

Learning to respond to a global health crisis (Part III)

In its message dated 25 November 2020, the Universal House of Justice wrote to the Bahá'í World attesting to the dynamic power of the Covenant, evident in the unified endeavours of the Bahá'í community in each continent and country—ably guided by the institutions of the Cause—to “minister to the needs of an ailing world.” The House of Justice further noted that, with unwavering commitment, creativity, and determination, the friends are attending to the spiritual, intellectual, and material well-being of those around them, as well as supporting each other and their “sisters and brothers in society at large”. Fundamental to these efforts has been an intensified pattern of action, particularly among families, with parents becoming increasingly eager to draw on the society-building powers of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to influence their family and community life.

This edition of *Reflections on Growth*—the third in a series dedicated to the efforts made in response to the global health crisis—features stories that illustrate how groups of friends in various settings are assisting an increasing number of families to establish a rhythm of life which promotes the spiritual education and well-being of parents and children.

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In the following accounts neighbourhood teams were galvanized into action, in close collaboration with parents of children participating in the educational process, to cultivate a thriving community spirit among families and widen the circle of those engaged in the community-building activities.

AUSTRALIA

By early August 2020, the government restrictions associated with the pandemic had been eased for some time in the **Sydney** cluster and, with safety in mind, more members of the community were ready to return to in-person interactions with their neighbours and other friends. A team of friends in the Westmead neighbourhood recognized the possibility of restarting their regular children's festivals and began expanding the circle of those participating in the educational activities. Each member of the team would focus on one specific block by first visiting families that they knew in an apartment building, and then accompanying the children from those families to invite all their peers in the block. Through these efforts, most of the children in the neighbourhood were invited to the festival.

The festival attracted many families and nearly 150 children; numerous steps were taken to ensure social distancing and the safety of all attendees. For instance, the festival was held at the local park instead of in an enclosed space, all those that participated had their temperatures taken, and small activity groups were formed. The friends shared that what stood out in this festival was the participation of parents:

We saw how committed the parents were to learn how to teach entire lessons of the children's class materials when they gathered to read through the lessons and prepare them together.

One group of local mothers, having recently completed Book 3 of the sequence of courses, taught their first-ever children's classes alongside experienced teachers. What also brought joy to everyone was seeing a father of one of the young participants teach one of the lessons from Grade 2 of Book 3. In anticipation, he practiced delivering the lesson to his daughter three times in the morning before the festival. His participation changed the general perception of the parents about the role of men in the spiritual education of children.

Another distinct aspect of this festival was witnessing more children becoming aware of the Person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. When the teacher asked, "Does anyone know who 'Abdu'l-Bahá is?", most of the children raised their hands, as they had been inspired by the stories of the Master during previous festivals and children's classes.

After the event, the parents involved in teaching the classes were invited to reflect on their experiences, and another festival was planned for the upcoming school holiday period. As new children and junior youth register for weekly classes, and youth and adults learn how they can enter the institute process and begin contributing to a vibrant community life, such collective gatherings open to all have become important spaces where people can see, feel, and understand the community-building process in action. These festivals have also reaffirmed the idea that anyone can participate and play a part in inviting and sustaining ever-larger numbers to walk a shared path of service.

In response to a second lockdown implemented by the government, and aware of the challenging circumstances faced by all, the neighbourhood team of Hampton Park in the **Gippsland** cluster intensified their efforts to foster a collective spirit of community life. Online gatherings were organized with families and youth, contributing to a sense of calm and joy in these uncertain times. The team described their experience:

When news came of increased restrictions on movement and gatherings owing to a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, a heavy cloud of worry and anxiety loomed over the many families involved with our activities. Our team thought it would be an opportune time for residents of the neighbourhood to meet and consult about how we wanted to live and serve during this second lockdown.

We first consulted with parents about how we could work together to meet the needs of those in our neighbourhood, see each person as a protagonist of change, and endure, coming out of this second wave stronger together. Some parents shared a desire to have regular consultations with other families to generate new energy in our collective effort to unite and help our community.

Children, junior youth, youth, and parents participated in a community reflection gathering. The floor was open to all—everyone had a chance to share about their current situation, as well as their ideas and concerns. Some parents were worried about the impact of the situation on their young ones' engagement in education. One major concern was the feeling of isolation and separation from people in the community, and its effects on mental, spiritual, and physical health. When one parent mentioned the potential negative effects of social isolation on children during lengthy lockdown periods, a suggestion was made to create a space for daily check-ins and artistic activity sessions for children. We also realized that this

feeling of isolation was not just among the children but extended to the junior youth as well. So, we decided to involve the junior youth in organizing and running these sessions for the younger members of the community.

With the help of the junior youth and parents, we brought the children together online every day for 30 to 45 minutes to re-engage and strengthen their connection with the community and each other. We also invited those who were not yet involved in the community-building process to join these daily spaces. The responses we received from families in the neighbourhood have made us truly realize the urgency of strengthening the children's class team.

As these online gatherings continued to take place in the ensuing months, the parents consulted on how they too could contribute to the various ongoing activities in the neighbourhood. Gatherings have now started for mothers and efforts are being made to include all members of the families of the children and youth that are engaged in the process. Some families have begun studying the text *Learning About Excellence* from the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, while other social well-being groups are naturally starting to form. After a recent regional gathering, the team learned more about family groupings and now plans to help each family in the neighbourhood host a devotional meeting in their home as a next step.

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In the account shared below, a neighbourhood team making weekly visits to every household and family within a few streets, and working alongside a growing number of local inhabitants—particularly mothers—have fostered a thriving community-building process and strengthened relationships among groups of families.

BRAZIL

In the Vila Feliz neighbourhood, a centre of intense activity in the **Portal da Glória** cluster, every household over four adjoining streets is systematically involved in the process of community building. In each of these streets, all families regularly come together to pray and consult as a group, supporting one another as they walk together on a path of service.

Before the pandemic, the neighbourhood team visited each household and invited at least one member of the family to join them in visiting the next home. During these weekly visits families were encouraged to serve together. With the onset of the pandemic, these visits have evolved into outdoor conversations at the front gate of each home. The visiting team, equipped with masks and hand-sanitizers and maintaining an appropriate distance, leaves a kit with materials for families to read and study among themselves. These kits, distributed every week, contain Sacred Texts, messages of the Universal House of Justice, materials for children's classes and junior youth groups, and some prayers printed on beautiful paper. After a few days, the team returns to discuss the materials with the families. The friends serving in the neighbourhood explain:

We meet regularly to organize the activities for the week and to identify which families will be visited by whom. The themes we cover—for example, the spiritual education of children or junior youth, the importance of sharing prayers in the home, concepts from messages of the Universal House of Justice, and deepening themes from Book 2 of the sequence of courses—vary from visit to visit, taking

into account the situation that each family is faced with at any given time. Recently, a young man passed away, so we visited his family more frequently to pray and study the Writings about life after death.

The team visits around 70 families every month. The process of community building is being strengthened through the increasing involvement of groups of families in collective action, and a spirit of unity is being fostered among the families, particularly the mothers. One of the groups of families is taking on a greater role in fostering a spirit of service and worship in every home.

When we were accompanying the first group of families, all living on one street, it took time for them to take ownership of the process. Now, they are protagonists that are assuming greater responsibility in supporting and assisting other families in the nearby street to initiate activities. Mothers and young people are naturally involving other friends who bring along their families—they think about involving entire families. Many mothers have said that the community-building activities have brought them closer to one another. They consult in small groups about the well-being of all the families around them and in other parts of the neighbourhood and find creative ways to respond to the challenges emerging from the health crisis. They noticed, for instance, that some children were undernourished, so a wooden shed with a clay stove was built so cooked meals could be prepared three times a week for all the children of the neighbourhood. Following these meals, they come together to have Bahá'í classes and academic tutoring. During visits to deliver food packages to families in need, a beautifully prepared copy of a prayer for protection from Bahá'u'lláh was given to each household. Many have framed and hung the prayer on the front door of their homes.

Inspired by the weekly conversations, mothers are participating in study circles and are keen to strengthen their capacity to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of their community.

Study circles and devotional meetings among mothers are both generating a strong spirit of belonging. We delivered a Book 1 to the home of each participant so that they can read the material beforehand and, on a scheduled day, a tutor studies with them from a safe distance by the gate. We ensure that each study circle has no more than three participants. As the vast majority do not have access to the internet, our online study circles involve only a few individuals. Some of them are teaching children's classes or supporting their older children who are serving as teachers. Many are studying Book 3, and there are a few serving as animators.

We are now developing a schedule for the children's classes, determining locations for the classes, and training more teachers in Grades 3 and 4. We are planning to intensify the pace of new children's class teachers advancing through the subsequent grades. A similar process is underway for expanding the pool of animators and tutors.

The friends serving in the neighbourhood can see glimpses of the transformative power of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. They are concentrating their efforts on cultivating a thriving community life among an entire population within a smaller setting, by working alongside an expanding nucleus of local friends engaged as groups of families.

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The following story illustrates how, with intensity and creativity, a group of friends in a small community pressed on to establish a daily pattern of life dedicated to the spiritual well-being of families and the education of the children.

GHANA

Despite ongoing social restrictions in the **Akuapim South** cluster, the friends at the heart of the community-building process in the Gyankama community overcame challenges associated with the pandemic by implementing creative measures to safeguard the health and well-being of children and junior youth, involve parents in the spiritual education of their young ones, and support families in organizing their daily spiritual and material endeavours. From the impetus brought about by these efforts, the friends in the cluster were able to pass the second milestone in less than one cycle. The group shares their experience:

We saw that the lockdown instituted by the government in major cities across Ghana also impacted residents in nearby towns and villages. Many parents initially did not want their children and junior youth participating in children's classes and junior youth groups because they were concerned that it would be challenging to observe the health precautions in these spaces.

The friends consulted about how they might respond to the difficulties inherent in this situation. They were particularly struck by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's counsel quoted in the Naw-Rúz 177 message of the Universal House of Justice:

In a day such as this, when the tempests of trials and tribulations have encompassed the world, and fear and trembling have agitated the planet, ye must rise above the horizon of firmness and steadfastness with illumined faces and radiant brows in such wise that, God willing, the gloom of fear and consternation may be entirely obliterated, and the light of assurance may dawn above the manifest horizon and shine resplendently.

With these words of the Master in mind, the friends reviewed the restrictions on gathering in large groups and considered how they could all be observed during children's classes and junior youth groups.

A handful of our children's class teachers and junior youth animators decided to provide water and soap for hand washing as well as sanitizers to be used by children and junior youth at the start and end of the classes. In line with the public health regulations, they also agreed to ensure sufficient social distancing between each of the participants; the number of those who could take part—five to ten—would have to depend on the space available. They then visited the parents of each child and shared the measures they intended to put in place to safeguard the health of their children. The parents were heartened by the thought being given to these matters and agreed to have their children participate.

As bonds deepened between families, children's class teachers, and animators, parents came to see the friends supporting their children's spiritual education as close collaborators. Some parents also began to play an active role in assisting their children to memorize quotations. One of the mothers, who could not read but felt the need to assist, sat with her own child when she was reading to follow her progress. Each time she realized the child was struggling to say a word, the mother would ask the child to underline it. The mother would then encourage the child to show the difficult words to the children's class teacher when she visited, so that she could help the child pronounce them.

A suggestion was made to assist families to draw up a timetable for how the life of the family could be organized during such a period of considerable change. The day could naturally include a time for prayer and devotion, a time for when children needed to tune in to the government mandated academic programmes airing on television and radio, a time for a children's class or junior youth activity, and a time for chores and other duties. This effort greatly assisted the children in the village to bring structure to their daily lives under the circumstances, and participate effectively in their academic and spiritual educational activities.

Our nucleus of friends has been a source of encouragement to the families through frequent phone calls. During home visits, families have shared their appreciation for the support given to them to organize an elevated pattern of daily life.

These efforts re-energized the friends in the cluster and helped them advance in their path of development.

It was a joyous occasion to see so many parents, mainly women, participating so actively in launching the intensive programme of growth. On that occasion, a number of parents who had not yet opened their homes to devotional meetings pledged to do so after greatly admiring how their children and junior youth recited prayers and quotations and shared songs and dramatic presentations. To date, more than half of the parents of the children and junior youth engaged in the educational activities are hosting devotional meetings in their homes.

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