

## **The “Prayer Call” is our virtual Māsh̄riqū’l-Ādh̄kār, our virtual “House of Worship”**

Quotes from Bahá’u’lláh in The Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

***“O people of the world! Build ye houses of worship throughout the lands in the name of Him Who is the Lord of all religions. Make them as perfect as is possible in the world of being, and adorn them with that which befitteth them, not with images and effigies. Then, with radiance and joy, celebrate therein the praise of your Lord, the Most Compassionate. Verily, by His remembrance the eye is cheered and the heart is filled with light.”***

***Blessed is he who, at the hour of dawn, centring his thoughts on God, occupied with His remembrance, and supplicating His forgiveness, directeth his steps to the Mashriq'u'l-Adhkár and, entering therein, seateth himself in silence to listen to the verses of God, the Sovereign, the Mighty, the All-Praised. Say: The Mashriq'u'l-Adhkár is each and every building which hath been erected in cities and villages for the celebration of My praise. Such is the name by which it hath been designated before the throne of glory, were ye of those who understand.”***

Quotes from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in original tablets translated from Persian:

***“The Māsh̄riqū’l-Ādh̄kār is the dawning-place of lights and the gathering place of the righteous. Whenever a company of noble souls assemble in a heavenly gathering there and offer supplications, intone divine verses, and chant prayers with wondrous melodies, the inmates of the Concourse on high hearken and call out, crying, “Happy are we; let all the world rejoice!” for, praise be unto God, souls from among the angels of the Kingdom of Glory have arisen in the nether world to commune with their Lord and intone the verses of Divine Unity in a gathering of holiness. What bounty is there greater than this?” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá***

***“Do not call it a meeting. Call it a confluence of holy souls; a convocation of those who love the Lord; a retreat for the people of the All-Merciful; a palace-hall for all who sing His praise. For the members of that gathering are each one a lighted taper, and that council a mansion of the moon and stars.”***

From the Universal House of Justice in a letter dated 20 April 1997 to an individual believer

***“The term “Māsh̄riqū’l-Ādh̄kār” has been used in the Writings to describe various things: the gathering of the friends for prayers at dawn; a building where this activity takes place; the complete institution of the Māsh̄riqū’l-Ādh̄kār, with its dependencies; the central edifice of that institution, often described as a “House of Worship” or “Temple”. These variants can all be seen as denoting stages or aspects of the gradual introduction of Bahá’u’lláh’s concept as promulgated in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.”***

Welcome, dear friends, to this discussion of the origins and purpose of our daily confluence of holy souls, our virtual Mashriqu'l-Adhkár or House of Worship, where we gather each morning to *(in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá)* ***“inhale the heavenly fragrances, experience the sweetness of prayer, meditate upon the Creative Word, be transported on the wings of the spirit, and commune with the one Beloved.”***

Mashriqu'l-Adhkár (pronounced mash-ree-kul-az-car) translated into English means “the Dawning-place of the Praise of God,” and it is a unique gift to us from the Blessed Beauty in His Most Holy Book the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is described by the Universal House of Justice, in a letter dated 18 December 2014, as ***“a unique concept in the annals of religion”*** that ***“symbolizes the teachings of the new Day of God”***. The House of Justice further states that the House of Worship is a ***“collective centre of society to promote cordial affection”*** and that it ***“...stands as a universal place of worship open to all the inhabitants of a locality irrespective of their religious affiliation, background, ethnicity, or gender and a haven for the deepest contemplation on spiritual reality and foundational questions of life, including individual and collective responsibility for the betterment of society. Men and women, children and youth, are held in its embrace as equals.”***

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár embodies a distinguishing feature of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh—the principle of unity in diversity— and marks, according to Shoghi Effendi, the establishment ***“upon the face of the earth, in the most visible and tangible manner, a beauteous likeness and enduring expression of the vital and unbounded spirit of the Cause of Him Who is the Lord of all worlds”***.

In a Statement and Compilation from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, dated September 2017, we learn:

“Since the revelation of the law of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár by the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh, its implementation has followed a process of gradual, organic unfoldment commensurate with the capacity of the community. ...Their beginnings, the Master indicates, could assume even the humblest of forms:

***‘As to the Máshriqú'l-Ádhkár, it is of the utmost importance. The purpose is this: A spot should be designated, even if it is a small place beneath layers of earth and stone... At least once a week, it should become the gathering place of the chosen friends who have discovered the secrets and become the intimates of divine mysteries. It may assume any form, for even if it be an underground pit, that pit shall become a sheltering paradise, an exalted bower, and a garden of delight.’”***

Our own “garden of delight,” our virtual Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, which we have the great bounty of attending via technology, is a daily devotional gathering which is also lovingly referred to by its participants as “the Prayer Call.”

Please know that the Prayer Call is not an offspring of the Covid pandemic. This devotional gathering is in its 12<sup>th</sup> year of existence, and it is the fruit of the individual initiative of one person—our dear Baha'i brother, James Williams, who created it to serve a heart in distress. This space was born when James picked up the telephone daily to pray with his spiritual sister Lynda Tae Reed, who, upon returning home to West Virginia from pioneering in the Caribbean islands, began to experience challenges associated with aging and psychological isolation. Lynda had become ill, and James called her daily to pray with her.

*“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.” –James Williams*

Lynda Tae Reed transitioned to the Abhá Kingdom while on the Prayer Call, and today we send her our prayers and gratitude, as we imagine she continues to attend this gathering with us in spirit, consecrating its purpose and influencing its growth.

Over the last 11 plus years, this virtual Mashriqu'l-Adhkár has been consistently stewarded by James Williams with limitless love and devotion, and with much personal sacrifice. Year after year, James called each attendee one by one every single morning via Skype. This is an important aspect of the Prayer Call as it has always been his staunch commitment to CALL the believers to prayer each morning as a service—and as the technology has grown more sophisticated over time, it has become possible to serve many more souls.

In the last few months, this devotional gathering has grown to as many as 100 participants, (which is the maximum number this Uberconference platform can accommodate) and with that growth some logistical changes were needed. For example, “moderators” are now necessary to help with silencing noisy phone lines when participants forget to mute their phones. Also, participants are asked to offer only one prayer to allow more souls the opportunity to share.

Of course, with this growth in number, change is inevitable, but many who are new to this devotional gathering may not be aware that there are some intrinsic characteristics of the original prayer call that hold special importance to its originator, our brother James Williams.

One of these characteristics is the absence of cameras or recording devices. While the technology now exists to transform this space into a visual gathering, in the words of its originator “...*this Place was not built for physical eyes—one of its distinctive characteristics.*” Indeed, one powerful experience this space offers is an intense, pure focus on the devotions being offered—without visual distractions or any shift of focus to the physical qualities of the attendees.

Another original characteristic of this gathering is the absence of a pre-planned program or a scheduled or strict order of prayers. Other than The Remover of Difficulties at the very end of the call, which provides an opportunity for all of the voices present to grace the space, there is no predictability of devotions—leaving room for any attendee to spontaneously serve as a “hollow reed” for the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps most vital of all is the intention of creating in this virtual House of Worship what Shoghi Effendi describes as ***“a serenely spiritual atmosphere.”***

Shoghi Effendi advises in a letter written on his behalf, that our devotions be ***“simple, dignified, and designed to uplift the soul and educate it through hearing the creative word”***.

***“As regards the whole question of the Temple and services held in it: He wishes to emphasize that he is very anxious, now that this first and greatest Temple of the West has been built, and will, within a few years, be used for worship and regular services by the Bahá’ís, that no forms, no rituals, no set customs be introduced over and above the bare minimum outlined in the***

***teachings. The nature of these gatherings is for prayer, meditation and the reading of writings from the Sacred Scriptures of our Faith and other Faiths... The gatherings should be simple, dignified, and designed to uplift the soul and educate it through hearing the creative word. No speeches may be made, no extraneous matter introduced. He urges you, at all times, to receive the very best technical advice, and to bear in mind that the main thing is that the meetings in the Temple should be conducted in a beautiful and peaceful setting, in comfort and with dignity and simplicity, and that the audience should be able to hear perfectly and the tone values be pleasant to the ear.*** (From a letter dated 20 July 1946 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

In a letter dated November 2, 2015 the House of Justice states,

***“Lyrics used in songs being performed in the Māshriq’l-Ādhkār need not be confined to the Writings; rather, what is required is that they be based upon Bahá’í or other sacred writings and contain Bahá’í themes. It should be noted that the standard for lyrics used in songs performed is somewhat different from the standard for Writings and prayers to be read or chanted in devotional programmes in Houses of Worship. There is therefore no objection to the use of songs based on the Writings and talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.”***

In light of the above referenced quotes, please know that this is why in our virtual House of Worship we share only the writings of the Manifestations of God and the beloved Master, Bahá'u'lláh's son 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Songs with spiritual themes are welcomed and encouraged in our daily devotional gathering. Your songs of worship serve to deepen and illuminate the spirit of our devotions.

Please know that this discussion about limiting our readings (to the Central Figures of the Faith and the Manifestations of God) in our virtual House of Worship is specifically in reference to the prayer portion of our devotional gathering, and not to Foundation Hall University where our beloved sister Barbara Talley has served as the “architect” for the rebuilding our virtual Foundation Hall into a university of devoted souls committed to and focused on the elimination of racism, building community and elevating the station of black people designated as **pupil of the eye**.

Thank each and every one of you on the Prayer Call for striving always to become the “one soul in many bodies” which we all have the bounty of experiencing here each day.

Allāhu 'Abhā!