraced the Faith. The cluster passed the first milestone based on the strength of this neighbourhood.

To reinforce the efforts across the cluster, five friends arose to serve as visiting tutors in several neighbourhoods. Supported by the Board members and a regional growth facilitator, a friend with more experience coordinated the efforts of these tutors, accompanying them on a weekly basis through the study of the first unit of Book 10 of the sequence of courses and consulting with them on their next steps. Each tutor became connected to a different neighbourhood nucleus, meeting frequently with them online in a spirit and manner inspired by their study of Book 10.

Conscious that their engagements at the grassroots were to be characterised by true friendship, free from paternalism, and in a spirit of mutual assistance and learning, the visiting tutors had simple and loving conversations with the friends in each neighbourhood, which evolved into a devotional space for the nucleus and others around them as it expanded. A culture of growth was fostered as they consulted on the opportunities and needs emerging in their local setting, and several study circles were formed.

Around the same time these efforts were underway, a family with experience in the community-building process arose to pioneer. The Regional Bahá'í Council consulted with the family, who moved to a receptive neighbourhood. As this family included children, junior youth, and youth, they were able to quickly integrate into the life of the community there.

Rapid progress was made across the cluster as a rhythm of weekly reflection and consultation unfolded among the Board members, growth facilitator, and the individual coordinating the work of the visiting tutors, among the tutors and the experienced friend who accompanied them, and among the tutors and those living and serving in the neighbourhoods. This system of mutual support and coordination from the regional level to the grassroots fostered a continuous process of learning.

A growing number of friends in the nuclei are now learning to apply the pattern of action, reflection, consultation, and study. Devotional meetings have multiplied across the cluster and three groups with friends from the wider community are going through Book 1. Many believers are having meaningful conversations with their local friends and holding regular firesides, demonstrating the increasingly outward-looking orientation characteristic of a cluster that has now passed the second milestone.

PAKISTAN

At the beginning of the last Plan, a group of rural clusters in the Sindh and Balochistan region established intensive programmes of growth, one of which was the **Matli** cluster. Although it was one of the more advanced clusters in that group, the friends there felt they needed to deeply reflect on their reality, and identify the capacities required to further advance the process of growth and support the adjoining clusters. Upon studying and reflecting on the guidance, they realized that the institute process had yet to take root in their cluster, despite many people having completed the main sequence of courses. The pool of effective tutors who could accompany participants through study and the practical elements needed to be widened. Through this process, the friends generated experiences and insights that helped them pass the third milestone, allowing them, in turn, to systematically assist adjoining clusters to accelerate the process of growth.

As a first step, we focused on one village and worked closely with a group of young adults to raise their capacity to serve, helping them to advance along the sequence of courses and invite their peers to join them on the same path. Through a rhythm of study circles and institute campaigns, an increasing number of people began to join, some coming from neighbouring villages.

At the same time, to raise a cadre of tutors, we identified from among the young adults those who could potentially serve in that capacity but needed more experience and confidence. We grouped them in pairs and accompanied them to co-tutor study circles for youth during an institute campaign. Every evening, they came together to reflect on their experiences and plan for the next day. We encouraged them to pay close attention to the content and practice component of each book of the institute. For instance, as they tutored Book 1, they learned how to assist the youth to form devotional meetings and have conversations about the importance of praying with their parents and friends. Upon completing Books 3 and 5, they assisted the youth with delivering the lessons and making clear and tangible personal plans of action to form children's classes and junior youth groups. Immediately following the intensive study, the tutors took steps to accompany these youth in their villages and help them put their plans into action. They also had conversations with the parents of the youth and certain village elders to increase their appreciation and support of the educational process and the community-building activities.

With this pattern of studying, practicing, and accompanying, capacity was raised, and insights were gained across the cluster about having conversations, conducting devotional meetings and educational activities, and offering institute courses. As a result, the cluster started moving forward and the friends had a sense of joy and a new enthusiasm as the youth continued assisting each other and coming together in reflection spaces.

As the friends in Matli shared what they were learning in regional gatherings, this spirit was kindled throughout the region. A friend from Matli, joined by some from Diplo cluster, turned their attention to the neighbouring clusters, one of which was **Mithi**.

We visited the Mithi cluster to identify a village with some receptivity and eventually found one called Mayari, with nearly 400 households. We explained that we wanted to invite the local people to join an educational process that would build capacity to grow spiritually and materially within everyone in the locality. We described each educational imperative and went into some detail about the practical components. After we spoke with the village chief, he became quite interested in our plans and offered to host us. During this period, the chief also visited the Matli cluster twice to experience the process unfolding at a more advanced stage. He then gave his blessing for us to begin studying the institute courses with the youth in his village, many of whom had more free time than usual because of the pandemic restrictions.

So, we continued our conversations and began study circles with the village youth. The chief also attended some sessions, sharing that the content being studied was very effective and needed in this day and age; he encouraged us to continue our efforts. Several youth completed their study of Book 1 and were quickly accompanied to start devotional meetings in the village. Some advanced to Book 3 and started children's classes straight after.

While working in neighbourhoods and villages, we observed that once the villagers get to know us and join the process, they start considering us as one of their own. They invite us to all their occasions, be it a marriage ceremony or any other significant celebration, which in the Sindhi culture implies that they trust us and consider us a part of their family. When the parents and elders understand the process early on, they have faith in it and support it, and this sustains the youth in their efforts. Thus, we first form bonds of friendship and have regular conversations with the parents and the elders, and then we share the training institute process with them. If they are appreciative, they will encourage their children and youth to participate.

The efforts of the believers in Matli have contributed significantly to the progress in the region; since 2020, seven clusters have passed the second milestone, and one cluster has passed the third. Currently there are 14 intensive programmes of growth in this group of adjoining clusters.

SIERRA LEONE

In the **Barrie Peje** cluster, located in the south of the country, there are over 1,500 friends participating in 160 core activities. The cluster passed the third milestone in 2019 and is now serving as a reservoir of experience for the adjoining clusters. In one village, Kundowahun, a significant proportion of the inhabitants have become involved in devotional meetings, children's classes, and junior youth groups. Each member of the Local Spiritual Assembly of this community—the only one in the cluster—has at least one core activity in their own home. The Assembly and local friends brought the community-building process to two neighbouring villages and supported the local inhabitants as they began engaging in the activities.

The Local Assembly is very active and provides support to the friends. Some months ago, it began to consult about extending the community-building process to

two villages a few miles away—Vaama and Mapoima—each with a population of around 800. These villages were selected after a series of visits by the Auxiliary Board member and a few assistants who are at the heart of the efforts in Kundowahun.

A group of 15 friends—six of whom are members of the Local Assembly—consulted with the Board member and the cluster agencies. Following this initial consultation, five of these individuals visited the two villages and shared the vision of the institute process with 10 community elders and some 40 youth, who all showed an interest in participating.

A few days after these visits, an intensive institute campaign was held in Kundowahun to train children's class coordinators and collaborators in Grades 3 and 4. As part of their practice component, participants joined the visiting team and the Board member to invite residents from the two villages to take part in the institute process. The younger friends engaged with the youth, while the members of the Local Assembly spoke with the adults. After this visit, 27 adults and youth from the villages began studying the institute courses and the youth conference materials.

Two believers from Kundowahun with experience in promoting devotional meetings that became portals to educational activities were asked to support the efforts in the two villages. A three-day orientation was organized to prepare them for their role, during which time they studied key guidance and reviewed the institute courses. They were accompanied by the cluster coordinator and a homefront pioneer as they started tutoring the first book of the sequence of courses with participants from the two villages. At the end of each day, these participants, who were all youth, visited families to share the concepts they were learning. Parents were invited to bring their children to children's classes, several of which had started before the training was completed. Eight children's classes were formed with 16 new teachers, and several regular devotional meetings began. These two friends visit every week and hold monthly reflection spaces for the youth who have become teachers and devotional hosts, and invite them to gatherings for the group of adjoining clusters.

Following the initial training, weekly visits were also made by the institute coordinators. A group of active friends, which included village elders, emerged in each village, and began meeting every week to reflect on the progress being made and to respond to any challenges faced by those serving. The friends from each nucleus have steadily built capacity to converse with more youth. In one of the villages, this has resulted in a second cohort of young people studying Book 1, from which have emerged promoters of devotional meetings. They are working with the children's class teachers to initiate such gatherings in the homes of parents who have shown interest in the spiritual education of their children, and they are learning to work with young mothers. Some friends who show interest in helping others are now being accompanied to develop the capacities necessary to coordinate classes for children. Eager to advance in the sequence of courses, the friends have asked for tutors to be sent to their villages to assist this group to study the second book of the sequence.

As a next step, those accompanying the friends in these villages hope to assist the nuclei to initiate regular reflection and include an expansion phase in their pattern of activities.

The Local Assembly of Kundowahun has supported these efforts by providing a subsidy for the institute materials. Its members regularly visit both villages, updating the Local Assembly each week about the development there and sharing any of the friends' needs or challenges. The Local Assembly ensures that, while support is being lent to the two villages, their own community also receives attention to build capacity to embrace larger numbers of friends.

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