

## **Addressing Race, Class, and Culture: Reflections on Bahá'í Institutional Efforts in Washington, DC**

### **Introduction**

The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Washington, DC is committed to a process of action and reflection as it guides the community to address issues of racial justice and to reach out to African Americans. We still have much to learn as an Assembly and a community, and in providing this information we do not want to indicate in any way that we have arrived or that we have not made mistakes. Certainly, there have been challenges and racial or cultural misunderstandings to address in our process of growth and at times in planning various activities. It is difficult to share those in a public document for reasons of confidentiality. However, as an Assembly, we continue to make every effort to address them when they arise and learn from them as we move forward. We share the information below only to contribute to learning that is taking place all across the country and not out of a sense of triumphalism.

This document focuses primarily on the efforts of the Local Spiritual Assembly and also incorporates some of the experience of the Auxiliary Board Members and cluster agencies.

### **Washington, DC Bahá'í Community: History and Context**

Washington, DC has approximately 350 Bahá'ís, mostly white, Persian American, and Persian, with about 40 individuals who are African American or of African descent. The community is almost exclusively middle and upper-middle income. The Washington, DC Bahá'í community is characterized by considerable unity of thought and action and a vibrant community life. It is an advanced cluster with close to 250 core activities serving approximately 850 participants. Notably, more than one third of the Bahá'í community is actively carrying out one if not several core activities along with dozens of friends of the Faith and new believers. The Local Spiritual Assembly and Auxiliary Board members have taken various steps in their approaches and actions to promote and strengthen the spiritual health of the community, which has contributed significantly to the community's growing capacity to constructively address sensitive and challenging issues, including racial prejudice.

Washington, DC has a long history of striving to eliminate racial prejudice. That history goes back to the days of Abdul-Baha's visits to the city in 1912, where He emphasized interracial harmony in word and deed, including in his address at Howard University to a mixed audience of over 1,000 people. Hand of the Cause of God Louis Gregory lived in Washington, DC, as did other advocates for racial justice, including Joseph and Pauline Hannen, who taught Mr. Gregory the Faith. In those early years, efforts to address racial prejudice in and out of the Bahá'í community proceeded in "fits and starts," a pattern that has characterized much of the national Bahá'í community's efforts to deal with issues of race (letter from Universal House of Justice on April 10, 2011). That being said, the Bahá'í community of Washington, DC and its Local Spiritual Assembly and Auxiliary Board members have continually found ways to bring these issues to the forefront, although until more recently they have done so without the benefit of systematic methods to continue sustained engagement.

This journey has not been without its challenges. For many years, even though the community itself was smaller, a significant percentage of the Bahá'ís were African American. But the ratio changed as Bahá'ís who were not native to DC moved into the city. Now the percentage of African American Bahá'ís in DC is again rising. There have been times when these believers felt that if they did not talk about race, the issue would be ignored, and it seemed that the same concerns would come up over and over again. But as was stated earlier, the Assembly, the cluster agencies, and members of the community would find ways to bring the elimination of racial prejudice back to the forefront.

The Local Spiritual Assembly of Washington, DC is conscious of the shoulders on which we stand, most notably the shoulders of Abdul-Baha and Louis Gregory, as well as many others. During the current series of Five Year Plans, many efforts have been advanced to transform racial dynamics and to teach African Americans. Those efforts have become increasingly coherent with the Plans and have benefitted from wonderful and constant collaboration with the Auxiliary Board members and cluster agencies. This collaboration has been essential and has allowed us to remain consistent over time in fostering freedom from racial prejudice.

### **Making freedom from Racial Prejudice the Watchword**

Several years ago, in our ongoing effort to systematically ensure that the elimination of racial prejudice truly became the watchword “in the social spaces in which they are engaged for the activities of the Plan,” the Local Spiritual Assembly decided it would reflect on a particular question before or after we made decisions. There have been variations on the question, but the following is one representation: **What are the racial, cultural, class, and gender implications of this decision?**

We realized that unconscious bias can surface when decisions are made in a hasty manner or without pausing to determine if there are racial and cultural implications to the decision. Over a number of years, this question has become part of the Assembly's culture, has spread to several of our committees as well as cluster agencies, and has become a much more normalized part of the thinking process of the community. Certainly this is not the case all the time, nor is it the case for every member of the community; still you will hear this question raised in discussions among the friends at all levels.

Some time after initiating this practice, the Assembly began regularly asking a second question that asked how our decisions promote the nobility of African Americans and draw on their experience. These questions are placed at the top of the Assembly's agenda, and asking them has definitely influenced decisions in many different situations. Equally important is the consultation that takes place when the questions are considered as part of the consultative process. Our understanding of issues deepens, as does our unity of thought. At times the consultation can become very intense, but the Assembly has not backed away from that intensity.

There are numerous examples of how these questions have influenced both major and minor decisions. A simple example is that when the Assembly has decided to buy flowers for a community member or group, it purchases them from a Black-owned flower shop. When such reflection questions become routine, they influence decisions which may seem very minor and, at first glance, completely unrelated

to race. But on further reflection, it becomes clear that there are in fact racial repercussions to these choices. What follows are additional examples of how asking these questions has influenced our decisions.

1. When the Assembly was reflecting on how it wanted to plan the **Bicentenary for the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh**, the decision was made to first meet with the African American Bahá'ís to get their input on the various aspects of the program. This meeting was very intentional and created a beautiful launching point for the rest of the planning process. In addition, there was further consultation about plans for the event at a few Nineteen-Day Feasts, which included discussion on where the event should be held. There were several suggestions, and a strong case was made to hold it in one of the more affluent areas of DC that would be fitting for invited dignitaries. The Assembly consulted on the suggestions and determined that this location would not be as welcoming and accessible to the broad range of the African American community. We determined that in planning such events, a combination of simplicity and dignity were important and that an historically black high school would be a welcoming environment for diverse African Americans. So that was the choice. Though we were unable to secure that particular venue, a similar high school was chosen. The Assembly also took the step of explaining to the community why it made this choice and why selecting a historically Black high school was important. This type of consultation allows the entire community to grow. And of course, all aspects of the program were considered through the lens of the two questions mentioned above.

One additional aspect of celebrating the Bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh was [a video](#) about the DC Bahá'í community that was commissioned by the Assembly. It highlighted the effect of the Bahá'í community-building process on the local population, with a specific emphasis on African American participants and how the DC community is addressing freedom from racial prejudice. The video was intended as a teaching tool, and we have received feedback from African Americans that seeing this emphasis on addressing race and African Americans represented as protagonists in the community aided their investigation of the Faith and increased their desire to be a part of it.

### ***What the Assembly learned***

Our Assembly continued to learn; to reflect more effectively on the racial, cultural, and class implications of our decisions; and to expand our capacity for deeper consultation, sensitivity, and understanding of what inclusion looks like. We increased our perseverance and patience, as it takes longer for consultation, planning, and execution when considering how to be inclusive. Without expressly saying it, the Assembly is learning how important it is to be involved at every level of the community in guiding and nurturing efforts to address issues of race, class and culture. Finally, we continue to learn about the beautiful and vibrant outcomes when we make sure everyone is included and work through challenges together with a unity of vision. It is hard to describe, but making sincere and diligent efforts to ensure inclusion is really like ensuring oneness, and when that happens, it seems to attract a vibrating and magnetic spiritual energy.

2. When the **Bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb** was held two years later, it was not really necessary to formally raise the two questions. The Assembly immediately made the decision to hold the main program in a very underserved area of DC that at the time was 95% African American. This is an area of DC where few such programs are held. This time we secured a historically black high school that had provided education for African American children since the early 1900s. Few Bahá'ís live in that area, and this decision meant that the predominately white, Persian, and Persian American community would need to come “across the river” to participate in the program. They did so, in significant numbers. The guidance given to the planning committee was that the program needed to be culturally relevant to the surrounding African American population and include drumming and storytelling, and that community residents should be invited to be part of the program. In the spirit of centering and drawing on the capacity of African Americans, the two Assembly liaisons were of African descent. One of the two story writers was of African descent. Three of the five readers, one of which was a friend of the Faith, were of African descent, including those who portrayed Khadijih Khanum (the wife of the Báb) and Tahirih. The opening remarks were given by an African American elder, the opening talk was given by two people of African descent, the drum circle was predominately African American and included a friend of the Faith, and the closing remarks were delivered by an African American. The program was vibrant, culturally relevant, and moving. As one indigenous-to-DC African American Bahá'í commented, “I felt like this program was truly ours.”

It is important to note that though many of the participants in the program were of African descent, there were several people involved in various aspects of the program who were not, and their efforts also played an important role in the spirit and quality of the program. (See: [more information & photo gallery](#))

### ***What the Assembly learned***

The Assembly spent time in deep reflection about the factors that contributed to the high quality of this program. We noted that the presence of many African Americans in all aspects of the event had certainly contributed to that quality. We also noted that people of all backgrounds were moved by the program, which demonstrated the inclusive spirit that a predominately African American group can create.

During the debriefing it became clear that one reason the program was so powerful was that the participants felt such ease with each other during the rehearsals and the planning process. This in part was due to the spirit created by having a large number of African Americans engaged. One person stated that they did not know who was a Bahá'í and who wasn't, and it didn't matter. Throughout the whole process, the Assembly was learning how to be intentional and thoughtful in its efforts to ensure that African Americans are in positions of leadership in meaningful service to the Faith.

3. The **hiring of the current resident manager of the DC Bahá'í Center** is another example of an instance when consideration of these questions shaped decision-making. Our Bahá'í Center has

an apartment located within it, and the Assembly has historically had a person or a couple live at the Center and oversee its operations, part of which involves being the face of the DC Bahá'í community. Our current resident manager is African American and one of the few native Black Washingtonians to serve in that role. Shortly after being appointed as the resident manager, he was appointed to the Area Teaching Committee and several months later was elected to the Local Spiritual Assembly. The process of hiring this resident manager allowed us to reflect deeply on the two questions shared earlier. There were layers of complexity; he was a single male and the other applicants were couples, which made him an unlikely choice, as effectively managing the center is a two-person job. Also the other applicants were white; in thinking about the racial implications and the centering of African Americans, it became very clear to the interviewing task force that having a native Black Washingtonian as the face of the Bahá'í community was an overriding consideration. This was not tokenism, but was a decision that allowed for the spirit and culture of a native Washingtonian to be at the forefront and made it the responsibility of the Assembly to find ways to assist with the workload.

#### ***What the Assembly learned***

We learned from this experience that it is important not to make too hasty a decision when the solution might at first appear obvious and that it is also important to consider race, class, and culture to ensure we are looking at all sides of an issue. The significance of this cannot be overestimated, because in this case a very logical choice would have been to hire one of the couples, since the work definitely requires two people. But that logic paled compared to the logic of hiring our current resident manager. That logic would not have emerged without reflection upon these questions. There seems to be something powerful and energizing when a decision aligns with moving a community in a spiritually meaningful and practical way toward the realization of the oneness of humankind.

4. **Memorializing the resting place of Mrs. Pocahontas Pope, the first African American Bahá'í in Washington, DC:** A beautiful example of collaboration between an individual and an institution is demonstrated by the following story. Mr. --, a white Bahá'í living in a neighboring community, first learned of Mrs. Pocahontas Cha Kay Pope while listening to a Bahá'í talk. He began researching her life and learned among other things that Mrs. Pope was of African American and Native American descent, the first African American Bahá'í in Washington, DC, and very likely the first Indigenous believer in the U.S. She became a Bahá'í in 1906 and received at least one Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Baha, a portion of which was translated and published in the 1986 World Centre compilation on women. (See [Bahai Teachings article](#) & [Bahai Chronicles](#), as well as [Press release](#))

Mr.-- learned that the cemetery where Mrs. Pope was buried in 1938 had subsequently been reclaimed by the government in the late 1950s for building a roadway. The African American people buried in the original cemetery were moved, WITHOUT markers, to the National Harmony Memorial Park. His research continued, and working closely with the National Harmony staff, he identified the general area of Mrs. Pope's resting place. Mr.-- approached the

Local Assembly in March 2017 with his research and his proposal to design and fund a marker to be placed at the approximate location of Mrs. Pope's gravesite. The Assembly was deeply moved by the importance of this work. Over the next year, organizing and planning continued. Mr.-- contacted Mrs. Pope's family; she had no children, but her other descendants were fully supportive of this effort.

The ceremony took place on May 19, 2018 and included a diverse program, including friends of the Faith. There was discussion of whether it should be held the same weekend as the memorial for Mrs. Anita Chapman, a longstanding member of the DC Bahá'í community, and the Assembly felt there would be power in memorializing two strong and devoted Bahá'í women, one black and one white American, on two consecutive days.

### ***What the Assembly learned***

The Assembly immediately agreed to this project, without hesitation. The ease of creating a shared vision may have been the outcome of working as an institution to keep the promotion of racial unity foremost in our thinking. The Assembly felt that restoring this resting place was an expression of dignity and justice. We also realized the value, for us as an institution and for us as a community, of demonstrating in action our belief in honoring the nobility and contributions African Americans. There is beauty in working in unity; every step of this planning was made easy by our shared vision and purpose, and the result could be felt in the beauty of the ceremony itself.

5. **The Sunday Morning Program:** For over four decades, the DC Bahá'í community has hosted a Sunday morning program, which is our only regularly scheduled public-facing activity. This program has attracted a small but steady stream of African Americans, several of whom have declared over the years, although not all reside in DC. The program organizing committee, guided by the Local Spiritual Assembly, has considered questions such as: (1) Who hosts/emcees the program? Are we intentionally seeking out Black and non-Persian people of color to be hosts/emcees? (2) How can we more actively look for speakers who are Black or non-Persian minorities, not only for race topics but as experts and speakers in every field? (3) How do we make sure to regularly include topics about race unity, racial justice, and the lives of Black Bahá'í heroines and heroes? (4) How can we connect Bahá'í History to the life and suffering of oppressed people? e.g. Bábís and African Americans (5) What type of music do we share? Does it reflect the diversity of the Bahá'í community, particularly the rich traditions of African-American music? The third Sunday of each month is devoted to a drum circle led by a group of African American men who attended the Black Men's Gathering. This has been a source of attraction especially for African American seekers and Bahá'ís but has also drawn the broader community.

### ***What the Assembly learned***

There is a need for a space that is welcoming to African Americans and provides a sense of community in a public arena. Black believers of an older generation were pillars of this program

and the adjacent Sunday school. Music and culture of the African American friends has to be an integral component if we are to welcome, nurture, and retain them in the Faith.

- 6. Accompanying the Assembly's Committees** It should also be mentioned that the Local Spiritual Assembly made it part of the mandate of every committee to be conscious of how their plans would impact African Americans and to broadly consider race, class, and culture in their decisions. We have not fully captured how this has played out in each committee, and the committees are not regularly reminded about these guidelines. However, this is one example: in considering how to send Feast notifications, the Feast Committee realized that some community members lack regular access to email, which has been the main mode of communication. As many more people have cell phones, the decision was made to announce Feasts and Holy Days through a formal text messaging system (called Remind) in order to reach a broader segment of the community and be more mindful of class diversity. The adoption of this system has been beneficial for many in the community, not just those without email access.

### **Reaching African Americans and striving “to nurture, encourage, and safeguard”**

In the last year, eight African Americans have enrolled in the Faith; all were accompanied through the institute process by white, Latinx, Persian, and African American Bahá'ís, and they all remain actively engaged in the core activities and community life. One of these new African American believers has recently been appointed as a member of the Area Teaching Committee. The Assembly invited all eight to a dinner meeting to learn about their desires and to share passages about the pupil of the eye. From this gathering, the Assembly gained a great deal of insight into what these friends felt was important when sharing the Faith with other African Americans, such as the teachings on racial unity and racial justice and the concept of the pupil of the eye. The point of inviting them to such a gathering was to emphasize the role of African Americans and to assure them that they and their viewpoints are valued in this community. The Assembly strives to always remember that “every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it.” (Shoghi Effendi: *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 35)

Reflecting more broadly on the African Americans who embraced the Faith in recent years or have become protagonists in the community-building process, we see that these friends have been attracted to the Faith primarily through very thoughtful and consistent efforts of teams of tutors who created, through their activities in a smaller setting, a nurturing and welcoming community environment for them to develop their own relationship with Bahá'u'lláh and contribute their share to the progress of the Faith as protagonists. This is important to note, as there have been instances where newly declared African Americans were introduced to the broader Bahá'í community too soon, which can create challenges for a person's newly awakened Faith.

## Further Examples of Efforts to Address Racial Issues

- An early effort during the current series of Five Year Plans was a campaign dedicated to Louis Gregory that included the systematic study of the Advent of Divine Justice along with self-reflection tools for honest assessment of individuals' racial awareness. This was a comprehensive program designed to embrace the entire community. As the Assembly began to understand more and more about the institute process and how the elimination of racial prejudice was an integral part of the three areas of expansion and consolidation, public discourse, and social action, we started refining our efforts.
- Around 2012, two Assembly members conducted a deepening with the community on the April 10, 2011 message from the Universal House of Justice. This was an effort to familiarize the community with what at the time was the most recent guidance provided by the House of Justice on how the elimination of racial prejudice can be addressed within the community-building process.
- In late 2014, there was a highly successful and well attended community conversation on race embracing the wider-DC community, titled "What is missing in the conversation about race?" This was an effort to participate in the city's discourse on race in a way that was unique, focusing on the spiritual dimension of addressing racial prejudice. Participants described both the content and tone of the meeting as inspiring, thought-provoking, and different than the prevalent discourse on race. Several friends of the Faith, all African Americans, were invited to and started engaging in core activities.
- The Auxiliary Board member and a representative of the Local Spiritual Assembly held a reflection space in the summer of 2016 with cluster agencies to discuss how to engage in deeper exploration of issues of race, class, and culture in the community-building activities. Steps were taken to systematically integrate such discussions in various existing spaces (e.g. reflection meetings, tutor gatherings, devotional host meetings, etc.) so that the theme would become a natural part of our conversations. Cluster agencies, with support of the Board members, are reflecting regularly about how to become more intentional in accompanying African Americans on their journey toward service in institutional and cluster capacities. There have consistently been African Americans serving on the ATC, in a few cases as coordinators. Encouragement from the Auxiliary Board members early on supported the cluster agencies in sustaining a commitment to this process, regardless of membership changes.
- In March and July 2018, the Auxiliary Board members hosted two gatherings in Washington D.C. that included friends from adjoining clusters. The program was specifically designed for nuclei in African American neighborhoods and teaching teams focused on reaching African Americans; its purpose was to explore how we can better understand the culture of the communities where teaching efforts are taking place and how we can increase our capacity to read the social reality of those neighborhoods. Additional time was devoted to sharing experiences and learning about meaningful conversations about the teachings and the community-building process in these same neighborhoods. This was a highly successful effort guided by an African American facilitator who is



living in an African American neighborhood and has had extensive experience serving in diverse African American neighborhoods. Participants left with greater awareness of the spiritual and practical implications of engaging with their respective communities, as well as with more confidence in carrying out elevated conversations.

- The elimination of racial prejudice became a consistent theme at Nineteen Day Feasts. Stories of early believers in DC were and continue to be shared regularly at the Feast, often by children and junior youth, and frequently those stories are about African Americans and/or individual's efforts to champion the cause of racial justice.
- The Local Spiritual Assembly has met several times with the African American believers to make sure the Assembly is in tune with their perspectives and concerns. Some of those meetings are described below. In addition, the Auxiliary Board members have been conscious, when working with cluster agencies and their collaborators, to identify and accompany African Americans so that eventually these individuals serve on agencies and emerge as key collaborators and assistants to advance the community building efforts.
- In 2018, a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors for the Americas visited Washington, DC and urged the Assembly to intensify teaching efforts in two predominately African American neighborhoods where there was a nucleus of Bahá'ís living and striving to lay foundations for the institute process and to become an integral part of the community. She visited these areas more than once and joined in outreach efforts. In addition, the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly, Ken Bowers, also came to DC with the Counsellor to visit these neighborhoods and encourage the friends. These visits prompted the Local Spiritual Assembly to consult with the Regional Council and set in motion plans to have an Institute house in the Deanwood neighborhood. The Deanwood area is considered a very underserved region of Washington DC, so it was significant that the LSA determined to have an Institute House in that location.
- In 2018 the Local Spiritual Assembly ,in consultation with the Auxiliary Board members and cluster agencies, agreed to participate in a National Spiritual Assembly pilot project designed to capture what the DC community is learning about how to address the elimination of racial prejudice within the context of the community-building process.
- For many years, the Local Spiritual Assembly has hosted an annual commemoration of Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Howard University in April 1912, where he spoke at the historic Rankin Chapel on the need and requirements for interracial harmony to a racially diverse audience of over 1,000 people. This commemoration includes a talk and artistic presentations, including song, dramatic performances, and poetry. It has provided the Assembly with an opportunity to proclaim the Faith's commitment to freedom from racial prejudice as a prerequisite to peace and American progress; to build relationships with prominent speakers, who learn more about the Faith as a result of being invited to speak on this theme; and to share the DC Bahá'í community's efforts to eliminate racial prejudice and invite interested attendees to join us in striving to better our city. In recent years, the programs

have begun to speak more directly about the role of the Bahá'í community-building activities in addressing racial prejudice, and organizers have engaged African American seekers, friends of the Faith, and institute participants in the program.

### **Broad learning**

Efforts to integrate questions of race, class and culture into the life of the DC Bahá'í community have been significantly aided by two foundational principles guiding the framework for action of the Five Year Plan: 1) approaching this with intention as an aspect of a process of learning that 2) advances as we build capacity through systematic action and reflection. The more we do, the more we learn. The more we learn, the more we grow in strength. Thus, we understand this is a process in which we learn to build our capacity at all levels - the individual, the community and the institutions - to better address issues of race proactively and as they naturally come up when a diverse group of people come together in an intimate space. This understanding allows us to appreciate that this is a process that unfolds over time, which is not at odds with urgency, and to remember that "systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act" (Ridvan Message 1998)

The Local Spiritual Assembly is learning that in order to keep our focus on the elimination of racial prejudice, as we are continually encouraged to do by the National Spiritual Assembly and Universal House of Justice, there needs to be close collaboration with the Auxiliary Board and the cluster agencies. The importance of inter-institutional unity of vision around racial justice cannot be overemphasized, and we have to be engaged in continuous conversation and consultation in order to maintain it.

The Assembly is learning that we must be willing to tackle the complexities of race while continuing to keep it at the forefront of the community's attention, which is facilitated by repeatedly and systematically asking a question about racial implications and being willing to follow through. The Assembly strives to be very open and forthright about its commitment to these issues, always inviting frank and loving consultation from the community.

We are increasing our capacity to ensure that the three protagonists of the Plan - the individual, the community, and the institutions - are engaged in the learning process and to assist those who are struggling with issues of race to build their own capacities.

We are learning to stay in touch with the feelings and concerns of the African American believers and to make clear that their views are heard by the Assembly. We are learning to provide encouragement and support to African Americans, who make up only a small percentage of the community, by having frank and open consultation, meeting with them regularly, and giving thorough consideration to their suggestions when decisions are being made.

The Assembly needs to continue learning how to collaborate more effectively with organizations in the broader community in addressing this issue.

## **Recent Efforts since the martyrdom of George Floyd**

The community is expanding its ability to address issues of race within the activities of the community-building process. There has been an intensification of these efforts since the recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others. For example, the cluster recently held a 3-week intensive virtual camp for children, junior youth, and youth. The Auxiliary Board members urged those facilitating the camp to make integrating issues of race throughout the materials one of their learning objectives; the planners wholeheartedly embraced this guidance and demonstrated much creativity and effort as they learned to make these connections.

The two community-wide Feasts held after the killing of Mr. Floyd included an opening statement from the Assembly acknowledging the pain and heartbreak of the time. This was followed by a long period of devotions, mostly in song, and calling on our ancestors for support, and finally by consultation on what individuals are doing and learning about advancing freedom from racial prejudice. These feasts generated insight, experiences, questions, and desires from the community at large. After consultation, the Assembly and the Area Teaching Committee together offered encouragement and resources back to the community as one response to the expression of three heartfelt desires shared by individuals: (i) to attempt to self-educate on the history of systematic racism and structural racism in the United States and explore internal biases; (ii) to better articulate how and why the community-building efforts promoted by the institute process are revolutionary, radical, and aimed towards justice; and (iii) to see Bahá'u'lláh's Word reaching the African-Americans of our city, who the Guardian has stated are urgently needed at the forefront for His World Order to be able to advance.

The Assembly also met again with the African American believers in the community to consult on their well-being, needs, and thoughts about the way forward. This meeting created an opportunity for very frank consultation. It was clear that the African American friends reflected a wide spectrum of emotion; some had raw emotions and needed a nurturing space for healing, while others were moved to share examples of opportunities they saw in their spheres of influence. While some were comfortable with how the meeting was framed, others were very frank in their comments that it felt too structured and they did not want to have to respond to such formal questions. The Assembly heard their concerns and the space evolved into a more informal one. The Assembly later reflected on how to be more effective in creating spaces where people who are in pain can express what they're feeling and people who want to talk about possibilities, opportunities, and actions steps can do that. We realized what a delicate balance this is, particularly when there are so many raw emotions.

### ***What the Assembly learned:***

Regarding the camp efforts, we have not fully debriefed with those involved, but it is clear from individual conversations that both the planners of the activities and the participants learned a great deal.

The Assembly was well aware that we needed to provide institutional guidance in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. After consultation, it became clear that the Assembly's first line of action should be creating space to listen to the community as a whole, to hear their feelings and concerns, and to learn

how they were addressing race in response to this tragedy. The Assembly did that for two consecutive Feasts, and after consultation at our next meeting, we offered resources and direction related to the three heartfelt desires noted above. Our learning here was that in this particular case, it was important to hear from the community first before offering direction and guidance.

Reflecting on the recent gatherings for African American Bahá'ís, The Assembly knew that some emotions would be raw and that the friends might need to come together for healing. We learned that whatever structure is created for such a gathering, there needs to be great deal of flexibility and a continuous reading of the emotional temperature of the group, beginning with just checking in and asking how everyone is doing before launching into any kind of agenda. Each person in the group will have their particular emotional and spiritual needs, some more focused on the pain they are in, and others more focused on possibilities for action. It is important to create space for both and to be clear that both kinds of input are valued.

### **In closing**

As we stated in the beginning of this document, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Washington, DC is sharing this information in the spirit of learning, not because we feel like we've arrived. We are grateful to Bahá'u'lláh for guiding us in our efforts, realizing that we still have much to learn.

**Submitted by the Pilot Project team in collaboration with the Local Spiritual Assembly and the Auxiliary Board members serving Washington, DC on July 16, 2020**