

The Eleven Year (and counting) Virtual House of Worship Story

By Its Founder: James Williams

Welcome to our virtual House of Worship where we strive to make our hearts pleasing and acceptable to God. For many years it has had a healing and bonding influence upon many lives. Its organic growth and expansion, its gradually unfolding spiritual purpose, its resulting community of attendees can only mean that it was constructed and still being sustained by the mysterious forces released by Bahá'u'lláh, the Lord of humanity.

Who can describe this beauty? What musical instruments can attain the heights of yearning souls in prayer, thus only the human voice is heard within the sanctuary? Each attendee has his or her own personal testimony and perceptions. And, like miracles, they are meant only for the minds and hearts that experience them. So be assured that this servant well-knows that our union with the Holy Spirit and its sustaining, endless bounties is far beyond his ability to describe.

What truly seeking mind can remain unaffected by the outpouring of grace and mercy experienced here each morning? Why do so many attendees say, “This is my lifeline”? Why did one, amidst her tears, describe it as “my reward”? Who knows? “The Spirit breathing through the Holy Scriptures is food for all who hunger”.¹ Thus, everyone has its own unique relationship with the Holy Spirit. Surely this House is a spiritual refuge, a haven of love and spiritual bounties, a fortress of certitude against the prevailing winds of religious superstition and the godlessness of materialism.

You are reading this servant's account of not only its humble beginnings but also personal perceptions pertaining to why it has continued through the present month of May 2020. His attempts to describe this Place find their ultimate expression in the question, “O Bahá'u'lláh, what hast Thou done?”^{2 3}

Between 50 to 60 now *come* every morning. Perhaps they, too, are discerning that this virtual House of Worship was constructed solely to serve the lofty station of the servants of God. During its nascent beginnings, a handful of devoted believers *attended* from different states. Due to its organically grown membership, no one personally knew everyone else. And even then, no cameras were allowed. For this Place was not built for physical eyes—one of its distinctive characteristics.

Another is that most of those attending are *called* to prayer at 9am EST, just as church bells ring for Christians and the Islamic call to prayer is recited by the muezzin from the mosque minaret at prescribed times of the day. This particular time was selected to accommodate believers in the west who must arise before 6am to attend, and even moderate.

Another characteristic is the absence of a program or scheduled order for attendees to follow. Other than the recitation of the *Tablet of Ahmad* and *The Remover of Difficulties* at the very end, there is no predictability. Devotions are participatory, meaning every heart is invited to pray. Three, even more, attendees always share the recitation of long prayers and Tablets. And miraculous things began to happen from the beginning.

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, “Paris Talks”

² 'Abdu'l-Baha, quoted by the Universal House of Justice, “The Bahá'í World: Volume 13 (1954-1963)”

³ Future minds should know that this is being written while a virus contagion envelopes Earth. The Universal House of Justice is encouraging Bahá'is worldwide, especially those who have adequate electronic means, to undertake the necessity of community devotions. It is hoped that this Place has encouraged others to replicate it.

Some will tell you that, early on, it was discovered that a collective ‘mind’ mysteriously emerges within our conscious perceptions. One of its effects is that it is still uncommon for two people to start praying simultaneously even though there are no visual cues. In other words, prayers from our hearts seemed to be orchestrated by Something or Someone. But our Lord stated that “*I have breathed within thee a breath of My own spirit...*”⁴ So is this mystery originating from our own souls when collectively focused on God? Or all three? This phenomenon remains beyond our intellectual understanding. Some of us suspect, however, that our spirits already know the answer.

Our virtual House of Worship began humbly, in April 2009, as a private devotional between this servant and Ms Lynda Tae Reed (now departed). Lynda, of European descent, was an artistic, emotionally complex, and sometimes brilliant elderly woman who then lived in WV in her birthplace home. She had returned from her pioneering post in the Caribbean Islands a few years back, having recognized, and declared her devotion to, Bahá’u’lláh while living there. Being in the same electoral unit, we naturally became friends.

While at her post, her life became enriched through dedicated service, as well as by close associations with visiting Hands of the Cause and members of the Universal House of Justice. She devotedly served on a National Spiritual Assembly and, traveling from island to island, she taught what her heart and mind knew to be true with great fervor. Of all possible things, the “most vital and challenging issue” was one of her guiding stars.

Upon returning home she began to experience challenges associated with aging and psychological isolation, despite living in a small Bahá’í community. She eventually became depressingly ill from various physical ailments. This servant called her. He had learned the healing power of collective prayer from years of immersion in Black Men’s Bahá’í Gathering devotions, whose doors were prayerfully guarded by the Universal House of Justice and whose purpose and vision were guided and shaped by Dr. Billy Roberts, its faithful servant. Thus, the sole reason for that call was to ask her to pray together. Otherwise, “*No deed have I done...*”⁵

Neither one of us could imagine that the construction of today’s virtual House of Worship began at that moment.

Prayers, long and short, all from the Three Central Figures of the Faith, were recited over the telephone every morning for a week. Their transforming effect on Lynda, as well as on this servant, became so confirming that she invited two of her friends (Joyce Olinga, Mary Williams) to experience it. Her spirit was becoming refreshed, renewed, hopeful, as she continued to attend this other-dimensional and organically expanding Spot.

On the morning of December 14, 2014, we heard her enter this Place from her geographically afar nursing home bed, and say, “I’m here”, thus making her intimately, spiritually, perceptually near to us. Yet, that distinctive voice was never heard again by anyone. Her nurses, whom Lynda had instructed not to bother her during her prayer time, discovered that she had departed with her telephone receiver beside her ear; our prayers could still be heard. One of them picked it up and respectfully, quietly informed us that Lynda had passed away.

We do not grieve for Ms Lynda Tae Reed. She intensely, unconditionally loved Bahá’u’lláh. Years earlier while at her post, she had been granted the highest privilege of seeing Him during

⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Hidden Words*

⁵ *The Báb, Bahá’í Prayers*

a heart wrenching, tearful, and emotionally confusing moment. There is no doubt her spiritual wings of departure were assisted by the Holy Spirit. Please read her testimony in the Resources section; it was the first among those sent to the Universal House of Justice.

It is not surprising that, then and now, tears often flow during our devotions, tears evoked solely by reciting the sacred words of the revealed prayers and Writings. During the earliest years, we could not understand what was happening to us; the prayers and sacred verses seemed more meaningful. Nor could we comprehend why most Bahá'is, wherever each attendee resided, rejected our spiritual experiences. We believed our morning prayers fulfilled the highest purpose of electronic communications. Still, our communities ignored us, in effect placing us outside of the Faith's guidance. Each of them confidently claimed that this could not be a true devotional meeting, saying; What we were experiencing was occurring within an electronically created venue—not 'physical'—and, therefore, could not be a 'true' devotional meeting.

Finally, in 2012, an Auxiliary Board member suggested that we appeal to that Institution that "God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error."⁶ Nine attendees then wrote personal testimonies that were sent to the Universal House of Justice with an accompanying letter. We will eternally bow before It; Its precious, affirming 'decision' can be read in the Resources section of this website.

Scholarly study of what occurs here every morning is invited. This lowly servant, however, continues to research the vast Ocean of the Supreme Revelation of God, attempting to understand what we encounter within our sanctuary.

There are many applicable sacred verses; only a few are selected. For example, Bahá'u'lláh confirms the reality of this Place with just these few words:

"The tongue I have designed for the mention of Me..."⁷ "the rays of the sun of the Word are seen with inner vision."⁸

As for collective prayer using an electronic venue, He clearly states:

In truth, the hearts of men are edified through the power of the tongue... We have assigned to every end a means for its accomplishment; avail yourselves thereof, and place your trust and confidence in God, the Omniscient, the All-Wise.⁹

'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us what a true Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is. He wrote:

In reality, the radiant, pure hearts are the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar and from them the voice of supplication and invocation continually reacheth the Supreme Concourse. I ask God to make the heart of every one of you a temple of the Divine Temples and to let the lamp of the great guidance be lighted therein...¹⁰

Yes, Bahá'u'lláh constructed this sacred edifice with a sanctuary in which physical eyes are forbidden. By now, most of us have learned that physical eyes have become the primary tool of minds conditioned and prejudiced by the dark forces of this world. This is confirmed by fundamental teachings within God's

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi, "Establishment of the Universal House of Justice"

⁷ The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh

⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet of the Holy Mariner

⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas

¹⁰ Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas p. 678

Supreme Revelation that tell us the human spirit has its own eyes and ears. Why else would He command us to “*see with the eye of the spirit*”.¹¹

The Universal House of Justice wrote in 1985:

The endowments which distinguish the human race from all other forms of life are summed up in what is known as the human spirit; the mind is its essential quality. These endowments have enabled humanity to build civilizations and to prosper materially. But such accomplishments alone have never satisfied the human spirit, whose mysterious nature inclines it towards transcendence, a reaching towards an invisible realm, towards the ultimate reality, that unknowable essence of essences called God.¹²

This servant believes that humanity’s spirit of faith has historically been suppressed by systems and social constructs of the human intellect. “[T]he human mind, the human intellect, the human thought are limited, whereas the reality of Divinity is unlimited.”¹³ It is the intellect that rejects God. It is the intellect that builds its ‘logical Towers of Babel’ and many other foolish things. To this day, the intellect’s ‘logic’ remains the most familiar to us, the most trusted, not the spirit.

Thus, our spirits have been yearning to be free, yearning to collectively commune with God, unhampered by worldly veils of material and physical considerations. Here, while physically within the privacy of our chambers, the suppressed powers of our spiritual eyes and ears seem to be released, confirmed, and strengthened in their personal, yet synergistically comingled interactions with the Holy Spirit. Here, spiritually together, the Holy Spirit is attracted just as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá promised; we can prepare for It, anticipate It, open our hearts to It. It always comes, and “each shall receive a share thereof”.¹⁴

As a “confluence of holy souls”¹⁵, a tiny microcosm of human diversity, we are experiencing mysteries as well as affirming, whispered answers, including those pertaining to the “oneness of mankind”. It can now be conclusively stated that our spirits are innately attracted to the godly realities of others who are perceptually different, albeit always predicated upon one’s heart’s desire. Thus:

Responding to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker, they carry out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character.¹⁶

The following selected, sacred verses, for example, transcend human thought:

*Blessed is the spot, and the house, and the place...where mention of God hath been made, and His praise glorified.*¹⁷

They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful in the most melodious of tones will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty of earth and heaven can never be compared... Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that

¹¹ Bahá’u’lláh, Summons of the Lord of Hosts

¹² October 1985 – To the Peoples of the World

¹³ The Promulgation of Universal Peace, Pages 421-425: 422

¹⁴ Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

¹⁵ Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

¹⁶ the Universal House of Justice, 2008 Ridvan Message

¹⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, Bahá’í Prayers

*can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion. Blessed be those who hearken.*¹⁸

*Far, far from Thy glory be what mortal man can affirm of Thee, or attribute unto Thee, or the praise with which he can glorify Thee! Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto that station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.*¹⁹

For the sake of brevity, this concludes this servant's testimony concerning the sacred sanctuary within our House of Worship. Who can believe that Bahá'u'lláh changed tiny seeds of faith in to such an Edifice?

Morning devotions are now guided by highly dedicated volunteers who act as moderators²⁰ and hosts. Attendees come from numerous states coast-to-coast; every American time zone is represented. Beautiful voices sing and chant God's praises, and the word of God seems all-embracing when expressed by hearts raised in different ethnicities or recited in diverse languages.

Lastly, it is common to hear sweet voices saying, "See you tomorrow". Who can doubt that this is special Place?

However, it seems that this House was destined to serve another necessary purpose, a purpose dedicated specifically to the further education of our minds. Our virtual foundation hall had seen only occasional use over the years. But, as they say, "When the students are ready a teacher will appear". And so, one day, in late December 2019, an indefatigable and unusually dedicated visionary, a proven architect of social thought and accomplished poet, quietly attended without fanfare. Her name is Mrs. Barbara Talley. Surely Bahá'u'lláh guided her to this Place. Many of us had attended the phenomenal national "Pupil of the Eye" conference held in Nashville the month before. We did not know at that time that she had planned and organized it almost single-handedly. Regardless, we certainly knew that a sea-change had occurred within the consciousness of the three hundred individuals of African descent, including families, who came. Since then, what happened there has become a Movement. As usual, we invited her to continue worshipping with us, but also to further educate us on the "Pupil of the Eye". Briefly, everything our foundation hall has become— its beautiful website, its order, study documents, selected Writings, guest lecturers (Dr. Derrick Smith is our first), etc.—are due to her devotion, many skills, patience and vision. Again, Bahá'u'lláh surely sent her, for which we are profoundly grateful. **Note: please read Mrs. Talley's own thoughts about our virtual foundation hall.**

¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas

¹⁹ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

²⁰ **SPECIAL MENTION:** Renee and Eugene Dixon (CA); their son Joshua Owens (OR); our platform benefactor and Eugene's sister, Kathleen Cross (CA); Sandy Simmons-Williams (CA); Jamey-James Findley (WA); Selma Anderson (OR)