

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

In its 25 November 2020 message, the Universal House of Justice called on the friends in clusters where a flourishing growth process was well underway to consolidate the achievements made and cultivate “the conditions necessary for welcoming larger and larger numbers of souls into the embrace of a community recognized for its fortitude and outward-looking orientation.” Engaging the believers across the cluster in a pattern of action where they live, work, or study while also concentrating efforts in centres of intense activity in villages and neighbourhoods, in which all elements of the framework of the Plan “most visibly cohere and connect, multiplying the community’s powers in the field of action,” has proven fundamental to this process.

This issue of *Reflections on Growth*—the second in a series dedicated to the One Year Plan—features stories about institutions and agencies supporting the friends in their response to this call; some are responding through their everyday encounters across the cluster with souls who are open to the exploration of spiritual matters, and others are responding to receptivity within villages or neighbourhoods.

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In the accounts below, the agencies in two clusters systematically assisted the generality of the believers to nurture the devotional character of their community, while also supporting the nucleus of friends serving in a centre of intense activity to intensify the process of community building. These efforts led to the friends in both clusters passing the third milestone at the beginning of the One Year Plan.

ARGENTINA

In the months preceding the One Year Plan, the friends in the **May Maxwell Norte** cluster set their sights on intensifying their efforts to enhance the spirit of collective worship within the community. One of the friends involved described this process.

The Auxiliary Board member began to meet every week with a few assistants, members of the Area Teaching Committee, and the Secretary of the Regional Bahá’í Council to reflect on how to multiply the number of devotional gatherings in the cluster in order to elevate the devotional character of the community. The frequency of these meetings allowed them to set simple goals to accomplish by the end of each week and to adjust the course of their next actions. As they studied and reflected on relevant guidance, they realized that there were in fact many people involved—albeit with varying degrees of commitment—in the conversations and activities across the cluster, and were able to envision strategies to assist them to arise and serve.

Studying the *Prayer and Devotional Life* compilation prepared by the Research Department of the Bahá’í World Centre helped the members of the agencies to reflect on the influence of prayer in their own lives and in those of the friends beginning to pray together. They also realized that the desire to pray for people in need has reinforced the determination of many to open these devotional spaces. To

support the efforts of these friends, a gathering was organized to explore some of the concepts in Book 1, which led to two study circles starting.

The members of the agencies also noted that when believers begin an activity, even with a few participants, others quickly join, helping to create an atmosphere of mutual support. This spirit of accompanying one another, together with an outward-looking orientation, is attracting souls from the wider community. The Local Spiritual Assembly contributes to this movement by encouraging families to start their own devotional meetings.

While these endeavours were under way, the cluster agencies were also consulting on the process of growth in the San Pedro neighbourhood. They recognized that the nucleus of friends serving there needed additional support to engage a growing percentage of the local population in the community-building efforts. To bolster the endeavours of the nucleus, two young pioneers from another cluster were invited to support those already intensively serving in San Pedro.

A three-day orientation was organised to ensure that everyone was acquainted with the processes underway. Reflecting on accumulated experience, the participants explored principles and methods for raising the capacity of the local population and expanding the circle of residents engaged in the community-building process, with different degrees of involvement, giving special thought to fostering the movement of youth. The regional coordinator, Auxiliary Board member, secretary of the institute board, and Secretary of the Regional Bahá'í Council all attended this gathering, offering insights from other clusters on the same learning path. Every afternoon, the friends visited homes in the neighbourhood to put into practice the concepts they had reflected on in the morning.

Over the following weeks, after studying the second theme of the youth conference material and being invited to visit ongoing junior youth groups, several local youth began studying the institute courses and taking their first steps in service—one hosting a devotional gathering with her family, another supporting a children's class, and a third co-animating a junior youth group. To build on this momentum, the friends in the nucleus intensified their efforts, organizing each month of the cycle of growth into three phases: finding new people, training them, and then assisting them to start new activities. They themselves have continued to advance through the sequence of courses and have organized spaces for those serving as tutors in the neighbourhood to reflect on the quality of their efforts. After participating in a zonal seminar focused on disseminating learning accrued in advanced clusters with centres of intense activity, their efforts broadened to include the families of the youth involved, focusing on a smaller pocket within the neighbourhood and beginning to envision the involvement of the entire population of that pocket in the community-building process. Some 100 families are now connected through conversations, including many with children participating in the educational activities. A good number of these families are now also holding devotional meetings in their homes.

TURKEY

With just four months remaining of the last Five Year Plan, the friends serving in the **Hatay 1** cluster resolved to intensify the rhythm of growth in a number of neighbourhoods where believers resided, visiting households to nurture a spirit of worship and service in home after home. In addition, each member of the cluster agencies set a personal goal of starting

a new activity. These initiatives inspired other friends across the cluster to offer their own contributions to the progress of the Cause.

Despite the restrictive conditions created by the pandemic, many believers were visited. Teams were formed, which included members of the institutions, to make systematic home visits in neighbourhoods where the friends were striving to intensify their work. Prayer campaigns for the success of all the efforts being made across the cluster inspired the believers to dedicate more time and energy to reaching their goal by Naw-Rúz. Fifty people studied the revised edition of Book 1, and the number of devotional meetings doubled by mid-March.

The cluster agencies began assisting the friends in every Bahá'í home to host a devotional meeting. The team in the Çekmece neighbourhood responded to this initiative by thinking about the families around them that were connected to the community-building process in order to identify those that could be encouraged to open their homes for regular prayer meetings. Over a period of two weeks, many new devotional gatherings were initiated. One of the friends described the effect this has had on family life in that neighbourhood.

It was heartening to see mothers concerned about the way their children behave when they pray, and to hear experiences of how their children are reading prayers before they go to sleep. One father had memorized some quotations because he wanted to support his child's efforts to memorize them.

Through heightening the devotional character of the community and paying continued attention to the educational processes, the friends in Hatay 1 realized their goal of passing the third milestone by Rıdván 2021.

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The description below demonstrates how a series of junior youth camps became a means to empower the friends in one community to engage in conversations with families around them and to contribute to the progress of the Faith in their cluster.

KAZAKHSTAN

A few years ago, when reflecting on how to engage a larger number of the believers in the **Almaty** cluster in collective action, the agencies and institutions reflected on the reality of the community and recognized that efforts with junior youth were an area of untapped potential. There was a general awareness among the friends that the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme could be a portal of growth, but it had been difficult to sustain junior youth groups over time and many of the junior youth scattered throughout the cluster were not regularly participating in the programme. The idea of holding a camp involving the junior youth and their parents resonated with the community, and the Local Spiritual Assembly supported this initiative. It became an opportunity for the friends to develop their ability to share the Holy Writings and to speak about the programme with those they invited.

For some two months prior to the first camp, with the support of the cluster agencies and an Auxiliary Board member, parents of junior youth from both the community and wider society participated in a weekly gathering, where they met with the animators and became familiar with the various texts of the programme. Discussion topics included the specific nature of early adolescence and ways to assist this age group to confidently navigate this stage in life. The warm, joyous atmosphere and the content of these meetings gave parents the language to

describe the programme fluently to their friends and acquaintances and invite more junior youth to the camp. As they reflected on prayers and studied the Creative Word, the parents gradually and naturally began to open their homes for devotional meetings and to share prayers in their day-to-day interactions with others.

Fifty junior youth, including those from Bahá'í families, their relatives, and their friends, participated in the first camp, supported by fifty youth and adults helping in various ways to ensure its success. By March 2020, four camps had been held, one per cycle. With each camp the number of participants increased, particularly those from the wider community. Many adults and youth were involved in some aspect of the camps: inviting junior youth and their parents, gaining experience serving as animators, or assisting with the logistical arrangements such as cooking, cleaning, and providing security. On the first day, parents were brought together for an overview of the programme and a presentation on the junior youth texts. This orientation enhanced everyone's understanding of the importance of the spiritual and intellectual education of junior youth and empowered each parent to take on at least one responsibility during the camp.

Within one year, the older junior youth that had participated in the first camp had become youth and were studying the sequence of courses. Some began serving as children's class teachers, while others, with the help of local believers, organized junior youth groups in several neighbourhoods across the cluster. The institute accompanied the youth to further their study of the sequence of courses and organized regular gatherings for the teachers and animators.

One family with two daughters aged 11 and 14 was among the participants of the first camp. Some time later, a junior youth group was formed in their neighbourhood with their younger daughter and her friends, and the parents began to attend a devotional meeting and to study the first book of the sequence. The older daughter eventually became an animator and embraced the Faith. Efforts gained momentum and one of the cluster coordinators relocated there; this neighbourhood is now a centre of intense activity.

Wherever they reside, the friends' confidence in reaching out to others has brought new impetus to the growth process as they speak to their neighbours, carry out home visits, and invite individuals and families to a growing number of devotional gatherings. With more and more individuals arising to serve those around them, the cluster of Almaty has now passed the third milestone.

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In the following vignette, the outward-looking orientation of the friends in one advanced cluster has helped them build their capacity to form close relationships with those from the wider society engaged in the community-building process and converse with them about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings.

PHILIPPINES

In **General Trias City**, one of the five clusters in the South Luzon region that had traversed the third milestone in the last Five Year Plan, the friends have learned to sustain over 230 core activities, a large proportion of which are gatherings for prayer among the parents of the participants in junior youth groups and children's classes. They are now further advancing the process of growth through a regular pattern of teaching the Cause and welcoming families and young people into the embrace of the Bahá'í community.

One important element in the advance of General Trias City cluster is the outward-looking orientation of the friends. They are regularly engaged in teaching the Faith, either in personal initiatives or as part of collective efforts. They are constantly having conversations with their friends and neighbours about Bahá'u'lláh, His teachings, and the community-building activities of the cluster. Another essential element that the friends learned early on is the importance of developing close relationships with the parents of the children and junior youth participating in the activities. This has had tremendous effect not only on the parents but also on the children, who appreciate this friendship between their teacher or animator and their parents.

Often the children are the ones to invite their parents to learn more about Bahá'u'lláh and His Faith. One of the friends shared an example:

When the pandemic had just set in and the classes were interrupted for a time, two parents and their children visited one of the teachers. The parents had come to learn about the Faith at the encouragement of their children who had been attending the classes. They told the teacher of the transformation they had witnessed in their children since attending the classes. On that day the parents declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh, with both them and their children shedding tears of joy. The children said that, at last, their family is a Bahá'í family. Several families then requested the teacher of their children to visit their homes so that they could know more about the Faith.

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In the following account, the cluster agencies serving an indigenous population extended the process of action, reflection, and consultation to groups of families, who they accompanied to engage others in the community-building process, while also remaining alert to opportunities to assist them to embrace the Faith.

COSTA RICA

The **Talamanca** cluster, located in the southeast of the country, is home to a sizable indigenous community. The cluster agencies, with the wholehearted participation of youth, have been concentrating on raising the capacity of groups of families to teach the Faith directly and to welcome an increasing number of people into the institute process.

Early in 2021, as part of the expansion phase, the agencies organized a campaign of home visits to families, which drew on a series of materials about the spiritual nature of the global enterprise, the expanding nucleus, the role of the institute, the processes of integration and disintegration, and mutual support. In preparation for these visits, fifty-one youth were invited to facilitate the study of the materials with these families. The agencies looked at where each youth resided and identified villages they could visit, joining the youth during these visits.

The agencies also realised that the reflection meeting planned for the beginning of the cycle needed to be adapted to meet public health guidelines and to accommodate the growth that had occurred in the cluster. They decided to organize reflections as a number of smaller gatherings among groups of families, providing an opportunity for everyone to participate and see themselves as part of the growth process. Many of the members of these families said that

in larger reflection spaces they had felt unable to participate and had simply listened to others who were at the forefront of the activities. But now, in these smaller groupings, they felt free to express what they were thinking and feeling about the subject being discussed. In addition, the gatherings were infused with a spirit of joy that brought the families closer together.

Over the next month, the youth accompanied the families as they engaged those around them and continued to study the various themes in the materials. By the end of this phase there had been conversations with more than 400 people, and many had committed to participating in the institute process and to teaching.

The agencies saw the youth who had accompanied the families as valiant “soldiers of Bahá’u’lláh”. They invited them together to celebrate and to share their experiences and how they had been impacted by this service. The youth spoke of the joy of serving and of finding opportunities to help others. For example, during their visits they had seen a need for prayer books and other materials, so they took a catalogue of Bahá’í books to the villages and then returned with books that the families wanted to read, such as stories from the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

As they thought more about the youth and their development, the cluster agencies realized that they needed to assist them to advance in the study of the sequence of courses to enable them to serve even more effectively. By the end of the cycle, some of the youth had started their own study circles or devotional meetings, and some were organizing initiatives for social action.

In their reflections on the previous three months at the beginning of the following cycle, the agencies recognized that more capable individuals were needed to respond to the receptivity of the population. Over 260 people from 13 villages reflected together in family groupings to prepare for an expansion phase concentrated on finding new friends to enter the institute process. Conversations in these gatherings focused on the power of this process to release the potential of every individual to serve.

The expansion phase that followed lasted nine days—four days to invite new people into the institute process, and then five days to study Book 1 intensively. Twenty-six new study circles started with 78 participants, and more were formed in the following weeks. In addition, during the consolidation phase thirteen devotional meetings were started, five children’s classes were reactivated, and many home visits were made. This helped the agencies to see that there were many capable individuals with a strong desire to serve and learn.

The agencies had also realized during their consultations on the previous cycle that conditions were propitious for intensifying learning around direct teaching and enrolment, noting that there were many people participating in the expansion and consolidation efforts who already considered themselves Bahá’ís and could be invited to join the community. Furthermore, to welcome thousands of people into the embrace of the Cause, a large number of believers would need to engage in this learning process. Moving towards this vision, the agencies brought together 115 friends to reflect on the sacred duty of teaching, to review key concepts in Book 6, and to form teaching teams that would visit homes to talk about Bahá’u’lláh and invite families to become members of the Bahá’í community.

As part of the consolidation phase, some 200 friends in the cluster participated in conversations based on the themes of a video created for a recent Indigenous Communities Conference. This video explores ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision, as articulated in the Tablets of the

Divine Plan, that “should they be educated and guided,” the indigenous population of America “will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world.” The consultations that followed empowered the friends and helped them to understand that the community-building process should benefit all, and that they should not be satisfied with just having activities for the children and youth in their own community when there were people in other villages that had not yet had the opportunity to be part of the process.

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In the story below, an expanding nucleus of friends learned to read and respond to the evolving reality of an urban neighbourhood and found creative ways to collaborate closely with parents, particularly mothers, who are making significant contributions to the community-building process underway.

MALAWI

The friends recount the journey taken to initiate and accelerate the rhythm of activity in Mtandire neighbourhood in the **Lilongwe City** cluster.

In January 2018, a few friends from the cluster returned from a seminar, offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, filled with excitement and a desire to serve. Together with the Counsellor, they explored the idea of working in the urban neighbourhood of Mtandire, and the friends, some of whom were originally from that township, were intrigued by the idea. Over the next month, they made regular visits, reading its reality, identifying its constructive and destructive forces, studying relevant guidance, and consulting together.

As the area had a total population of over 70,000 divided into 14 blocks, the team initially chose one highly populated block where some 5,000 people were living in 500 homes, identifying it as their neighbourhood of focus. Most people in the neighbourhood can read and write and the population is young and transient. Most are gardeners, or work in shops, and there are many young mothers who sell at the market.

The process moved quickly and by February 2018 the team was engaging with the residents of the neighbourhood. Noting the large population of children, one of the youth suggested beginning a class. The response was overwhelming, so the children were divided into several classes and each youth began to teach one. After a week, some parents wanted to know more about the classes, providing an opportunity for visits, which solidified commitment and increased the regular participation of the children.

In the meantime, groups of youth from the neighbourhood were engaged in conversation and invited to study the youth conference materials. Engaging the first group was challenging but the team continued to refine its approach, meeting with them every week to have conversations as well as tutoring them in Maths and English. While this increased interest among the residents, it also raised suspicions among parents who were unsure of what the youth were doing. Further engagement with these parents alleviated their fears and bolstered the attendance of the youth in the activities. Soon a group of youth had been trained as teachers,

resulting in a significant increase in the number of children's classes; the newly trained youth also took over the existing classes started by the team.

As many young women became involved in the community-building process, the three young men serving intensively in the neighbourhood realized that it would be helpful to have two additional female team members to serve alongside them.

Since then, a number of trainings have been held over school holidays and it has now become much easier to expand the effort to reach more youth, as the Bahá'ís are becoming well known in the community. One additional element that has recently led to increased participation and retention in the core activities is the conscious endeavour to engage children, junior youth, and youth from the same household. Efforts are being made to work with whole families by involving parents in devotional meetings.

Parents have played an important role in this process. At the very beginning, the team faced challenges in working with them because its members were young. In response to this, the team engaged a few of the mothers whose daughters and sons were participating in the activities, with the intention of forming a parents' group with which to consult and reflect. Soon a group of eight women formed, whose children were active teachers and animators, and a space was created for this parents' group to reflect on issues concerning their children, families, and the entire community.

These friends then extended their efforts to more and more parents, encouraging them to be part of the conversations and to open their homes for activities. They were also assisted to start the main sequence of institute courses by studying Book 1, and then accompanied to establish devotional meetings in their homes. As increasing numbers of parents developed the capacity to speak about the activities and respond to questions from friends and other community members, they collaborated closely with the expanding nucleus to extend the conversations across the community and to mobilize more youth in study and service. Currently some 100 youth are contributing to the vibrancy of the community-building process in this neighbourhood, and more than 1,000 adults, youth, junior youth, and children are now participating in core activities.

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