



## Riḍván 2024 Annual Report

National Spiritual Assembly  
of the Bahá'ís of the United States



STRIVE  
THAT YOUR  
ACTIONS  
DAY<sup>B</sup> DAY  
MAY·BE  
BEAUTIFUL  
PRAYERS  
'A BDU'L-BAHÁ

# Ridván 2024 Annual Report

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

## To the American Bahá'í Community

### **Cherished friends and co-workers:**

As the second year of the Nine Year Plan draws to a conclusion, our hearts go out to each and every one of you with deepest love and gratitude for your devoted and steadfast services at the Threshold of the Blessed Beauty. These sentiments grow even stronger in the light of the Universal House of Justice's message of November 28, 2023, in which it surveyed the achievements of the Bahá'í world community over the course of the first century of the Formative Age of the Faith—a period of growth in which the American believers played a significant part. Our ardent prayer is that, whatever tests and trials may lie ahead, we will together continue to meaningfully contribute, along with our beloved sister communities throughout the world, to the onward march of the Cause of God.

Among the insights provided by the House of Justice's weighty message is that the Bahá'ís of the world have always been in a mode of learning. This can be seen during the ministry of our beloved Guardian, in the patient and loving way in which he elucidated for us the fundamental verities of our Faith and tutored us all in the essential principles and features of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Over the course of more than three decades, the understanding and capacities of the community gradually increased until such time as he was able, in his final years, to launch the entire Bahá'í world upon the Ten Year Global Crusade—the first international teaching plan in our history. Within that short span such victories were won, according to the Guardian's own statements, as to eclipse in many ways the achievements of the previous 11 decades of the Bahá'í Dispensation.

In a similar manner, the Universal House of Justice has now for more than six decades continued the task of training the entire Bahá'í community and guiding it systematically toward its ultimate destiny. Among the Supreme Body's achievements, which became very evident over the course of the past generation, was to instill the capacity for a more mature process of learning that reaches from the grass roots all the way up to the international level. Among the characteristics of this process are the ability to define objectives, analyze results, and refine action according to experience. In describing the achievements of the Bahá'í world in recent years, the House of Justice explained that, whereas some clusters have achieved extraordinary progress and others less so, they all advance by the same essential learning process:

Naturally, prevalence of Bahá'í activity on this scale is not a prospect everywhere. It is necessary to appreciate the difference that is made by the conditions in a cluster or in parts of a cluster and by the characteristics of a people—that is, by the reality of circumstances. Accordingly, the ways in which the society-building power of the Faith will find expression in different settings will vary. But regardless of the extent to which Bahá'í community life embraces those who reside in a particular area—regardless, even, of the intensity of a programme of growth in a cluster or the level of activity in a neighbourhood or village—the challenge facing the friends serving at the grassroots is essentially the same in every place. They must be able to read their own reality and ask: what, in light of the possibilities and requirements at hand, would be fitting objectives to pursue in the coming cycle or series of cycles? You and your auxiliaries are ideally placed to put this question and to ensure

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**While the regional institutions take up their challenging roles as agents of the teaching work, the National Spiritual Assembly is shifting its focus from one of developing and delivering training to pursuing lines of action more in keeping with current realities.** ”

that appropriate strategies are identified. Much can be learned from the experience of the friends in similar clusters, for a community that is a step further along the same path can provide valuable insights about the goal to strive for next. As the friends ponder what is before them, they will readily see that for every community there is a goal in reach, and for every goal a path to reach it.

We can take as our guide certain clusters that have advanced to a relatively higher degree; in other words, those that have passed well beyond the third milestone of development. In these places we can begin to see, especially in neighborhoods of intensive focus, various lines of action being pursued simultaneously, and a consequent emergence of new patterns of community life that are having an increasingly discernible impact on the lives of their inhabitants.

In such clusters, one might say that a significant locus of learning about growth has emerged. The issue then is how to continue to advance that cluster, while also connecting it with friends in clusters throughout a region, so that others can share in the insights being generated. In this way one can see the gradual emergence of a network of clusters, each contributing to and benefiting from a wider system for the generation and dissemination of knowledge. At the national level, the challenge then emerges of ensuring that this process of learning can impact all regions. Moreover, there is the need to ensure the adequate development of administrative mechanisms that will facilitate the flow of people through the institute, the flow of information and guidance throughout communities, and the flow of material resources necessary to support community-building efforts. In sum, there must be a robust system of growth at every level, yet with the understanding that the locus of learning is at the community's grass roots.

As we speak of learning, we always keep in mind our fundamental objective—to release the

society-building powers of the Faith in ever-greater measures over the course of the coming years. Such a vision requires attention to the spiritual dimensions of the Revelation as much as to orderliness and systematization. Among the implications of this understanding is the cultivation of spiritual attributes such as humility, inclusion of all people, justice, reliance on prayer, and channeling the powers of the Holy Spirit. All such capacities are unlocked through engagement in the institute, as we encounter the Word of God for today and strive to translate what has been written into reality.

As a community of learners, we might also say that we are proving the truth of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about reality: that there is a God, that human beings have an inherent spiritual nature, that there are spiritual forces at work in the world to which we have access and that can bring us together, and that there is a Covenant that has the power to bind the hearts of people in a unified effort to advance civilization. This can happen in a receptive neighborhood and in any other setting.

Another seminal message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, addressed to this National Spiritual Assembly on March 20 of last year, has already begun to profoundly impact the thinking about Bahá'í administration in this



country. The letter describes the present epoch as one of “historic transition” in the administration of the Faith. It goes on to elaborate certain principles that will distinguish this period from previous stages of administrative development.

The letter also refers to the dramatic changes in the national administration of the Faith in the late 1960s and early 1970s—a time of extraordinary growth as the result of organized campaigns of mass teaching as well as widespread teaching efforts in such varied spaces as college campuses, the homes of believers, and other settings. This new reality necessitated the emergence at the national level of a much larger cadre of friends willing to devote themselves to full-time service in assisting the National Spiritual Assembly to minister to the needs of our far-flung country. At that time the work of developing Local Spiritual Assemblies, educating and training the friends, marshalling support for the Funds of the Faith beyond the local level, and maintaining the flow of information and guidance rested directly upon the shoulders of the National Spiritual Assembly. This is because there were no intermediary institutions between it and more than 1,000 Local Spiritual Assemblies.

This situation existed for an entire generation, until the Universal House of Justice, in the late 1990s, introduced two extremely important innovations. The first, in 1996, was the worldwide establishment of the training institute, with all of the concepts about growth and development that this entailed. The next, in 1997, was the establishment of Regional Bahá’í Councils in the United States, which now gave the National Assembly a means closer to the grass roots to effect a new mode of operating. In the years since then, these two closely related developments have steadily matured and advanced, such that new possibilities are now in view.

While the regional institutions take up their challenging roles as agents of the teaching work, the National Spiritual Assembly is shifting its focus from one of developing and delivering training to pursuing lines of action more in keeping with current realities. As has already been said, learning begins at the grass roots and is the



responsibility of all institutions, but the National Assembly now must ensure that a healthy process of learning exists at all levels. It is structuring its operations to this end, with the exception of such functions as must in the natural course of things remain at the national level.

All of this said, there are certain particular objectives of learning that we feel deserve special attention in the coming year. They do not exclude other areas, but seem to us to be priorities of the moment.

The first is a need for the generality of the believers to appreciate the seemingly inexhaustible potential of the institute process to effect social transformation. In our most advanced clusters this power is becoming very clear as patterns of life emerge embracing children, junior youth, youth, and their families—and beyond them neighbors, civic organizations, and others who share the aspiration to create a new way of life. Those who have been impacted by their encounter with the Bahá’í Revelation are now rapidly developing the means for the spiritual and intellectual advancement of young people and are, in many other ways, increasingly acting as agents for the betterment of their communities—whether through projects of social action, engagement in relevant discourses, or other community-building activities. These are local populations who feel ownership of the process and are themselves taking the reins of development into their own hands.

Again, not every cluster or every neighborhood will advance at the same pace or in the same way—yet the potential is there to some extent wherever we serve. No matter their location, any group of friends who consciously envision themselves as members of “an expanding nucleus” in the manner described in the guidance,

and act on that principle with determination and persistence in an attitude of learning, will most certainly reap the tangible rewards of such effort.

Another issue is that, while we continue to increase the circle of participants in the life of the community, we should also bear in mind the need to learn how we can wisely and lovingly attract increasing numbers of souls to formally embrace the Cause of God. After all, we are not just building communities—we are building Bahá'í communities; and we should be mindful of the significance of nurturing receptive souls to the point of true belief in the Blessed Beauty and readiness to consecrate themselves to His service. We are reminded of this in the Universal House of Justice's message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counselors, dated December 30, 2021:

It is evident that the pattern of activity unfolding at the grassroots opens up a variety of settings in which receptive souls—sometimes whole families or peer groups—can take part in meaningful conversations which awaken interest in the vision of the Faith and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh. Over time, many such souls begin to identify themselves with the Bahá'í community, especially as they gain the confidence to participate in community life through service. Of course, the community welcomes any degree of association that a person would like to maintain, great or small. Yet to recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God and accept the privileges and responsibilities that are uniquely associated with membership in the Bahá'í community is a singular moment in a person's spiritual development, quite distinct from regular involvement in Bahá'í activities or voicing support for Bahá'í principles. Experience has shown that the environment created by community-building endeavours in a locality enables anyone who wishes to take this step to do so with relative ease. Wherever these endeavours are under way, it is important for the friends to remain mindful that the doors of the Faith are wide open and to give encouragement to those who stand at the threshold. And in areas where such endeavours have been well established for some time, many believers are

discovering that a vibrant, expanding pattern of activity can naturally lead to families, groups of friends, and even clusters of households being ready to enter the Cause. For in spaces where the possibility of joining the community can be discussed openly and inclusively among those who share a sense of collective identity, souls can more easily feel emboldened to take this step together. Bahá'í institutions, especially Local Spiritual Assemblies, must adopt a mindset that allows for such developments, and ensure that any obstacles are removed.

Again, to learn how to effectively teach the Faith is not an issue that is confined to a neighborhood within a cluster. Rather, in every possible way, whether individually or collectively, all of the friends should be so involved in this work that the entire cluster is aflame with the spirit of teaching.

Thirdly, we must be mindful of the ongoing need to be conscious of the special mission that has been given to this community to address the country's "most vital and challenging issue"—the elimination of racial prejudice. The Universal House of Justice has not failed to remind us time and again of the critical role we must play in this regard, most notably in its message to the American Bahá'í community dated July 22, 2020. Among other points in that landmark message, the House of Justice clearly links the achievement of this mission to the framework of the Plan:

The principles and exhortations that guide your steps are well known to you from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. The concepts and approaches for social transformation developed in the current series of Plans that can be utilized to promote race unity in the context of community building, social action and involvement in the discourses of society have been set out in our messages. Every believer, as the promulgator of Bahá'u'lláh's central principle of the oneness of humanity, should deeply meditate upon it and weigh its demanding implications for the profound alteration of thought and action required at this time.

And finally, rapid developments at the grass roots, which we can now anticipate, will

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call upon the friends everywhere to provide the material resources necessary for their unhindered progress. Although the staff numbers at the Bahá'í National Center are steadily declining, the need for people to serve full-time in the clusters and regions is rapidly increasing, as is the need for institute facilities that will help to ensure steady advancement. The element of sacrifice that this entails is no less important than any other commitment we can demonstrate of the genuineness of our faith and our hopes for the future.

The following pages chronicle the principal lines of action undertaken by this Assembly and its subsidiaries over the course of the past year. In the broad range of these diverse endeavors, you will see our community's continuing efforts to foster patterns of activity at every level to apply Bahá'u'lláh's life-giving teachings to the many needs of our time. We hope you will pay particular attention to the strategies by which the Regional Bahá'í Councils and Regional Training Institutes are, in their respective areas of service, advancing the development of clusters. You will also note the steps being taken by the National Spiritual Assembly's several desks—the Learning Desk, the Social Action Desk, the Desk for the Development of Administrative Systems, the Desk for the Development of Regional Properties, and the Race Unity Desk—to foster processes of learning around certain key issues. And you will see the considerable progress being made by various national agencies, such as the Office of Public Affairs, which is steadily gaining capacity to advance national discourse on such vital issues as race, gender equality, economic justice, and the environment.

We wish to express the abiding love and warm appreciation we feel for the members of the Continental Board of Counselors for the Americas and their Auxiliaries—as well as for the members of our 13 Regional Bahá'í Councils and Regional

Training Institutes, and for those who serve with great devotion in our various offices and agencies. Their tireless services contribute beyond measure to the success and well-being of this community and, taken together with the efforts of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the nation, have helped to set the stage for wondrous achievements in the new Nine Year Plan.

Finally, we encourage you to consider again the magnificent statement of the Universal House of Justice that not only unveils the expansive prospects now opening before us, but also reminds us of the spirit of sacrifice and devotion that must attend our efforts for the advancement of the Cause:

The Plan that will shortly commence—the first major undertaking in a sacred twenty-five-year venture, generational in its scope and significance—will make demands of the individual believer, the community, and the institutions reminiscent of the demands that the Guardian made of the Bahá'í world at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade. If, by the grace of Almighty God, the friends should succeed in reaching the heights of heroism to which they are now summoned, history will assuredly pay tribute to their actions in terms no less glowing than those with which it honours the glorious deeds that decorate the annals of the first century of the Formative Age.

Be certain our boundless love, our admiration and deepest gratitude, and our unceasing prayers for great success in the heroic endeavors to which we have all been summoned accompanies each and every one of you.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

*National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of  
the United States*

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# Emerging administrative systems support community building at the grass roots

Prepared by the Desk for the Development of Administrative Systems, the Desk for the Development of Properties, and the Learning Desk

As the Universal House of Justice stated in its December 30, 2021, message, the focus of the friends in clusters where the third milestone has been passed “begins to broaden as they approach a point where a significant proportion of the population of a particular area is taking part in community-building activities.” In the most advanced clusters in the country, there are certain centers of intense activity where cohorts of youth have completed the sequence of courses and are now themselves serving as tutors of youth. In one such neighborhood, for example, 55 young people were engaged in the institute for the past two years, and 32 are currently facilitating educational activities. Children are advancing their spiritual education by progressing through multiple grades of Bahá’í children’s classes, and it is heartening to note that all regions in the country are offering two grades or more; 46 neighborhoods have also achieved this milestone.

Junior youth complete three years in the junior youth spiritual empowerment program before entering the institute, which prepares them to join the ranks of young people serving in their communities. There are currently

## *A New Phase of Development*



193 neighborhoods that have at least one junior youth group, 60 have two or more, and four have groups in which over 50 junior youth are participating. Significantly, those participating in educational activities at the neighborhood level make up a large percentage of their entire cluster's participants. In some of the country's most advanced clusters, the friends have learned to sustain over 100 educational activities that engage several hundred participants. Half of these activities are happening in neighborhoods. And in a few small areas, friends have begun to think of "the progress and well-being of everyone dwelling in the vicinity"—how groups of entire families and neighbors can be involved in promoting the material and spiritual well-being of their communities.

These efforts did not spring up overnight—the friends in these centers of activity have demonstrated a commitment to learning that has allowed them to continue efforts through the inevitable crises and victories that arise. In these places new heights must be reached and new questions answered. Yet if these places are to continue to grow, and if this process is going to extend to cluster after cluster across regions, the friends laboring at the cluster and neighborhood levels must be supported by a more robust system. To that effect, the March 20, 2023, letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice and addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly notes that this current Nine Year Plan is a "moment of historic transition for the development of administrative systems" and that "in light of the growing capacity closer to the grassroots," regional institutional capacity must be strengthened.

### **Developing regional systems of support**

As work in centers of activity across the country advanced over the past year, the complexity of administration to support these efforts correspondingly increased, and Regional Councils and Regional Training Institute Boards arose to support the needs of a growing community. To enable growth occurring at the grass roots to continue to gather in strength, they committed themselves to establishing processes of learning around specific lines of action related to the flow of guidance and information, financial systems, and development and maintenance of institute properties.

### **Strengthening a system to facilitate the flow of guidance and information**

A letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice states, "[o]f particular significance is ensuring that all the believers, as well as their friends from the wider society who are labouring together with them, have access to the guidance of the House of Justice". After participating in a national seminar on the flow of guidance and information, a few Regional Councils reflected on how they could ensure that this would be possible. They also asked themselves how they could "help the friends grow in their capacity to study the guidance in the context of the experience being generated at the grassroots."

The Councils considered that strategies for the dissemination of guidance should be "devised based on both the nature and intended purpose of the guidance at hand, as well as the circumstances and conditions of those receiving it." Over the course of consultations, it became clear in each region that a small group thinking about the flow of guidance and information at the regional level, no matter how experienced, was too far removed from the reality at the grass roots to meaningfully identify neighborhood or household level strategies for the dissemination and study of guidance. The closer one gets to the grass roots, the better this information is known.

In light of these considerations, some Regional Councils decided to initially support the development of plans for the flow of guidance in a small number of clusters and to learn from their experience. To do so, the Councils organized weekend gatherings, to which Auxiliary Board members, cluster agencies, members of Local Spiritual Assemblies, and other collaborators were invited. At these gatherings they studied documents produced by the Office for the Development of Administrative Systems on the flow of guidance and information, consulted about the current situation in their communities, and started to create local- and cluster-level plans. These friends were asked to identify strategies for the dissemination and study of guidance in their communities with a vision of reaching 100 percent of the believers in their localities. Councils often encouraged planning for study of the Riḍvān letter, since the timing of that letter is predictable, enabling communities to prepare for a large number of home visits, in which guidance can be discussed through face-to-face conversations.

Achieving the high aim of ensuring that every believer in a small geographical area is able to receive a message of the House of Justice and be provided with an opportunity to study it in a manner that is suitable to their circumstances is a formidable task. Faithful to their commitment to learning, Councils are creating spaces for reflection to ensure that, year after year, progress can be made toward the noble goal of connecting every believer to the guidance of the House of Justice.

By identifying a small number of clusters to learn with initially, Councils were able to follow developments more easily and ensure that their own process of learning was being strengthened as they made progress.

### **Strengthening a system of financial administration**

Although the work of strengthening a financial system includes a number of very practical steps, refining a system that supports the work of the friends at the grass roots is a long-term effort that is, in essence, a process of capacity building. Institutions and agencies at different levels in a region need to develop their own ability to plan budgets, operate their treasuries, implement sound financial policies and practices, and inspire and educate the friends in contributing to the Funds.

Over the past year, four Regional Councils implemented plans to strengthen the financial systems in their regions and, in doing so, learned more about what it means to assist others in creating and refining administrative mechanisms. Strategies were advanced in areas such as fund education, planning and budgeting, and the operation of a regional treasury office. The Councils also endeavored to strengthen their own

ability to closely follow developments in this area, reflect regularly, and ensure that progress is made with every passing cycle.

In the area of fund education, some initial steps being taken appear promising. Councils considered how educational efforts could be driven primarily by those friends serving as close to the grass roots of the community as possible. It was understood that institutions and agencies at the regional, cluster, and local levels would need to gain greater experience and capacity in relation to fostering a culture of joyful and generous giving.

Over the last year, two Regional Councils brought together a select number of Local Assemblies to familiarize them with the global body of knowledge related to strengthening the Fund. They also invited them to consult and create local plans for fund education, sought to assist them to learn as they implemented their plans, and strengthened communication between the Regional Council and the Local Spiritual Assembly. Through these efforts, more than 30 Local Assemblies identified strategies to educate believers in their community about the sacred obligation of contributing to the Fund and began to implement their plans. While these efforts are nascent and must continue to evolve, it has been promising to observe that contributions to the regional branch of the National Fund in one region nearly doubled after the first year of implementation of its financial system plan.

The same two Councils have also worked on the development of remuneration policies for individuals serving in the regions. In the March 20, 2023, letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, it states that “ensuring that training institutes are able to offer spiritual



education in a manner sufficient to meet growing demands will require the involvement of some full-time, thoughtful, and far-sighted individuals.” In light of this, institutes have been giving close thought to terms of service for their coordinators that are longer in range than before. The development of the institute requires that the services of a select few individuals with critically important experience, such as the coordination of highly complex programs with hundreds of youth and junior youth, be retained for an extended period of time and enabled to dedicate themselves to full-time service for many years; this has implications for the salaries and the level of benefits provided. The two Councils have prepared draft policies and are currently reviewing them with legal counsel in their regions to ensure compliance with relevant laws. It has been encouraging to observe the two Councils test certain concepts from the draft policies in the field before finalizing them. This helps the Councils devise policies that are in tune with the needs on the ground. Since a process of learning is being established, we anticipate that policies will continue to be refined in light of ongoing experience, even after they have been finalized.

Three Regional Councils took steps to systematically strengthen capacity for planning and budgeting at the cluster level. An effective and financially sound budget must be based on a well-conceived plan, and attention was given to strengthening planning in a number of places. These Councils encouraged cluster agencies to create annual plans, in consultation with Auxiliary Board members, that include analysis of strategies or approaches to be adopted for the coming year and lines of action to be followed. For such plans to meaningfully reflect the community’s objectives, conversations needed to take place at different levels, including, in some cases, in planning spaces at the neighborhood or nuclei-level. In their analysis, friends sought to review what was learned over the past year, assess the present situation, discuss what needs to be learned for progress to occur, consider human resource requirements for the strategies identified, and analyze the challenges that are facing the community.

### **Development and maintenance of properties**

Four regions are now engaged in a formal learning process regarding the development

and maintenance of properties. A shared understanding has emerged that the need for Bahá’í properties arises organically from the growth of the Cause—particularly when the institute process advances in terms of developing human resources and of sustaining and intensifying the movement of a population.

Certain grassroots nuclei at the frontiers of growth are building their capacity to read their dynamic reality and articulate their facility needs in support of growth. They are supported by the Regional Council and its emerging structures to assist with the development of properties. For instance, in one region, a neighborhood team realized that the facility that had been acquired was too much for the level of growth they were experiencing, such that it was a distraction rather than an assistance to the community-building process. In consultation with the regional institutions, they ended the lease of that property. Other teams in the same region have changed or expanded their leased facilities in response to the needs of growth. In several localities in the regions, Local Spiritual Assemblies are learning to take on certain responsibilities related to institute facilities—for example, supporting their maintenance or offering funds for renovations.

As the regions move forward with their plans in all of these areas, they are learning about establishing, guiding, and supporting administrative structures with sufficient latitude to assist the Council in implementation of their plans. One key component is facilitating reflection spaces in the region where the global body of knowledge can be studied and experience shared more widely.

### **Development of administrative structures**

As Regional Councils created plans to promote the development of the various systems described above, the Councils discovered that it was necessary to reexamine their administrative arrangements if they are to be responsive to rapidly evolving needs that emerge in these areas.

Where Council officers have often valiantly handled the majority of the work of the regional secretariat or regional treasury office themselves, including matters of a routine, technical, and operational nature, the vision of development that lies ahead has demanded that the time and attention of these individuals be freed up so that

they can focus their energies on important and strategic matters. Council officers, therefore, needed to learn how to draw on the assistance of an increasing number of volunteers and to support them in their service. The need for additional human resources to support the work of regional offices grew significantly during this past year, and this is expected to continue to grow.

As the aforementioned plans introduced greater complexity to the work of the Council, Councils benefited from the support of designated individuals who could assist them to follow developments. These individuals, who oversee implementation of the plans in a certain area such as properties or the financial system, provide a wide range of support, ensure that the plans are able to advance without delays, and assist the Council to learn as progress is made. The introduction of these capable individuals has also required that Councils learn how to give them sufficient latitude and thoughtful support as they carry out their work and to welcome their analysis and recommendations for the Councils' consideration.

As the Regional Councils implemented strategies to strengthen capacity at the local and cluster levels in a number of areas, a wide variety of new structures at the local and cluster level were also established during this past year. For example, in one region, an individual was appointed to coordinate development of the financial system in a cluster, including planning and budgeting, fund education, and more. In another region, the Regional Council appointed collaborators to provide support to Local Spiritual Assemblies in their efforts to educate the believers about the sacred duty to contribute to the Funds. In a number of regions, teams have been formed at the local and cluster levels to assist with preparation of plans for the dissemination and study of guidance.

In all of these cases, it has been necessary to identify individuals with the proper attitudes, qualities, and experience to serve in these roles. Five Councils have increasingly systematized a process by which they identify individuals to serve. For example, in many cases, after preparing a written description of a role, the Councils shared the description with select individuals across the region, such as Auxiliary Board members. Council officers or the regional secretariat then engaged

in brief conversations with those Auxiliary Board members or other individuals to request names of potential candidates and a few comments about the candidates' relevant qualifications. In this way, Councils found it possible to compile a sizable list of candidates and their qualifications in a very short amount of time, which could then be analyzed. Each Council developed its own unique strategy for creating a shortlist of the strongest candidates and its own process to identify the individual to be appointed. In every instance, capable individuals were discovered who were not previously known to the Councils. In some cases, the Councils were able to draw on the list of candidates and the description of their experience and qualifications at a later time for other roles. It is anticipated that the process of identifying volunteers and staff will continue to evolve in the coming year, as more support will be needed in a wider range of areas.

### **Developing national systems of support**

To assist the National Assembly to follow these developments at the regional level, the National Assembly established a Desk for the Development of Administrative Systems and a Desk for the Development of Properties. These desks draw on working papers, compilations, and case studies produced by the Office for the Development of Administrative Systems at the Bahá'í World Center in carrying out their work. The process supports "raising capacity for administration at all levels" and "strengthening the capacity of Councils to facilitate a process of learning in their regions."

Over time, Regional Councils are being invited to participate in seminars hosted by the national desks for intensive study of the body of knowledge in a particular area—whether on properties, flow of guidance and information, or financial systems. Participants in the seminars include Counselors, members of Regional Councils and their regional institute boards, friends from advanced clusters and neighborhoods, and a range of other collaborators. In light of the consultation that takes place in these seminars—which draws on guidance and experience—Regional Councils develop and begin to implement plans related to one of the aforementioned areas. The national desks work closely with the Regional Councils to assist them as they take initial steps and to try to ensure that the regions have the support that they need to nurture the work taking place at the grass roots.

*The Year in Review*

02

## The year in review

More than a decade ago, the Universal House of Justice encouraged the Bahá'ís of the world to devote themselves to service by writing that “the transformative power of thousands upon thousands of simple actions undertaken at the grassroots tied together in a common framework should not be underestimated.”

During the past year, members of the Bahá'í community in the United States have energetically pursued this transformation.

Through thousands of simple actions, in communities across the country, some still recovering socially and economically from the pandemic years, Bahá'ís emerged with a desire to create the “new normal”: to gather, to pray and study together, to teach their children, to create art, to visit one another in their homes, to form delegations to meet with members of Congress, to start meaningful conversations with neighbors and friends—all efforts directed to unleashing the society-building power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

Compiled here are some glimpses of these efforts that took place over the course of the past year.









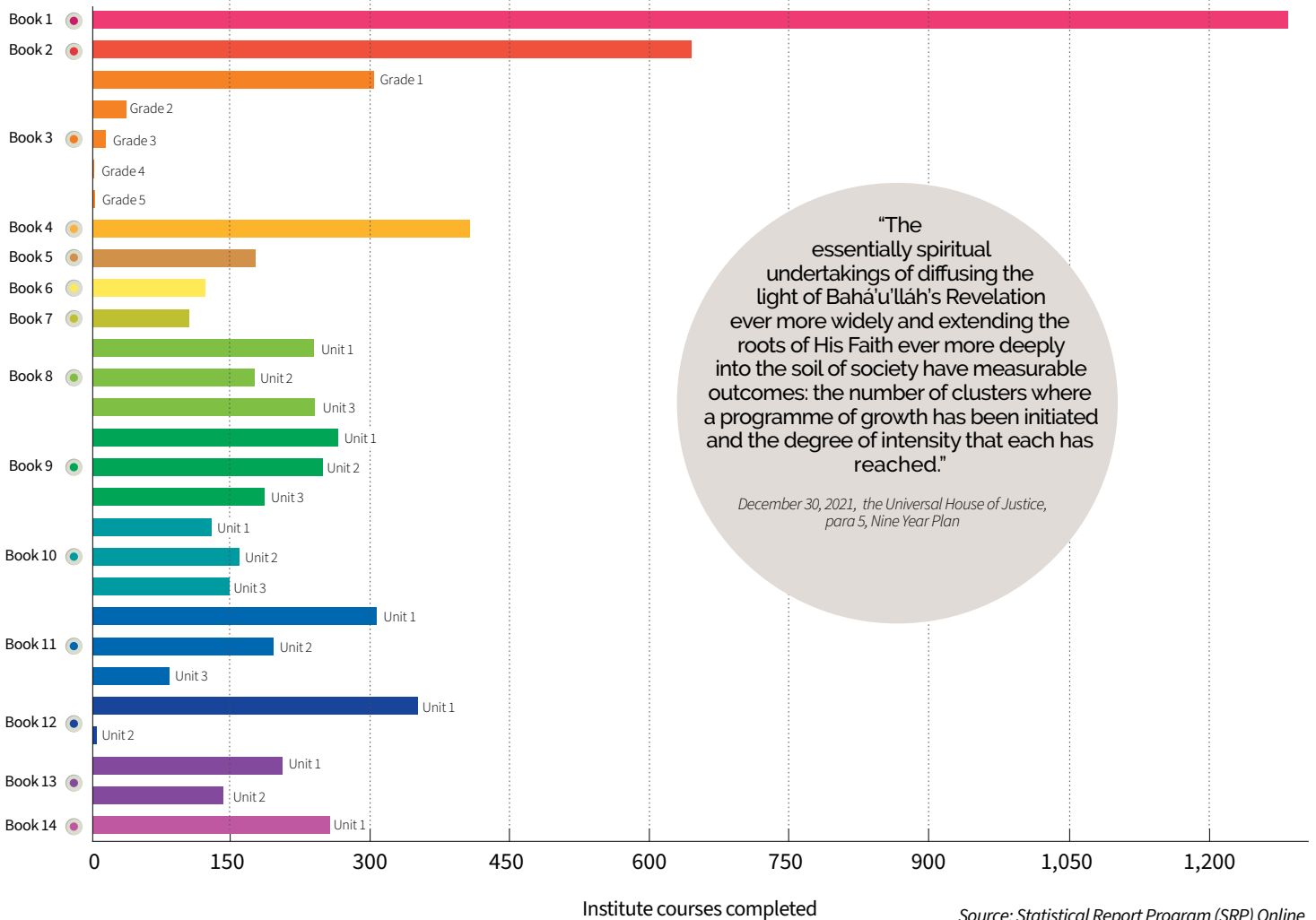
*National Statistics Highlights*

# 03

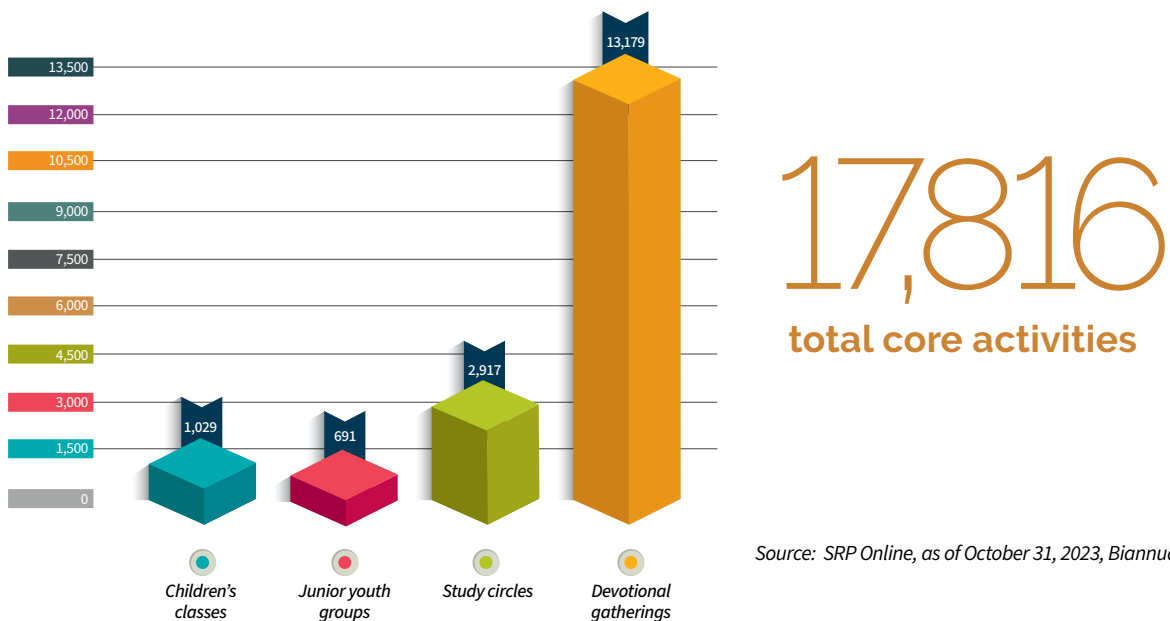


# 6,400 books of the Ruhi Institute completed by Bahá'ís and friends of the Faith

November 1, 2022 to October 31, 2023

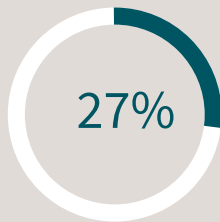


## Core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



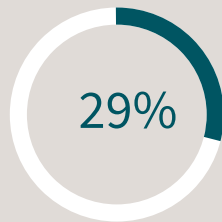
# Friends of the Faith participating in core activities

as of October 31, 2023



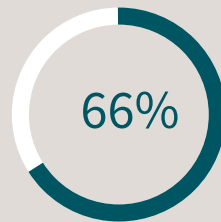
### Study circles

The estimated number of friends of the Faith who participated in study circles was 27 percent of the **11,199** total participants.



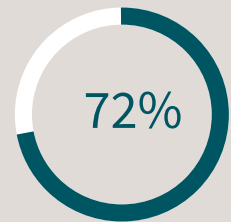
### Devotional gatherings

The estimated number of friends of the Faith who participated in devotional gatherings was 29 percent of the **54,599** total participants.



### Children's classes

The estimated number of friends of the Faith who participated in children's classes was 66 percent of the **5,435** total participants.



### Junior youth groups

The estimated number of friends of the Faith who participated in junior youth groups was 72 percent of the **3,823** total participants.

Friends of the Faith    Bahá'í participants

Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey

## Endeavors in the area of social action

Category 1. Activities of fixed duration	<b>7,337</b>
Category 2. Sustained efforts or agencies	<b>268</b>
Advancement of women	<b>8</b>
Arts and media	<b>26</b>
Agriculture	<b>16</b>
Economic life of communities	<b>61</b>
Education	<b>27</b>
Eliminating racial prejudice	<b>86</b>
Environment	<b>12</b>
Health	<b>23</b>
Language	<b>3</b>
Multiple or Other	<b>6</b>
Category 3. Development organizations	<b>25</b>

Source: Social Action Desk

## 54 Homefront pioneers

30 men and 24 women arose during the 12 months between November 1, 2022, and October 31, 2023

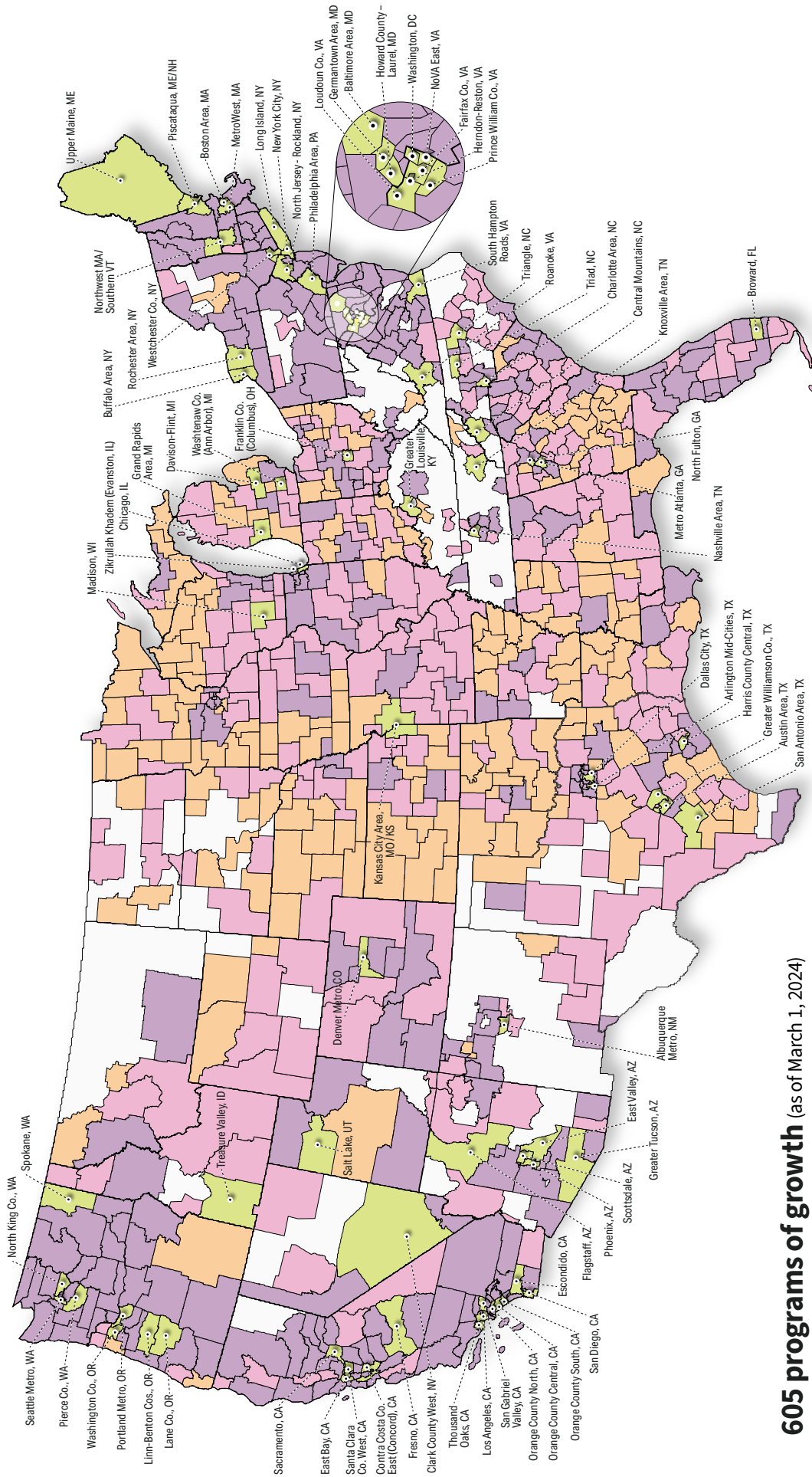


## 44 International pioneers



23 men and 21 women arose during the 12 months ending October 31, 2023. 26 international pioneers are serving or will soon serve in goal clusters identified by the Universal House of Justice.

Source: National Office of Pioneering



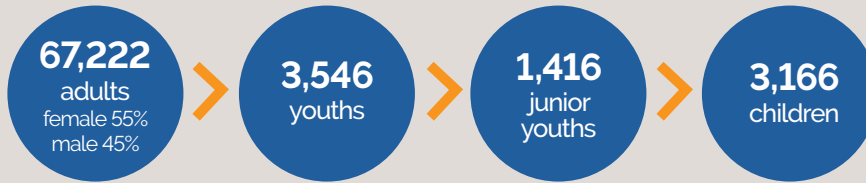
**605 programs of growth (as of March 1, 2024)**

- 78** clusters have passed milestone 3 —the pattern of activity embraces large numbers
- 286** clusters have passed milestone 2 —the cluster has an intensive program of growth
- 241** clusters have passed milestone 1 —the cluster has a program of growth
- 182** clusters have not yet advanced to a program of growth
- Areas not in clusters

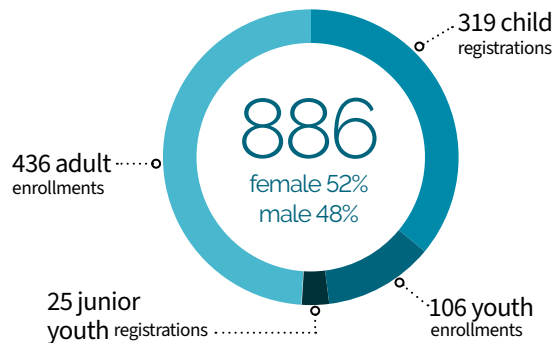
**364** intensive programs of growth in  
787 total clusters in the United States

# US Bahá'í population<sup>1</sup> on March 1, 2024

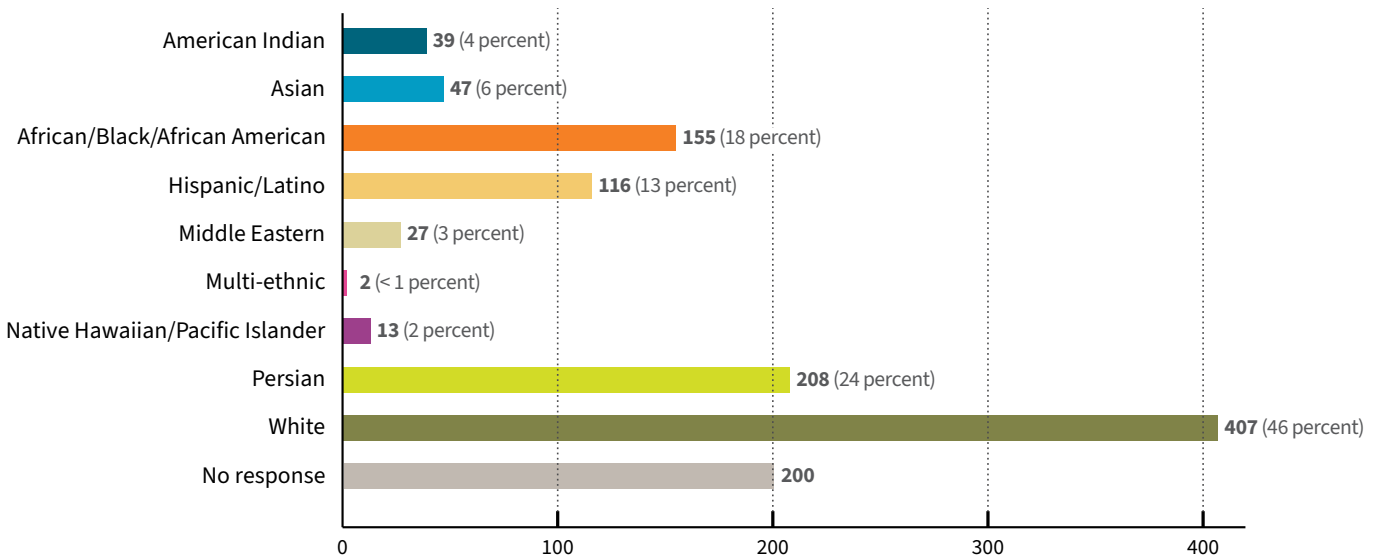
75,350 with known addresses



## New registrations and enrollments<sup>2</sup> 12 months ending March 1, 2024



## New Bahá'ís by race/ethnicity<sup>3</sup> 12 months ending March 1, 2024



<sup>1</sup> National membership data includes an additional 102,565 records for Bahá'ís whose current addresses are unknown. Friends are encouraged to contact their cluster agencies or Local Spiritual Assembly with updated information. *Source: UnityWeb*

<sup>2</sup> Does not include several hundred Bahá'ís who were registered as children and turned 15 during the year. *Source: UnityWeb*

<sup>3</sup> Race and ethnicity are self-identified or reported by parents; Bahá'ís may choose more than one category. *Sources: SRP Online and UnityWeb*

## Localities celebrating Feast and Holy Days

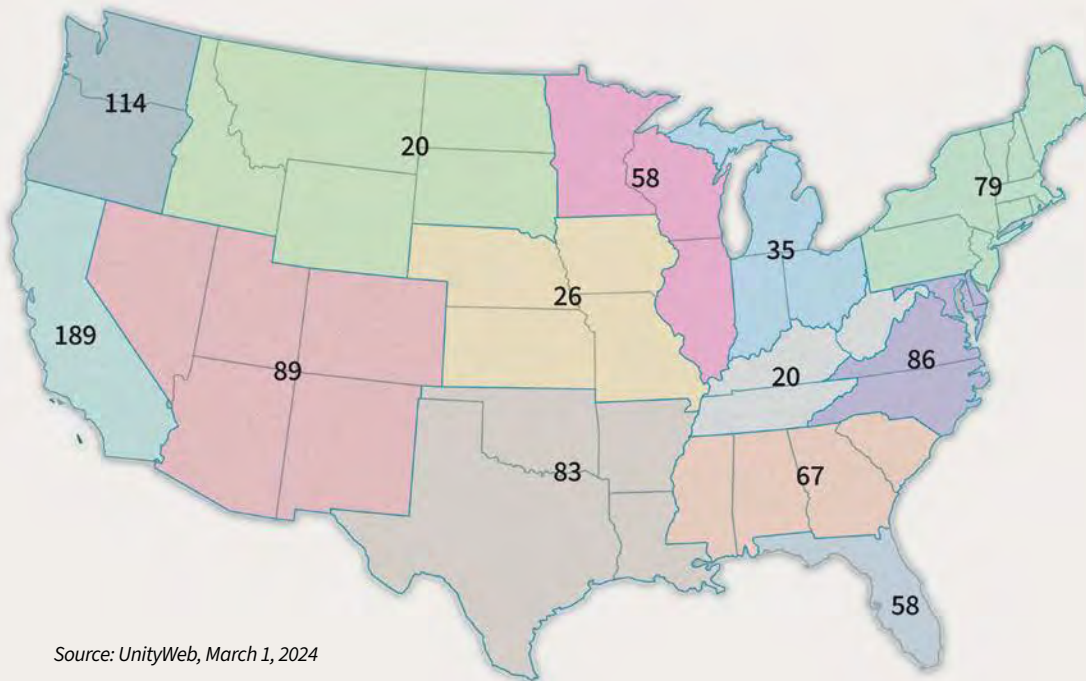
1,809

localities celebrate  
the 19 Day Feast with  
18,340 Bahá'ís attending

1,637

localities observe  
Holy Days with  
21,252 individuals attending

## 924 Local Spiritual Assemblies in 13 regions



### Membership statistics

Deaths*	436
Withdrawals	249
New US arrivals	519
Returning to the US	199
Transfers out of US	238
Membership reinstatement	23

\*An additional 167 deaths were reported from previous years

Source: UnityWeb, for the 12 months ending March 1, 2024

### US locality types

Isolated centers (one adult Bahá'í)	2,393
Groups with fewer than nine adult Bahá'ís	3,069
Groups with nine or more adult believers	514
Local Spiritual Assemblies	924
Localities without Bahá'ís	25,720
<b>Total US localities</b>	<b>36,620</b>

Source: Statistical Report Program (SRP) Online

The assistance of the National Statistics Office, which provided all statistics presented on these pages, and the mapping specialist for the Bahá'í National Organization are gratefully acknowledged. Data reported by local and regional agencies in the Statistical Report Program, with reports generated biannually, are the basis for all statistics presented elsewhere in this Annual Report.



*Regional Bahá'í Councils*

# 04





## The Regional Bahá'í Council of the **Appalachian States**



### **Expanding the circle of friends**

The Regional Bahá'í Council of the Appalachian States has continued to focus on strengthening the region's three third-milestone clusters as well as three of the stronger second-milestone clusters. Emphasis has been placed on strengthening focus neighborhoods, promoting a spirit of universal participation among the generality of believers, and strengthening the training institute. Outreach to populations of special significance has occurred largely in focus neighborhoods, save for one cluster where efforts are being made to reach a population that is spread throughout the cluster.

### **Advancing the institute process**

Notable developments this year include the occurrence of a summer-of-service leadership training, a summer cohort of period-of-service volunteers, the reconstitution of a collaborative group for the institute, initiatives to mobilize Bahá'í youth, family institute camps, and a training space for institute coordinators.

This summer two regional coordinators organized a three-day pre-camp orientation for youth who had prior experience with institute camps to help them prepare to lead aspects of the summer-of-service activities. During the summer camps additional space was created for these youth leaders to prepare themselves ahead of each activity they would lead and to reflect afterwards and consult

about next steps. Similar approaches were used in other camps during the year.

A cohort of five youths offered a month of full-time service in the North Memphis neighborhood. Rather than providing individual stipends to support the youth, the Council and regional coordinator organized a collective fund to support the period of intense activity.

The neighborhood team in North Memphis has also been learning about holding more frequent camps, especially during extended weekends. Of special note was a Ruhi Book 1 camp held over Labor Day weekend in which youth identified during the summer-of-service intensive were welcomed into the institute. The camp placed special emphasis on sharing a prayer and discussing its meaning. It ended with a barbecue where members of the Local Spiritual Assembly were invited to study a prayer one-on-one with each of the youth. The next weekend, some of the same youths were invited to teach the prayers they learned to a neighborhood children's class.

In central Tennessee an effort across three clusters to mobilize Bahá'í youth has resulted in a monthly youth night in Nashville. The youth

night in turn, led to the emergence of a new youth camp hosted by a community that had not hosted one before. Plans are under way to share this learning with another cluster with similar dynamics.

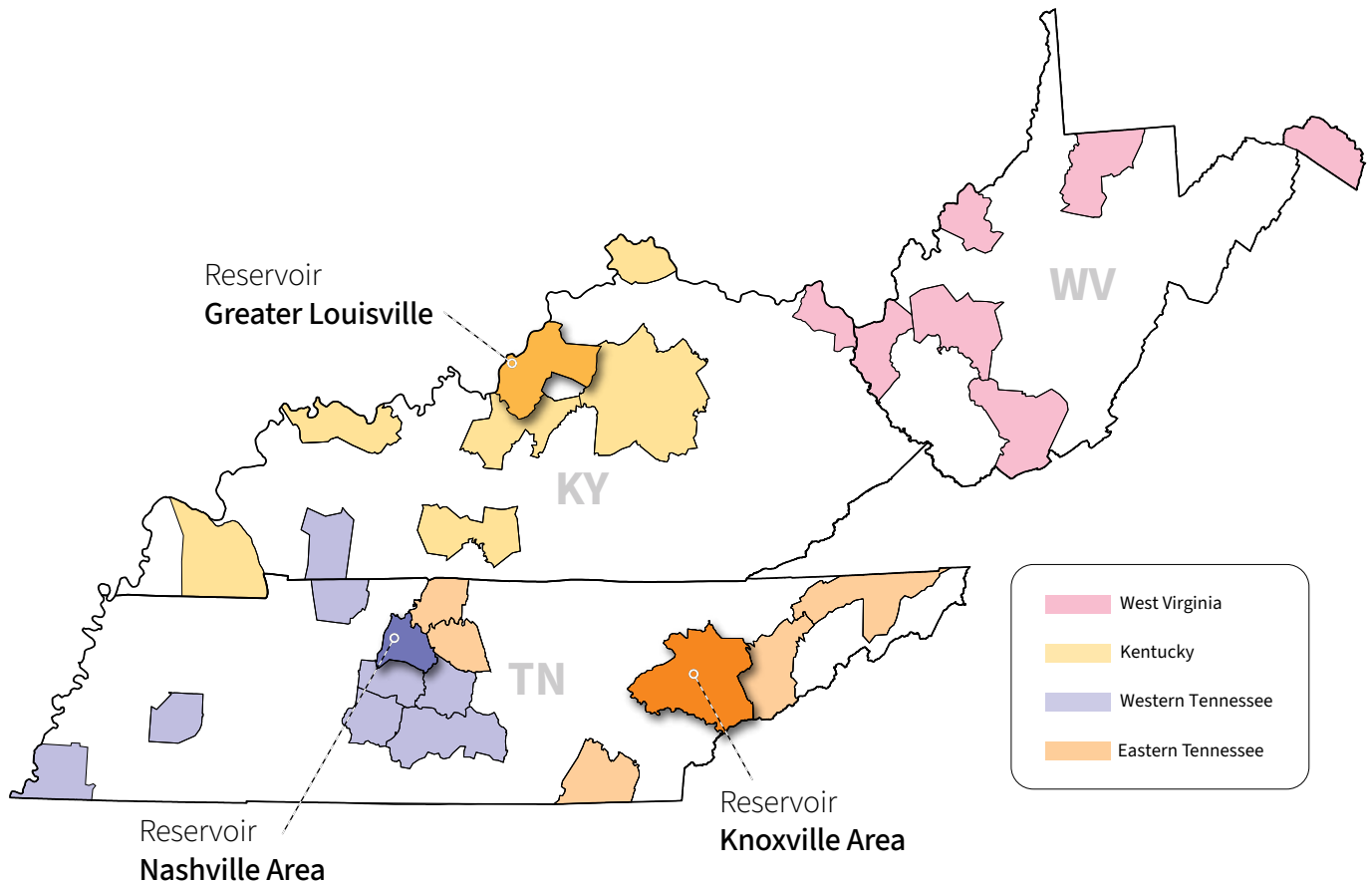
The community of Morgantown, West Virginia, has been learning about holding monthly, family institute camps. Their most recent camp welcomed five seekers into the institute process.

The Regional Training Institute Board reconstituted its collaborative group for the institute. Together the board completed an analysis of the state of the institute across the region and developed objects of learning for each of the three educational imperatives. It also organized a training space for coordinators to advance in their understanding of accompaniment and raising up collaborators.

### Cluster advancement through shared learning

Strategies for shared learning have included visiting teams, regional institutional meetings (RIMs), virtual reflection spaces, and a regional newsletter. When clusters have held reflection gatherings or cluster institutional meetings

## 4 Cluster Groupings





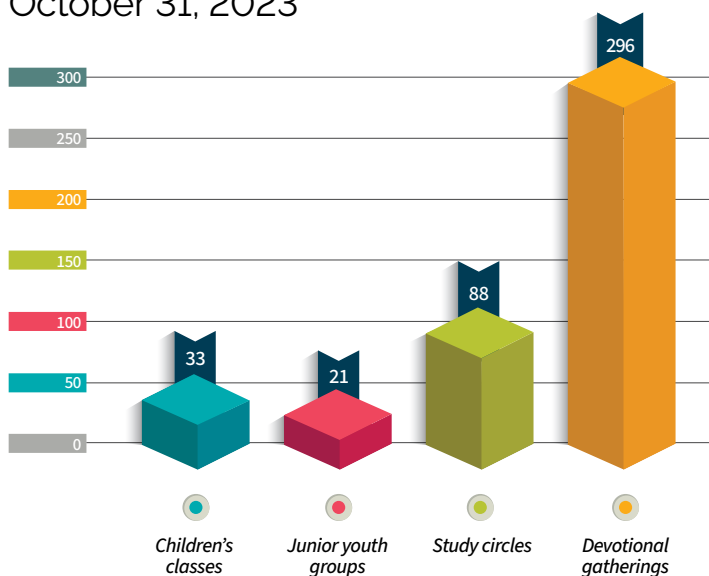
shortly after RIMs, the dissemination of insights from the RIM and related planning at the cluster level have been more effective.

Of special note this year was a trip to Brazil in which two of the region’s foremost teachers of the Faith got to visit the Portal da Gloria cluster to observe the dynamics in six centers of intense activity. A document with their reflections was shared in person and virtually with neighborhood teams, institute coordinators, and in a virtual gathering for institutions and collaborators across the region.

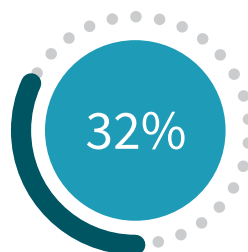
### Pioneering

The Council’s working group for pioneers welcomed two pioneers from outside the region to settle in goal clusters. It also supported the move of two homefront-pioneer families within the region. One family settled in a goal cluster, and the other moved to a focus neighborhood to join a neighborhood team.

**438** core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



### Friends of the Faith participating in core activities



Of the **2,091** overall participants, an estimated 664 were friends of the Faith

Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey

## Programs of growth in the Appalachian States (16 intensive)

### Social action and contributing to the discourses of society

Efforts across the region vary widely in the areas of social action and discourse, and the Council has not made a systematic assessment of their scope and number. Many efforts are individual initiatives, including the work of professionals and academics working in their fields. Others fall more within the context of community conversations and mutual support among neighbors and friends. Service projects, of course, have taken place wherever people have been engaged in study and action.

Targeted media campaign teams continue to function in the region's third-milestone clusters, and all resulting meetings have transitioned back to being in person.

Milestone 3	3	intensive
Milestone 2	13	intensive
Milestone 1	5	not yet intensive
Getting started	6	not yet designated a program of growth
<b>Totals</b>	<b>27</b>	

Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024





## The Regional Bahá'í Council of the **Atlantic States**



### **Expanding the circle of friends**

In April 2023, a day-long gathering was held with participants from the Northeastern, Appalachian, and Atlantic regions to learn about how the community-building process is contributing to spiritual and social transformation in predominantly African American neighborhoods. A significant number of attendees were friends of the Faith and youth, and most were residents of the neighborhoods they represented. Interactions were marked by an extremely healthy and conspicuous blurring of lines between those who are formally enrolled members of the Faith and those who are not. It was also clear that heightened capacities for consultation were being naturally cultivated among the youth—especially those who entered the process as junior youth and then became children’s class teachers, animators, or tutors themselves.



In another effort, a team of friends serving the agencies in one northern Virginia cluster came together in early 2023 to consult on mobilizing the generality of believers—mostly Persian-speaking—into the field of service. The team put together a series of two-day seminars that focused on learning about conversations used to invite souls into the institute process, often drawing from “A Few Thoughts for the Tutor” in Ruhi Book 1 and a document written in Iran entitled *Toward a Better World*. Emphasis was placed on setting up a system for accompanying

participants to start activities including study circles, children’s classes, junior youth groups, firesides, and devotional gatherings. As of January, 24 expanding nuclei have formed, engaging over 300 participants, more than half of whom are friends of the Faith.

**Advancing the institute process and cluster advancement through shared learning**

Building on content seminars of Ruhi Books 1–4, the friends are striving to expand the number of participants in study circles, children’s classes, and junior youth groups, particularly in small settings where local inhabitants are taking charge of their own spiritual transformation. Youth and mothers are helping younger generations, and junior youth are eager to help teach classes for children. The friends are steadily learning about the impact of small groups of families that come together to consult and make plans. It is expected that these processes will benefit from the recent visit to a cluster in Brazil by a cohort of 15 friends who are engaged in service at both the regional level and in the region’s most advanced cluster. A learning document was crafted by the

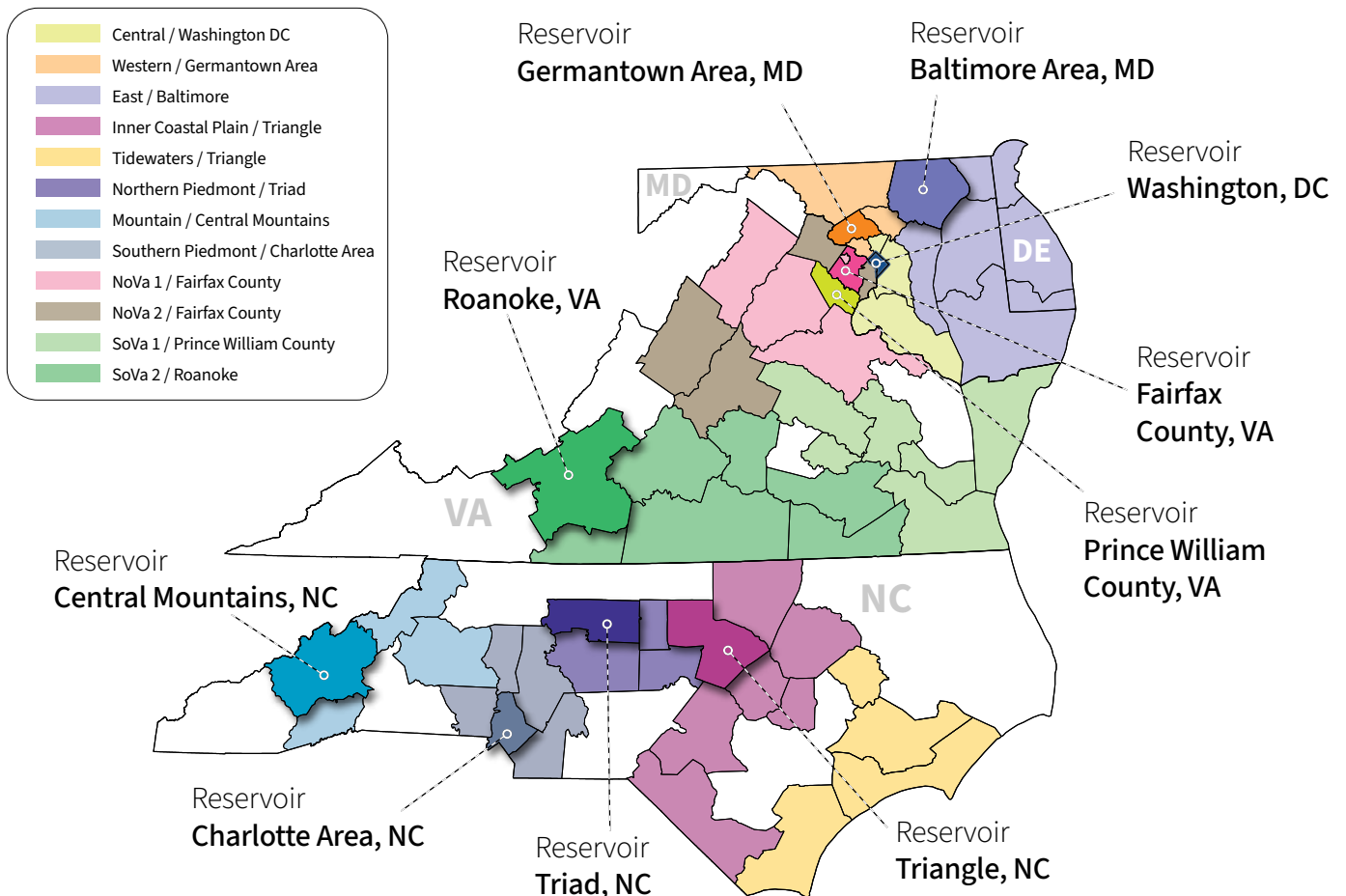
visiting team and, within weeks of completing the trip, key strategies for home visits were already beginning to be implemented in a few advanced neighborhoods.

Additionally, over 55 youths participated in the summer-of-service teaching initiative, designed to build capacity to teach children’s classes, animate junior youth groups, and tutor study circles in advanced clusters. The content included deepening on the importance of prayer, fasting, reading the verses of God, and connecting to the Central Figures and the Universal House of Justice. An increased number of these youths are engaged in service and have invited their friends to join the program. To strengthen this process, the region now has a full-time coordinator for the youth-year-of-service program. Adding this role will help ensure that youth are closely supported throughout their entire year of service.

**Pioneering**

The regional pioneering task force hosted two orientations at the Triangle Bahá’í Institute. The second of these was organized and facilitated almost entirely by the friends either serving on the

## 12 Cluster Groupings





regional task force or serving in regional roles in the Atlantic States.

A network of recruitment collaborators is growing in a way that will allow it to offer support in metropolitan Washington, DC, the most densely populated area in the Atlantic region.

**Social action**

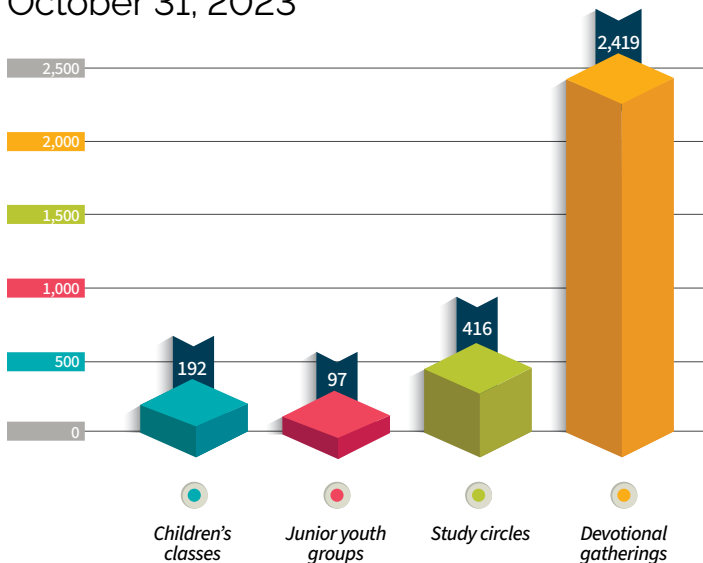
The Universal House of Justice’s letter of March 20, 2023, has helped raise consciousness around the extent to which every aspect of community building is connected to social transformation. Experience is steadily being gained through traditional social action initiatives organized by junior youth groups, such as appealing to a

parks and recreation department in a particular municipality to address the need for repairs to equipment. However, a broader foundation is being crafted through the increased awareness of how even the introduction of spiritual habits—in the earliest units of the Ruhi Institute courses—has implications for social action. More and more souls throughout the region are coming to understand that the discipline of following a process of learning, which requires honing skills and attitudes essential for consultation, is an indispensable feature of social transformation.

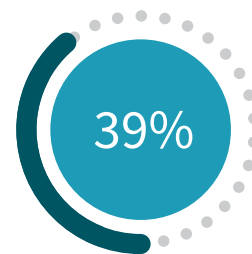
**Additional areas of learning**

The Council and selected friends serving at regional, cluster, and local levels—who were joined by representatives from the Northeast region—participated in a “Strengthening

**3,124** core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



**Friends of the Faith participating in core activities**



Of the **12,182** overall participants, an estimated 4,804 were friends of the Faith

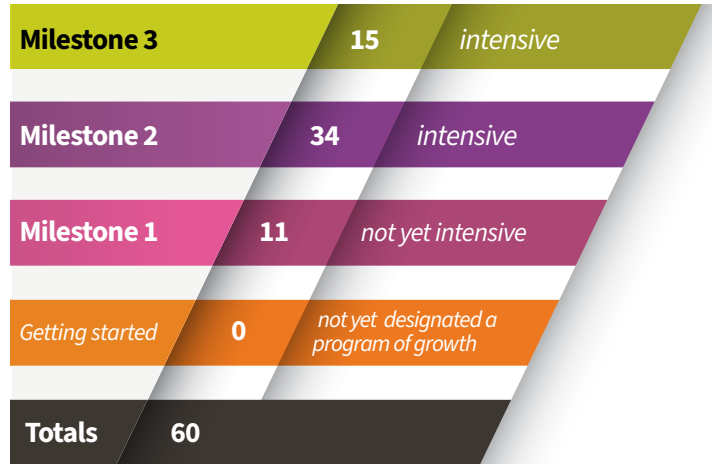
Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey



## Programs of growth in the Atlantic States (49 intensive)

Financial Systems” seminar, where they studied materials prepared by the Office for the Development of Administrative Systems at the Bahá’í World Center. Initial planning yielded a working group that developed a financial-systems plan for the Council’s consideration. A chief aim is to ultimately appoint a financial systems coordinator who will be responsible for furthering the plan’s implementation.

Additionally, a cohort of friends serving the Council and the Regional Training Institute Board, along with the Regional Desk for the Development of Properties, attended a property-development seminar. Representatives from the Atlantic states and California were invited to the seminar in support of the Councils of the Four Corners and Southeast regions, both of which have begun to engage in this learning process. The experience offered a rich opportunity to share experience captured in the Atlantic states during its first year of operation since attending an initial seminar in 2022.



Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024





The Regional Bahá'í Council  
of the state of

## California



The second year of the Nine Year Plan was truly a joyous period for the California Bahá'ís and their friends from the wider community. Many clusters made progress as classes for children and junior youth groups continued to build strength both qualitatively and quantitatively.

### **Expanding the circle of friends**

Friends serving in receptive neighborhoods maintained their efforts to reach out to populations of historical significance as well as to immigrant populations. They worked to involve the newly found friends in all aspects of community building, helped to raise their capacity through home visits, deepened bonds of friendship, and performed acts of worship and service within the framework for action. Lessons learned from a visit by active teachers of the Faith to Brazil taught the friends how to rely on the power of the Word of God, how to widen the path of service so others can also walk alongside them, and how to simplify the initial steps so as to empower and help new friends become true protagonists of change.

### Advancing the institute process

The training institute this year strengthened the operation of the youth-year-of-service program. Over 200 Bahá'í youths and their friends from the wider community volunteered to serve full time during the summer months. After the summer of intense activities, 10 youths joined the year-of-service program and participated in a month-long orientation in September before being placed in pairs to serve in five advanced neighborhoods. These youths are engaging with the books of the Ruhi Institute while at the same time deepening their own knowledge of the history and teachings of the Faith, for example, by studying *The Dawn Breakers* in collective settings, while being closely accompanied by an institution member.

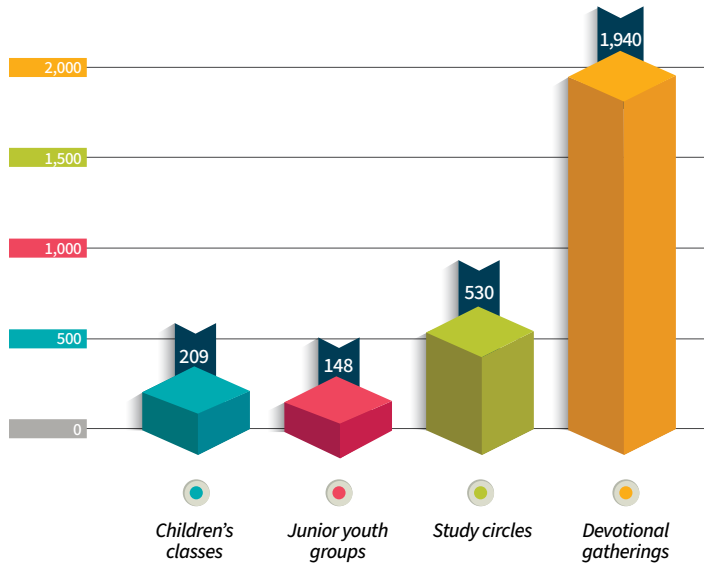
By wintertime the number of youth institute camps multiplied, and some 300 youths joined and advanced their study of the main sequence of institute courses. These camps include a great deal of singing and graceful integration of other forms of arts. The Council observed that songs are among the most potent instruments to help those at the threshold to fully embrace the Faith and foster the desire to share it with others.

The training institute raised up additional regional coordinators, several of whom are full-time, with the hope that they will serve for multiple years. This will provide a measure of stability and continuity to the institute's operation as it evolves to become a significant educational organization. Cluster advancement through shared learning

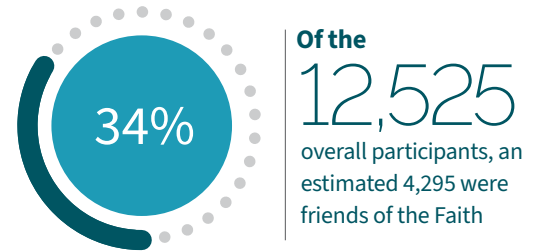
## 7 Cluster Groupings



**2,827** core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



### Friends of the Faith participating in core activities



Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey



A distinguishing feature of this past year was the week-long visit to the cluster of Portal de Gloria in the south of Brazil by nearly two dozen active teachers of the Faith including a member of the Continental Board of Counselors and several Auxiliary Board members from the four clusters of Fresno, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Yolo County. This visit showed the friends firsthand how to multiply core activities in centers of intense activity with friends of the Faith. The lessons observed were captured in writing and became the object of study in dozens of the region's clusters. Upon returning to their respective communities, these friends began applying their observations in their own neighborhoods, generating practical experience that quickly yielded insights about engaging populations and fostering ownership among individuals and families.

#### Pioneering

A nine-day orientation was held to sharpen the skills of prospective international pioneers arising from California and beyond. This orientation included a significant element of home visits and direct teaching. Field visits are increasingly becoming a feature of all regional gatherings, so that practical experience is interwoven with study of guidance.

#### Additional areas of growth



During the year, several working groups assisted the Council to implement learning processes in the region related to four areas of endeavor: the financial systems including budgeting and planning, remuneration, fund education, and the regional treasury office; acquisition, use, beautification, and maintenance of more than six properties to further strengthen the operation of the training institute; the flow of guidance and information between and among neighborhoods and clusters; and the spiritual health of populations working to advance and implement Bahá' u'lláh's vision for humanity. Institute facilities in the Florin neighborhood of the Sacramento cluster and in the San Gabriel Valley cluster further expanded to provide space for a growing number of participants from the wider community. A new facility comprising over 7,000 square feet was leased for use in the San Pablo neighborhood of the East Bay cluster. All in all, these properties have supported a joyful sense of growth.

As it approaches the Riqvân period, the community is exhibiting a vibrant and hopeful outlook, preparing itself for heroic deeds reminiscent of the Ten Year Crusade. Council members bow their heads in gratitude to Bahá' u'lláh for having enabled the believers in California to arise with such joy and enthusiasm and on such a large scale.

### Programs of growth in the State of California (55 intensive)

<b>Milestone 3</b>	<b>13</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 2</b>	<b>42</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 1</b>	<b>8</b>	<i>not yet intensive</i>
<i>Getting started</i>	<b>0</b>	<i>not yet designated a program of growth</i>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>63</b>	

Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024



The Regional Bahá'í Council  
of the state of

## Florida



*Editor's note: The contribution of the Regional Bahá'í Council of the State of Florida to the Riḍván 2024 Annual Report is more general in nature given the Council's recent formation.*

Over the last 12 months, the Florida region has continued to focus on learning around three facets of community building within the framework of the Nine Year Plan: the strengthening of the institute process in particular clusters, the dynamics of growing nuclei across the generality of believers and their networks, and the efforts to establish and strengthen bonds of friendship and a service-oriented culture in receptive neighborhoods. Cycle after cycle, the friends serving within four clusters of focus sought to learn about the qualities of effective tutors, the development of the institute process in their areas, the effects of focused planning on one or two related lines of action, executing outreach campaigns, and learning about the development of new and ongoing conversations with local residents related to community building.



### Broward cluster

In the southeast subregion of Florida, some friends in the Broward cluster have been working side by side with residents in the Bonaventure neighborhood in Weston, where many activities were held outdoors. Due to Florida’s unpredictable weather, activities were often canceled with little notice, and the friends recognized the need for an institute home. An apartment was identified in the neighborhood, and a lease was signed, allowing activities to continue indoors when needed. Meanwhile, a group of Latina women in Bonaventure, who call themselves Las Flores, continued to meet for prayer, conversation, and study. Earlier this year, the group organized a trip to visit the Bahá’í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, and—determined to ensure that no one was left out—raised funds so that all the women in the group could participate.

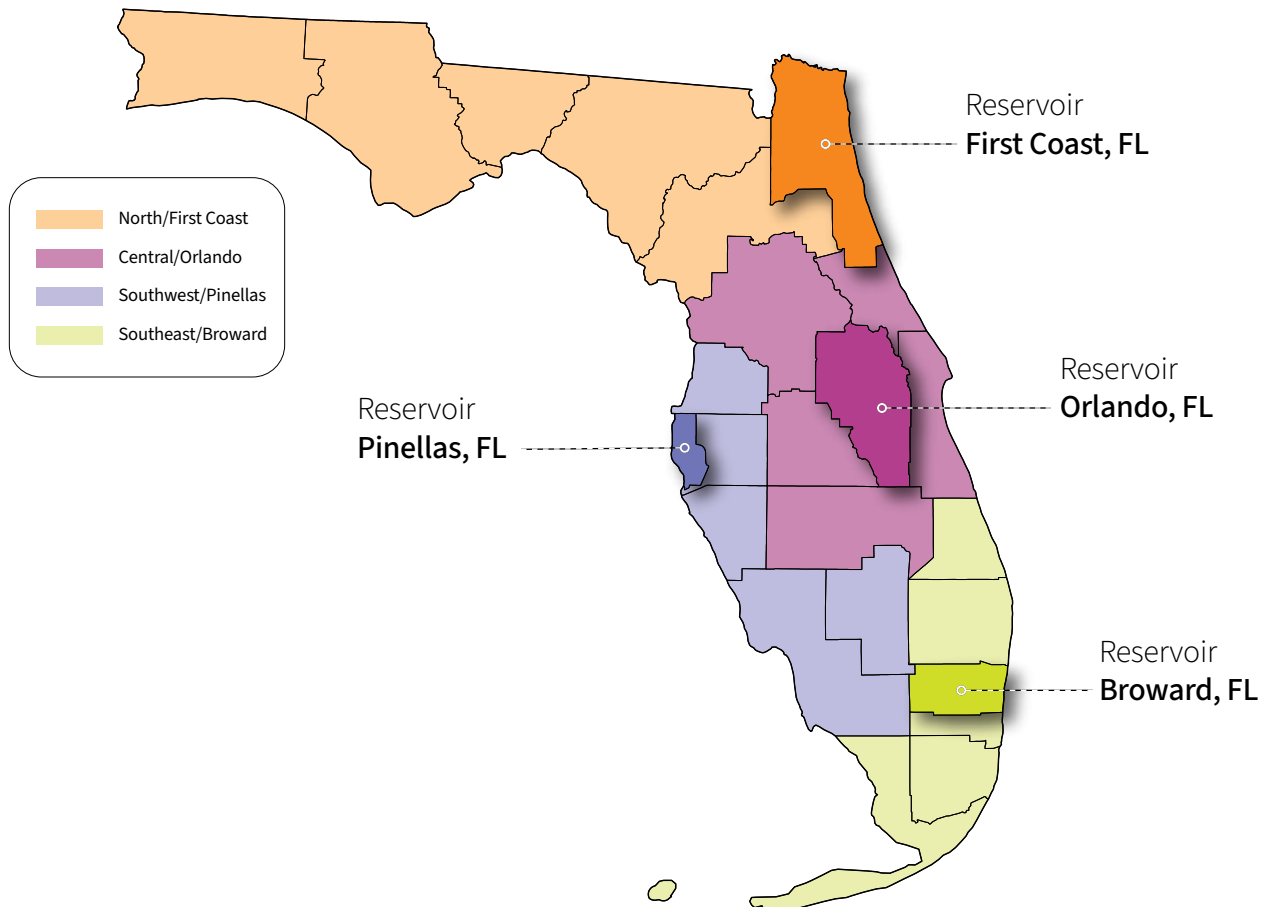
### Pinellas cluster

In the southeast subregion, the Pinellas cluster made efforts to increase the quality and quantity of devotional gatherings by visiting people in their homes and discussing what the friends have been learning about devotional spaces in light of their study of Ruhi Book 1 (*Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*). Those serving in this regard are conscious of the need for greater systematic efforts and wish to learn how home visits and devotionals can help enhance the process of growth in their cluster.

### Orlando cluster

In the central subregion, the Orlando cluster has set its focus on the development of the capacities of youth, as well as learning about supporting groups of families. In one neighborhood, two families and several youths, with support from an Auxiliary Board member, began holding a

## 4 Cluster Groupings





space every Sunday called “Soul Sunday.” Due to a healthy pattern of ongoing conversations with their friends and neighbors, these two families were able to involve approximately eight other families who are friends to socialize, pray, and then break into groups including two children’s classes, a junior youth group, and an adult program. To encourage shared ownership of Soul Sundays, the group rotates through different host families who open their homes to these activities.

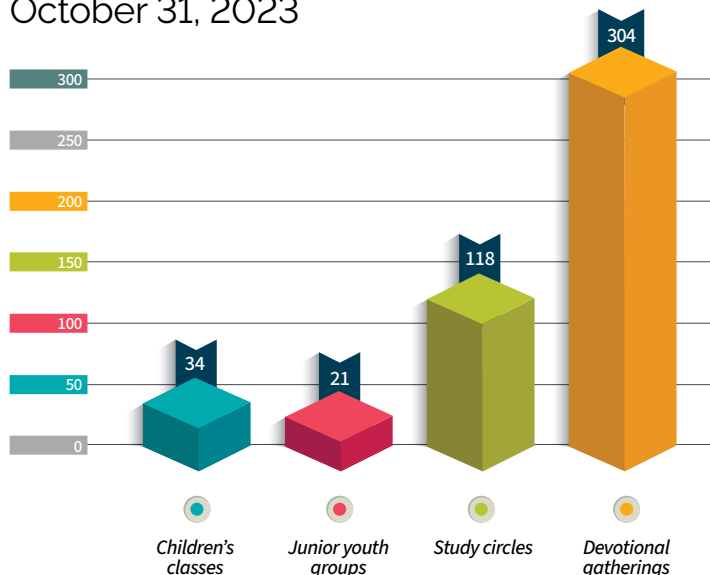
**First Coast cluster**

Within north Florida’s First Coast cluster, the friends are organizing their efforts around three goals: to develop and strengthen the movement of youth into the institute process, to open a focus neighborhood, and to strengthen the devotional character of the cluster. In support of the first

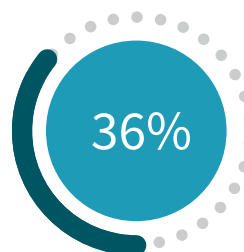
goal, a series of home visits to the families of youths were carried out, and, from among them, three young people arose to learn and serve together, including by attending youth seminars at the Magdelene Carney Bahá’í Institute in West Palm Beach. This led to the support of the second goal, in which some of these youths supported a family who had moved to the Southern Oaks neighborhood to begin activities. After six weeks of intense efforts, a children’s class, a junior youth group, and a devotional gathering were formed in this neighborhood.

In support of the third goal, a renewed focus on developing devotional gatherings with an outward-oriented mindset found root within several Persian-speaking families who had been accompanied by an assistant to the Auxiliary Board member. With the assistant’s support, the

**477** core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



**Friends of the Faith participating in core activities**



Of the **2,651** overall participants, an estimated 947 were friends of the Faith

Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey



families studied paragraphs 3, 4, and 11 of the December 30, 2021, message from the Universal House of Justice, which led them to engage in meaningful conversations and regular devotionals with Persian- and Arabic-speaking friends of the Faith.

This year a new and exciting development has emerged: the appointment of the region’s first Regional Training Institute Board. With this important step forward, the region is poised for continued growth, looking next at the dynamics of a reservoir cluster—an area where experience has been gained that may be relevant to a neighboring cluster. The excitement and determination of the friends in Florida are great, and the reliance on divine assistance, consistent effort with no fear of failure, and an outward-oriented mindset are fast becoming core facets of a growing culture of service throughout the state. The Council looks forward with joy to what this year will bring.

### Programs of growth in the State of Florida (15 intensive)

<b>Milestone 3</b>	<b>1</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 2</b>	<b>14</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 1</b>	<b>8</b>	<i>not yet intensive</i>
<i>Getting started</i>	<b>1</b>	<i>not yet designated a program of growth</i>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>24</b>	

Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024





The Regional Bahá'í Council of the  
**Four Corners States**



**Expanding the circle of friends**

The Four Corners region is beginning to understand the most notable societal transformation is at the neighborhood level. In the East Valley cluster, the Chaparral neighborhood is one of the region's strongest areas, and groups of predominantly LatinX friends or families are not only learning to deepen and grow their work together but are also actively contributing to the development of the entire community. The engagement of youth in the institute process, regular devotional gatherings, and partnerships with local institutions reflect the multifaceted impact of this community-building process.

In Phoenix, the Creighton and Mountain View neighborhoods—two centers of intense activity working with LatinX communities—both engage hundreds of people in devotionals, institute activities, family gatherings, festivals, and camps. Through these experiences, they learn to welcome groups of families who are taking ownership of their own expanding nucleus. Both neighborhoods maintain a focus on sustaining basic programs for junior youth and children, and home visits are critical as opportunities for prayer and spiritual conversations.

**Advancing the institute process**

The Phoenix and East Valley clusters each have a well-established pattern of creating a steady flow of youth into the institute, and this is beginning

to develop across the region. Offering two regional studies of Ruhi Book 5 (*Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth*) and its branch courses over the summer supported efforts across many clusters to raise up animators in intensive settings and raised capacity in growing numbers of tutors. As a result, 11 new junior youth groups formed across the region.

Animators have also been supported in many other spaces including animator gatherings, study-of-the-text gatherings, and neighborhood team meetings that allow them to engage with other animators. Devotionals, Holy Day celebrations, Feasts, and other community spaces also contribute to a sense of mutual support and kindlement.

To engage parents more meaningfully in their children’s spiritual education, conversations about children’s classes have evolved beyond the activity itself to explore connections between spiritual education and the relevant issues on people’s hearts. For example, in the Creighton neighborhood in Phoenix, where parents place great value on the family, the relationship

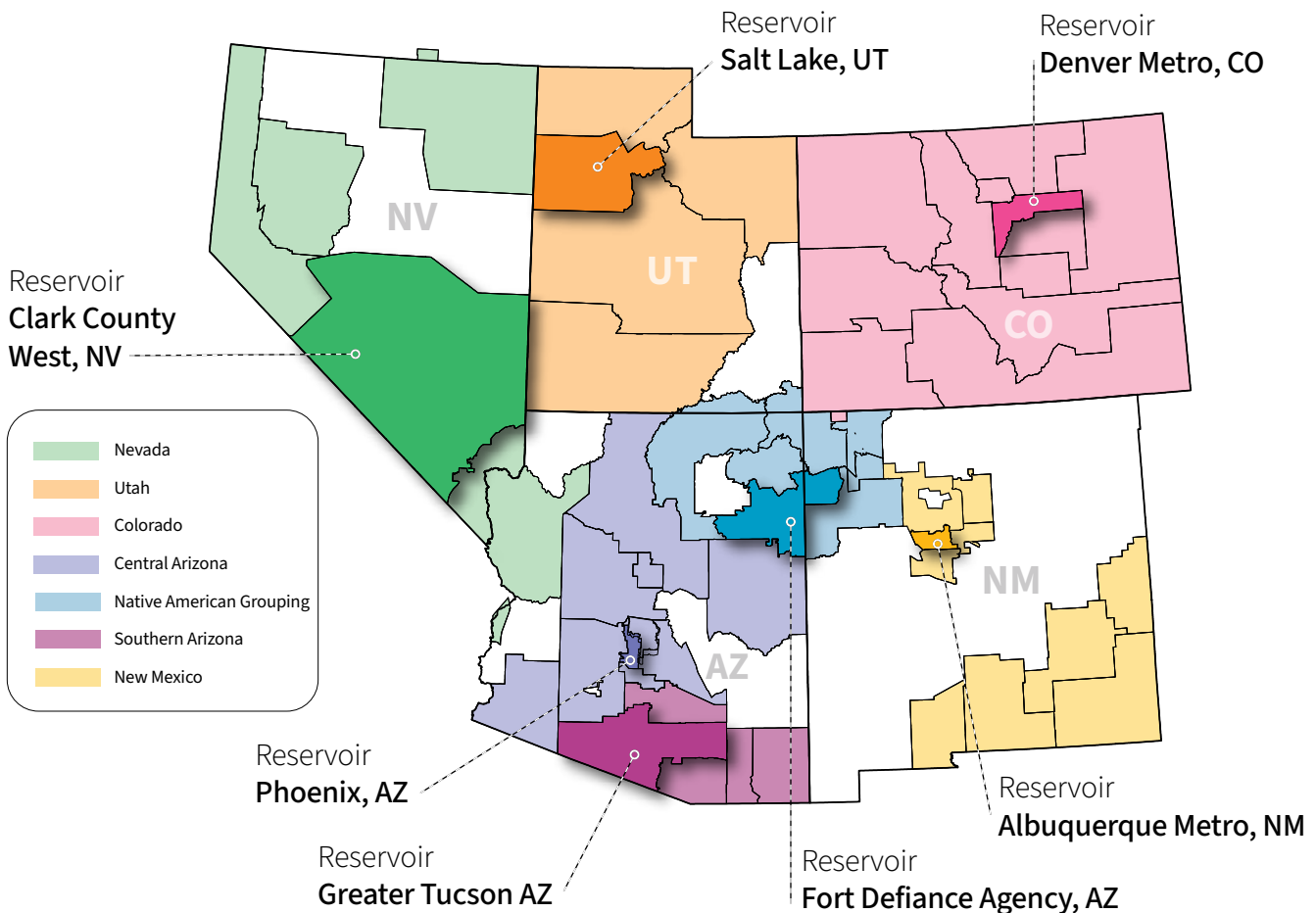
between the spiritual education of children, prayer, and a family’s health and wellbeing has begun to be explored. In an effort to engage African American families across the Greater Tucson cluster, the friends are learning to discuss the importance of a child’s spiritual education and children’s need to grow up to be strong spiritual leaders in their communities similar to past figures who strove to end racial prejudice.

With guidance and support from the institutions, the region hosted over 300 youths in four youth conferences in Denver, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, and at the Native American Bahá’í Institute. The conferences aimed to be a platform for inviting large numbers of youth to join a “mighty, transforming process,” and supporting them in arising to fulfill their sacred charge. The goal for these annual conferences is to inspire youth across the region to pursue opportunities for service and study.

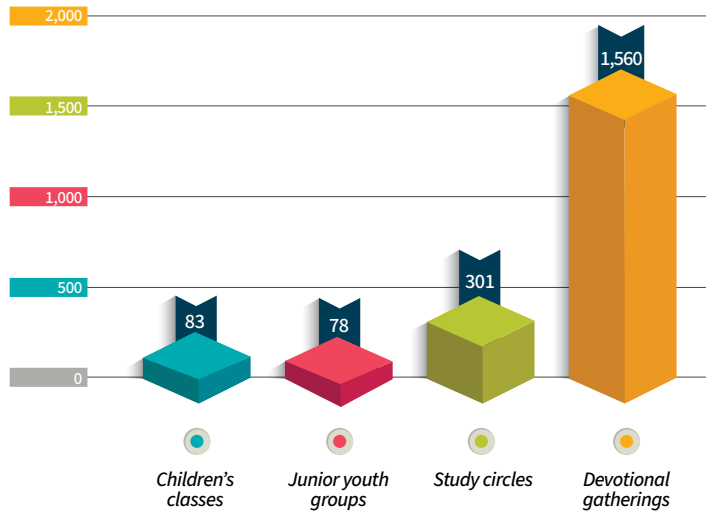
**Cluster advancement through shared learning**

Organized visits and collaborative efforts stand out as effective mechanisms for disseminating learning across clusters. Phoenix, as a host for

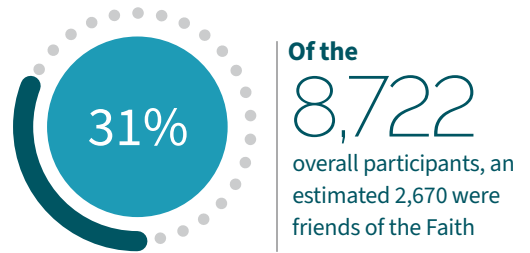
## 7 Cluster Groupings



## 2,022 core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



### Friends of the Faith participating in core activities



Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey

visiting clusters from not only the Four Corners but also other regions, exemplifies a spirit of love, generosity, and collaboration. Visitors benefit from field visits and reflection spaces and are then able to apply what they learn in their own communities. An important object of learning is how a systematic structure of visits might be created to ensure that every cluster has another more-advanced cluster to learn from, and every nucleus has a more-advanced nucleus to visit.

the Northern Plains region completed an initial deployment in the Phoenix area to gain experience and then returned to their region to settle in posts. In November, 16 pioneers joined a 10-day orientation in Phoenix where they engaged in intense study and fieldwork. Observations and insights around the identification, orientation, deployment, and support of pioneers continue to be a primary focus for the region's pioneering task force.

### Pioneering

In the past year, one international post and three homefront posts were filled by a total of seven pioneers, and one family is preparing to fill another international post. Five pioneers from

### Advancing the region's administrative systems

In preparing the annual Regional Council budget, the Council treasurer and regional growth facilitators have worked closely with three reservoir cluster agencies and Local Spiritual Assemblies to create plans and budgets for their expansion and consolidation activities. Spaces





## Programs of growth in the Four Corners States (35 intensive)

have been created to help build understanding about the spiritual nature of the funds, allow the friends to become familiar with material from the Office of the Development of Administrative Systems at the Bahá'í World Center, and provide practical support to cluster agencies and Local Assemblies to plan and budget. Gatherings have been hosted for Local Assemblies on the spiritual nature of giving and how to increase awareness of the region's financial needs. Many Local Assemblies have created plans for fund education in their communities and have significantly helped to increase contributions to the Regional Bahá'í Fund.

<b>Milestone 3</b>	<b>9</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 2</b>	<b>26</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 1</b>	<b>17</b>	<i>not yet intensive</i>
<i>Getting started</i>	<b>3</b>	<i>not yet designated a program of growth</i>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>55</b>	

Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024



## The Regional Bahá'í Council of the **Heartland States**



### **Expanding the circle of friends**

The Heartland region now engages around 400 more friends of the Faith compared to Riḍván last year. Area Teaching Committees are nurturing a unified vision and understanding of what it means to be part of an expanding nucleus as the region's friends begin to identify themselves in these terms.

The number of clusters holding teaching conferences continues to grow, welcoming friends of all backgrounds with a special focus on love, devotionals, and exploring the dynamics of expanding nuclei. There are a few efforts to engage receptive networks of Congolese refugees, one of which has grown from a team of five teachers supporting 11 children to a process that now engages some 70+ people of all ages. Through engagement over six cycles with Congolese refugees, another cluster moved from holding a few core activities to having 30. Other nuclei are engaging African American, Indigenous, Latino, and recent immigrant communities. A Council working group is striving to follow and learn from these efforts.

### **Advancing the institute process**

A Ruhi Book 3 (*Teaching Children's Classes*) content seminar was introduced this year to complement ongoing seminars for Ruhi Books 1 (*Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*) and 2 (*Arising to Serve*). The seminars are designed in close collaboration with the Counselors and training institutes in

other regions and help release the institute’s potential. Since the launch of the Book 3 seminar last May, the region has seen a 30 percent increase in the numbers of children’s classes and their participants. Animators are using the branch courses of Ruhi Book 5 (*Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth*) to reflect on their service and prepare for subsequent texts. These branch courses are proving to be invaluable in building understanding prior to animating junior youth groups.

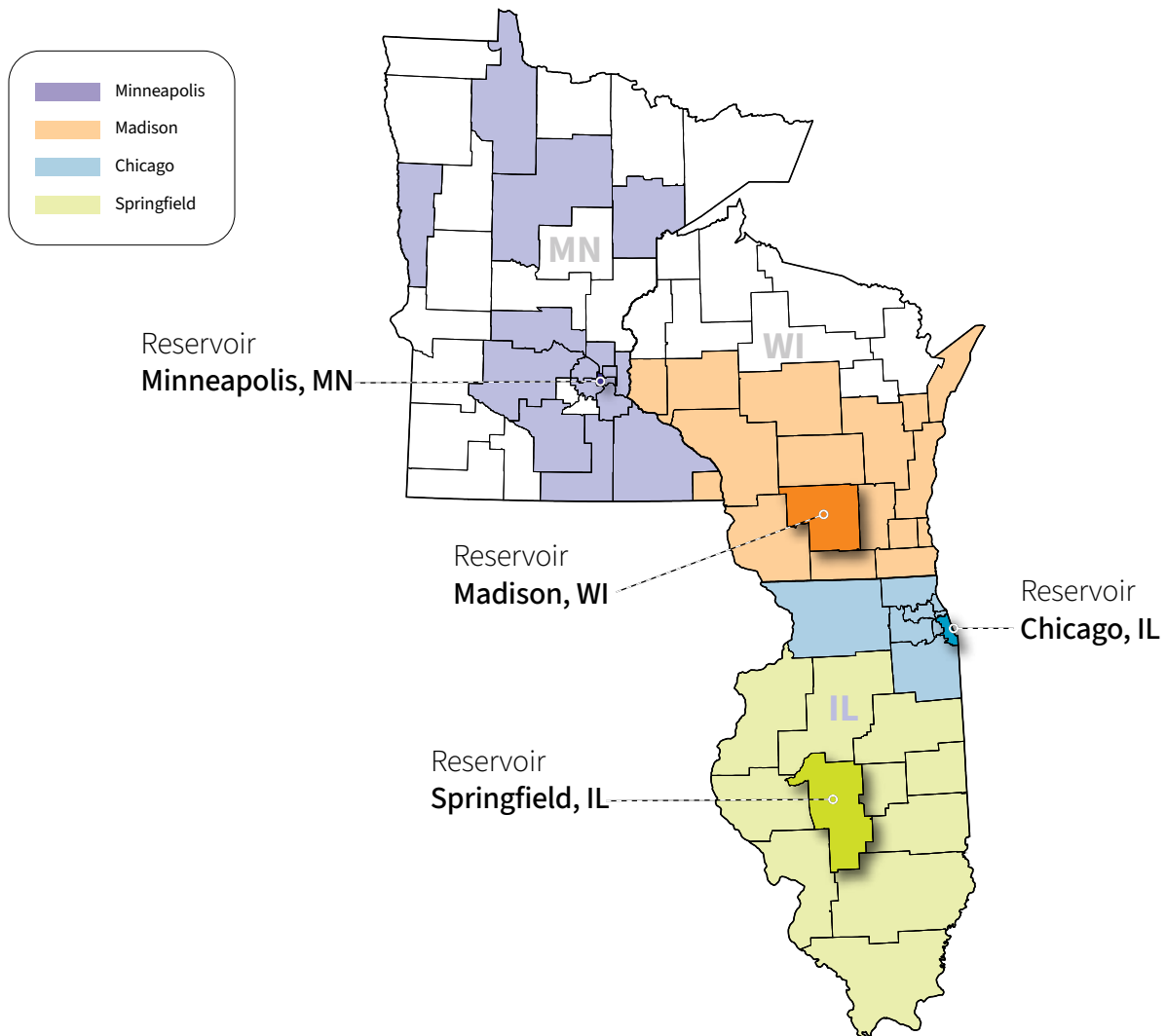
All subregions have established a strong, regular rhythm of hosting several institute camps for youth and junior youth throughout the year. A youth summer-of-service program is now in its third year of operation and is becoming a regular feature of annual activities in the most-advanced clusters. These intense periods of service over the summer months are lending significant strength to existing cluster activities and expanding the number of educational programs.

### Cluster advancement through shared learning

The Heartland region has made progress towards its goal of moving 35 clusters past the second milestone and 14 clusters past the third milestone by Rıdván 2026. The Zikrullah Khadem (Evanston), Illinois, and Madison, Wisconsin, clusters both passed the third milestone in 2023, bringing the total in the region to three; significant progress is being made in many others. Key strategies for assisting clusters to advance include striving for devotionals to be hosted in every home and visiting more advanced clusters, which provides opportunities to expand vision, build unity of understanding, and engage in action.

Spaces to share learning are also advancing at all levels, offering opportunities for study, reflection, and planning. Periodic “strengthening the institute” gatherings bring together those focused on advancing the institute with youth and junior youth from seven neighborhoods across the region. Subregional gatherings focused on

## 4 Cluster Groupings





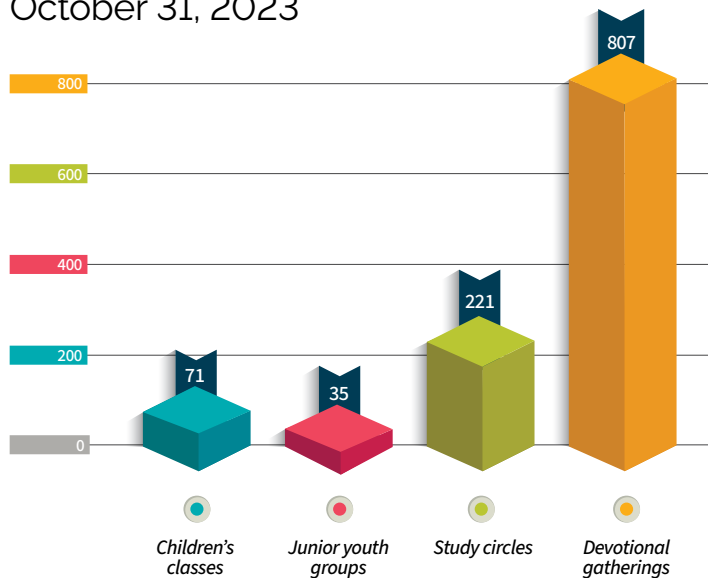
learning about advancing neighborhoods also occur and are engaging a receptive population of African refugees spread throughout a few different clusters. Monthly virtual gatherings and bi-annual in-person meetings for Area Teaching Committees to study and reflect together are being consistently organized.

The Chicago cluster hosted a visit from representatives of five clusters from the Heartland and Midwestern regions, aimed at helping them advance past the third milestone. Similar visits will be a main strategy in efforts to help more clusters advance.

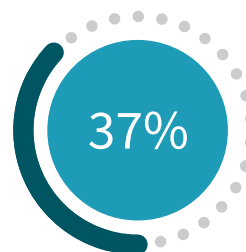
### Pioneering

The Heartland region helped to host a national pioneering orientation in May 2023. The region has also helped train four international pioneers—two who are already deployed and two who will deploy around Riqvan—and hosted one regional homefront pioneering orientation with 15 participants. In the past year, four homefront pioneers have settled at their posts. The region was also blessed to be able to deploy a family from the Heartland to pioneer internationally in the goal country of Bermuda.

**1,134** core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



### Friends of the Faith participating in core activities



Of the **4,615** overall participants, an estimated 1,726 were friends of the Faith

Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey





**Social action and contributing to the discourses of society**

In the most-advanced neighborhoods, efforts are being made to support academic achievement through summer reading programs, study clubs, and homework help. Additionally, a few small teams have begun hosting adult English classes for recent immigrants. Contributing to discourse has arisen primarily through home visits and parent gatherings. In these settings, consultation takes place about neighborhood conditions, and those involved explore solutions to problems they identify. Frequent problems include the impact of screens and social media on children and junior youth, poor health and nutrition, racial prejudice, violence, and the importance of education.



Programs of growth in the Heartland States (25 intensive)

<b>Milestone 3</b>	<b>3</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 2</b>	<b>22</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 1</b>	<b>27</b>	<i>not yet intensive</i>
<i>Getting started</i>	<b>26</b>	<i>not yet designated a program of growth</i>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>78</b>	

Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024



## The Regional Bahá'í Council of the **Midwestern States**



### **Expanding the circle of friends**

In one cluster in the region, swift progress was achieved when five Bahá'ís collaborated with a few friends of the Faith in a conscious effort to expand core activities. They were joined by Bahá'ís from nearby clusters and decided to focus their teaching and community-building efforts on an assisted-living residential facility where one of the believers lives. This decision came out of a study of the guidance about teaching “in places where receptivity wells up, those small centres of population where intense activity can be sustained.” They have approached the facility as a “neighborhood” and planned a series of activities that included home visits to all residents, devotional meetings, and Holy Day celebrations, thus, meeting the level of intensity required to pass the second milestone.



### Advancing the institute process

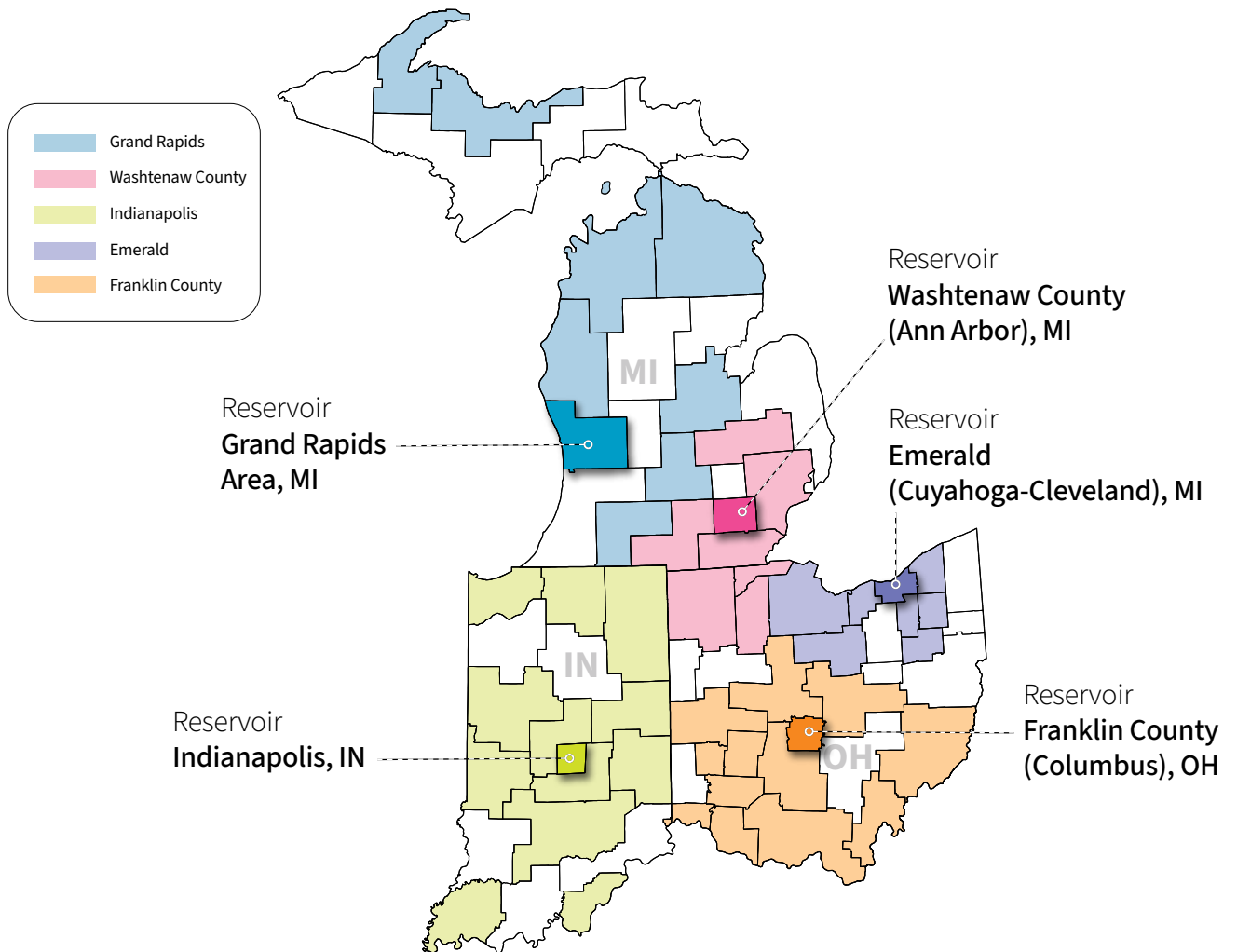
In recent months, over 150 youths have participated in conferences, camps, and youth gatherings. A youth conference in Ohio drew 120 youths from seven different neighborhoods, with over half of these souls participating in summer-of-service programs organized in either Indianapolis, Grand Rapids, Flint, or Fort Wayne. The percentage of Bahá'í youth participating in activities has more than doubled in the past year as the training institute continues to build resources among youth, advanced neighborhoods, and the generality of believers across the region. African American and immigrant youth have proven to be receptive populations in all reservoir clusters. Experience has shown how organizing a home-visit campaign by extending invitations to all youth in a reservoir cluster can help young people fulfill their "sacred charge" of inviting their peers and family members into the institute.

### Cluster advancement through shared learning

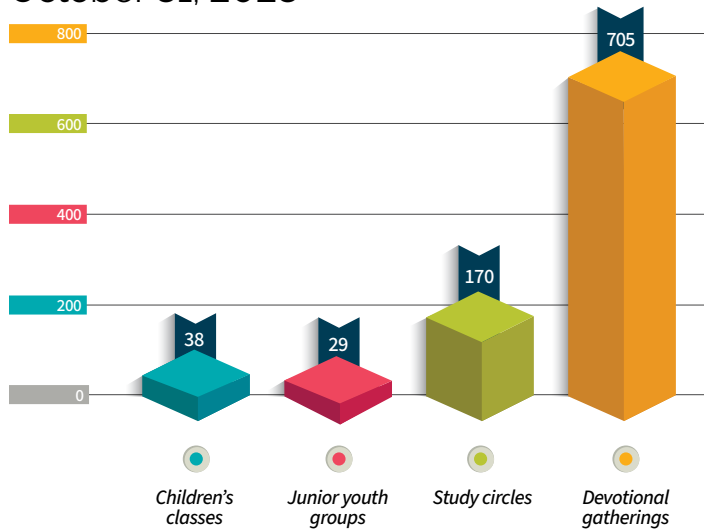
This year, four clusters have advanced from the first to the second milestone, and an additional cluster has achieved the third milestone. The Council, with the help of a Counselor, analyzed the conditions that led to this growth and prepared a narrative. Key elements identified were: seeing an initial consciousness about launching a program of growth and advancing toward the next milestone; having a nucleus of four to eight Bahá'í friends who were active in the work of expansion and consolidation; and having an institute that gains in strength through participation in content seminars in regional spaces and visits to more advanced clusters. The insights from the narrative can be used to advance growth in the region's other clusters.

In January 2024, the Regional Council invited the Spiritual Assembly of Fort Wayne, Indiana, to bring together a group of seven newly enrolled friends for an evening of dinner, prayer, and

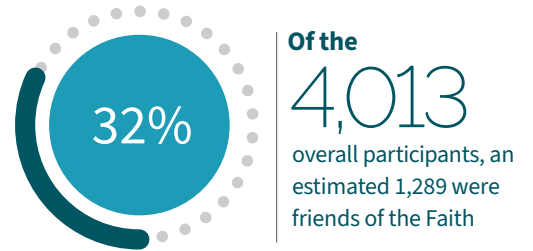
## 5 Cluster Groupings



942 core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



Friends of the Faith participating in core activities



Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey

conversation. This cluster is responsible for a substantial number of regional declarations in the last 24 months. Their vibrant community has made significant progress in learning “how to give encouragement to those who are poised to enter.” The newly enrolled friends shared stories reflecting the importance of the community’s unconditional love, an all-embracing atmosphere free from subtle pressures, and the centrality of quick engagement with the institute process.

### Pioneering

The regional pioneering task force was formed with two members and draws upon the continuous input from the Counselor, an Auxiliary Board member with extensive experience as a pioneer, subregional teams, and other institutions. Since Riḍván 2023, three adults and one child have arisen as homefront pioneers.

### Social Action

The Council continues to host monthly Racial Justice and Unity forums by Zoom with the mission of learning about racial justice and unity at the grassroots. Creating conditions where authentic sharing of race-related experiences can occur in a loving environment has been critical to the success of discussions at local and regional levels. The final forum of 2023 featured a nucleus of friends from a newly advanced second-milestone cluster. Their story illustrated how understanding and overcoming unconscious racial prejudice can lead to intimate friendships among people from different racial backgrounds. These loving friendships created the conditions necessary for moving forward and establishing foundations for growth in spite of negative racial experiences. The Council also sponsors a learning group whose mission is to strengthen the process





of learning about teaching Indigenous peoples in the Midwest. A small panel from this learning group shared a presentation on the theme of “Indigenous and invisible” and asked carefully crafted questions that engaged the participants.

**Contributing to the discourses of society**

In 2023, the Summit County (Akron) cluster in Ohio held a follow-up to its first Nine Year Plan world conference in the serene and beautiful setting of Cuyahoga Valley National Park. In attendance were people from all walks of life: White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Mennonite, and more. Park rangers assisting with the conference were impressed by the diversity of attendants and loved the idea of coming together with many people to have conversations. Observing the conference, a senior ranger decided to incorporate conversations in the park’s regular hikes, which will impact scores of people. The rangers posted signs along the trails sharing ideas about building communities and service to the community.

Programs of growth in the Midwestern States (*21 intensive*)

<b>Milestone 3</b>	<b>4</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 2</b>	<b>17</b>	<i>intensive</i>
<b>Milestone 1</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>not yet intensive</b>
<i>Getting started</i>	<b>25</b>	<i>not yet designated a program of growth</i>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>75</b>	

Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024



## The Regional Bahá'í Council of the **Northeastern States**



Over the past year, as enkindled souls in the Northeast region sought to understand Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and apply them to the needs of society, they relied more than ever before on the infusion of loving guidance from the Universal House of Justice. They immersed themselves in deep and ongoing study of messages such as the letter tracing the events of the first century of the Formative Age and another on the need for further decentralization of the Faith's administrative processes. Council members participated in regional-level seminars on financial systems and the flow of guidance, the flow of information, and the operation of a regional secretariat. As a result of these seminars, plans are being developed in each of these areas. Capacity for effective action is increasing at all levels throughout the region.

### **Expanding the circle of friends**

At the beginning of the Nine Year Plan, the Regional Bahá'í Council asked the region to concentrate on six focus areas. Chief among them was to infuse love, joy, the spirit of the Faith, and flexibility into all efforts, knowing that it is the friends' ability to sustain genuine, loving relationships and the spiritual qualities of Bahá'í endeavors that will release the society-building power of the Faith in the Northeast.

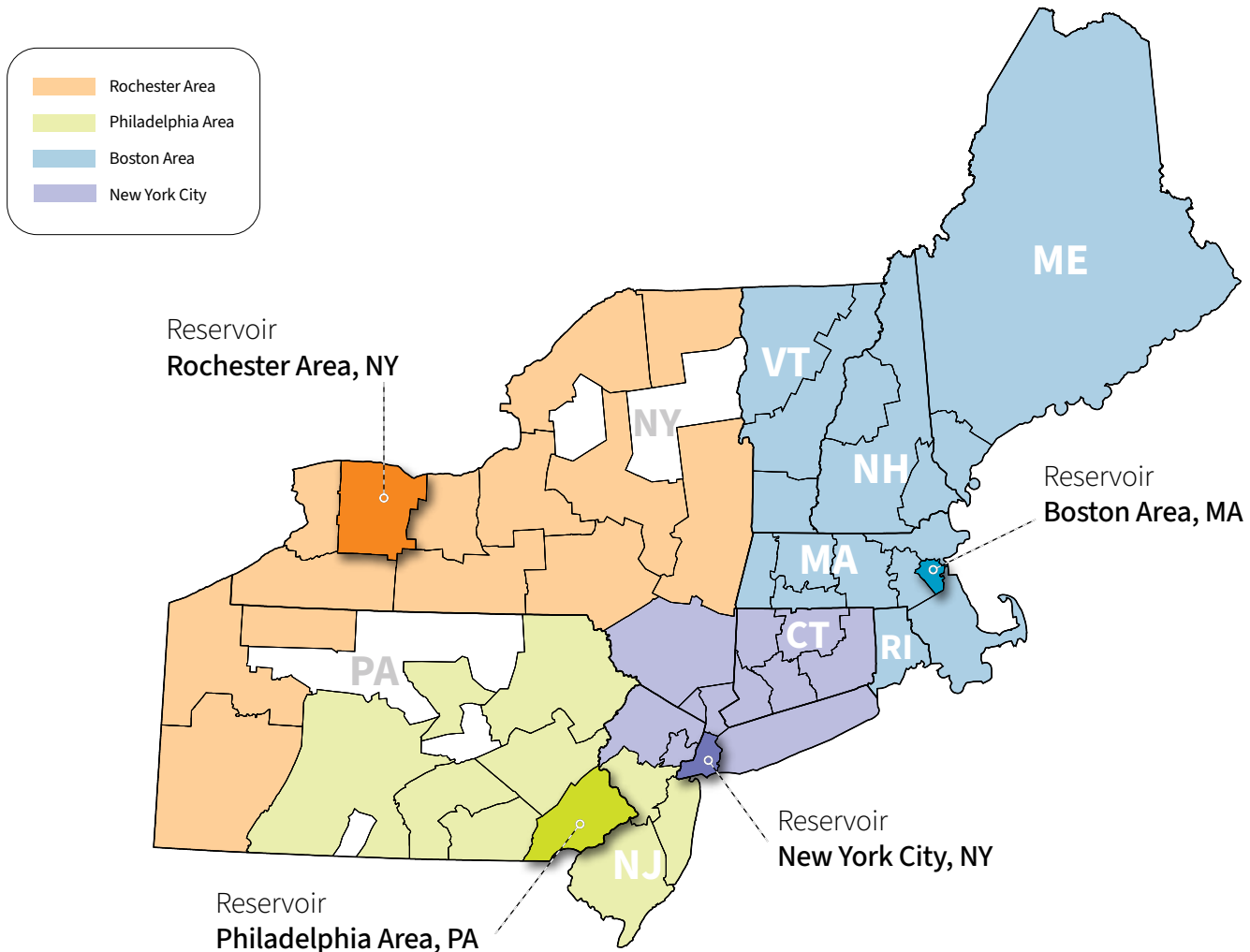
Recognizing the important role a spirit of love and joy plays in community building and the need to expand the circle of friends who are involved, attention is being given in neighborhoods to building capacity to engage in conversations, extend invitations for involvement, and maintain relationships that produce spiritual and social advancement. At the same time, in response to Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of humanity, outreach to populations of special significance is consciously maintained in centers of intense activity, thus ensuring a focus on working with African American, Latino, and Nepali populations.

Area Teaching Committees are assisting the generality of believers to see themselves as belonging to expanding nuclei and to understand how this widens the circle of participation. Through the creation of spaces where guidance is studied and concepts are explored, the friends are encouraged to reach out, according to their own circumstances, to include others and learn about how to advance their endeavors to build community.

### Advancing the institute process

Following a letter from the Regional Bahá'í Council and the Regional Training Institute Board, which emphasized the importance of advancing the institute process and called for a doubling of education activities by Ridván 2024, friends in the region began the past year by engaging in conversations and planning needed to move forward in these areas. At Feasts, in Spiritual Assembly chambers, in the consultations of cluster agencies, and within nuclei, neighborhoods, and families, ideas were shared and plans were made. As a result, seminars with built-in field work, an increase in the number of youth and junior youth camps, and intensive sessions for study multiplied. The summer-of-service program focused on building the capacity of youth to serve, and, with increased attendance and time in the field in various settings in the region, the friends agreed that it was the best summer of service ever.

## 4 Cluster Groupings





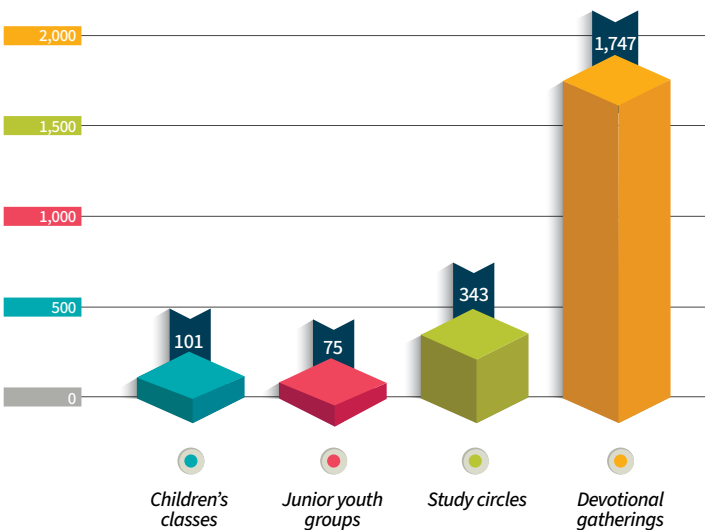
**Cluster advancement through shared learning**

Regional institutional meetings, where more and more clusters are invited to learn from and participate in the systematic processes of reflection and planning, provide one regional opportunity to share learning. Similar reflection spaces, organized by the training institute, bring friends together to consider what has been learned and what still needs to be learned to enhance the institute process. One cluster’s agencies are teaming up with Green Acre Bahá’í School, which resulted in a home-visit campaign being carried out by those attending Green Acre’s winter school. Agencies from other communities have subsequently had opportunities to visit the cluster to gain field experience and to learn about organizing home-visit campaigns.

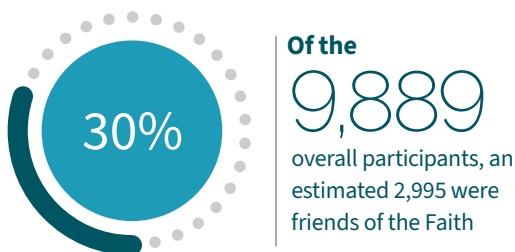
**Pioneering**

In addition to its continuing efforts to encourage and support friends who arise to serve as pioneers—whether internationally or on the home front—the region’s pioneering task force has been working to identify additional individuals with whom to converse about possibly serving in these capacities. Furthermore, young people’s experiences in the institute process and their resulting service continue to inspire them to offer periods of service in the region’s most advanced neighborhoods.

**2,266** core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



**Friends of the Faith participating in core activities**



Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey



**Social Action**

As the community-building process advances in neighborhoods, so does the ability to engage in the improvement of spiritual and social conditions in the wider community. The Council sees this happen in a variety of ways, organically and according to the circumstances at play in the places and among the populations involved. Sometimes social action manifests in the systematic building of relationships that result in participation in core activities and organized efforts among the friends to help each other in real-life situations. A few among the countless evolving examples are assisting with community gardens, helping with home repairs, offering English classes, and setting up sharing tables in areas experiencing food instability.

**Contributing to the discourses of society**

Opportunities to participate with like-minded organizations in the wider community have enhanced the region’s involvement in the discourses of society. With the region’s continued focus on learning about race unity, participation in discourses on that subject are a priority, and many of the friends in the Northeast have made and are making tremendous contributions by sharing the principles of the Faith with others who are striving for the elimination of racial prejudice. Efforts to share in society’s discourses are also advancing in areas like the oneness of religion, justice, human rights, and the promotion of the arts.

Programs of growth in the Northeastern States (44 intensive)

Milestone 3	12	intensive
Milestone 2	32	intensive
Milestone 1	4	not yet intensive
Getting started	1	not yet designated a program of growth
<b>Totals</b>	<b>49</b>	

Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024





## The Regional Bahá'í Council of the **Northern Plains States**



The Regional Bahá'í Council of the Northern Plains States focused this year on learning about expansion of the community-building process within Indigenous populations, primarily on the Turtle Mountain and Nez Perce Reservations. In Rapid City, South Dakota, Bahá'ís are learning to work with urban Indigenous populations.

### **Expanding the circle of friends**

Efforts to expand the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program in both urban and rural areas are ongoing (rural areas have population centers with fewer than 2,000 people).

In Sioux Falls, South Dakota, an urban setting, a children's class serves the younger siblings of a junior youth group begun last year, comprised of African immigrants. The class is hosted in a parent's home.

In urban Rapid City, a pioneer has partnered with local police to offer a children's class for Indigenous children. Two new devotionals serve primarily Indigenous and African American populations.

In Pocatello, Idaho, an urban setting, a junior youth group continues to expand, now serving 21 participants representing diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The parents of these junior youth support the group in numerous ways through the arts and culture.

In urban Caldwell, Idaho, a junior youth group is composed of one Bahá'í junior youth and nine of her school and neighborhood friends.

In Lapwai, Idaho, which is on the Nez Perce Reservation, and in Columbus, Montana, both rural settings, junior youth programs have been established by Bahá'í parents for their middle school children and their school friends.

On the Turtle Mountain Reservation, in rural North Dakota, a children's class continues with the support of tribal elders.

**Advancing the institute process**

Friends from the region's goal clusters are applying new capacities in their localities after gathering for an institute seminar, and the Regional Training Institute Board is actively planning further seminars.

The Council assisted the region's youth to attend youth conferences in the Four Corners states. Upon returning, youth from Lapwai and Boise,

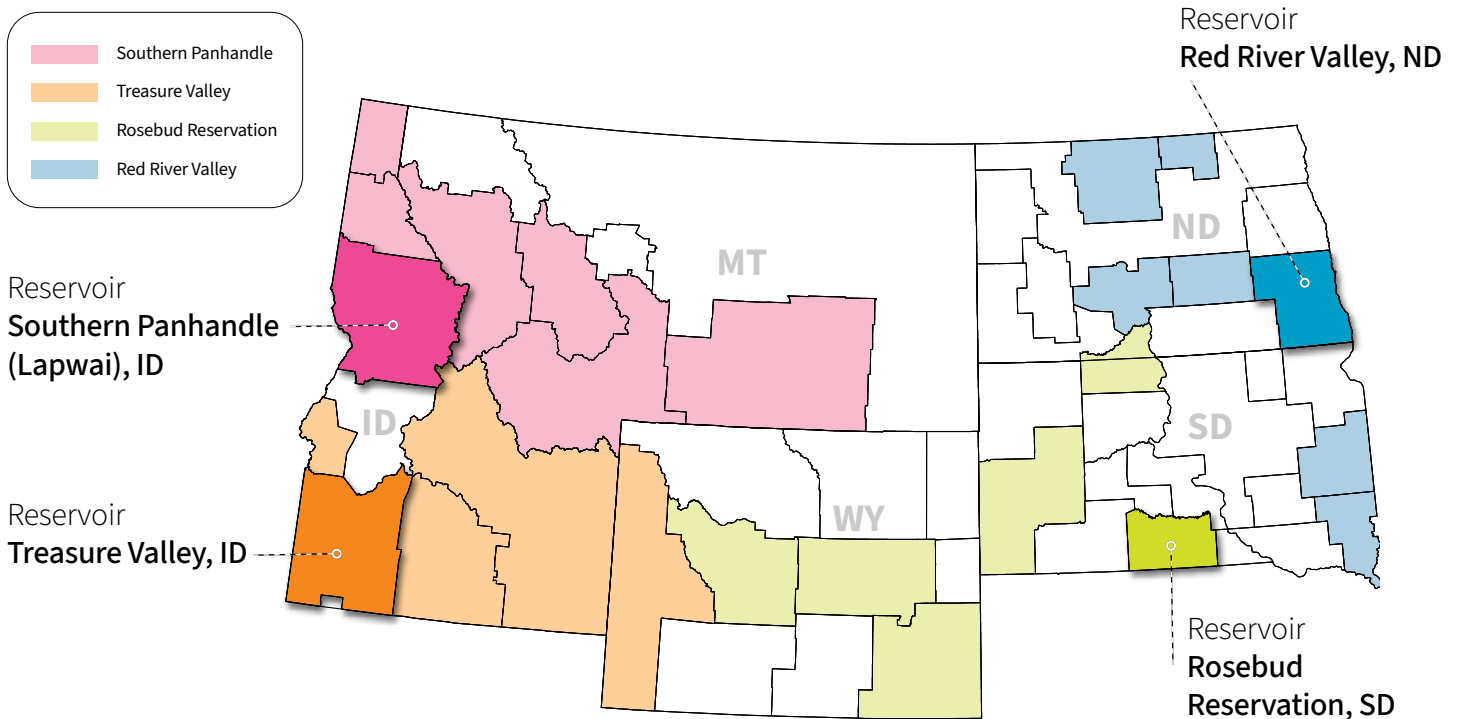
Idaho, renewed their study of the main sequence of courses. A virtual study circle assisted rural youth from Montana and North Dakota to progress through the sequence of Ruhi Institute courses.

There is also progress through the institute's higher-level books, and seekers are studying Book 1 (*Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*).

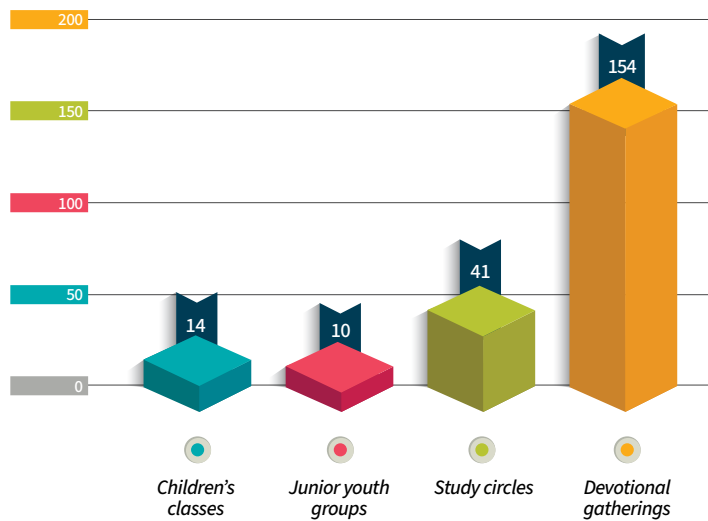
**Cluster advancement through shared learning**

Learning in goal clusters has been supported by visits to and from Bahá'ís in the Four Corners states. Institute coordinators and resource people are helping to expand and consolidate efforts, particularly on the Turtle Mountain Reservation and in Sioux Falls. The Treasure Valley cluster in Idaho is learning how the Salt Lake cluster in Utah invigorated the community-building process through home visits. Additionally, the regional institute coordinator, who lives in the region's only third-milestone cluster, has visited Rapid City and Billings, Montana, to assist with learning about outreach.

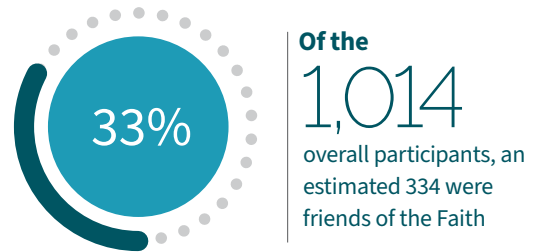
## 4 Cluster Groupings



219 core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



### Friends of the Faith participating in core activities



Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey



### Pioneering

This year, nine homefront pioneers settled in the region. The Council is planning a pioneer gathering for later this spring to learn about their challenges and needs for support. The Four Corners provided training for five pioneers who are serving in the Northern Plains, and these friends are applying their learnings in their new communities.

### Social action

Most social action is being done through individual initiative. In Rapid City, one person helped establish a weekly prayer circle with recovering alcoholics to pray for still-suffering alcoholics in their city. In addition, the local children's class visits elders in their neighborhood and brings them gifts to spread kindness and joy.

Youths from Lapwai who attended the Four Corners youth conferences started a devotional meeting for other youths and their families.

To promote Martin Luther King, Jr.'s concept of a "Beloved Community," the Lincoln County, Wyoming, Bahá'ís established an ongoing grassroots project to promote acts of service and kindness. They also assisted the emergency management agency in a response drill.

The junior youth group in Billings held a fundraiser for the local homeless shelter and a peace vigil in response to a neighborhood shooting near a Bahá'í home. In Columbus, Montana, junior youth raked leaves for neighbors.

In the Farmway neighborhood of the Treasure Valley cluster, Bahá'ís offer an English-conversation group for primarily Spanish-speaking residents as well as after-school activities for children.

**Contributing to the discourses of society**

In the Treasure Valley cluster, Bahá'ís have been involved in several community-sponsored events, notably “Faith and Blue,” United Nations Interfaith Harmony Week, and Healing Our Future, an interfaith group.

Bahá'ís and their friends from the Racism Recovery group on the Flathead Reservation in Montana partnered with tribal members to initiate a Circle of Hope monthly gathering wherein friends at the grass roots come together to plan, act, and consult on ways to change their communities for the well-being of the commonweal.

In Pocatello, Idaho, a Bahá'í was invited to participate in a locally organized conference—Peace Building: Everyday Skills for Finding Common Ground. One of the organizers commented that all could learn from the Bahá'ís because they already know how to find common ground.

In Billings, friends have participated in gatherings organized by the interfaith group and a community gathering to discuss peace.



Programs of growth in the Northern Plains States (4 intensive)

Milestone 3	1	intensive
Milestone 2	3	intensive
Milestone 1	22	not yet intensive
Getting started	14	not yet designated a program of growth
<b>Totals</b>	<b>40</b>	

Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024





## The Regional Bahá'í Council of the **Northwestern States**



### **Expanding the circle of friends**

Nuclei of friends in the Northwestern States are learning to expand within populations of special significance, both in neighborhoods and in areas that extend well beyond cluster boundaries. Several nuclei banded together to learn how to support their friends as they take their rightful place in advancing Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of humanity. Together they crafted devotions that act as portals where worship, cultural drumming, and fellowship lead to conversations that identify participants' aspirations and connect them with the institute process. Those involved in the effort shared:

“Thousands of years ago family society was split. The drum was turned and used to make war and drove troops to conquer communities through force and left only tears in its path. Now we are asking the drum to bring people back together. Starting with Native and Black communities, the drum will call the people back to the heart of community to the great remembrance of peace, love and the spirit of fellowship and solidarity.”

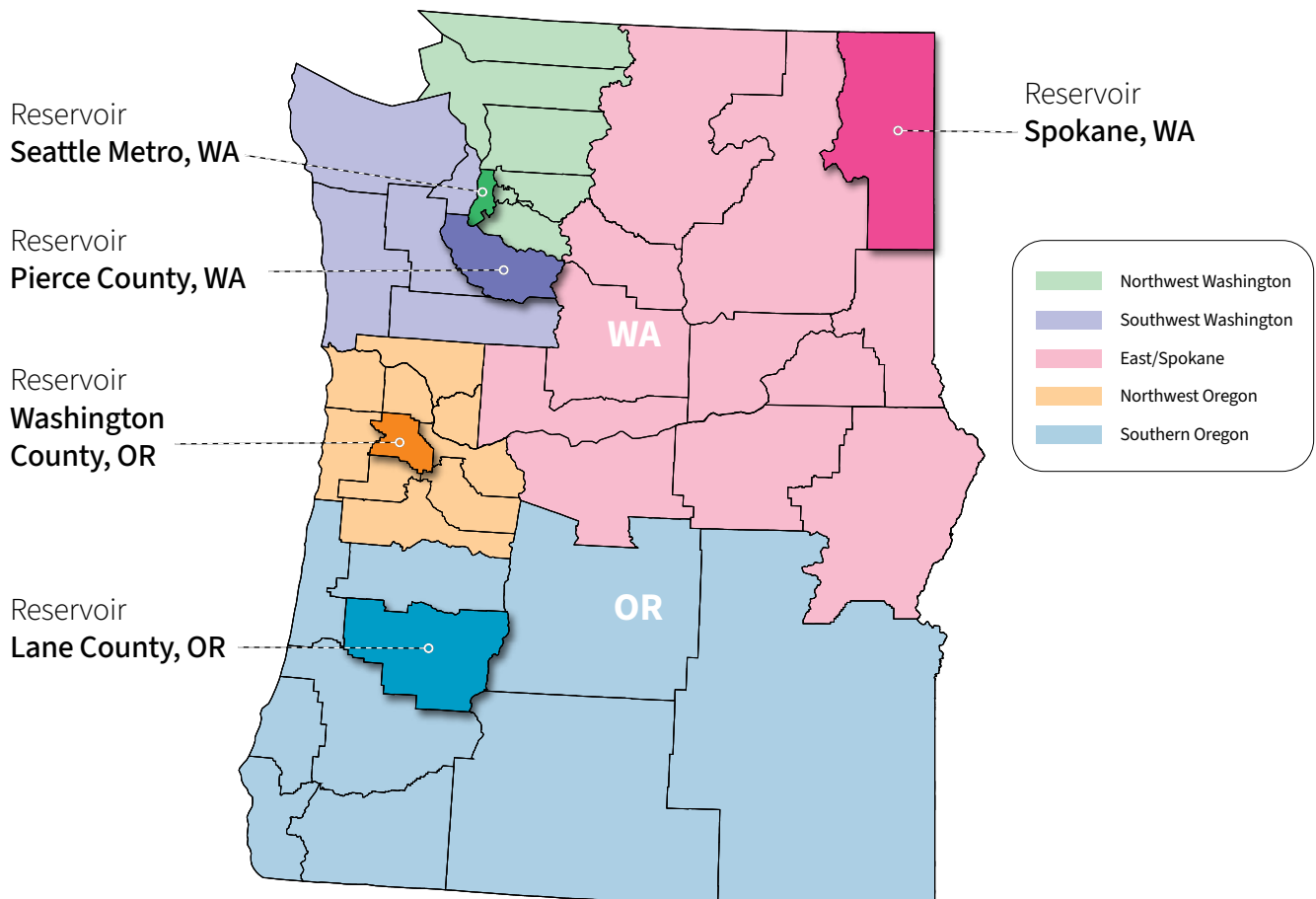
## Strengthening the institute process

For the last two years, the Northwest regional training institute focused on two main goals: enhancing the quality and delivery of the Ruhi Institute’s educational programs and strengthening the movement of youth in centers of intense activity. Systematic visits between teams working in these centers have proved fruitful for both goals. Teams from areas at earlier stages of development visited communities within the Northwest region, while teams from the region’s three most advanced clusters visited centers of activity in other places. With the support of the Counselors, the Council collaborated with training institutes in British Columbia and Alaska, both sending and receiving friends who share learning.

This year, the Council also extended the reach and regularity of institute camps. It held 18 camps to promote the movement of youth through the institute’s courses, serving 138 individuals from 16 clusters. This process drew on resources from five reservoir clusters, contributed to raising 16 new tutors, and led to the appointment of three cluster coordinators from the youth population.



## 5 Cluster Groupings





**Advancing clusters through shared learning**

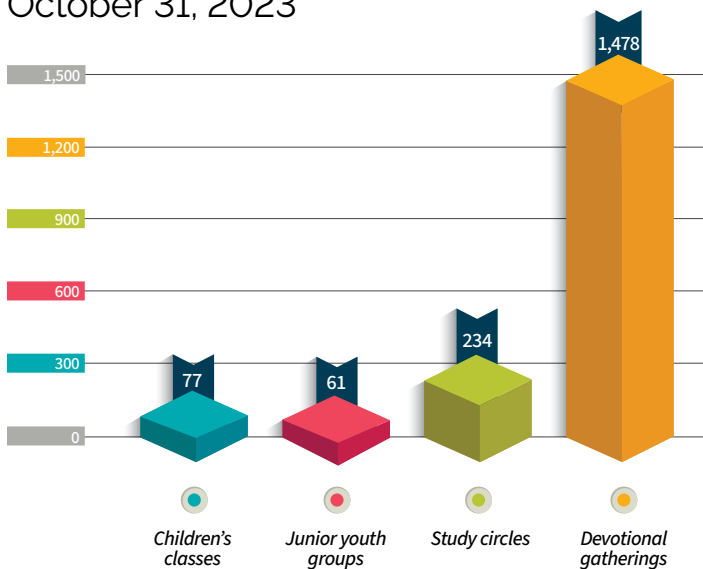
The region continues to learn to identify insights emerging in frontier clusters that can be shared with other communities. As an understanding of a cluster’s needed capacities and next steps develops—through consultation at the grass roots—friends and agencies within that cluster can be connected with the body of experience-based learning that exists in the region. Shared learning happens in various ways: through regular visits to neighboring clusters by teams made up of friends from reservoir clusters and youth who are offering a period of service; by welcoming friends to reservoir clusters to participate in teaching campaigns, institute camps for youth, and reflection spaces; via a cross-region learning process being fostered through meaningful conversations with youth about their training,

support, and accompaniment along the path of service; and through visits from the Northwest’s frontier clusters to clusters in other regions.

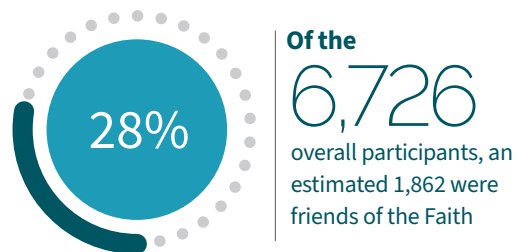
**Pioneering**

Given the growing number of international pioneers who are coming from the Northwest region, the primary objective of the region’s pioneering task force continues to be learning about the nature of conversations that inspire friends to arise to meet international pioneering goals. It also accompanies them through various stages of conversation and exploration, and identifies the support they need as they progress toward international pioneering. Identification of pioneers often happens in spaces outside the task force itself, including in conversations with regional institution members in the field. Many

**1,850** core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



**Friends of the Faith participating in core activities**



Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey



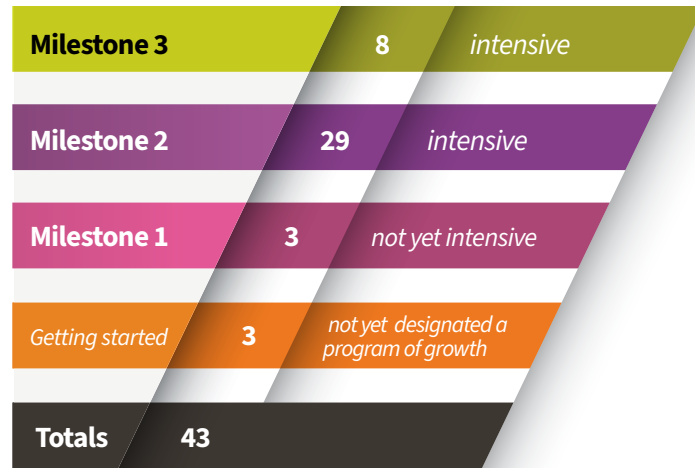
friends who have arisen were self-initiated in direct response to the call of the Universal House of Justice. This response has been fostered through further dialogue and support at regional and national levels, including the pivotal experience of attending a national pioneer orientation.

**Gaining a deeper vision of the Nine Year Plan**

To help a growing number of individuals and institutions gain a deeper vision of the Nine Year Plan and contribute to its advancement by strengthening the flow of guidance at the grass roots, the Council held seminars with four Local Spiritual Assemblies and their cluster agencies. Guidance from the House of Justice was studied, and each Assembly determined a scheme to create its own systematic annual plan to bring more of the friends into direct contact with the guidance. They also decided how their plan’s implementation would be followed and how learning would be captured. A Council member acted as a liaison to accompany and support each Assembly with its plans.

To learn about strengthening the flow of guidance to institutions, Council members partnered with Auxiliary Board members to meet with a few strong Spiritual Assemblies to study guidance about how an Assembly develops capacity to foster the Plan’s pattern of action. Each Assembly identified examples where specific capacities were present, then steps were identified to strengthen those capacities or develop new ones.

Programs of growth in the Northwestern States (37 intensive)



Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024





The Regional Bahá'í Council of the  
**Prairie States**



**Expanding the circle of friends**

Central to expanding participation in the community-building process has been an ongoing series of regional youth institute camps. Begun in their current format in January 2023, the camps have welcomed 94 young people, 43 percent of whom are from the wider community.

Camp participants come from a variety of populations, in roughly the following proportions: 26 percent White, 21 percent African American, 17 percent African immigrant, 16 percent Persian, 11 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Indigenous, 3 percent Pacific Islander. This is significantly more diverse than the overall population in the region and the current Bahá'í community.

Having a sizable cohort of East African youth from the Cedar Rapids, Iowa, cluster has led to camp courses being offered in Swahili, and three of four young women participating from the Omaha Indian Reservation descend directly from members of the first all-Indian Local Spiritual Assembly, elected in 1948.

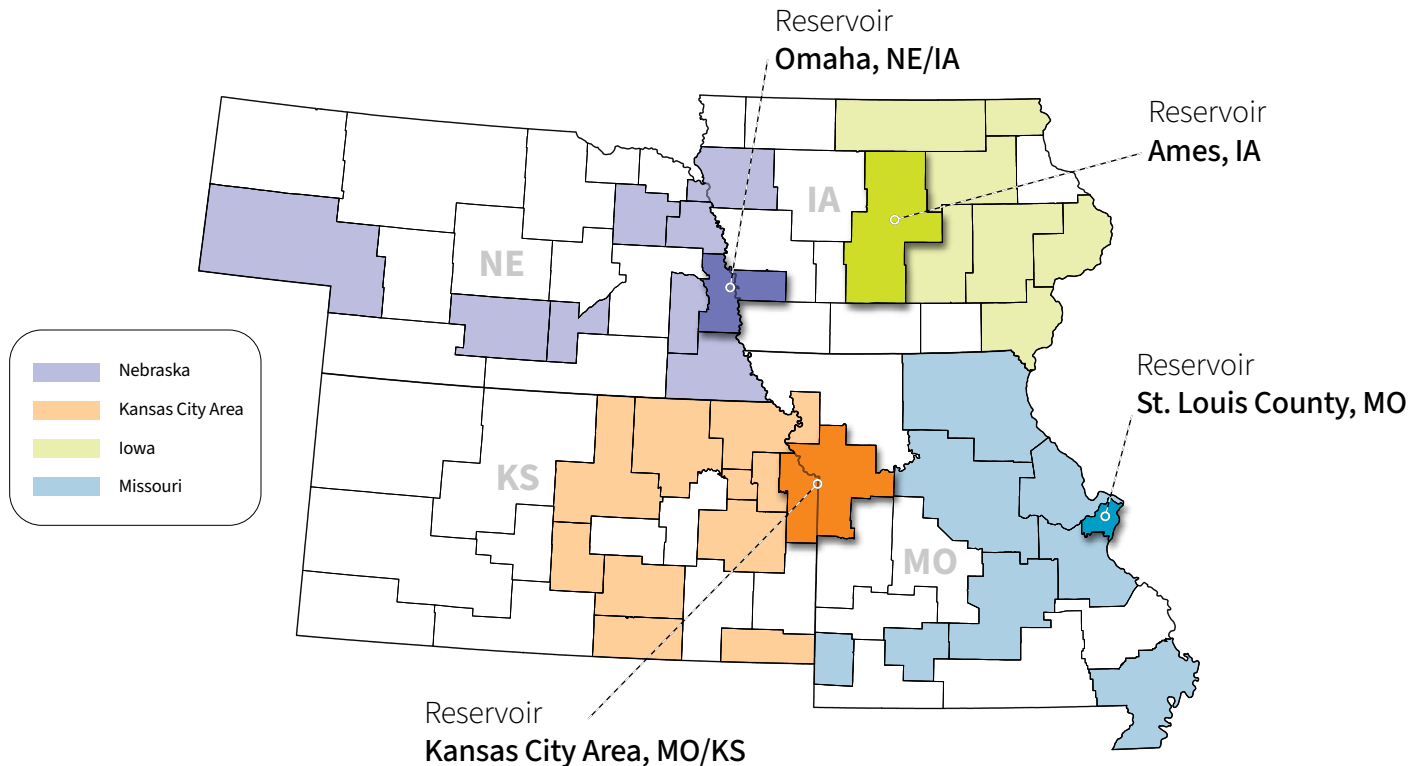
Reaching out to families is another important means of expanding the community. In the Ames, Iowa, cluster, a nucleus of one family with young children and their grandparents consists of 10 friends serving 35, in two devotionals, three study circles, one children's class, and one junior youth group.

### Advancing the institute process

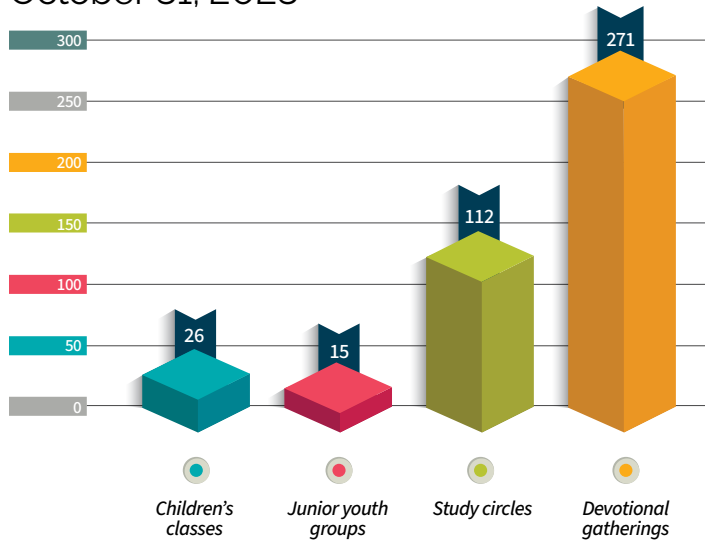
Preparing individuals to tutor at youth camps has advanced learning about raising the quality of youth-focused study circles. The cluster hosting the camps—Kansas City Area—has benefited from dozens of field visits by camp participants. The visits help expand children’s classes and junior youth groups; reinforce connections with parents, family members, and seekers from the wider community; and inspire Bahá’ís receiving visits to arise in service. The volume of visits has pushed the cluster’s Area Teaching Committee to expand its capacities and has spurred other Area Teaching Committees, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and individual believers across the region to consider how new cohorts of young people can be met and invited into the process, as well as how youth who attend camps can be assisted to arise in service and be connected with an active neighborhood nucleus.

A great source of joy has been seeing youth camp participants begin to offer acts of service in their home communities. Examples include a youth from the Wichita, Kansas, cluster who completed Ruhi Book 3 (*Teaching Children’s Classes*) and moved from working with preschool-age siblings in an ongoing children’s class to teaching one herself. A youth from the Omaha, Nebraska, cluster who studied several courses at various camps, started, with assistance from her mother, a series of weekly youth night discussions, exploring themes through a spiritual lens such as the impact of social media, the educational system, and the effects of competition. Two youths from the Kansas City Area cluster who studied Ruhi Book 7 (*Walking a Path of Service*) formed a new Book 1 (*Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*) with several friends, and one has begun tutoring that book at institute camps. One youth from the St. Louis County, Missouri, cluster was moved to enroll in the Faith and offer a year of service.

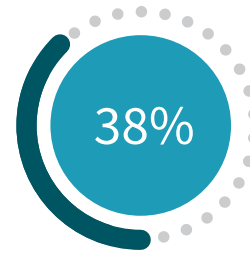
## 4 Cluster Groupings



## 424 core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



### Friends of the Faith participating in core activities



Of the 1,757 overall participants, an estimated 664 were friends of the Faith

Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey

Efforts were made to advance the institute process in other areas as well. The first region-wide junior youth camp drew 35 junior youth from 10 clusters. Children's class teachers continue to gather in a monthly regional online reflection space, and several clusters are experimenting with weekly youth nights, which support youth between institute camps and offer a portal into the institute process.

#### Cluster advancement through shared learning

A variety of efforts were made to share learning between different parts of the region. A monthly online gathering of Area Teaching Committee secretaries allows these individuals to learn from

one another's efforts and experiences. The first of an expected series of gatherings for cluster statistics officers serving the region's four reservoir clusters was held; notably, three of the four participants were newly appointed and under the age of 25. Additional learning was shared through regular effectiveness spaces for tutors of Ruhi Books 1 and 2, through children's class teacher reflection spaces, and through biannual in-person gatherings for junior youth animators. A virtual gathering was held for the region's Local Spiritual Assembly secretaries and chairs, and more targeted meetings gathered secretaries and chairs of Spiritual Assemblies from key reservoir clusters.



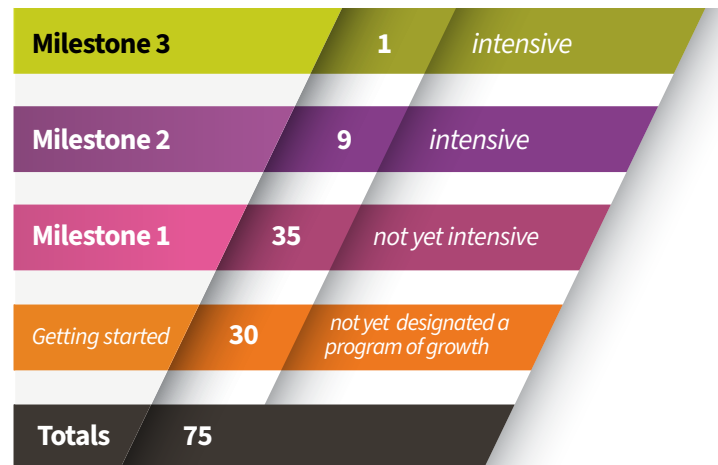


**Social action and contributing to the discourses of society**

Much social action in the region is driven by junior youth service projects, including a prairie-restoration effort done in collaboration with a state park. The project grew out of a series of local weekend junior youth camps in the Sioux City, Iowa, cluster.

In contributing to the discourses of society, the Meaningful Conversations initiative, piloted in the Kansas City Area cluster, has been notable. Overseen and supported by the Bahá'í National Center in select clusters, the initiative invites social media users in a local area to attend a series of weekly in-person conversations, focusing on topics such as “The Arts as Divine Inspiration,” “Healing Racism,” and “Mind Full or Mindful?” This effort has so far attracted around 100 participants, a dozen of whom have entered the institute process.

Programs of growth in the Prairie States (10 intensive)



Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024



## The Regional Bahá'í Council of the **South Central States**



### **Expanding the circle of friends**

Regional growth facilitators are accompanying Area Teaching Committees to learn about how a nucleus expands, how to spend more time in the field visiting homes, and how to encourage friends to take small steps and then reflect on their services. Two clusters in Arkansas and Oklahoma are working with the Marshallese population and have been hosting youth camps and initiating home visit campaigns. In one Texas cluster, a small nucleus has expanded from a handful to over 25 friends from the wider community through purposeful conversations, a weekly devotional gathering, Holy Day celebrations, study circles for Ruhi Books 1 and 2, a women's retreat, an intensive institute camp, and game nights. Organically and very naturally, two participants enrolled in the Faith during the celebration of the Twin Holy Days.



### Advancing the institute process

Following successful regional seminars to better prepare tutors to offer Ruhi Book 1, these same seminars were extended to 168 additional tutors at the grassroots level. As a result, the number of friends completing Book 1 grew by 144 between April 2023 and January 2024.

Another major line of action has been to offer periods of intensive study of the institute materials to youth around the region. The capacity to organize camps and institute campaigns now exists in five of the nine cluster groupings, and camps reached 85 youths from April 2023 to January 2024. Fifteen youths have arisen to serve as coordinators and tutors of institute camps and to support and accompany their friends on the path of service throughout the year. Several of these youth offered dedicated periods of service, an experience which has helped lay the foundation for the formalization of a year-of-service program.

### Cluster advancement through shared learning

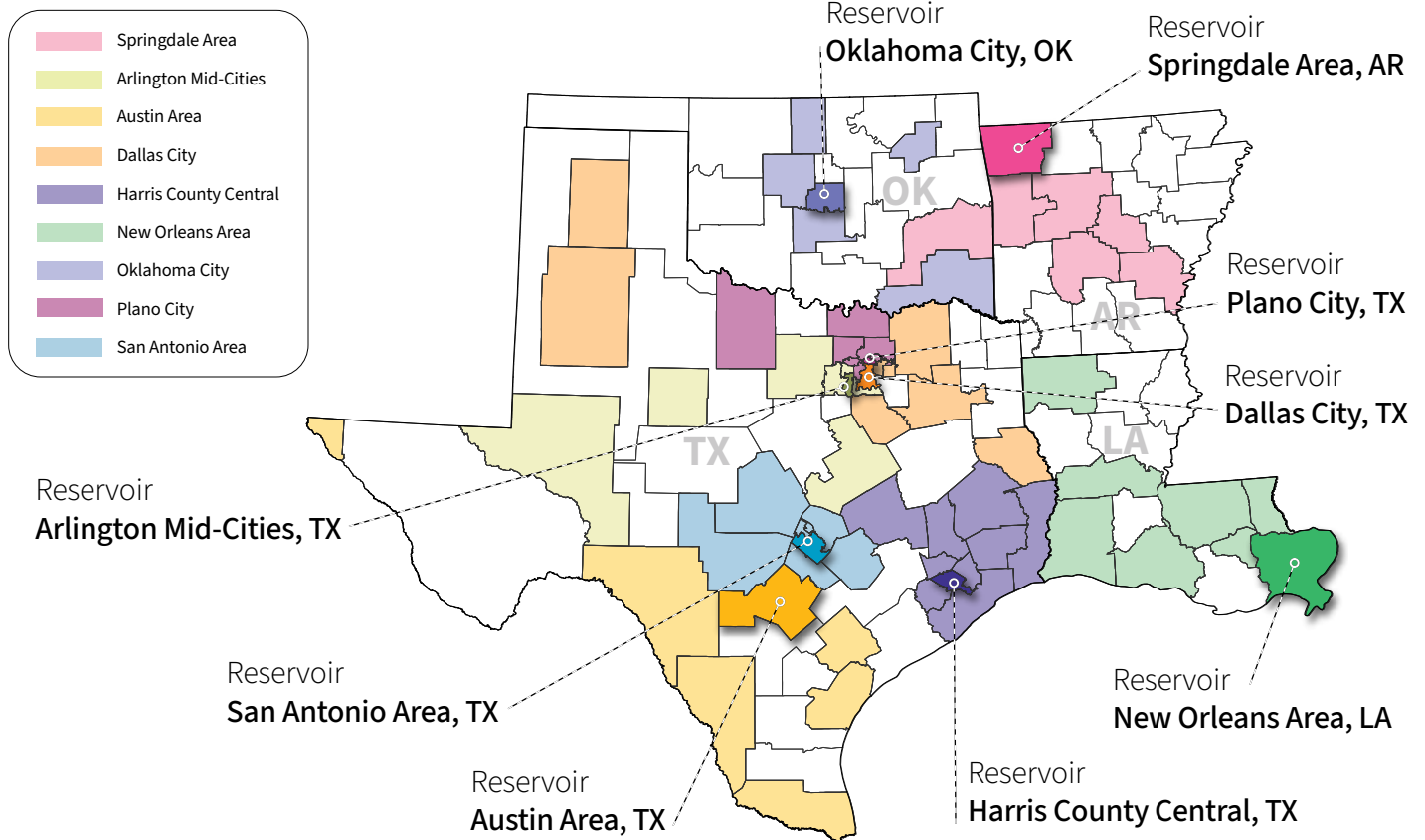
Clusters periodically visit the Dallas learning site, and friends from the site travel to meet with other



clusters' agencies to study, consult, and reflect together. The primary focus has been on gaining experience in the field. The friends consult about how they see themselves as an expanding nucleus, how they can reach out to more neighbors and whole families, and how they can effectively convey the vision of the institute process and invite others to become protagonists.

The Council visited several reservoir clusters this year, meeting with Spiritual Assemblies, Auxiliary Board members, and cluster agencies to learn about their experiences and consult on activities underway in their clusters.

## 9 Cluster Groupings





### Pioneering

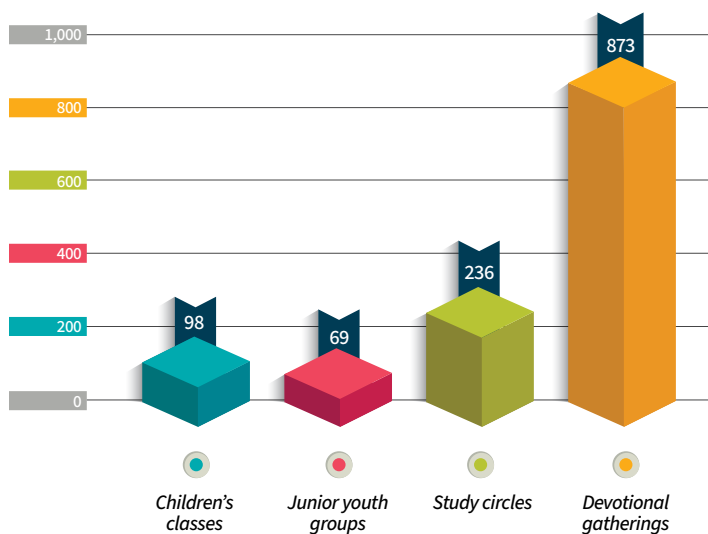
Drawing on guidance in the Universal House of Justice’s May 24, 2022, message, the pioneering task force focused on identifying international and homefront pioneers. One goal is to have a third-milestone cluster in each cluster grouping in the region. Consultations with the existing nuclei in target clusters helped the task force better understand the needs and realities. As a result, the Council identified pioneers for the Rio Grande Valley and Amarillo Area clusters. A regional training for homefront pioneers in February helped them to deepen understandings of the framework for action, adopt an outward-looking orientation, and engage in regular cycles of action and reflection in order to serve their neighborhoods and communities.

### Social action

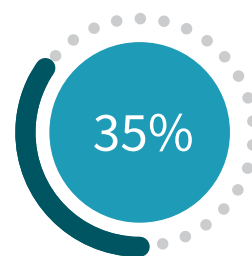
In several clusters, tutors and animators who recognized a growing need to support the academic education of young people are, in modest ways, tutoring youth in their homework, reflecting with them on study habits, assisting them in completing the requirements for college enrollment, creating spaces for them to meet professionals from different fields, or creating opportunities to learn a trade skill. In some neighborhoods, collaboration with clinics, schools, or community organizations opens doors for friends participating in institute programs to render service. For example, a simple vegetable garden started during a children’s camp has continued for several years with the support of families engaged in the process. Someone running a nearby nonprofit clinic invited the friends to beautify the clinic grounds and hopes to eventually start a community garden with their assistance.



**1,276** core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



### Friends of the Faith participating in core activities



Of the **5,481** overall participants, an estimated 1,925 were friends of the Faith

Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey



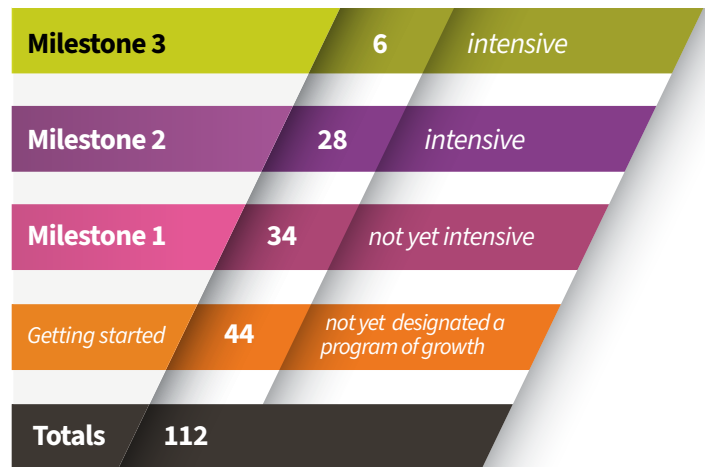
**Contributing to the discourses of society**

Last summer, a group of youth from a refugee population in Texas were completing Ruhi Book 2 (*Arising to Serve*) when they found studying the theme of women and men’s equality gave them new language to respond to disparaging statements about the roles of women. While these conversations were not easy, the youth reflected that they would have previously kept quiet and not responded; but now they felt confident to humbly share the principle of the equality of women with their own neighbors and family members. As a result of institute courses, the population’s young women are developing powers of expression and using them to socialize the concept of gender equality.

The social media initiative contributes to public discourse via gatherings for meaningful conversations in 10 clusters, with another five clusters being onboarded. These weekly gatherings attract an average of six participants from the wider community with some sessions bringing in up to 24. Topics are based on Bahá’í principles and use quotations that foster elevated conversations. As friendships grow, several participants have joined devotional gatherings, study circles, and other activities. Through this process in the last year, the region has welcomed seven new believers who are already involved in the institute process and are protagonists in the Plan.



Programs of growth in the South Central States (34 intensive)



Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024



## The Regional Bahá'í Council of the Southeastern States



In the past year, friends in the Southeast region have redoubled efforts to be “clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn,” and how this focus can be nurtured at the regional, cluster, local, and individual levels. Particular efforts are centered on strengthening potential reservoir clusters.

### Expanding the circle of friends

Friends throughout the region are learning about what it means to be part of an expanding nucleus. A statewide teaching conference brought together 66 friends from South Carolina and Georgia who are committed to learning effective approaches to welcoming more people into a community-building process. A key component of the conference was learning in action through a home-visit campaign in the host cluster.

Friends in the Metro Atlanta cluster are actively reaching out to neighbors, friends, and coworkers. These cluster-wide efforts have been strengthened through sector reflection spaces, gatherings for devotional hosts, and the help of collaborators who accompany families as they start and maintain devotional gatherings. The cluster has surpassed 200 core activities, and teams of individuals are working side by side to learn to raise up centers of intense activity.

### Advancing the institute process

A regular rhythm of regional youth camps has continued, and a consistent cohort of youth is steadily moving through the sequence of courses. The institute has gained experience in accompanying youth to begin community activities—working first with clusters adjoining Metro Atlanta—and teams of youth visit each

other to share experiences. Impacts are being felt at the cluster level as they share their increased understanding in spaces such as cluster gatherings and Nineteen Day Feasts.

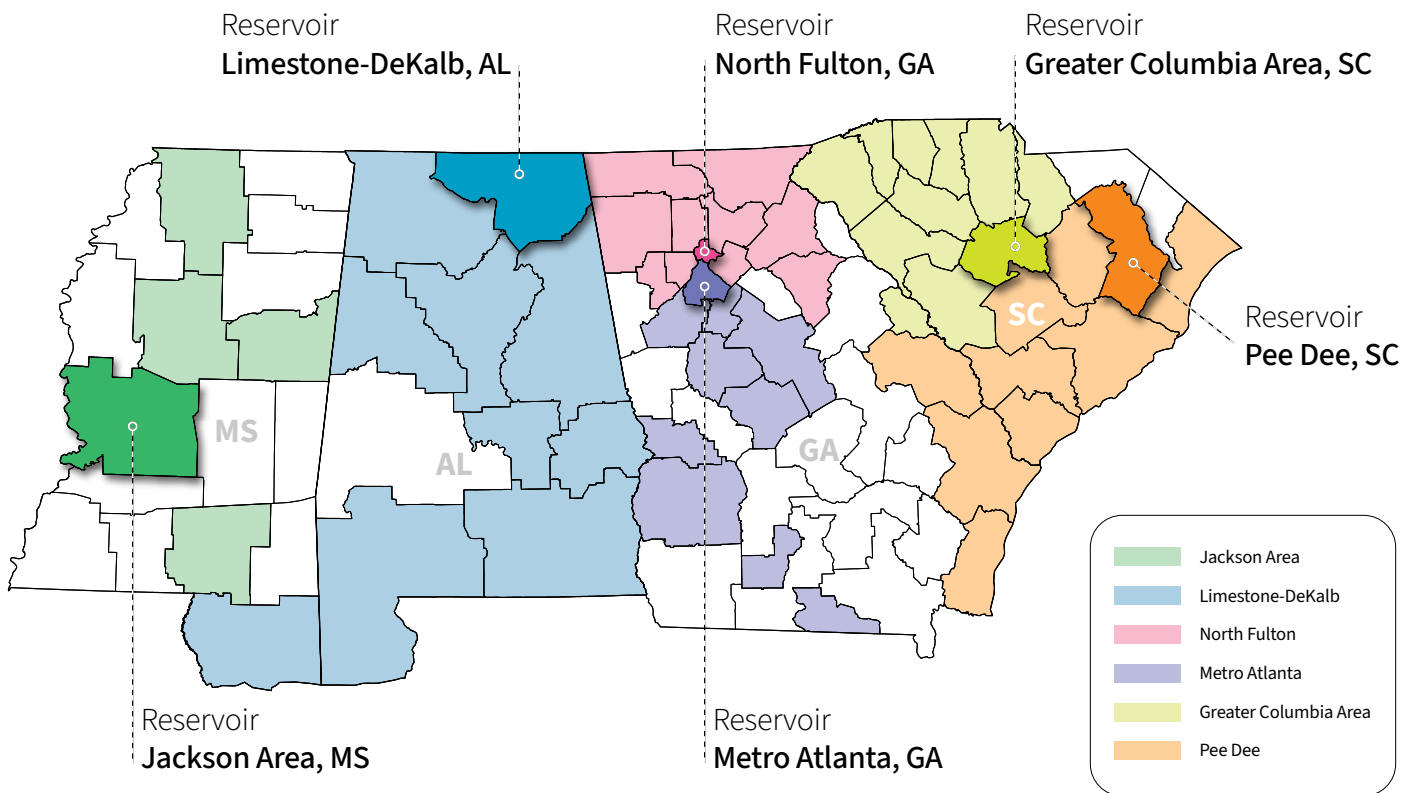
Youth at every camp deliberate on the implications of oneness and reflect on the training institute as the means of addressing justice. In June, participants visited the Civil Rights Museum in Atlanta, a Juneteenth Celebration at the Atlanta History Center, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park. In December, participants traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, to visit the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Youth thought deeply about their place in the region’s social and spiritual legacy and how many of the principles reflected in the civil rights movement also inform the institute.

Institute tutors and collaborators are learning to talk about the institute as an instrument for meaningful social change through the application of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. Friends from many regions—including California, the Four Corners, the South Central States, and the Northern Plains—visited Atlanta last year and will do so again to learn from the region’s work with African American families, youth, and communities; an important area of learning is how the training institute can empower a population.

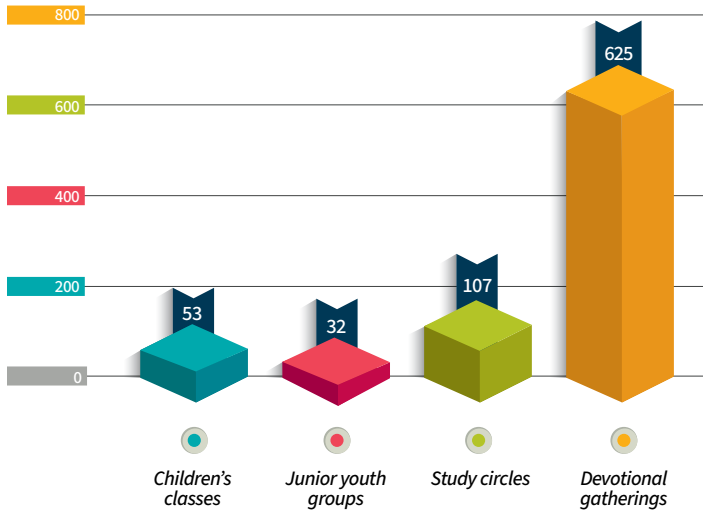
**Cluster advancement through shared learning**

Monthly calls with Area Teaching Committee (ATC) secretaries have provided a space for clusters to gain insights from each other’s experiences. A primary focus has been identifying clear objects of learning and systematically following them over time. The Council is also engaged with a group of nine Local Spiritual

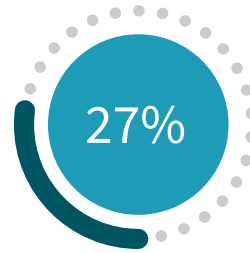
## 6 Cluster Groupings



**817** core activities underway as of October 31, 2023



**Friends of the Faith participating in core activities**



Of the **3,390** overall participants, an estimated 911 were friends of the Faith

Source: SRP Online, as of October 31, 2023, Biannual Survey

Assemblies in a learning process centered on the Assemblies' role in nurturing the community's devotional character.

More frequent opportunities to consult have strengthened regional institutional collaboration. The impact has been tangible in the region's most-advanced cluster—Metro Atlanta—where a shared vision of growth is being realized among cluster institutions and agencies. In close collaboration with the Continental Board of Counselors, Metro Atlanta's ATC and institute coordinators are learning how to support each other's activities. Following and propelled by an all-day meeting of the cluster's core team, a newly appointed ATC hosted a vibrant reflection gathering with a record number of participants who engaged in rich reflection and collaborative planning.

**South Carolina Enterprise**

A seminar on growth, held at the Louis G. Gregory Institute and attended by 45 people, highlighted the rich history of growth in South Carolina and Coastal Georgia and the need to raise up teams who are learning to engage large numbers of friends in community building. Integral to the seminar were community field visits where participants practiced what was being learned.

In the Pee Dee cluster, a weekly evening youth space at the Community Empowerment Center in Florence has been sustained for two years. The regional training institute's close accompaniment has helped strengthen the focus and quality of participation, including through support of a vigorous home visit campaign to meet with families of youth. About 12 to 15 youths participate in monthly, day-long camps initiated to allow

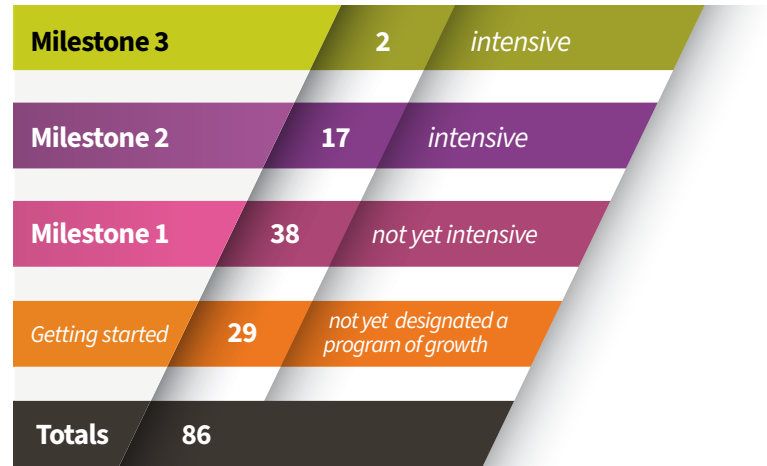


youth to accelerate their study of the courses, including youths who are tutors. A weekend youth gathering in December focused on reaching pockets of youth who are engaged in Bahá'í activities in South Carolina and connecting them with the vision of the institute.

**Additional comments**

Following a seminar on the development of properties, the Council developed a multi-year plan for systematic learning about the relationship between properties and growth, focusing on strengthening relationships with institutions and communities. Also, a redesigned regional website (rbcse.org) was launched to strengthen communication across the region.

Programs of growth in the Southeastern States (19 intensive)



Source: SRP Online, as of March 1, 2024

## Radio Bahá'í WLGI, Hemingway, South Carolina

In 2023, Radio Bahá'í continued its unwavering mission to spread love, peace, and unity to listeners across South Carolina. Under the guidance of a new, two-person leadership team, the station marked a new era while maintaining its soulful commitment to the community.

Radio Bahá'í's rhythm revolves around curated music that aligns with Bahá'í principles. The station's virtual stage, [radiobahai.us](http://radiobahai.us), spotlights current and recent tracks. The Radio Bahá'í App, launched in 2023, enables listeners to stream from any location, fostering a two-way conversation through text and voice messages. The average number of monthly streaming listeners in the United States has so far reached an impressive 1,290.

Direct quotes from the Bahá'í Writings echo twice each hour, infusing spiritual wisdom into the broadcast. Special programs for Bahá'í Holy Days and historical narratives add depth to the musical tapestry. The Radio Bahá'í staff began revisiting Ruhi Books 1 and 2 to gain insights and practical skills they could use to introduce Bahá'í teachings and to weave the Word of God into on-air comments and into conversations in the community.

In 2023, Radio Bahá'í broadcasted 87 public service announcements addressing critical issues ranging from COVID-19 awareness to diabetes tips to mental health advocacy. Recognizing local vaccine hesitancy and health concerns, the station strategically amplified messages promoting well-being. Additionally, community announcements informed listeners about local events such as the South Carolina Winter School, the Meaningful Conversations program, and the Exploring Bahá'í Teachings discussion group.

The airwaves resonated with 583 science-related public service programs, including Loh Down on Science and Climate Connection, in keeping with Radio Bahá'í's commitment to promoting the harmony of science and religion. Special broadcasts commemorating Black History Month, Women's History Month, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day featured interviews with authors, epidemiologists, and community-action organizations.

Nielsen's diary-based research revealed an estimated 6,200 weekly listeners across the five counties in the station's primary coverage area.



Radio Bahá'í's in-person support of community events increased this year in collaboration with a wide range of community organizations. The station actively participated in an Earth Day event at the Community Garden in Pawley Island, a Cinco de Mayo Health Fair in Georgetown, a Juneteenth Festival in Myrtle Beach, the Myrtle Beach Jazz Festival, Village Group-sponsored events in Plantersville, the Waccamaw EOC Health Fair in Georgetown, and the Atlantic Beach Gullah-Geechee Festival.

These events served as opportunities for community engagement and collaboration with local Bahá'ís who provided literature and information about the Bahá'í Faith. Interviews with community organizers, such as Tamika Obeng and Tyron Wilson, and jazz artists, like Julian Vaughn and Jazmin Ghent, showcased the station's commitment to connecting with and uplifting the local community.

Operating around the clock at 50,000 watts every day of the year, Radio Bahá'í upgraded its transmitter in 2023, replacing the one in place since the station's inception. This new transmitter not only occupies less space and has proved extremely reliable but has also saved the station over \$8,000 in electricity costs, a 23 percent reduction compared to 2022. It also allows remote management, further enhancing operational efficiency.

The station implemented a new on-air operating system for both in-person and remote broadcasts, ensuring a user-friendly experience. Furthermore, Radio Bahá'í powered through 2023 using 100 percent renewable energy, thanks to renewable energy certificates, solidifying its commitment to sustainability.

### **Anecdotes from listeners and local Bahá'ís**

One listener related that she moved from New Jersey to Myrtle Beach and found Radio Bahá'í when she was on a trip to Charleston. She said she's been listening ever since. Another area resident said he's been listening for over 20 years and loves the positivity of the station.

A local Bahá'í related the following: "I wanted to let you know a couple from Murrells Inlet called the Bahá'í Center yesterday morning inquiring about our programs and came for the 11:00 a.m. devotional gathering. As we got acquainted, we learned the wife had been listening to Radio Bahá'í in her car after her CD player broke. When she and her husband were driving back from Florida recently, his CD player stopped working too so she suggested they listen to 90.9 FM. They have been visiting different churches since moving here from San Francisco, and love the music and everything about Radio Bahá'í, which led to the devotional gathering.

"We had deep conversations about Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and the oneness of religion and humanity. They now have prayer books, The Hidden Words, and some other writings of Bahá'u'lláh, with plans to get together soon."

Another Bahá'í shared this story: "A local Bahá'í related that when they went out in the community for home visits, they met with a grandmother who was home with her kids and grandkids. He said that it was a really good conversation and asked if she ever listens to Radio Bahá'í, and she replied yes, her radio stays on 90.9 all the time. The thing she likes is the positive mix of music. She wants her children and grandchildren to start listening to the station."

*Public Affairs*

# 05



# Office of Public Affairs

The Office of Public Affairs (OPA), with offices in Washington, DC, and New York City, represents the National Spiritual Assembly in its relationships with the public, including the US government, the United Nations, members and organizations of civil society, and the media. Public discourse focuses on human rights, including the defense of Bahá'ís in countries where they experience persecution; gender equality and the advancement of women; race relations; the role of the media in society; economic justice; sustainable development, including climate change; and, most recently, the narratives of America. OPA is learning about how to help others apply Bahá'í teachings in their individual and collective lives and is moving—to the extent possible—toward decentralization given that the office is tasked with dealings at the national level.

OPA has a strong focus on human rights, particularly the defense of Bahá'ís in countries where they experience persecution and discrimination, including in Iran, where Bahá'ís are severely persecuted by the Iranian government; in Yemen, where Bahá'ís are persecuted by the Houthis; and in Qatar and Egypt, where Bahá'ís experience serious discrimination.

## Human rights, including the persecution of Bahá'ís

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### Iran

The surging persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran that began in June 2022 continues to the present day. Between May 2023 and February 2024, Bahá'ís were subjected to more than 300 instances of raids, arrests, detentions, beatings, sentencings, property demolitions and confiscations, or exclusions from higher education. The Bahá'í International Community (BIC) responded

with the #OurStoryIsOne campaign, involving dozens of national Bahá'í communities across the world that used both traditional and social media to spread information and share artistic contributions. The campaign, which also sought engagement with national governments, was designed to demonstrate commonalities between the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran and broader oppression in Iranian society, especially of women. It reminded the world that June 18, 2023, marked the 40th anniversary of the hanging in Shiraz of 10 Bahá'í women, whose only crime was refusing to recant their faith, and linked that event to an emergent pattern of targeting Bahá'í women. Since 2020, approximately two-thirds of Bahá'ís arrested and sentenced in Iran have been women. Similarly, following the protests sparked by the killing of Jina Mahsa Amini in September 2022, Iranian women have disproportionately suffered violence and abuse at the hands of the country's security forces.

Highlights from the #OurStoryIsOne campaign included the expedited passage on September 12, 2023, of House Resolution 492 (H.Res.492). The introduction included an unprecedented 38 initial cosponsors (out of a final 58 before passage) due to the enthusiastic efforts of its chief sponsor, Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, whose district includes the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. She spoke at the House of Worship on June 9 during an event honoring the 10 Bahá'í women. Her comments, and those of Ms. Ruhi Jahanpour, who was a prisoner with the 10 women, provided a moving program showcasing current and past injustices. NBC News, Agence France-Presse (AFP), and the Religion News Service provided significant media coverage. Social media platforms and local media further distributed the coverage and included numerous testimonial videos by women who knew the martyred women.





The Bahá'í World News Service reported that the #OurStoryIsOne campaign reached 250 million views, including a Twitter storm that trended in nine countries, including in Iran. Contributing to the success were tweets by US Bahá'í actors Rainn Wilson, Eva LaRue, Justin Baldoni, and Parisa Fitz-Henley, as well as friend of the Faith, Mark Ruffalo. Ruffalo's tweet highlighted one of two particularly outstanding music videos contributed by [American Bahá'ís](#) or [facilitated](#) by OPA. The passage of H.Res.492 generated an [interview](#) on Iran International, four paragraphs of an [article](#) in *The Washington Times*, a [tweet](#) by Iran International (English), a [tweet](#) by Congresswoman Schakowsky, a strong floor [statement](#) by the chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Mike McCaul of Texas, and two superb floor statements by Representative Madeleine Dean of Pennsylvania, who is a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

As part of the #OurStoryIsOne campaign, OPA hosted an event on January 29, 2024, at the Washington, DC, headquarters of the human rights NGO Freedom House, with cosponsors Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, USA, titled

“Iran and the Modernization of Oppression of Religious Freedom.” The event featured [Dr. Nazila Ghanea](#), the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief; [Dr. Payam Akhavan](#), professor of international law and human rights chair at Massey College, University of Toronto; and [Mr. Michael Page](#), deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa Division at Human Rights Watch. Iran International covered the event and broadcast a [segment](#) twice on January 30 and, on the next day, interviews recorded with attendees Ms. Ruhi Jahanpour and Ms. Minoo Anvari. The latter two were imprisoned with the 10 martyred women of Shiraz.



In a related event, on January 30 and 31, 2024, OPA facilitated the participation of Dr. Ghanea and Dr. Akhavan as speakers at plenary sessions of the annual US Civil Society Summit for International Religious Freedom in Washington, DC, which was attended by approximately 1,200 people. Ms. Jahanpour and Ms. Anvari also spoke in breakout sessions about their

experiences in 1983 and compared them to the situation in Iran today. They were interviewed by the press, along with Dr. Mitra Aliabouzar, a friend of the Faith who, while imprisoned for five

months in 2012, became close friends with former Yaran members Fariba Kamalabadi and Mahvash Sabet. Dr. Aliabouzar described the experience and the current situation in an op-ed [piece](#) published on February 3, 2024, in Higher Ground, a publication of *The Washington Times*. Further coverage of the three panelists was published in [The Washington Times](#) and [Fox Digital](#).

As events unfolded, OPA continued to obtain public statements from the US State Department and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). On June 30, 2023, for example, a statement was made from the State Department's "[Virtual Embassy Tehran](#)," which was retweeted by its Office of International Religious Freedom, and a [statement](#) from USCIRF was given on August 9, 2023, condemning recent arrests and jailings. The State Department issued a [statement](#) on November 13, 2023, noting the targeting of Bahá'í women. USCIRF issued a [statement](#) on November 15, 2023, calling attention to a surge in arrests in Hamadan, Mehrshahr, Yazd, Karaj, Alborz, and Tehran and the continued imprisonment of Fariba Kamalabadi, Mahvash Sabet, and Afif Naimi. OPA obtained [coverage](#) of this surge by the AFP.

### Yemen

In Yemen, OPA was focused, together with the Bahá'í International Community and other national Bahá'í communities' offices of public affairs, on the release of 17 Bahá'ís—12 men and five women—who were detained on May 25, 2023. Houthi authorities detained them at the beginning of the Bahá'í National Convention, which was taking place at a Bahá'í home as a hybrid in-person/online meeting. The collective efforts to free these friends gradually reduced the number of detainees—who have not been charged with any crime—to only five men. Following OPA's requests, statements condemning the arrests were provided by the State Department's [Office](#) of International Religious Freedom and by the US ambassador to Yemen, [Steven Fagin](#), who is located in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Mr. Fagin was also quoted in National, a state-owned publication in the United Arab Emirates. USCIRF issued a [statement condemning the arrests](#), as did USCIRF Vice Chair Abraham Cooper. Particularly helpful was an August 16 statement made at the UN Security Council by the

US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, which followed consultations between OPA and US special envoy for Yemen, Tim Lenderking.

### Qatar

OPA continued to communicate extensively with the US State Department, both in Washington, DC, and in Doha, Qatar, to call attention to and bring an end to the blacklisting of Bahá'ís in Qatar. Bahá'ís in the country are regularly denied residency-visa renewals and the issuance of work permits, and the chairman of the National Spiritual Assembly, Mr. Remy Rouhani, has been sentenced to one month in prison and fined the equivalent of \$13,500. The sentence has not yet been implemented.

### Other Issues

OPA continued its support for the Washington Working Group on the International Criminal Court (WICC) through monthly meetings hosting human rights organizations. A hybrid format allows participation from prominent organizations, law schools, and universities, both locally and internationally.

At the first 2023 meeting, Dr. Beth Van Schaack, ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice, discussed US priorities for advancing global criminal justice, emphasizing support for the ICC within the context of accountability for victims in the Ukraine conflict. The year concluded with a closed-door meeting at OPA, facilitating dialogue between the US observer delegation to the 22nd Assembly of States Parties (ASP) and civil society organizations regarding priorities and engagements at the Assembly.

WICC meetings serve as a platform to build relationships with organizations and government actors to advocate for justice, support victims, and address human rights issues like crimes against humanity and persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. OPA also initiated off-the-record meetings regarding a domestic crimes against humanity (CAH) bill, advocating for explicit mention of religious persecution.

Through WICC, OPA established a partnership with Citizens for Global Solutions (CGS), facilitating discussions on the US role in the global system of

states. This collaboration extends to other initiatives, integrating perspectives from the Narratives of America initiative (see below) in conversations with CGS members nationwide.

### **Gender equality and the advancement of women**

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OPA remains dedicated to clarifying key themes in gender equality discourse while assessing the effectiveness of its engagement in social spaces. The discourse officer focuses on understanding the current reality of each theme, entering existing spaces, building institutional relationships, enhancing collaboration, and engaging with the US government, particularly the Department of State.

Consistency in engagement is crucial for building trust and fostering stronger relationships. For instance, OPA participates in a national coalition addressing gender-based violence, initially aiming to introduce principles of consultation and justice. Through persistent attendance and a humble posture of learning, the officer eventually influenced the coalition to establish a learning subcommittee, promoting critical inquiry into the roots of violence against women.

Addressing the role of men in gender equality is another focal point, intersecting with topics like women, peace, and security; racial and religious dynamics; gender-based violence; gender healing; and strengthening motherhood and fatherhood. OPA actively engages in coalitions such as the Interfaith Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and the Civil Society Working Group for Women, Peace and Security, facilitating the establishment of subcommittees for national learning processes.

OPA's involvement in the GLOCAL Committee within the Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security underscores its commitment to shaping the national discourse and State Department efforts. Additionally, participation in events like the International Day of the Girl and the Fatherhood is Leadership conference allows OPA to deepen relationships

with government officials and contribute to discussions on societal challenges.

OPA's gender equality discourse officer also represents the Bahá'í International Community at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, focusing on uncovering underlying assumptions, identifying learning opportunities, and amplifying voices often marginalized in discourse. These efforts demonstrate OPA's proactive approach to fostering inclusive dialogue and advancing gender equality.

### **Racial justice**

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In addition to its focus on gender issues, OPA remained actively engaged in promoting racial justice and unity, largely through the efforts of its race discourse officers. The officers analyzed national discourse on race by studying content from writers, thinkers, and activists and convening social spaces in Washington, DC, and across the nation. Building relationships with civil society and government colleagues, OPA sought collaboration opportunities and shared its interests and efforts.

Collaboration extended to Bahá'ís nationwide, leveraging their expertise and institutional guidance to inform OPA's initiatives. Staff participated in virtual gatherings hosted by the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Center, exchanging insights with external affairs offices from global Bahá'í communities.

Major themes in race discourse included the role of religion in combating racism, fostering belonging across diverse communities, and ensuring inclusion for marginalized groups like African Americans, Indigenous peoples, and immigrants. OPA engaged in various conferences and summits—including the Greenlining Institute's Just Futures Summit, the Othering and Belonging Institute's conference, and the Parliament of World's Religions—to explore concepts central to the transformation of society.

OPA presented its work at events like the Dialogue on Faith and Race Summit, where participants studied the document "Overcoming Racism: The Role of Religion and the Faith Community." Collaboration with organizations like the Aspen Institute and



Faith in Action facilitated discussions on promoting pluralism and racial justice.

Collaborative efforts also focused on nurturing emerging leaders in racial justice discourse through programs like the Aspen Institute’s Racial Justice and Religion Collective and the Othering and Belonging Institute’s Democracy and Belonging in Cities Learning Community. OPA’s commitment to advancing racial justice was evident in its multifaceted engagement and collaboration with diverse stakeholders.

### **Narratives of America**

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Originating from a recognition of society’s need for inclusive and forward-thinking narratives about the United States, OPA initiated discussions with a variety of participants sharing similar concerns. These discussions evolved into an ongoing project.

The project speaks to current conditions in society, and its relevance is heightened as we approach the upcoming 250th Declaration of Independence anniversary in 2026. Emerging discourse brings attention to historic oppression while acknowledging diverse groups’ resilience and contributions. This raises questions about the interplay of narratives and the potential for a shared narrative of redemption and common vision.

From a Bahá’í perspective, America has an important role in fostering global peace and prosperity. This project is one way of exploring the imperative in the Nine Year Plan of releasing “ever-increasing measures of the society-building power of the Faith.” As conversations unfolded, feedback

from participants spurred hope, with over 150 individuals contributing diverse insights.

The initiative delves into how narratives shape individuals’ lives and influence societal understanding and aspirations. Key questions include how narratives can address past injustices, foster mutual trust, and promote a just and prosperous society. Additionally, the project examines America’s foundational ideals and its potential for justice and shared prosperity beyond Western liberalism.

The project has facilitated valuable connections with individuals and organizations, prompting the launch of online platforms for wider engagement. Collaboration with external entities, such as the Aspen Institute’s Religion in Society Program, underscores the initiative’s broader impact. As the nation approaches significant milestones, OPA aims to contribute to constructive narrative building, aligning with the framework for action and addressing societal needs, including economic justice.

### **Economic justice**

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Recent years have seen a notable evolution in societal discussions concerning economic justice. The Bahá’í principle of eliminating extremes of wealth and poverty not only addresses poverty but also critiques the economic systems enabling excessive wealth accumulation. Once challenging to promote in the United States, these ideas are now part of mainstream discourse, spurred by events like the 2008 economic crisis, Occupy Wall Street, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversations

about addressing inequality tend to be limited by ideological preconceptions.

Within this landscape, OPA views the Narratives of America discourse as an opportunity to delve into deeper societal concerns and to elevate discussions. This perspective offers fresh insights into addressing past injustices and fostering shared prosperity, which are central to economic justice.

Furthermore, attention is given to (re)constructive approaches, such as building new economic institutions and reimagining economic processes. OPA is connecting to these discussions through various spaces like the Just Economy Conference and the Just Futures Summit.

## **Sustainable development and the environment**

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Sustainable development and environmental discourse have a longstanding history of collaboration with Bahá'í partners, emphasizing the necessity for sustained engagement and nuanced dialogue. OPA's environmental discourse officer oversees involvement in various nationally significant climate and environmental forums, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, SCORAI's spirituality and consumption working group, and ecoAmerica's Joint Executive Leadership Committee. Additionally, OPA actively participates in events like the SCORAI conference, the interfaith Talanoa Dialogue, and COP28, facilitating dialogue and sharing Bahá'í insights.

Content creation by OPA aligns with major climate and environmental events, aiming to foster ongoing discourse. Recent content explores concepts like overcoming self-interest and avoiding sloganism, while contributing to the evolving conversation.

In examining society's relationship with the environment, sustainability, and climate change, a shift has been observed of moving toward recognizing systemic change beyond policy adjustments. This includes addressing issues like economic extraction and racism. Increased creativity and willingness to discuss individual versus societal transformation are noted, with a focus on facilitating change at both levels.

This trend echoes across discourse areas, evident in OPA's involvement in the United Nations, where intersections of gender equality, racism, human rights, and sustainable development are central. The ongoing discourse emphasizes the importance of sustained engagement and nuanced dialogue to address complex societal challenges.

## **United Nations**

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The National Spiritual Assembly's principal representative to the United Nations, who leads the United Nations Office of the US Office of Public Affairs (USUN), served on the Parliament of the World's Religions (PoWR) board and helped with the Bahá'í community's participation at the [convening of 7,000 participants](#) held in Chicago on August 14-18. Over 100 Bahá'ís participated, including a member of the National Spiritual Assembly and a Continental Counselor, in a standing-room-only event organized by the Bahá'í International Community entitled, "Humanity's Transition from Adolescence to Maturity: Recognizing our Common Humanity and Advancing Human Rights." The Bahá'í community hosted the largest event associated with the convening—an evening reception at the House of Worship where over 200 participants socialized and attended a devotional gathering. Approximately 20 side events took place with Bahá'í speakers or themes and performers contributing to the convening. The National Spiritual Assembly hosted a booth focused on children and youth. A member of the Bahá'í International Community was a plenary speaker.

The USUN representative attended the [second session](#) of the Permanent Forum for People of African Descent at the United Nations headquarters in New York, which brought together activists and government delegations who shared opinions about issues related to the status of African descendants. The USUN representative is still determining how to best work with the US government's Permanent Forum representatives.

The USUN representative attended the third edition of the [UNESCO Global Forum against Racism and Discrimination – Race to the Top: Putting Racial Equity and Justice at the Forefront of Development Agendas](#). UNESCO—the United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—promotes the belief that the Global Forum has become a catalytic moment in the international agenda to recognize the facts, gather evidence, and provide effective solutions. It was borne out of the [global call against racism](#) that UNESCO member states adopted in 2020. Many government and civil society speakers shared challenges and solutions.

The USUN youth representative attended two leadership initiatives. The first was [A Call to Men](#) (ACM) Leadership Academy, with 24 other professionals and advocacy leaders. The workshop focused on sharing ACM’s framework and methodology, which it has learned from 20 years of challenging work with men learning to be gender equality advocates. The second was the Shiv Shakti Women’s Leadership retreat, hosted by a United Nations office faith-based collaborator. Participants reflected on the feminine attributes missing or undervalued in humanity’s search for its highest calling. Most attendees were social advocates from faith-based backgrounds and the diverse expressions were a valuable contribution to their conceptions of reality. The youth representative was the moderator of the annual Spirit of the United Nations Awards, hosted by the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values, and Global Concerns.

## Media relations

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Under the direction of its media discourse officer, OPA produced and distributed press releases highlighting the meetings and events it organized in several areas, and it collaborated with individuals and reporters to publish articles about the situation of the Bahá’ís in Iran, Yemen, and Qatar. Some 15 press releases were issued concerning the Bahá’ís in Iran and Yemen.

Opinion articles were written and published about the friends in Iran in publications and outlets such as *The Washington Times*. Owing to OPA’s outreach, articles were published on these issues by Agence-France Presse, *The Washington Times*, Iran International TV, Fox Digital, and others. OPA coordinated the

events, stories, and other media content for the #OurStoryisOne Campaign, in defense of the Bahá’ís in Iran, with the Bahá’í International Community.

## Discourse work: Conferences, talks, and travel

OPA hired a new media officer who began the process of engaging the role of media in society discourse by attending conferences and building relationships with journalists and media professionals. Though the work has been ongoing, questions familiar to all working to advance the goals of the Nine Year Plan have arisen around how to transition from one person in a role to the next, ensuring the continuity of a systematic effort.

## Social media

OPA continued to utilize Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to share news about the situations of the Bahá’ís in Iran and Yemen, as well as articles and information about OPA’s other areas of discourse. OPA created new social media accounts and a webpage for its new project, Narratives of America.

## Correspondence with individual Bahá’ís and Bahá’í institutions

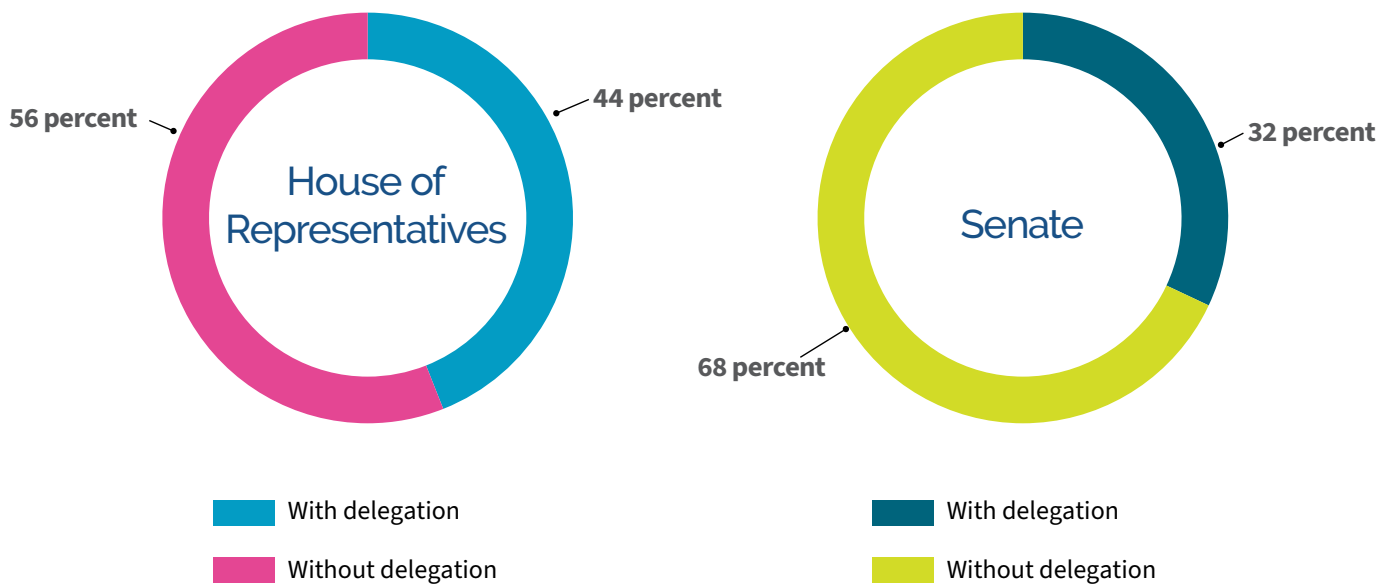
OPA regularly corresponded with Bahá’ís who had media-related inquiries and, in collaboration with the Office of Communications, worked with Local Spiritual Assemblies and their public information officers to help coordinate local media efforts.

This line of action aligns closely with the work of the communications officer, as both the media officer and the communications officer work to build capacity at the local level to engage in public affairs work.

## Communications

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OPA played a pivotal role in providing guidance and information to the US Bahá’í Community and the public on engagement in public affairs, discourse areas, and human rights, particularly regarding



the defense of Bahá'ís facing persecution in Iran and other nations. Correspondence extended to Bahá'í institutions, government agencies, national organizations, and influential figures.

The communications officer spearheaded the congressional outreach initiative, ensuring regular contact between Bahá'ís and members of Congress. Specific Local Spiritual Assemblies are tasked with appointing delegations to engage with Congress on behalf of the Bahá'í Faith. Currently, delegations have been appointed for 44 percent of House members and 32 percent of senators.

Efforts to increase engagement include semiannual reflection seminars for delegation leaders and Assemblies to better understand their roles, reflect on experience, and network with each other. Training materials and software to aid delegations are in development for building relationships with Congress, advocating for Bahá'í rights in Iran, and promoting Bahá'í perspectives on racial justice. Congressional resolutions condemning Iranian persecution of Bahá'ís have garnered significant

support, and efforts are ongoing to secure further cosponsors for upcoming legislation, as well as to encourage other actions members of Congress can take. Delegations also introduce Bahá'í ideas on racial justice to members of Congress, fostering discourse on relevant societal issues.

In these ways, the OPA communications team is contributing to learning across the office, both in the areas of defense and discourse. Learning continues regarding how to measure the impact of OPA's efforts toward releasing the society-building power of the Faith.

### Personnel and administration

In September 2023, OPA hired two new staff members: Rachel Wolfe, as the media relations officer, replacing James Samimi-Farr, and Amalia Giebitz, as the communications officer, replacing Debra Taylor, who retired after nearly 15 years with OPA. D. Alexander Scott joined OPA in August 2023 as the OPA Fellow.

# Coordination of ISGP seminars

The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) is a nonprofit research and educational organization. At the heart of the Institute's work is an exploration of how science and religion, conceived of as two complementary systems of knowledge and practice, can be drawn on to achieve positive and enduring change for the betterment of the world. In the context of its mission to create spaces in which individuals and groups concerned with social transformation can come together to explore the elements of a framework for thought and action that is inspired by both science and religion, ISGP collaborates with national Bahá'í communities to offer seminars for university students, university graduates, and young professionals.

## Seminars for undergraduate students

The purpose of these seminars is to raise the consciousness of youth about the importance of engaging in action and discourse directed toward social change; to develop their capacity to reflect, to analyze, and to learn from action; to explore elements of a conceptual framework for contributing to the advancement of civilization; to provide them with tools to understand and analyze the culture in which they are immersed as well as the content of the university courses they are studying; to help them assume ownership of

their education; and to assist them in their efforts to acquire the kind of knowledge that will enable them to live fruitful, productive, and meaningful lives. These seminars consist of a four-year program of annual, 10-day seminars for Bahá'í undergraduate students.

In 2010, with the support of the National Spiritual Assembly, seminars were offered for the first time in the United States. Eighty youths attended these initial offerings, which were held at Green Acre and Bosch Bahá'í Schools. By 2013 it became clear that a second seminar was needed in California, and one was added in Florida, which gave youth in the South greater access to the program. The experience in Florida brought into focus the opportunity for a similar arrangement in the Four Corners region in 2014, again extending the program's reach to a population that had been less represented at the offerings held at the national schools. During these years, attention was given to the quality of the program, and efforts were made to build capacity in coordinators and facilitators; particularly in terms of fostering a joyful, disciplined, and transformative environment. By 2019, nearly 1,000 youths had participated in the first year of the seminars. To reach an even greater proportion of the eligible Bahá'í youth, the program will need to raise the number of annual offerings and to further decentralize the locations in which the seminars are held each year.

To fulfill the National Assembly's desire to make the seminars increasingly accessible to young Bahá'ís across the country, additional resources were provided in 2023 to establish a national office to support the program's rapid expansion and development. Between 2014 and 2021, the number of annual seminars offered remained at five until the addition of a seminar in the South Central region in 2022. In 2023 alone, two more







seminars were added—one in Oregon and another in Maine. A total of 314 youths participated in undergraduate seminars in 2023, representing an increase of nearly 100 participants compared to the previous year. The decentralization of places seminars are being held is leading to stronger collaboration between the teams that coordinate seminars and institutions working at regional and subregional levels. Plans to establish an additional three annual seminars in 2024 are already underway. This will bring the total annual offerings to 11 by the start of 2025. It also means that eight of the country’s 13 regions will be directly served by at least one seminar.

**Participants described their experiences in the following ways:**

- ...the seminar is an opportunity to reflect deeply on the veils that keep us from seeing reality, learn about the abounding opportunities to initiate material and spiritual progress in our communities, and join a global discourse on how to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to our present world and its issues.
- Over the course of the seminar I began to more deeply understand the educational approaches in society, social forces acting on me, and my own power to transform myself and my community....I feel that my spiritual vision, motivation, and hope increased steadily over the course of the seminar.



**Seminars for university graduates and young professionals**

In addition to the program for undergraduate students, ISGP also offers a program for university graduates and other young adults in the early stages of their careers or professions. The graduate seminar assists individuals to develop the capacity to examine and analyze society and the forces acting upon it and to introduce relevant aspects of the Bahá’í teachings both in their academic and professional fields and in other social spaces in which they are present. This year 68 people from across North America attended the graduate seminar at Louhelen Bahá’í School.

## Number of ISGP seminar units by venue

Seminar Unit	2023 Dates	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Total
Green Acre, established 2010	August 3 to 13	40	47	4	8	99
Four Corners, established 2014	August 2 to 12	14	6	-	5	25
Florida, established 2013	May 26 to June 5	10	10	-	-	20
Southern California, established 2013	June 19 to 29	15	18	-	-	33
South Central, established 2022	July 31 to August 10	22	16	-	-	38
Pacific Northwest, established 2023	July 30 to August 9	15	-	-	-	15
Northeast, established 2023	June 25 to July 5	21	-	-	-	21
Northern California, established 2010	December 17 to 27	24	27	7	5	63
<b>Total</b>		<b>161</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>314</b>



# Persian Public Information Office with Persian Bahá'í Media Service

## Office objectives

The Persian Public Information Office (PPIO) strives to provide the general public with information about the Bahá'í Faith, meet the needs of the Bahá'í National Center, and serve Persian-speaking members of the United States Bahá'í community. PPIO is made up of three departments that collaboratively provide multimedia information about the Bahá'í Faith to the Iranian public—the Persian Bahá'í Media Service, the Persian Reviewing Panel, and the Persian Office at the Bahá'í National Center (BNC).

## Persian Office

In 2023, the Persian Office regularly prepared the Persian pages of *The American Bahá'í* magazine; and translated Feast letters and other formal and informative letters from and to individual Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í community. The Office also consults with the National Spiritual Assembly and its subsidiary offices on matters related to the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. Moreover, the Office serves the needs of Iranian Bahá'ís in the United States, such as by supporting racial justice courses, helping communities with their studies of the Nine Year Plan, providing documentation for students from the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, certifying marriages, and performing various other administrative tasks. The Office—in collaboration with Bahá'í International Community (BIC) offices in New York, Switzerland, Brussels, and other locations—provides information to the Persian media concerning the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.

## Persian Reviewing Panel

In 2023, the Persian Reviewing Panel received new manuscripts and revisions of previously submitted work. Submissions ranged in scope from a dozen to several hundred pages and included studies of the Bábí and Bahá'í Writings, a volume of articles commemorating the centenary of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, texts treating aspects of the Faith's history, translations of Bahá'í books published in English,



memoirs, *istidláliyih*s (works adducing proofs of the Faith based on scriptures of past religions), a compilation of poetry, and other literature. In its work, the Panel has been greatly assisted by a group of resource persons, who generously share their time and expertise.

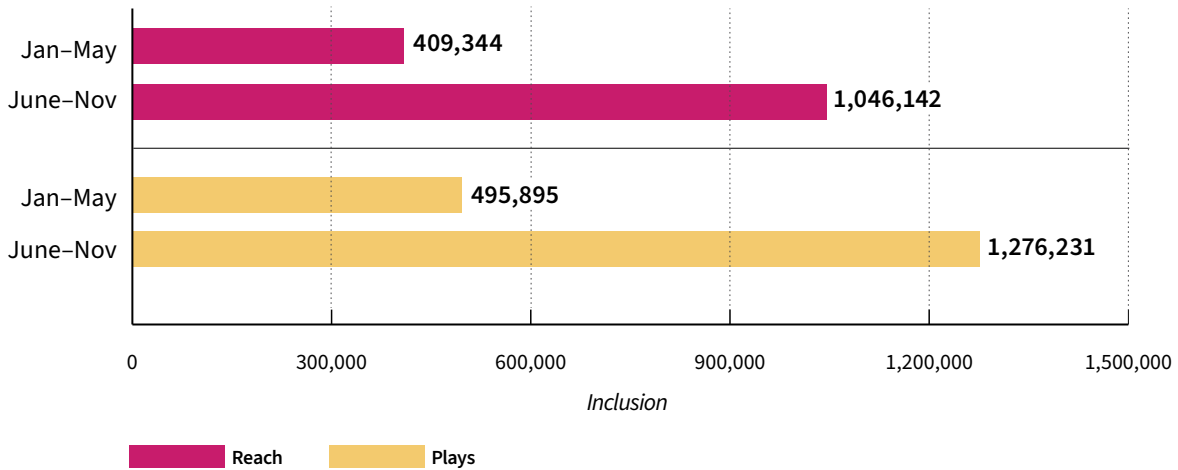
## Persian Bahá'í Media Service

Persian Bahá'í Media Service (PersianBMS) creates and distributes media content that supports the efforts of Bahá'ís in Iran to advance the goals of the Nine Year Plan. PersianBMS is a trusted source among Iranians and Farsi speakers for factual information about the Bahá'í Faith and the life of Iran's Bahá'í community. Its target audience is the wider community in Iran.

In 2022, an advisory board was formed to oversee PersianBMS's development and help it learn to read the realities and needs of the Iranian people so it could produce programs beneficial to Iran's social, cultural, and economic development. PersianBMS produces and broadcasts a 45-minute daily radio program, *Payam-e Doost*; two one-hour weekly television programs; and 24-hour streaming audio available on two different satellites to Europe and the Middle East. Programs are also available via a free smartphone application, a webpage

# Instagram metrics: comparison of organic data

January – November 2023



An average increase of 140% across key metrics during the second half of the year

(persianbahaimedia.org), Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, Podcast, and SoundCloud.

In 2023, a systematic effort was made to incorporate the reading of reality—in light of guidance from the Universal House of Justice—a regular practice in PersianBMS meetings. PersianBMS is continuously learning to refine this capacity, advance its agility, and keep up with changing circumstances in Iran and around the world.

In April 2023, a systematic approach was adopted, in close collaboration with the Bahá’í World News Service and the BIC, to amplify news articles and certain BIC messages directed to the Iranian people. This included through podcasts, videos, social media content, and weekly TV satellite and radio programs. A new page featuring the related content was created on the PersianBMS website. Also, special focus was given to the “Our Story is One” campaign, which commemorated the 40th anniversary of the execution of 10 Bahá’í women in Iran.

One PersianBMS objective remains learning how to introduce Bahá’ís as active members of society engaged in social and moral transformation. To achieve this, related media content was created and disseminated on all PersianBMS platforms.

For example, a visual series based on *The Bahá’ís*, a magazine published by the Bahá’í World Center, was broadcast. In another example, the TV series *For the Future* showcases Bahá’ís’ community-building efforts and highlights Bahá’í children’s classes, junior youth spiritual empowerment groups, and devotional gatherings and their collective impact on individuals and families. Another TV series is based on the activities of the Bahá’í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, which is being produced in collaboration with the Chair.

As seen in the chart above, the PersianBMS Instagram channel exhibited tremendous growth from January–November 2023. A striking 140-percent increase in key performance indicators illustrates a significant boost in user engagement and content reach. Specifically, the “Reach” metric grew from 409,344 in the period from January to May, to 1,046,142 from June to November. Similarly, “Plays” surged from 495,895 to 1,276,231 in the same timeframes. These figures are indicative of the channel’s successful content-creation and audience-interaction strategies, leading to a more prominent presence and increased influence on the platform.

*Office of the Treasurer*



# Fund Development

The Office of the Treasurer continues to align its efforts with the goals of the Nine Year Plan. Focusing on the release of “the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures,” the current Plan is unlike any the Bahá’í world has ever seen. The Universal House of Justice has summoned all believers to arise in building upon “the knowledge, insights, and skills” gained through previous Plans to propel the Bahá’í community to new heights and be a force of positive change for the greater society. Equipped with an “expansive view”, as indicated by the Supreme Body, Bahá’ís are called upon to develop the capacity to visualize and implement the vital, transformative, and lasting impact of their activities and collaborations on greater society.

The Faith’s progress and development during the 30-year ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Center of the Covenant, offers an impeccable example. His gaze, fixed on the distant future, the beloved Master labored tirelessly on numerous fronts to establish the foundations of the Kingdom of God on earth. This is the perspective the Office of the Treasurer seeks in its communications even as it engages with the Bahá’í community in realizing the vision of the Master for the future of humanity.

For individual believers, the community, and the Faith’s institutions, this Nine Year Plan calls for increased efforts in establishing communities of distinction as examples to all who hope to create a unified world society founded on divine love, “cooperation and mutual assistance.” For the Office of the Treasurer, this means the introduction of a new set of ideas and processes for engaging with believers, as well as developing capacity to serve as a resource to the community.

This year, in collaboration with focus groups representing various localities, teams within the Office developed a new version of the website. As an ongoing collaborative project, the website incorporates numerous resources available to the community, resulting in improved fund education

and financial systems management at the local level. The team’s hope is that the new website will be a useful tool for Bahá’ís—one that they will be able to easily and efficiently navigate.

Other tools to highlight are the texting program and the *Bahá’í Fund Bulletin*. During the past year the texting program saw an increase in use by local treasurers and served as an additional resource for communication offering convenient, fast, and simple access to the Office of the Treasurer. *Bahá’í Fund Bulletin*, which is distributed monthly for every Feast, was revised to provide regular updates related to the Fund and to serve as an additional platform for communications and special news from the Office to individuals and local communities.

Throughout the last several months, with a focus on Fund education, members of the Office have visited three regions to collaborate with host assemblies in offering educational workshops in their areas. The participants, including the youth, were inspired, appreciative, receptive, and shared their views. These workshops help believers more fully appreciate their spiritual privilege and responsibility while deepening their understanding of the institution of the Fund, connecting their hearts, and increasing universal participation.

Another way of connecting to the hearts of the friends was by establishing a loving relationship with local treasurers through a phone call campaign that started in March 2023 and resumed in February 2024. Calls were made to Local Assembly treasurers, resulting in loving encouragement of the community’s efforts and support of the National Fund through both individual and community fundraisers. These one-on-one connections create space to explore options for Fund education, to build fellowship and collaboration with the treasurers, and to reflect on their needs.

The mission of the Plan also calls for the establishment of uniquely Bahá’í financial systems, characterized by “rectitude of conduct and such qualities as justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty,

fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness.” To this end, in August 2023, the Office successfully launched the new Online Audit System (OAS), enabling every Local Spiritual Assembly to prepare, conduct, and submit annual audit reports online. To date, hundreds of Local Spiritual Assemblies have submitted an audit using this new system.

### Current status of the Fund

The height of commitment demonstrated by the American believers despite the uncertainties and global tribulations of our times continues to be a source of inspiration and confirmation. At the outset of the current Plan, the Universal House of Justice called our attention to the fact that it “will require a further rise in the capacity of the individual believer, the local community, and the institutions of the Faith.” An aspect of this challenge is unfolding now in the American Bahá’í Community. Though our activities are expanding during a period of political, social, and economic turbulence, followers of Bahá’u’lláh are arising with steadfast generosity as a unified community to meet the goal of the Bahá’í National Fund.

As of March 1 of this fiscal year, the cumulative unrestricted contributions to the Fund, including those received through bequests and to the Regional Bahá’í Councils, represented about a 13-percent growth over the same period the previous year. Since November 2023, unrestricted contributions to the National Fund have continued to be considerably higher as compared to the same months in the previous fiscal year.

The increase in the many activities of the Faith and the needs of the Nine Year Plan contributed to the increase in the overall operating expenses of the Bahá’í National Organization, creating a gap of \$2.8 million from its revenue stream at the end of February 2024.

The Office of the Treasurer also notes with joy that the generosity of American Bahá’ís is evident in their support of various other Funds of the Faith. For example, as of March 1, 2024, contributions at the national level toward the Persian Bahá’í Media Services Fund have totaled \$836,000. At the international level, a cumulative total of \$36 million has been contributed to the Shrine of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

### Planned giving

In the past year, planned giving has remained a cornerstone of support for Bahá’ís, providing them with meaningful avenues to contribute to the Funds of the Faith. This has been shared through platforms such as *The American Bahá’í*, the *Bahá’í Fund Bulletin*, text messages, and virtual and in-person presentations. Through a range of instruments offered by the program, including gifts of appreciated securities, donor advised funds, and IRA charitable rollovers, the community has demonstrated its shared mission of supporting the life-blood of the Faith.

One standout highlight has been the remarkable surge in participation in the charitable gift annuity program, which witnessed an astounding 282 percent increase compared to the previous year. This underscores the enduring appeal of this option among believers, offering both an opportunity to contribute to the Faith and ensure a lifetime income stream for participants.



National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

## Combined statements of financial position

10 months ended February 29, 2024, and fiscal year ended April 30, 2023

Assets	National Bahá'í Fund	Publishing Trust	Combined total	
			February 2024 unaudited	April 2023 audited
<b>Current assets</b>				
Cash and investments	\$ 2,523,527	\$ 83,101	\$ 2,606,628	\$ 8,860,340
Due (to)/from other Funds	11,545,178	(11,545,178)	-	-
Investments	41,211,911	-	41,211,911	24,000,000
Accounts and notes receivable	828,130	18,259	846,389	299,880
Inventories	90,182	398,693	488,875	500,450
Prepaid expenses	699,182	14,177	713,359	934,451
<b>Total current assets</b>	<b>\$ 56,898,110</b>	<b>\$ (11,030,949)</b>	<b>\$ 45,867,162</b>	<b>\$ 34,595,121</b>
Property and equipment net of accumulated depreciation	\$ 51,754,692	-	\$ 51,754,692	\$ 50,108,023
Investments	48,379,200	-	48,379,200	57,002,063
Right-of-use assets - leases	4,030,443	-	4,030,443	4,030,444
Notes receivable, net	-	-	0	148,783
Other assets	748,806	-	748,806	439,684
Receivable under charitable trusts	2,679,717	-	2,679,717	2,512,457
<b>Total assets</b>	<b>\$ 164,490,969</b>	<b>\$ (11,030,949)</b>	<b>\$ 153,460,020</b>	<b>\$ 148,836,575</b>
<b>Liabilities and net assets</b>				
<b>Liabilities</b>				
<b>Current liabilities</b>				
Short-term debt	\$ 24,914,871	-	\$ 24,914,871	\$ 25,673,195
Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	2,356,793	15,025	2,371,819	4,064,185
Amounts payable to International Funds	1,012,508	-	1,012,508	663,478
Deferred revenues	-	10,344	10,344	8,850
Gift annuities, current portion	852,418	-	852,418	640,000
Current portion of operating lease liabilities	1,107,745	-	1,107,745	1,107,745
<b>Total current liabilities</b>	<b>\$ 30,244,335</b>	<b>\$25,370</b>	<b>\$ 30,269,705</b>	<b>\$ 32,157,453</b>
<b>Long-term liabilities</b>				
Pension liabilities	\$ 5,314,015	-	\$ 5,314,015	\$ 6,214,015
Gift annuities, net of current portion	7,121,556	-	7,121,556	5,771,574
Security deposits	63,221	-	63,221	30,246
Operating lease liabilities, net of current portion	2,907,513	-	2,907,513	2,907,512
<b>Total liabilities</b>	<b>\$ 45,650,640</b>	<b>\$25,370</b>	<b>\$ 45,676,009</b>	<b>\$ 47,080,800</b>
<b>Net assets</b>				
<b>Without donor restrictions</b>				
Undesignated	\$ 44,011,961	\$ (11,056,318)	\$ 32,955,643	\$ 37,954,989
Designated by the Board for Operating Reserve	34,085,586	-	34,085,586	32,117,278
Designated by the Board for Specific Projects	7,629,415	-	7,629,415	-
Designated by the Board for Endowment Fund	4,937,150	-	4,937,150	4,374,341
<b>Total without donor restrictions</b>	<b>\$ 90,664,112</b>	<b>\$ (11,056,318)</b>	<b>\$ 79,607,794</b>	<b>\$ 74,446,608</b>
<b>With donor restrictions</b>				
Purpose restrictions	\$ 24,259,951	-	\$ 24,259,951	\$ 24,769,302
Perpetual in nature	3,916,266	-	3,916,266	2,539,865
<b>Total with donor restrictions</b>	<b>\$ 28,176,217</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>\$ 28,176,217</b>	<b>\$ 27,309,167</b>
<b>Total net assets</b>	<b>\$ 118,840,329</b>	<b>\$ (11,056,318)</b>	<b>\$ 107,784,011</b>	<b>\$ 101,755,775</b>
<b>Total liabilities and net assets</b>	<b>\$ 164,490,969</b>	<b>\$ (11,030,948)</b>	<b>\$ 153,460,020</b>	<b>\$ 148,836,575</b>



National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

## Combined statements of activities

10 months ended February 29, 2024, and fiscal year ended April 30, 2023

	<b>Combined total</b>			
	Without donor restrictions	With donor restrictions	February 2024 unaudited	April 2023 audited
<b>Changes in net assets</b>				
<b>Revenues</b>				
Contributions	\$ 28,416,210	\$ 1,921,189	\$ 30,337,398	\$ 43,192,445
Estate bequests	5,190,677	-	5,190,677	4,119,394
Investment income	2,454,239	-	2,454,239	2,312,180
Bahá'í schools tuition	630,244	-	630,244	474,569
Sale of books and special materials	662,959	-	662,959	719,607
Other income	875,862	-	875,862	425,215
Unrealized gain (loss) on investments	6,657,892	-	6,657,892	(1,572,781)
Unrealized gain (loss) on perpetual trust	1,376,401	(1,376,401)	0	115,000
<b>Total revenues</b>	<b>\$ 46,264,484</b>	<b>\$ 544,788</b>	<b>\$ 46,809,271</b>	<b>\$ 49,785,629</b>
<b>Expenses</b>				
Education and teaching activities	\$ 18,037,159	-	\$ 18,037,159	\$ 20,924,325
Community services provided by the National Spiritual Assembly	5,730,182	-	5,730,182	6,824,646
Publishing and communications	5,693,263	-	5,693,263	7,222,918
Contributions to related and other organizations	2,000,000	-	2,000,000	1,725,626
General management and administration	2,223,921	-	2,223,921	3,398,239
Properties operations and maintenance	4,301,627	-	4,301,627	4,795,522
Information technology	3,160,521	-	3,160,521	2,925,216
<b>Total expenses</b>	<b>\$ 41,146,672</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>\$ 41,146,672</b>	<b>\$ 47,816,491</b>
<b>Changes in net assets before pension adjustment</b>	<b>\$ 5,117,811</b>	<b>\$ (430,224)</b>	<b>\$ 5,662,599</b>	<b>\$ 1,969,138</b>
<b>Non-operating</b>				
Net periodic pension benefit cost (estimated)	\$ 170,426	-	\$ 170,426	\$ 549,497
Pension changes other than net periodic benefit cost (estimated)	(1,386,204)	-	(1,386,204)	(4,393,190)
	\$ (1,215,778)	\$ -	\$ (1,215,778)	\$ (3,843,693)
<b>Increase/(decrease) in net assets</b>	<b>\$ 6,333,589</b>	<b>\$ (430,224)</b>	<b>\$ 5,903,365</b>	<b>\$ 5,812,831</b>
<b>Net assets, beginning of year</b>	<b>\$ 112,506,739</b>	<b>\$ (10,626,094)</b>	<b>\$ 101,880,645</b>	<b>\$ 95,942,944</b>
<b>Net assets, end of year</b>	<b>\$ 118,840,328</b>	<b>\$ (11,056,318)</b>	<b>\$ 107,784,010</b>	<b>\$ 101,755,775</b>

# Notes to financial statements

February 29, 2024, and April 30, 2023

## Operations and accounting policies

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States (the Assembly) was established in 1927 as a voluntary trust and subsequently incorporated in October 1994 as an Illinois not-for-profit corporation to administer, teach, and further the Bahá'í Faith in the United States.

The accounts of the Assembly are maintained on the accrual basis. The financial statements of the Assembly include the assets, liabilities, net assets (deficits), and financial activities of the National Bahá'í Fund and the Bahá'í Publishing Trust.

The principal accounting policies used by the Assembly are as follows:

### Contributions

All contributions from members of the Faith, unless specifically restricted by the donor, are considered to be available for unrestricted use and are recorded as received. Items received of artistic or religious significance for which no value can be readily determined and which are not anticipated to be sold are recorded at nominal value. Contributions also include bequests which are recorded as received.

Contributions from nonmembers may not be used to support the Faith and, accordingly, such amounts received are distributed for other humanitarian causes. Contributions restricted by the donor for particular programs and projects, or for property and equipment acquisitions, are earned and reported as revenues when the Assembly has incurred expenses for the purpose specified by the donor. Such amounts received, but not yet earned, are reported as restricted deferred amounts.

### Tax-exempt status

The US Treasury Department has held that the National Spiritual Assembly and all subordinate Local Spiritual Assemblies are exempt from Federal income tax as organizations described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (IRC) of 1986. Accordingly, contributions made to the National Spiritual Assembly and all of its subordinate Local Spiritual Assemblies are deductible by the donors for Federal income tax purposes as provided by IRC Section 170.

Bequests, legacies, devises, transfers, or gifts to the National Spiritual Assembly or its subordinate Local Assemblies are deductible for Federal estate

and gift tax purposes as provided by IRC Sections 2055, 2106, and 2522.

### Inventories

Inventories of books and special materials are recorded at the lower of cost, using the average cost method, or market.

### Investments

Investments are recorded at market value.

### Operating Leases

On May, 1 2022 the National Assembly adopted the new ASC 842, an accounting standard that requires all leases longer than 12 months to be reflected on the organization's balance sheet as right of use (ROU) assets and lease liability. Lease assets represent the Assembly's right to use an underlying asset for the lease term and lease liabilities represent the Assembly's obligation to make lease payments arising from the lease.

### Property and equipment

Property and equipment are stated at cost. The Assembly computes depreciation of fixed assets over their estimated useful lives using the straight line method. The estimated lives used in computing depreciation are as follows:

Asset description	Asset life
Furniture/Equipment	3–5 years
Buildings/Improvements	5–40 years
Baha'i House of Worship	75 years

### Bosch Bahá'í School

The Bosch school is in the process of being rebuilt.

### Pension Plan

Effective October 1, 2022, the National Spiritual Assembly amended the defined benefit plan. The amendment freezes all benefits accruals and service credits for all employees in the plan and those that qualified as of October 1, 2022.

*Community Building*

# 07



# Desk for the Development of Administrative Systems

The Desk for the Development of Administrative Systems' primary objective is to assist the National Spiritual Assembly to support and follow the development of administrative and financial systems at the regional level. The Desk primarily interacts with Regional Bahá'í Councils but lends support to the development of systems at the national level when requested. It also systematizes knowledge and prepares reports for the National Assembly. As it carries out its work, the Desk consults regularly with the Desk for the Development of Properties, the Learning Desk, and the Social Action Desk.

Over the past year, the Desk for the Development of Administrative Systems supported a number of Regional Councils as they strengthened a process of learning related to the region's financial system or the region's system to facilitate the flow of guidance and information. This involved offering the Councils consultative support as they engaged in study, consultation, and planning; implementation of those plans; and then reflection.

One way in which Regional Councils have become familiar with the body of knowledge related to administrative or financial systems has been to engage in study of relevant documents produced by the Office for the Development of Administrative Systems at the Bahá'í World Center in seminars facilitated by the Desk. During the past year, five Regional Councils participated in seminars for

the flow of guidance and information, and two participated in seminars for the financial system.

After the seminars, the Councils were supported by the Desk to identify and consult about needs related to growth and prepare strategic plans for development of the relevant administrative or financial systems. During this process, the Desk shared relevant guidance and experience with the Regional Councils and offered consultative support.

As Councils began to implement their plans, new questions and challenges emerged, demanding higher levels of reflection, consultation, planning, and execution. The Desk is working with Regional Councils to strengthen analysis of their experiences and to ensure that they establish adequate spaces for reflection.

As of Riḍván 2024, seven Regional Councils are engaged in strengthening the system to facilitate the flow of guidance and information, and four are implementing plans to strengthen the financial systems in their regions. It is anticipated that over the coming year, all Regional Councils in the United States will be connected to the body of knowledge related to the flow of guidance and information and the operation of a regional secretariat.



# Desk for the Development of Properties

The Desk for the Development of Properties pursues two primary objectives: to assist the National Spiritual Assembly to nurture and follow the development and implementation of regional property plans in response to the needs of growth, and to offer the friends in the regions support and gather learning as they acquire properties-related capacities. In this work, the Desk closely collaborates with the Desk for the Development of Administrative Systems, as well as the Learning Desk and the Social Action Desk.

## Supporting the development of regional capacities

The Desk is part of a systematic learning process launched by the National Assembly to nurture the strengthening of regional capacities, using the global learning approach the Universal House of Justice has developed through its Office for the Development of Administrative Systems (ODAS). The process supports “raising capacity for administration at all levels” as well as “strengthening the capacity of Councils to facilitate a process of learning in their regions,” as called for in the December 30, 2021, and March 20, 2023, messages from the Universal House of Justice.

Four regions are now engaged in a formal learning process regarding the development and maintenance of properties. The process begins with a seminar for intensive study of the body of knowledge compiled by ODAS, based on guidance and global experience. Participants in the seminars include representatives from the Institution of the Learned, members of Regional Bahá’í Councils and training institute boards, friends from leading clusters and neighborhoods, and a range of other collaborators. Each region then develops and implements properties plans based on the body of knowledge and analysis from reading the reality of

its growth. A shared understanding has emerged that the need for Bahá’í properties arises organically from the growth of the Cause—particularly when the institute process advances in terms of developing human resources and sustaining and intensifying the movement of a population.

The Atlantic and California regions, the first two in the learning process, prepared initial five-year properties plans in 2022. The regions have put in place administrative arrangements to assist in the implementation of their plans. In conjunction with the annual budgeting process, both regions have now completed two annual cycles of reflection,



refining and updating their properties plans and incorporating their properties needs into their annual regional budgets. Over the past year, both regions gained further experience at the frontiers of growth with their grassroots nuclei reading their evolving reality and, working with regional support, either securing new facilities or expanding existing ones.

Two more regions, the Four Corners and Southeastern States, have joined the learning process, participating in the most recent development-of-properties seminar held at the



Bahá'í House of Worship in September 2023. The Regional Councils of both regions subsequently wrote and approved five-year properties plans, which have been shared with the National Assembly.

As they move forward in the learning process, the Regional Councils share common areas of focus:

- implementing properties plans in the context of available resources
- developing regional maintenance and protection plans
- creating and encouraging study and dissemination spaces to connect a wider set of friends to guidance and experience, raising consciousness and understanding of the vision of the development of properties in relation to growth
- ensuring that key information on all regional properties is readily accessible in a shared database, which among other things can assist in the exploration of creative ways to utilize existing properties in support of growth
- strengthening and nurturing processes of learning at all levels

In the coming year additional regions are expected to join in the formal learning process.

### Questions in the learning process

Several questions are emerging from the process:

- How are facility needs being identified and addressed in the most advanced reservoir clusters? This is particularly relevant in the context of accelerating advancements at the frontiers of growth and enhancing reservoirs' capacity to disseminate learning and experience.

- What impacts are facilities having on the community-building process with regards to, for example,
  - ▷ the flow of people into the institute process?
  - ▷ the flow of people through the institute process?
  - ▷ the flow of people into the field of service?
  - ▷ engagement with families?
- How are grassroots nuclei, supported by a regional process, developing capacity to read their evolving reality and articulate their dynamic institute facility needs? For example, are nuclei developing capacity to gauge whether leasing or acquiring a physical space is likely to propel growth? Conversely, will they avoid getting bogged down with properties if the necessary conditions and human resources to acquire, manage, and maintain them do not yet exist?
- How is the learning process around properties being integrated into the region's overall learning about growth? For example, what is being learned about properties in relation to widening participation—particularly among grassroots nuclei and agencies at the frontiers of growth—and encouraging coherence across lines of action?
- What institutional capacities and qualities are needed to support the regional administrative arrangements being implemented to carry out properties plans?
- What institutional relationships best foster facility maintenance and development?

# Junior Youth Program Learning Sites

A global network of sites meant to generate and disseminate learning about the junior youth spiritual empowerment program is overseen by the Bahá'í International Development Organization (BIDO) of the Bahá'í World Center. The four learning sites in the United States are: the Triangle cluster in the Atlantic Region, the Dallas cluster in the South Central Region, the San Diego cluster in the California Region, and the East Valley cluster in the Four Corners Region.

Each region pursued a similar path of inquiry, which is centered on 1) the spirit of collaboration and common enterprise between the institute and learning site 2) efforts to expand the base of ownership around the junior youth spiritual empowerment program 3) institutional collaborations and 4) considerations for centers of intense activity. Here is a summary of how the inquiry and learning are expressed in each cluster:

## **Triangle cluster, Atlantic Region**

Currently, four out of the five institute coordinators serving the agencies of the Triangle cluster are graduates of the junior youth program. They have a special appreciation for the “seamless coherent educational experience from the age of five, upwards to the age of junior youth, and through into adulthood” that the institute hopes to promote.

Coordinators and resource persons follow and tend to the movement of participants from one stage of the educational process to the next with a goal of strengthening the capacity of the institute to refine its system of delivery and improve the quality of the educational experience.

Regular offerings of institute courses, scheduled around school holidays and monthly weekends, have significantly increased opportunities for young people to progress through the sequence. This pattern has become a prominent feature of the institute's operations in the cluster. The system also facilitates the offering of Ruhi Book 5 branch courses to support animators and includes day and multi-day camps.

Broadening and strengthening the base of ownership around the junior youth spiritual empowerment program across the cluster has been a central object of learning for the site.

This effort involves helping each generation of youth acquire “a sense of mission” and a “level of commitment to the education of junior youth.” Collaboration with the institute has been significant in this regard. The concept of “generations” has served to organize the experience and capacity of those contributing to the program. Younger animators work alongside more experienced friends who have followed this specialized path of service.

The work underway in the centers of intense activity has continued to be a central focus for the Triangle learning site. Among the objects of learning that the site set to pursue over the past year was the establishment and strengthening of institutional collaborations with relevant actors, particularly those involved with youth and junior youth in Chapelboro, which is one of the centers of intense activity.



Initial steps were taken in the last year, including a gathering of educational leaders, initial conversations with several local organizations, and the establishment of a relationship with a local middle school that now offers the program as an after-school activity for its students. The recent visit of a team to Portal de Gloria, Brazil, will inevitably provide insights into the work ahead in these centers and its unfolding patterns.

## **Dallas cluster, South Central Region**

In Dallas, 32 junior youths have graduated over the last 12 months and entered the institute and path of service. Some of these young people are being walked with by an older friend with more experience, whether as an animator or teacher

of a children's class week-to-week. Many of the graduates are being supported as they consider how they are developing the habits laid out in Ruhi Books 1 and 2 within the context of their own lives and the lives of their families or groups of friends.

One of the habits that has strengthened considerably among the youth progressing through the institute process is that of turning to prayer. As a result, the devotional character of spaces that involve the youth has increased considerably, and the youth have also been able to enrich the devotional character of the spaces created for junior youth.

Developing the habit of consistently turning to the branch courses of Book 5 has been a renewed focus with a larger group of animators and tutors, who are thinking about how to sustain youth on a path of service. While this team is focused on ensuring that all the youth will be able to study the entirety of these branch courses, participants are also being assisted to draw on relevant sections of Book 5 and the branch courses immediately, especially with regards to text reviews.

Teams thinking about institute camps for youth have emerged and strengthened because of the experience of the team who has hosted junior youth camps, and now both of these teams work closely together.

Through ongoing seminars in the site, insights and objects of learning have been systematically shared with the three associated clusters and another cluster near the learning site. Visits of coordinators, collaborators, and youth for extended periods of time contribute to the pattern of learning in the cluster. Teams of collaborators now systematically follow the growth of the program and the movement of youth through the institute.

This is one such example of how the learning site has been able to assist the regional training institute to advance the institute process in the clusters that are also serving as reservoir clusters for the region. One strong example exists in the Harris County Central cluster (Houston, TX), where a cluster junior youth coordinator has been raised up as the program has grown to take

on more of the capacities of a basic junior youth program.

The regional and cluster coordinators are now learning about the movement of youth through the institute process as part of a team of collaborators focused on all aspects of the educational process, therefore contributing to the strengthening of the cluster agencies.

### **San Diego cluster, California Region**

The San Diego learning site has been striving to generate knowledge around the path of development for an animator. Effort has been made to understand the nature and dynamics of what allows a young person—be they formally enrolled in the Faith or not—to scale the heights of service and develop capacities that allow them to, in turn, begin accompanying others. The team serving the site quickly recognized the necessity to collaborate with the other institutions and agencies in the cluster, as the development of an animator cannot happen in isolation. Specifically, the team saw the importance of an animator being connected to a strong expanding nucleus that is operating in a mode of learning; thus, collaboration with the Area Teaching Committee strengthened. The team saw the need for an animator to be progressing through the main sequence of courses; thus, collaboration with the study circle coordinators increased. Lastly, the team has seen the importance of an animator studying guidance from the House of Justice; thus, collaboration with the Local Spiritual Assembly and Auxiliary Board members also strengthened in this respect.

Another area of learning over the past year has been the work with collaborators. Prior to the pandemic, the cluster had several collaborators for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program; however, for the last few years that arrangement has not been as strong. This past year, the team has identified collaborators who can assist with the growth of the program as well as the quality of the program across the cluster. This is notable due to the fact that the team's ability to reach a larger share of the animators has dramatically increased.



Relatedly, a key area of learning for this past year has been to strengthen the dissemination of learning across the cluster. While it remains an ongoing area of learning, there has been marked progress both structurally and culturally. As already stated, the collaborators have been a key area that has allowed insights to reach more animators and nuclei. Further, the increased collaboration among all the institutions and agencies has also allowed for insights to flow more seamlessly. At the level of culture, there have also been advances as the animators have objects of learning in their minds and are frequently conversing with one another about them. All these factors have allowed the team to see insights flow from one nucleus to the next.

### **East Valley cluster, Four Corners Region**

The East Valley learning site has continued to focus on three particular areas of interest over the last year: 1) close collaboration with the regional training institute in order to disseminate learning about establishing a basic junior youth program in many more clusters in the region 2) generating experience and insights related to reaching 300 junior youth within a cluster and 3) generating experience and insights related to establishing a basic program among indigenous populations in rural communities.

Developments regarding collaboration with the regional training institute have occurred this past year through the establishment of formalized programmatic teams for each of the educational imperatives. The resource persons now serve alongside two experienced subregional junior youth coordinators to consider the needs and plans for the program across the region.

As a result of this more formalized collaboration with the regional training institute, the resource persons were able to support the planning and implementation of two regional-level Ruhi Book 5 intensives during the summer of 2023. These intensives led not only to the formation of many new groups across the region, but also to the development of capacity among a new cadre of Book 5 tutors and provided direct support to

one of the host clusters to achieve the goal of establishing a basic junior youth program.

Alongside Book 5, a group of current animators attended each intensive to study one or more of the branch courses of Book 5, providing new experience to both the participants and tutors in the region.

The learning site will be continuing in its collaboration with the training institute to more effectively share insights regarding mechanisms the site has used in the past to disseminate learning across many clusters. The hope is that these insights will strengthen not only the junior youth program in the region, but also the other educational imperatives.



The effort continues, particularly in the Phoenix cluster, to learn about extending the program to many neighborhoods/nuclei to strive for 300 junior youth in the program; however, the goal has yet to be achieved. Finally, with the bounty of a resource person dedicated particularly to the work with indigenous populations in rural communities, the site is learning how regular camps/intensive spaces may be more effective and feasible than weekly meetings for nurturing junior youth in rural populations.



## Learning Desk

The National Spiritual Assembly established the Learning Desk in October 2013 to assist it in systematically following the work of expansion and consolidation unfolding across the regions of the country.

The Universal House of Justice describes the matter in its message of December 29, 2015:

To discharge their duties effectively, regional and national institutions will need to remain fully acquainted with developments at the grassroots and what is being learned in the clusters whose progress they oversee... The need to stay well informed about the community's accumulating experience holds particular implications for National Assemblies in larger countries that have several Regional Councils, notably so when the Assembly has devolved to Councils the work of administering the institute. Here, new arrangements at the national level have sometimes been necessary to provide the Assembly with cogent analysis of what is being learned in all regions.

During 2023–24, the Desk continued to organize its work around two primary objectives:

- providing the National Spiritual Assembly with cogent analysis of the process of expansion and consolidation in progress across the country
- offering what the Desk is seeing across the country as an assistance to the efforts of other offices at the Bahá'í National Organization

This year the Learning Desk continued to travel around the country to spend time with the friends in gatherings and in the field. Both the conversations that ensued and the analysis of data allowed the Desk to prepare reports for the National Assembly and Counselors.

The need for training institutes to attain a higher level of functioning remains a pressing concern, and the exigencies of the Nine Year Plan continue to place a heavy demand on the institutes. In November 2022, the National Assembly and Counselors asked the Desk—together with the Desk for the Development of Administrative Systems—to focus specifically on the analysis of three training institutes in the country. This conversation has continued with periodic reports prepared for the National Assembly and Counselors' retreats. The March 20, 2023, letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice gave further guidance for the unfoldment of the institutes and what the Learning Desk should follow. The collaboration between the Learning and Administrative Systems Desks has helped both advance their work in supporting the National Assembly, and the Learning Desk is also in conversation with the Desk for the Development of Properties and the Social Action Desk to try to ensure coherence among all these agencies.

# National Statistics Office

One of the important accomplishments since April 2007 in the United States is the heightened awareness among believers and institutions across the country of the role statistical information plays in facilitating the planning process at the cluster level. The Statistical Report Program (SRP)—an instrument designed by the Bahá’í World Center and administered by the Department of Statistics to formalize the consistent and efficient collection of information—is the means by which statistical information is shared swiftly among institutions.

As the friends continue to collect pertinent data and use it to draw attention to emerging strengths and to overcome challenges; monitor progress in neighborhoods, localities, clusters, and regions; and set informed goals for the next cycles of growth, new capacities are emerging across the United States. In this regard, the National Statistics Office serves the National Spiritual Assembly by ensuring that the capacity to use this important instrument is firmly established at the cluster, regional, and national levels. In this regard, the Office serves institutions and agencies—such as Counselors, their Auxiliary Board members, Regional Bahá’í Councils and

their respective regional statistics officers, and regional training institute members—to ensure that the capacity to use SRP, the Cluster Growth Profile, and the Biannual Survey—three instruments designed for analysis and planning at the cluster, regional, and national levels—is fully developed. The national statistics officer provides monthly reports to the National Assembly, including analyses of the progress made in expansion and consolidation efforts as reported from the field through these instruments.

## **Strengthening capacity to analyze progress**

### ***Training institutes at the cluster and regional levels.***

In the past year, regional and national statistics officers have actively strengthened relationships with regional and cluster-level training institute secretaries and coordinators, fostering increased use of SRP in the field. This collaborative effort is significantly enhancing the accuracy of data collected and reported, improving the systematic flow of statistical information. Cluster institute coordinators—serving study circles, children’s classes, and junior youth groups—now more than ever contribute directly to updating information on new educational activities and confirming



participant information about friends of the Faith and local Bahá'ís, as a natural part of the everyday activities they carry out.

Regional clearance officers—responsible for ensuring clearances of facilitators serving educational activities with participating minors—have benefitted from newly strengthened collaboration with regional and national statistics officers and now efficiently use SRP to indicate timely approvals simultaneous with activities in progress. New systems are emerging to support the efforts of the training institute to provide a flow of capable resources in the field of service.

On a nationwide scale, substantial progress has been achieved in securing the commitment of Regional Training Institute Boards. Most now actively monitor activities and facilitators through dashboards within the SRP application, enabling them to stay informed about current needs, thereby expanding the vision of cluster development, and making well-informed decisions. This collective effort reflects dynamic progress in capacity building through the use of statistical information that supports periodic gatherings for reflection and insights into the progress of programs of growth. Such timely access to information that is qualitative and quantitative is not only providing an accurate read of the reality of communities across the country but, more broadly, is inspiring the generality of the believers, promoting greater unity, and keeping them well informed of developments.

**Local Spiritual Assemblies.** Steadily, statistics officers are actively continuing their work to raise awareness among Local Spiritual Assemblies regarding their role in using statistics for planning and analysis. With direct access to SRP,

Local Assemblies are assessing the devotional character in their respective communities, addressing the spiritual educational needs of the children in their community through institute-raised teachers, inspiring junior youth potential through the spiritual empowerment program, and strengthening the spiritual and social fabric through visits to homes of friends of the Faith and new believers. This comprehensive understanding and engagement empower Local Assemblies to make informed decisions and contribute meaningfully to the overarching goals of the Nine Year Plan.

**Seminars to strengthen the capacity of statistics officers.** During the final months before Riqdán 2024, the national and regional statistics officers have joined efforts to improve their capacity to pull data from SRP to respond to analytical questions about growth being raised in the field and inspired by insights drawn from the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. In this way, the officers are protagonists of their own development. Objects of learning include data analysis and visualization, systematic orientations to SRP for those newly appointed to roles across the cluster and region, building capacity to expand the use of SRP through custom-report features within the application, and documenting insights to disseminate learning across the country.

Friends can now log in to [www.bahai.us](http://www.bahai.us) and navigate Resources/National Statistics Office to view a collection of guidance about the use of statistics for planning and analysis. Contact the National Statistics Office by email ([NSO@usbnc.org](mailto:NSO@usbnc.org)) with any questions.

# Office of Pioneering

Since the call from the Supreme Body on June 19, 2022, to fulfill 52 pioneering posts in 26 overseas goal clusters, the American Bahá'í community has gained over a year and a half of invaluable experience learning about effective identification, orientation, training, deployment, and support of international pioneers. Through the process of systematic action and collaborative reflection, and the increasing insight and capacity it engenders, elements recognized as essential to this endeavor at its outset, such as pioneer identification, have been strengthened, and new areas of learning, particularly related to pioneer deployment and support, have emerged. The role of the Office of Pioneering has remained one of administrative support to the National Spiritual Assembly's national pioneering task force, corresponding on its behalf with prospective pioneers and assisting to facilitate the flow of information between the national and regional levels.

Regarding pioneer identification, the role of the national task force, increasingly, is supplemental to regional efforts to engage the friends in conversations about pioneering. In the past year, regional task forces have extended the reach of the pioneer identification process through home visits and by creating spaces where conversations about this historic mission, the needs of the Nine Year Plan, and the spiritual import of pioneering feature prominently.

With the increase in deployments over the past year, it has become a priority of the national task force to reflect on methods of support for pioneers in the field. For example, institute resource persons, who have now been identified for some international clusters, visit designated goal clusters regularly to reflect and plan with pioneers; those pioneers and clusters have benefited greatly from the accompaniment of these friends.



Recognizable patterns are now also emerging regarding pioneer orientation and training; analyzing those experiences has yielded valuable insight. For instance, it was learned that moving through the process designed by the task force—from the moment the pioneer is identified, through orientation, possible training in an advanced cluster, logistical preparation, and finally, deployment—takes, on average, about nine months to complete. This learning is vital because it suggests that in order to reach the goal set by the Universal House of Justice—to have all 52 pioneering posts filled during the first phase of the Nine Year Plan, ending Riqḍván 2025—the remaining pioneers will have to be identified as soon as possible.

Since Riqḍván 2023, four in-person orientations have been held for pioneers who are planning to deploy soon. A significant theme in this regard has been the strengthening of regional ownership over these orientations. Essentially, the planning and hosting of these intense, transformative, and crucial spaces is now completely in the hands of the pioneering task forces of the regions in which they take place.

After completing orientation, many pioneers underwent extensive preparation prior to their deployment by relocating to an advanced cluster to gain additional experience in the community-building process. The outcome of pioneers' focused engagement and effort during this period of training has been encouraging and inspirational. A heartwarming example of this is the story of a particular pioneer, who, initially not seeing herself as a pioneer, moved across the country to an unfamiliar city for training, and, with the support of national and regional institutions, gained more experience teaching the Cause, with the courses of the training institute, and in community-building activities.

Stories, pictures, and videos detailing deployed pioneers' efforts to fulfill their sacred responsibility in the field of service pour in from posts all over the world. It is clear from these updates that the seeds planted by these souls are beginning to bear fruit. With immense joy, it is possible to report that, as of February 2024, 26 souls have arisen and have either deployed or are currently preparing for deployment to one of this community's assigned posts. Nine designated goal posts have been fulfilled by a team of pioneers, and four are currently partially fulfilled by a single pioneer, leaving 13 remaining posts. A year and a half into this historic and blessed assignment, this community is roughly halfway to achieving its goal. Additionally, a multitude of friends have arisen to pioneer elsewhere internationally or on the home front and are laboring steadfastly to further the spiritual and material advancement of wherever they reside.

Parallels in their importance and scope have been evoked by the Supreme Body between the goals of this Plan and those of the Ten Year Crusade approximately 70 years ago; in both, assisting countries and regions through the deployment of pioneers is a major element. Completion of this objective will, ultimately, contribute to the advancement of a central goal of this Plan—to have, in every region and country on earth, at least one cluster in which the third milestone has been passed—and will bring the worldwide community one step closer to this landmark moment in the history of the Faith. It is with sights set on this sacred eventuality, global in scope and unprecedented in history, and with hearts “assured of ultimate victory,” that this Office continues its work of supporting those, both overseas and stateside, lending their capacities to this tremendous endeavor.



## Race Unity Desk

In October 2023, the National Spiritual Assembly established the Race Unity Desk. The primary objective of the Desk is to assist the National Assembly in understanding and supporting the Bahá'í community's involvement with race unity efforts. The Desk's initial focus will be on reading the reality of local engagements with race unity through a qualitative and quantitative assessment of current initiatives and identifying areas for action and learning.

In this early stage of its development, the work of the Race Unity Desk involves gathering and

systematizing knowledge about race unity efforts taking place in the context of community-building endeavors throughout the country. The Desk is also learning about the efforts being stewarded by institutions at the local and regional levels. In the near term, the Desk will prepare reports for the National Assembly to inform decision-making and strategic planning. In the future, the Desk will host meetings and seminars to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge and experiences related to race unity work.

# Social Action Desk

The Social Action Desk is an agency established by the National Spiritual Assembly in 2010 for the purpose of following and supporting social action emerging across the country.

The commitment of the Bahá'í community to social action is, of course, not new. The Bahá'í International Development Organization reminds us that it is, in fact, “rooted in [the Faith’s] sacred scriptures, which state that all human beings ‘have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.’ Fundamental to Bahá'í belief is the conviction that every person, every people, every nation has a part to play in building a peaceful and prosperous global society.”

The Universal House of Justice described the coherence between the community-building endeavors of the divine Plan and the Bahá'í community’s growing involvement in the life of society as follows:

“Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community’s engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase. At this crucial point in the unfoldment of the Plan, when so many clusters are nearing such a stage, it seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this respect, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.”

Social action seeks to “apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect



of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly,” the House of Justice writes. “Such endeavours are distinguished, then, by their stated purpose to promote the material well-being of the population, in addition to its spiritual welfare.” The House of Justice further states that “while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another.”

As it is currently conceived, the work of the Desk involves surveying and describing the range of social action across the country; collaborating with training institutes in their efforts to cultivate capacity for social action; nurturing first stirrings in social action; following and supporting sustained endeavors and the work of Bahá'í-inspired organizations; disseminating insights and experience; and learning how other educational opportunities within diverse populations can complement the spiritual education offered by the training institute.



*Community Development*

# 08



# Office of Assembly Development

During the past year, the Office of Assembly Development refined efforts in its two areas of endeavor: maintaining a body of guidance as a resource for Local Spiritual Assemblies and supporting Assemblies by promoting spiritual and administrative processes that advance institutional learning.

The Office carries out its work in close collaboration with the Office of Community Administration, through collective meetings, topic-specific small groups, and systematic study of the guidance. After a hiatus of several years, the two offices were able to hold a retreat where the friends looked at the work as a whole and how they are utilizing the elements of the framework for action. They consulted about how to enhance their collaboration and prayed together in the House of Worship. It is expected that as they pursue the aims of the Nine Year Plan, the administrative arrangements supporting the work of these interrelated offices will evolve significantly.

## Maintaining a body of guidance

**Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies.** The Office stays abreast of new guidance received from the Bahá'í World Center and the National Spiritual Assembly's significant policy decisions and is careful to identify content that it can add to *Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies (GLSA)*. In order to emphasize and clarify the role of Bahá'í administration in meeting the goals of the Nine Year Plan, the first two chapters of *GLSA* underwent substantial restructuring this year. The first chapter provides an introduction and overview of the Administrative Order, and the second gives details about Bahá'í elections and the formation of Local Spiritual Assemblies. Additional major revisions of chapters 3, 4, and 5 are expected to be completed in the coming year. A proposal for improving the searchable online version of *GLSA* was also presented to the Office of Information Technology.



**Abiding in God's Law.** The Office prepares the "Abiding in God's Law" column for *The American Bahá'í* as a resource to help friends consider how adherence to Bahá'í law contributes to the advancement of the work of the Cause. Placing the laws in this context can help reveal new insights and help the friends deepen their appreciation of the laws as "the choice Wine." This year the column explored some of the following topics: the Spiritual Assembly's role in releasing the society-building power of the Faith, the interdependence of the elected and the appointed arms of the Administrative Order, and how the law of parental consent for marriage contributes to the unity of the family.

It also posed questions:

- Can individuals, communities, or institutions manifest their full potential on their own?
- What "generates the dynamics of a joyous and active life conducive to spiritual transformation and systematic growth" at the heart of the community?
- How does forming an expanding nucleus help create a new rhythm of community life?
- What is the role of the Word of God in the process of transformation?
- What is the role of the Assembly in supporting the education of children?

It is hoped that the column will help the friends contribute to meaningful conversations being held nationwide in homes, study circles, at Feasts, and among groups of families and friends.

**Other resource documents.** The Office continues to update “Resources for Local Spiritual Assemblies,” a document created to help acquaint Local Assemblies with the resources available to them. It is housed on the national website (bahai.us), after logging in.

**Promoting spiritual and administrative processes that advance institutional learning**

**Supporting select Assemblies.** The Office has had the bounty of working with the Office of Community Administration to prepare study materials and meet with a few Assemblies that require additional support. Conversations about the implications of the guidance have been rich and have assisted Assemblies as they strive to strengthen their administrative processes. The offices will continue to reflect on the effectiveness of the materials framing these study sessions, the impact of the ongoing conversations, and their sustainability.

Over the past few years, the Office has been refining a document called “Some Thoughts on the Operational Practices of a Local Assembly,” which looks at various administrative aspects. It poses questions for an Assembly to consider as an institution. The document has been shared with individual Assemblies as well as with Auxiliary Board members and Regional Bahá’í Councils that support Assemblies at the grass roots. It continues to be refined with experience.

**Supporting the electoral process.** The Office serves as a resource for the electoral process through various means. For the eight Local Spiritual Assemblies that are holding two-stage elections, the Office prepares materials and accompanies the friends. National reflection spaces are created to capture insights and share them with those institutions just beginning the journey. Additionally, the Office collaborates with other

friends at the Bahá’í National Center who are supporting Unit Convention, the election of the Regional Councils, and all remaining Riḍván elections.

**Spiritual Health Working Group.** In collaboration with the Office of Community Administration, the Office provides administrative support to the National Assembly’s working group that is learning about fostering spiritual health. It helps prepare reports and ensures that meeting minutes are captured.



# Office of Community Administration

Using a collaborative approach, the Office of Community Administration handles a variety of administrative matters on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly. The Office sees its work in terms of fostering the community's spiritual health. To that end, it pursues three broad areas of endeavor: helping Spiritual Assemblies with the administration of Bahá'í law, offering scenario-specific support to individuals and institutions, and assisting Local Spiritual Assemblies as they strengthen their administrative processes. The range of work involves questions related to personal status, protection of the Faith, marriage and family life, Assembly functioning, and pastoral assistance.

## Preparing agenda items

A significant portion of the Office's work leads to the creation of agenda items for National Spiritual Assembly meetings. Each item involves gathering, compiling, and summarizing all background information; identifying relevant guidance; and providing some analysis as a basis for the National Assembly's consultation; the Office then helps to convey and implement the National Assembly's decisions.

Among the 68 agenda items prepared for the National Assembly this year, 42 involved the circumstances of individuals related to administrative status, exemptions from the law of parental consent, and other issues. Also included were 19 agenda items related to the formation or functioning of Local Assemblies. The Office also presented the National Assembly with questions related to general guidance and policy.

## Connecting individuals and institutions with guidance

On the National Assembly's behalf, the Office continues to serve as a resource for friends who submit questions related to a variety of topics. It attends to a significant volume of correspondence, with some 1,500 outgoing communications to individuals, institutions, and agencies. The aim is to provide relevant authoritative guidance, as well as insights generated from the grass roots, to assist Assemblies and individuals in their consultations in light of the Nine Year Plan.

## Supporting Local Spiritual Assemblies

This past year, the Office has further systematized the support it offers to Local Assemblies by designating a staff member to work with these institutions as they address challenges that, if left unaddressed, could hamper their functioning and shift their focus away from the goals of the Plan. Remaining staff members, accompanied by the Office of Assembly Development, also provided Assembly support in collaboration with Auxiliary Board members and, sometimes, with representatives of the National Assembly.

## Supporting the electoral process

The Office supports the Ríḍván elections in several ways: participating in consultations to prepare guidance and supporting documents, addressing



questions that arise throughout the process, and assisting communities where difficulties have arisen in relation to the election of a Local Assembly. Last year, the Office helped resolve formation issues involving approximately 75 Local Assemblies.

### **Boundaries**

This year, 31 locality boundary-change proposals, arising primarily from Regional Bahá'í Councils operating in a learning mode, were presented for the National Assembly's consideration. This is a significant increase from past years. It is anticipated that, with the further development of the Regional Councils, the identification and processing of locality boundary changes will evolve significantly in the coming years.

### **Withdrawals**

The Office also processes withdrawal requests from community members; 249 withdrawals occurred in the past year. Of those who provided comments about why they wished to withdraw, the Office noted several categories:

- 50 percent simply indicated they do not consider themselves believers.
- 18 percent found another religious community or spiritual path.

- 5 percent stated they did not accept social laws (six explicitly cited LGBTQ+ issues).
- 4 percent were minors withdrawn by a parent.
- 23 percent were miscellaneous comments (personal reasons, issues with the community, preferred not to say, enrolled too quickly).

### **Collaborations**

Over time, the Office has strengthened its collaborations with entire Spiritual Assemblies and Assembly representatives, committees, Continental Counselors, Auxiliary Board members, and groups of individuals. It also collaborates regularly with other offices at the Bahá'í National Center. The most frequent collaboration is with the Office of Assembly Development, involving regular consultation, systematic study, and working together to support Local Assemblies.

The Office has also had the opportunity to pursue collaborations related to specific topics, such as by supporting the Spiritual Health Working Group, which was formed by the National Assembly. The working group is currently learning about issues related to sexuality and gender identity. In collaboration with the Office of Assembly Development, the Office provides administrative support and shares insights gleaned from experience.

### **Refining the workflow**

Over time, internal systems to manage the large volume of work continue to be refined. For several years, the Office has been engaged with the Office of Information Technology in an extensive process of discovery related to case-management tools. Over the past year, significant advancement in this process has led to the development and implementation of software tools that allow for better organization of information on individual cases, improved efficiency for referencing relevant guidance, and increased visibility of the scope of the work across the Office. These developments have also coincided with new approaches to the division of responsibilities within the Office to better utilize specialized skill sets and experiences.



# Office of the Secretary

The Office of the Secretary directly serves the Secretary of our National Spiritual Assembly—its chief executive officer. The Office provides administrative support to the National Assembly as it carries out its responsibilities, and it functions in a broad range of areas:

- the organization and execution of conferences and meetings, including the regular monthly meetings of the National Assembly
- the processing of incoming correspondence as well as the Assembly's outgoing communications with other Bahá'í institutions and this national community (The Office processes approximately 4,000 incoming pieces of correspondence per year, as well as facilitates the flow of about 3,800 outgoing written communications conveying guidance, information, and resources to individuals, the community, and other Bahá'í institutions.)
- the organization and/or execution of annual Bahá'í electoral processes, including the National Convention, the Regional Bahá'í Council balloting process, Unit Conventions, and Riḍván elections
- direct support of the National Assembly's close relationship with the 13 Regional Bahá'í Councils, through its Regional Bahá'í Council liaison
- the handling of other necessary tasks associated with the efficient functioning of a complex organization and community



*Education*

# 09



# Office of Education and Schools

Summer and winter schools have been features of Bahá'í community life for many years. In addition to providing an opportunity for participants to study the Bahá'í writings and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of their significance, these seasonal schools allow Bahá'í families to spend a period of time together in a joyful atmosphere conducive to learning and the strengthening of spiritual bonds. Building on learning that is unfolding from the Nine Year Plan and from past Plans, the Office of Education and Schools began this year to strengthen relationships with its sister national and regional institutions and agencies. The doors of understanding are opening wider regarding how regional agencies might regularly utilize the permanent Bahá'í schools throughout the year. Understanding is also growing about how Regional Bahá'í Councils can increasingly take responsibility for programmatic oversight of the permanent and seasonal Bahá'í schools. As

capacity and genuine interest continue to grow, this oversight will extend from the summer schools all the way down to local retreats akin to family camps.

The permanent schools will also remain open to use by groups with a national outreach and character, such as the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, the Association for Bahá'í Studies-North America, the Wilmette Institute, race unity conferences, and cultural-centric conferences. Integrating the arts into programs is a constant clarion call.

The following pages highlight selected endeavors by the Green Acre and Louhelen Bahá'í Schools, the seasonal schools, and the Wilmette Institute. Bosch has been making great strides over the past year, working closely with the Regional Bahá'í Council of the State of California and its agencies to devise and approve plans for rebuilding cabins and dormitories in the year ahead.





# Green Acre Bahá'í School, Eliot, Maine

In 2023, Green Acre hosted 54 gatherings that filled 131 days and served over 2,700 participants. One third of the attendees, particularly those engaged in core activities in their home communities and surrounding clusters, were from the wider community. In an ongoing effort to align itself with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan, the Green Acre team collaborated more closely with both the Regional Bahá'í Council of the Northeastern States and the regional training institute to host 14 gatherings. These included family institute camps and intensives, neighborhood and general youth intensives, institutional gatherings, and regional seminars. Exploring the power of the arts and learning about discourse in the local cluster continued to be fruitful, leading to 21 events with 850 participants, 59 percent of whom were from the wider community. In addition, Green Acre hosted two undergraduate seminars for the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity and a retreat for the Office of Public Affairs and the Aspen Institute.

The Green Acre team joined a working group made up of members of the Regional Bahá'í Council and regional training institute to begin planning programming at Green Acre for the upcoming year. The working group was formed in response to the March 20, 2023, letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, which suggested that the Assembly might “wish to consider how the permanent schools have served over the years to complement and support the work of the institute and whether it would be advantageous to learn about how these long-standing facilities might increasingly be placed at the disposal of the relevant regional institutes.”

For the winter school, the working group brought together a team made up of an Auxiliary Board member, a regional institute coordinator, a friend of the Faith, and Green Acre staff members to develop a vision of the program. It was decided to focus on learning in action and incorporating home visits and devotional gatherings into the session. Plans were further developed at the regional institutional meeting with members of the Auxiliary Board and the Counselor. To prepare



the local community, a day of home visits was organized with the cluster agencies, the Auxiliary Board member, and the regional growth facilitator to learn how to reach out and schedule visits, prepare conversations, engage in the visits, and share reflections. During the winter school, more than 50 adults and youths formed teams and made 20 home visits in the local cluster. Two other teams created large and deeply moving devotional gatherings open to the wider community. The children and junior youth hosted the youth and adults in their classrooms to share their learning on the themes of home visits and devotional gatherings.

The Green Acre team continued to build on the experience of creating spaces to connect with the local community using the arts and meaningful conversations. In particular, the power of collaborating with like-minded institutions and artists led to a series of gatherings focused on a combination of artistic expression, discourse, and dialogue. The team produced two art themes—*Crossing the Threshold* and *Seeing Oneness*—that led to art shows on campus and online, along with related discourse spaces and evenings of performing art. The team produced a weekend-long art show with a local painter called the *Art*



of *Solidarity*, which included workshops and gallery hours. In collaboration with other local artists and institutions, Green Acre developed and hosted the second annual SeaChange Conference, which was open to all and centered BIPOC participants. It focused on the power of the arts for social change and combined meaningful conversations with visual and performing art, movement, and other forms of creative expression.

Green Acre created seven discourse spaces mostly related to the two art themes, but it also continued dialogue and collaboration with the Eliot Police Department. The team hosted 10 discourse gatherings organized by other local institutions including Kinship, Leadership Seacoast, Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire, One Planet Peace Forum, Eliot Connects, and the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Eliot. All these activities increased awareness of Green Acre, with some 500 members of the wider community participating; many of these friends came to campus for the first time. Due to the uplifting content, collaboration, and consistency of these activities, levels of trust and interest in Green Acre and the Faith have increased.

In addition, the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Eliot and local cluster agencies sponsored on-campus children's classes, junior youth groups, institute intensives, reflection gatherings, Feasts, and Holy Day celebrations.

Green Acre has many strengths—the physical, social, and spiritual beauty of the location; the developing capacities for hosting and collaboration; commitment to a mode of action, reflection, consultation, and study; engagement and exploration of the power of the arts and meaningful conversation; the developing coherence between processes and activities; and, most vitally, the emerging unity of vision, thought, and action. Building on these strengths, the team is well positioned to complement and support the work of the institute and to aid in the release of the society-building power of the Faith.



# Louhelen Bahá'í School, Davison, Michigan

The past year at Louhelen has seen a surge in interest from local communities and regional institutions eager to engage with the facilities. Recognizing the need for closer collaboration, a working group was established consisting of Louhelen staff, Midwest Bahá'í School Committee members, the regional training institute, and the Regional Bahá'í Council.

## **Working group and collaboration**

The working group has become a vital platform for sharing insights and addressing concerns. Through ongoing consultation, efforts are being made to harmonize collaboration between Louhelen and various institutions. This alignment is crucial for maximizing collective impact and integrating each institution's goals into the broader vision for the Nine Year Plan.

Despite navigating through uncertainties, the Louhelen team has successfully hosted sessions, emphasizing the importance of aligning individuals' perspectives with spiritual principles. The lessons learned underscore the necessity for openness to learning and collaboration, particularly in a service-oriented environment.

## **Engagement with local and regional institutions**

Louhelen has been delighted to host sessions organized by local and regional institutions and neighborhood groups, as well as departments within the Bahá'í National Organization. The active participation of numerous young people has brought vibrancy to the space, offering a rewarding and inspiring experience for the team.

## **Collaborating with like-minded friends**

During an open house event at New Standard Academy, Louhelen took the opportunity to engage with students and families by distributing copies of *Brilliant Star* children's magazine along with information about Louhelen's diverse programs. This outreach initiative aimed to showcase the educational and spiritual content Louhelen offers.

Louhelen actively participated in Black History Month events at New Standard, contributing



an engaging and memorable exhibit on the contributions of African Americans and the nobility of the soul, as well as a drum circle led by a volunteer. The rhythmic beats created a vibrant atmosphere, fostering a sense of unity and celebration.

Louhelen and New Standard Academy joined forces to orchestrate a heartwarming weekend-long Mother's Day celebration, dedicated to fostering the bond between mothers and daughters. This collaborative effort aimed to provide a meaningful and joyous experience for families within the community. From creative workshops to inspiring discussions, the event encouraged shared moments of reflection and appreciation. By organizing this special occasion, Louhelen and New Standard demonstrated their commitment to strengthening family ties and creating an inclusive space for the celebration of love and maternal bonds within the community.

In the summer, the collaborative spirit continued with the organization of a family day, a joint effort by Louhelen staff and community moms. This day-long program featured a variety of activities, fostering a sense of togetherness among families.

Louhelen and New Standard Academy also joined forces to create an enriching summer experience for students of different age groups. The collaboration featured a unique blend of activities on both campuses, catering to 4th–6th graders at Louhelen and 7th–12th graders at New Standard.



At Louhelen, the summer camp unfolded with a captivating plant expedition where students engaged in a hands-on exploration, identifying and learning about various plant species scattered across the campus. Meanwhile, at New Standard, the character-

building workshop for older students delved into meaningful discussions about life's challenges, conflict resolution, and personal growth. Each workshop session concluded with a lighthearted and enjoyable game, fostering camaraderie and a positive learning environment. This collaborative effort not only provided a platform for academic enrichment but also instilled valuable life skills and character development in participating students.

Despite staffing challenges, connections were established with other schools, and ongoing ties with literary programs were maintained. This was exemplified by Yarnell Ball's Read Art Loud initiative, ensuring a lasting connection with Flint Cultural Center Academy.

#### **Programs by local and regional institutions**

Collaborative efforts included programs organized by the Local Spiritual Assembly of Ann Arbor, the Regional Bahá'í Council, the Midwest Summer School, and the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, with a majority of these contributions from the regional training institute of the Midwest.



Louhelen has proudly served as a host for leadership training sessions for Michigan State University (MSU) and the Crim Fitness Foundation. The sessions organized at Louhelen have provided a valuable platform for knowledge-sharing and skill-building, aligning with MSU's educational objectives. Additionally, the collaboration with the Crim Fitness Foundation has underscored the importance of holistic well-being and personal development. These sessions not only contribute to the enrichment of each institutions' guests but also reinforce Louhelen's dedication to fostering a supportive environment for diverse educational initiatives in conjunction with esteemed institutions like MSU and community-focused organizations such as the Crim Fitness Foundation.

#### **Creating a culture of service**

Throughout 2023, Louhelen focused on instilling a culture of service within its team. Over the course of the year, the school hosted a total of 21 scheduled programs over a series of 24 weekends, showcasing a commitment to continuous engagement and learning. The year has been characterized by challenges and learning opportunities, all of which were embraced with determination. Louhelen's commitment to collaboration, community engagement, and a culture of service positions it well for continued growth and impact in the coming years.

## Seasonal Bahá'í schools

This year, the Office of Education and Schools convened its annual gathering not at Louhelen Bahá'í School, but online, inviting representatives from all seasonal and summer school committees and representatives of the now 13 Regional Bahá'í Councils. The vision of this gathering—guided by the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly and an accompanying Counselor—was to build capacity among various partners such as seasonal school committees, Auxiliary Board members, Regional Councils, and regional training institutes to take on an increasing role in the development and integration of seasonal school programs. This is a move toward the Councils' eventual full oversight and analysis of the growth of seasonal schools in their regions. In the Northwest region, such steps are timely; in the Northern Plains, Midwestern, Atlantic, and Florida regions, possibilities for next steps are emerging.

In 2023, nine schools operated in six different regions and ranged in duration from one to five days to accommodate the demands on human resources and programming imperatives. All were

regional or subregional schools. Looking toward 2024, about 12 schools should be able to offer programs, and collaborations at the cluster and regional levels continue to be primary learning objectives. Another focus is how to increasingly engage with friends of the Faith and make the schools ever more welcoming to the whole community, not only to Bahá'ís.

Like last year, there will be no official national theme for programs at the schools in 2024. Race unity remains an important focus, and the school committees are encouraged to avail themselves of materials already developed on that theme and on the theme of family. Committees will build on their ongoing collaboration with *Brilliant Star* magazine to enrich children's spiritual education.

Seasonal school committees—in consultation with their respective institutional partners and considering the reality and needs of the region or area they serve—are building their capacity to develop programs that can respond to a community's distinct needs. Below are reflections



from the John Wilcott School in Montana on the past summer’s program that illustrate well this kind of effort:

“Friends from the Bahá’í community and the friends of the Faith alike participated in topics such as ‘Administrative Order: Purpose and Organization;’ ‘Reflections on the Nine Year Plan;’ ‘Race Amity;’ and ‘Spiritual Identity.’

“The ‘Administrative Order: Purpose and Organization’ theme was a valuable discussion that helped deepen the friends about the importance of the roles these bodies provide and how to contact those friends serving those institutions and roles. It also was accompanied by a visual tool to help clarify confusion about these roles and institutions so the friends could be better informed about Bahá’í administration.

“Concepts and reflections on spiritual identity were explored through discussion and the arts. Friends in the Northern Plains have great distances to travel, and conversations around what accompanying from a distance might look like were of significant importance. Children and elders alike enjoyed each other’s company while playing cooperative games and doing arts. One example was the discussion of daily prayers with family—which was explored as a development of spiritual identity—through making beautiful prayer books that could be taken home. Participants were also invited to make ‘spiritual smores,’ incorporating recreation, delicious treats, and spiritual reflection.”



# Wilmette Institute

Working closely with the National Spiritual Assembly and the Bahá'í International Development Organization at the Bahá'í World Center, the Wilmette Institute has expanded its vision, redefining its mission to offer a quality, graduate-level, non-degree academic certificate based on a Bahá'í approach to social transformation. This distinctive learning approach is characterized by action and reflection that aims to raise the capacity of learners from diverse populations.

Since Wilmette Institute's one-week orientation course was introduced to all faculty and students in early 2023, the extension-course completion rate has risen to 20 percent—an increase of 32 percent over the previous year. The Institute aspires to achieve at least a 30-percent completion rate in 2024, so it will need to continue strengthening the quality of courses and teaching methodologies. For example, student engagement with courses seems to decline after four or five weeks, so the possibility of offering shorter courses is being explored.

## Certificate program

In 2023, Wilmette Institute continued to prepare the detailed documentation and processes necessary to obtain accreditation for its Social Transformation Certificate program from the Distance Education Accrediting Commission. Wilmette Institute anticipates being evaluated and approved in the coming fiscal year. The Institute has successfully offered three of the program's four available social transformation courses and will continue a second round in 2024. Certificate graduates will be encouraged to present in webinars and at the Association for Bahá'í Studies, as well as to join the Association's working groups.

## Partnership with North Carolina Central University

In 2023, the Wilmette Institute continued collaborating with Dr. Harvey McMurray of North Carolina Central University (NCCU), a publicly funded, historically Black university in Durham,



North Carolina. Dr. McMurray continues to head an interdisciplinary effort with various faculty members to explore social justice and social change. At the last meeting, which involved faculty from various disciplines, it was decided that faculty will work in smaller groups to pilot specific efforts. Plans made in 2023 for the spring and summer of 2024 include a campus-wide lecture by a Bahá'í speaker in collaboration with the Department of Social Work and Criminology and piloting one or two Wilmette Institute courses in the NCCU summer catalogue.

## Dissemination of learning

The Wilmette Institute offered three presentations at the 47th annual Association for Bahá'í Studies conference, including a four-member panel of instructors from the "Anti-Black Racism" course who spoke about their experience teaching approaches to engaging in anti-Black racism discourse. The Wilmette Institute pedagogy team made a presentation entitled "Expanding on a Bahá'í-inspired pedagogy of social transformation: Coming to grips with spiritual, moral, cultural, and social phenomena."

Another highlight of the conference was building on the Wilmette Institute webinar *Theater and Education for Social Action* with Dr. Harvey McMurray, Dr. Penny Carroll, graduate students, and activists who joined the Wilmette Institute to present at the conference. [This](#)



[plenary](#) presentation demonstrated that when operating in a learning mode with collaborators for an extended period of time, preparing a presentation about what has been learned creates an opportunity for all members to contribute to discourse from a Bahá'í perspective.

### **Partnership with Graduate Theological Union**

In the last year, Wilmette Institute continued to offer courses in both history and text, and social transformation. This allowed the team to learn from students who were experiencing the Bahá'í perspective for the first time. Based on this learning, the team was able to further develop its materials and pedagogy. Several unique developments have emerged in the past year as a result of the collaboration with the Graduate Theological Union (GTU):

- As an affiliate of GTU, Wilmette Institute faculty and students have been granted access to its entire physical and electronic library.

- After collaboration between Dr. Kathryn Barush, the Wilmette Institute associate director, and a Bahá'í graduate student at GTU, the Berkeley Art and Interreligious Pilgrimage Project now has a placeholder entitled: "[Pilgrimage at the Bahá'í World Center](#)," which is to be completed this year.
- One Bahá'í graduate student has applied for a doctorate at GTU and is actively contributing to discourse. The student, in collaboration with Wilmette Institute, is forming a GTU working group on Bahá'í perspectives.

### **Webinars**

In 2023, the Wilmette Institute offered 27 webinars, including five about publishing that were part of a weekend-long conference cosponsored by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust. The Wilmette Institute YouTube channel now has over 6,700 subscribers and has had over 821,000 views of its videos since 2015, with an increase of over 110,000 in the last year.

### **Website and social media**

The Wilmette Institute is upgrading its website to better cater to diverse users, including administrators, faculty, and students within and beyond our community. The content now includes more information on academic courses and the admission and enrollment processes. The Institute actively promotes its academic and extension courses, webinars, student news, and events on social media and in newsletters.

### **Personnel**

In June 2023, Wilmette Institute was pleased to welcome Dr. Derik Smith as its new acting director. Dr. Robert Stockman no longer serves in an administrative role at the institute but continues to offer his teaching experience as a faculty member, as the occasion permits.



*Bahá'í House of Worship*

10



# Report from the Temple Board

The following areas of learning guide the Bahá'í House of Worship's contributions to the further release of the society-building power of the Faith.

## **Enhancing the experience of visitors: Nurturing a spiritual atmosphere while considering cultural context**

The Temple continues to attract an estimated 200,000 annual visitors. The ongoing learning process among those serving at the Temple includes the review of several areas: how visitors are welcomed and oriented to the Temple and its welcome center, how the basic teachings of the Faith are being shared, how visitors can be more effectively connected to the activities of the Faith, and how prayer and devotional programs are organized in a manner that is welcoming to all. Over the past year, Temple staff also explored possible changes to the Temple brochure; reviewed literature offerings, signage, displays, and videos; and continued to make improvements to the guide and volunteer selection and orientation process. It has become clear that the ability to more effectively connect the Temple with visitors and populations while considering cultural context will require continued collaboration with surrounding Bahá'í communities, institutions, and cluster agencies. It will also require growing relationships with like-minded organizations.

## **Strengthening relationships: The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and the teaching and community-building process**

Collaboration between the Temple and surrounding cluster agencies and Bahá'í communities continued to strengthen over the past year, resulting in a growing pattern of activities at the Temple. These include regular youth and junior youth camps, children's classes, study circles, junior youth activities, and devotions. The utilization of nearby facilities,

which were first made available by the National Spiritual Assembly in 2022, plays a significant role in the growing number of activities, including the number and diversity of participants and the quality of their experiences. In the summer of 2023, the Temple was the host site for the summer-of-service program in surrounding clusters, providing overnight accommodations, meeting space, assistance with meals, and access to the Temple. Youth supported by a team of coordinators conducted service activities in half a dozen neighborhoods in surrounding communities in collaboration with local teams.

The Temple Board, in close consultation with the Properties Office and the National Properties Advisory Task Force, continues to give systematic attention to the current and projected needs of Temple-related properties and makes recommendations to the National Spiritual Assembly.

## **The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár as the spiritual center of the community and of collective worship**

The number and frequency of activities at the Temple sponsored or hosted by surrounding Bahá'í communities continue to grow. These activities included Holy Day observances, regularly scheduled and occasional devotional programs, arts-related activities, and scheduled tours by schools, church groups, community organizations, programs serving seniors, and others. Other activities hosted or supported by surrounding Bahá'í communities include firesides and special presentations, core activities, and memorials. Special visits by agencies, institutions, and groups of Bahá'ís from across the region and country for prayer, study, and consultation have become a growing pattern. The 15th Annual Bahá'í Choral Festival attracted over 1,000 local participants to the Temple and has become a much-anticipated local community event.

A reflection space has been opened to all visitors attending the weekly devotional programs in the Temple, and a monthly meditation group has attracted area residents on a regular basis. Observance of Black History Month for the second consecutive year was initiated and organized by a group of African American Bahá'ís and supported by surrounding Bahá'í communities. This year featured a month-long art exhibit along with educational and artistic presentations for all ages that raised awareness of African Americans' contributions to our country's social and spiritual progress. The programs strengthened bonds and ties of friendship connecting many new and old friends to the Temple as a spiritual center of the community.

### **Relationships with organizations from the wider society**

This year's Black History Month events included "Intimate Conversations on Race," a program that attracted over 100 participants—most of whom were friends of the Faith. The program was also attended by the current and former Wilmette village president and by representatives of local social justice and social action organizations. Attendance clearly reflected the growing involvement of local Bahá'ís in the life of the wider community.

The Temple, in close collaboration with the Office of Public Affairs, connected with the 2023 gathering of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, including through a special visit by over 200 Parliament attendees to the House of Worship for a reception and participation in a special devotional program. Also in collaboration with the Office of Public Affairs, the Temple hosted a special gathering in June 2023 commemorating the 40th anniversary of the



execution of 10 Bahá'í women in Iran (see report from the Office of Public Affairs for more details, p. 78). The program included a reception that recognized US Representative Jan Schakowsky, who sponsored the most recent Congressional resolution in defense of the Bahá'ís of Iran. The congresswoman participated fully in the program.

Half a dozen local civic organizations reached out this year to explore collaborations with and/or to arrange visits to the Temple.

# House of Worship Music Department

The Bahá'í House of Worship choir provides sacred a cappella music based on scriptures of the world's major religions in the Temple Auditorium on the first three Sundays of each month for the weekly 12:30 devotionals. In the past year, printed programs bearing the week's readings began to also indicate that the choir sings live from the mezzanine because so many visitors have asked whether the music was recorded. In 2023, the choir participated in two local interfaith programs—an interfaith Thanksgiving program sponsored by the New Trier Multifaith Alliance and hosted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Wilmette, Illinois, and a choral festival honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Black History Month, sponsored by The Hyde Park and Kenwood Interfaith Council at Hyde Park Union Church in Chicago. The choir has also provided music at the Temple for selected Bahá'í Holy Days and special meetings.

The choir, which is made up of volunteers, continues to strive to return to its prepandemic size. An average of about 10 singers, three of whom are not Bahá'í, participates weekly instead of the 15 or more who did so before COVID-19. Many of these friends balance choir membership with the demands of also maintaining and participating in their own Bahá'í communities' local activities and administrative duties. The choir holds regular rehearsals on the Sundays that it provides music at the Temple but hopes to return to a midweek rehearsal in the home of the director, as these are key to building a sense of community. The choir observes a break each August to allow vacation time for its members.

## The 15th Annual Bahá'í Choral Festival

In 2023, the Music Department successfully held the 15th Annual Bahá'í Choral Festival, which has become a flagship annual event and the cornerstone of the Department's commitment to cultural diversity and community engagement.



Singers come from not only many states in the United States but also from around the world. The festival continues to attract visitors from the local community through the unique, universal appeal of sacred a cappella music.

Last year's choral festival carried on the Department's dedication to promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding through the art of choral music, which transcends geographical boundaries and brings together



singers from diverse backgrounds to celebrate humanity's richness. The festival has become a melting pot of races and cultures, fostering an environment where people can exchange ideas and traditions from around the country, as well as learn new music. This cultural exchange extends beyond music, as participants often engage in collaborative projects and conversations that extend over years. Coordinating the participation of international and local singers always poses some logistical challenges. However, the implementation of advanced planning tools, improved communication channels, and constantly streamlined administrative processes has contributed to smoother operations.

The choral festival at the Temple is one of three such festivals held at continental Bahá'í Houses of Worship around the world. Concerts from past years are posted on YouTube for the enjoyment of the wider world community.

### **Carnegie Hall invitation**

For the second time, the Bahá'í choir was invited to take part in the annual presentation of Handel's Messiah at Carnegie Hall in New York. The first invitation came in 2017 after Distinguished Concerts International New York found videos of the Bahá'í Choral Festival choir singing choruses from the Messiah a cappella. That year, 97 singers under the banner of the Bahá'í House of Worship choir came together from around the country to participate, and now the choir has again been invited to become part of the 400 singers for the annual presentation. It is expected that 30–40 singers associated with the choir will participate in 2024.

### **Demonstrating racial justice**

While the main goal of the Bahá'í House of Worship choir remains to regularly provide music at the Temple, it continues to be recognized as a multi-racial choir that sings a wide variety of sacred a cappella music in the styles of several cultural groups. As it looks ahead, the Music Department remains steadfast in its pursuit of excellence, cultural understanding, and promoting and presenting the transformative power of music.







# Office of Communications *with The American Bahá'í, US Bahá'í Media Services, Brilliant Star, and Office of Inquiry Services*

Over the past year, the Office of Communications examined existing processes, reviewed the subtle balance between centralization and decentralization, and envisioned evolution—all in response to the growth and movement of clusters called for in the Nine Year Plan.

The Office comprises several teams focused on creating and sharing a variety of content about the Bahá'í Faith. Team members strive to generate content that sparks interest and facilitates engagement in the Faith's community-building activities.

Among the teams are content creators producing narratives and reports for Bahai.us/stories, *The American Bahá'í*, and the *Brilliant Star* magazine and website for children. US Bahá'í Media Services focuses on video production and on providing audio-visual support to major conferences and events. The Office of Inquiry Services handles incoming requests for information, and the Social Media Initiative team is learning about engagement through the “meaningful conversations” initiative, which is promoted on social media as a support to community-building efforts.

Additional news, articles, features, audio stories, and video pieces are also shared in *US Bahá'í News*, an electronic newsletter directed to a public audience via SoundCloud and on social media platforms.

## **Embracing changes**

As clusters throughout the US advance steadily toward the goals of the Nine Year Plan, corresponding changes at the Office of Communications have been initiated. The Office is actively examining different approaches

to its work and experimenting with various delivery methods and narrative styles, while also expanding its audience, strengthening interdepartmental collaborations, and taking initial steps in partnerships with a few regions.

The Office also advanced on its journey to refine the creation, promotion, distribution, and analysis of content, establishing a dedicated space in which all content creators can refine and merge their various strategies in an effort to achieve editorial coherence. This team is tasked with addressing overarching issues, such as identifying optimal matches between platforms and specific story types while placing a strong emphasis on clarity and accessibility.

Building on the collaborative efforts with Regional Bahá'í Councils and grassroots communities, a now operational internal asset management system has completed phase one. This collaborative project, which involves the Office of Information Technology and the National Bahá'í Archives, aims to ensure optimal utilization and long-term preservation of digital assets. The system is designed to improve the Office's capacity to manage, organize, and access its extensive collection of photos and videos, thereby enhancing accessibility for stakeholders. Furthermore, it serves the crucial role of safeguarding these files for future generations and facilitating their eventual transfer to the National Bahá'í Archives.

In addition to this, the migration of numerous media files has commenced, laying the foundation for a comprehensive media library within the new system. As the learning process unfolds regarding the construction of digital systems, the primary objective remains to inspire local communities to



document their activities and processes, fostering the creation of their own narratives.

The ongoing development of the *A Rich Tapestry* series by US Bahá'í Media Services involves striving to find fresh ways “community life begins to emerge in every cluster.” Collaborating with local youth and junior youth camps in the Chicago area, the team filmed activities and evaluated methods for using the footage to attract more participants. The insights gained will be shared with local institutions, camp organizers, and community members.

### **Office of Inquiry Services**

One of the past year's transformations, led by the Office of Inquiry Services (IQS), was the rollout of the new Inquiry Management System (IMS). This involved training responders across all 13 regions in the new seeker response system. The seeker response network is the initial contact point for thousands of requests for information from the general public and members of the Bahá'í community that come in by way of 800-22-UNITE, online contact forms, online registration forms, and web chats on bahai.us. All 13 regions will have transitioned to IMS by Ríḍván 2024.

The new IMS will better enable those serving in the seeker response network to follow up and connect with people who call, pose questions online, or engage in conversations as part of their spiritual search. The goal is to invite people to engage with community-building activities at the local level. The new system will also collect information about the topics that interest seekers. This information may inform future story coverage and content creation by the Office

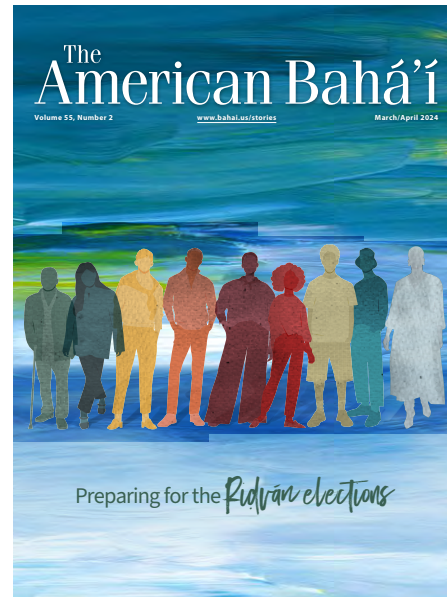
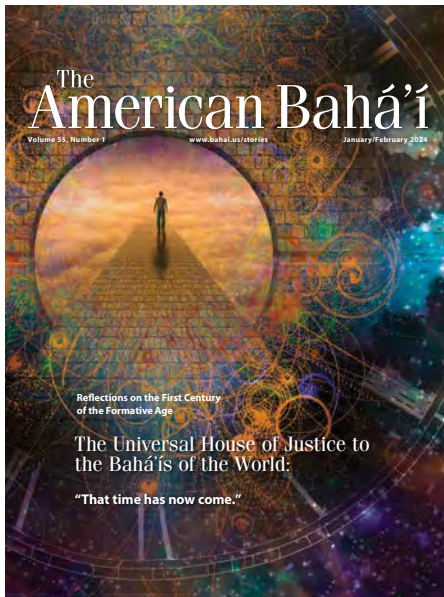
of Communication's publishing teams. Some highlights of this system are dynamic mobile access; clearer “statuses” of where seekers are on their journeys, which assists in follow-up; scalability of resources from the grass roots to the national level; ability to send mass email invitations; and ability to customize views of data.

Some 67 percent of all new adult and youth enrollments nationwide in 2023 came from online registrations. There was a decrease in the number of inquiries received this year.

Each member of the IQS team accompanies regional and subregional seeker response coordinators as they work to create timely connections between people who are interested in the Faith and Bahá'ís and community-building activities across the country. IQS also facilitates and supports a learning process for seeker response coordinators at the regional, subregional, and cluster levels. The IQS team provides training and support for the IMS database, updates the resource site for Councils and seeker response coordinators, hosts monthly and semi-annual reflections—the latter including representatives of Regional Councils and members of the Continental Board of Counselors—and produces a newsletter for seeker responders that shares learning gleaned from reflections, suggestions, and experience throughout each year.

### ***The American Bahá'í***

*The American Bahá'í* magazine endures in its mission to enlighten, invigorate, educate, and unite the Bahá'í community in the United States. As the Nine Year Plan continues to unfold, the publication's commitment to learning and



its dedication to fostering knowledge, both at the national level and at the grass roots, have advanced. Guided by the nascent content strategy crafted by the Office of Communications and propelled by shifts in personnel, the magazine endeavors to deepen its service to the national Bahá'í community.

A series of reflections and consultations revealed several focal points for growth and development so far:

- Encouraging a growing community: With the anticipated expansion outlined in the Nine Year Plan, the magazine commits to delivering content through both traditional print and digital platforms.
- Focusing on unified diversity: Recognizing the rich tapestry of cultures and Bahá'í experiences within its readership, the magazine seeks to refine its written and visual elements, particularly in elucidating glimpses of the transformative power of the Cause in society.
- Enhancing collaboration: To better support the Plan's objectives and national initiatives, the magazine aims to strengthen partnerships with the Learning Desk and other agencies of the National Spiritual Assembly, fostering a deeper understanding across the national community.

- Promoting Bahá'í life: With a special emphasis on youth and families, the magazine endeavors to champion the embodiment of Bahá'í principles in everyday life.
- Advancing storytelling: Recognizing the potency of storytelling, the magazine strives to empower collaborators across regions to hone their skills in written and visual narrative.
- Preserving institutional knowledge: As seasoned staff members transition into retirement and new talents join the team, the magazine remains committed to safeguarding and transmitting institutional wisdom.

*The American Bahá'í*, a cornerstone of communication within the US Bahá'í community, is published six times per year and distributed to the US Bahá'í community in the traditional printed edition and as a PDF downloadable from the national website ([bahai.us/community](http://bahai.us/community)). With its reach extending across the continental United States, it serves as a dedicated source of news and Bahá'í identity for tens of thousands of households.

The magazine fulfills multiple vital roles, including disseminating guidance from senior institutions, nurturing inspiration, and encouraging active participation in the Divine Plan among members of the national community. It also serves as a platform for sharing stories of Bahá'ís' endeavors at the national, regional, and local levels to foster community, advance

the Cause, and contribute to the betterment of humanity.

Central to all the content featured is an unwavering commitment to the principle of the oneness of humanity, particularly in addressing racial prejudice, which is deemed as “the most vital and challenging issue.” This thematic exploration has illuminated diverse initiatives, spanning from devotional gatherings to dialogues and community-building endeavors pursued by both individuals and institutions. Esteemed contributors to this discourse include entities such as the National Assembly’s Office of Public Affairs, the Bahá’í Chair for World Peace, and the National Center for Race Amity.

The publication thrives on collaborative efforts with a range of entities, including the Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu’lláh, Regional Bahá’í Councils, and numerous national agencies such as the Learning Desk, Office of Public Affairs, Bahá’í Distribution Service, *Brilliant Star*, Community Administration, Assembly Development, Fund Development, Human Resources, Inquiry Services, Persian Public Information, and the Social Action Desk. Furthermore, staff members actively engage with the Office of the Secretary in the production of the National Spiritual Assembly’s annual report, reinforcing the magazine’s commitment to transparency and accountability within the community.



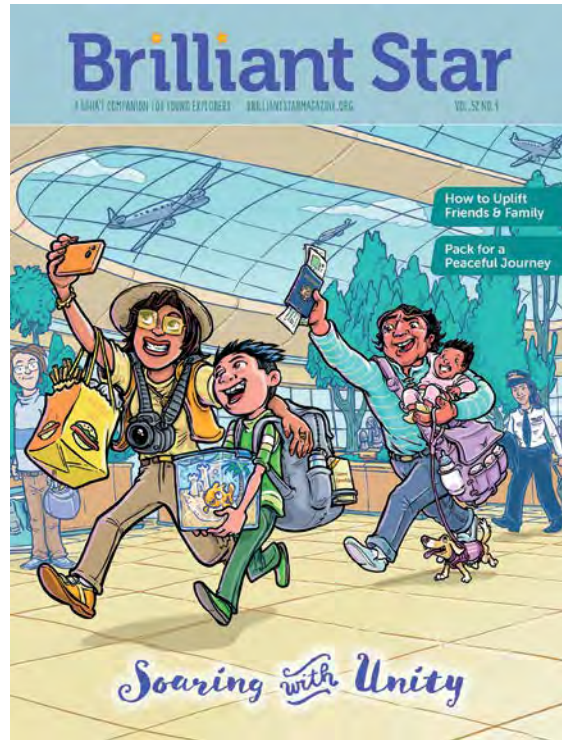
## Brilliant Star

*Brilliant Star* magazine helps to advance the Nine Year Plan through a twofold mission: to empower children and junior youth as world citizens working for the betterment of humanity and to provide resources for teachers and parents to use in education and community building. Content in the magazine and on *Brilliant Star Online*, the magazine's website, addresses timely themes in an accessible way, creating effective tools for sharing the Bahá'í Faith and contributing to public discourse.

To focus on more initiatives related to the Nine Year Plan, *Brilliant Star* has shifted to a quarterly publication schedule. Paid subscribers still receive six issues per subscription. This year, the following issues were in editorial development, production, and/or distribution: Thirst to Learn, Soaring with Unity, Wings of Equality, and issues on Vision of the Future and Power of the Soul (Vol. 52, No. 3 through Vol. 53, No. 3).

Readers continue to express enthusiasm for *Brilliant Star*, which the National Spiritual Assembly generously provides to all registered Bahá'í children in the United States, aged 7–12:

- “The magazine makes me feel happy and spiritual. It helps me learn my virtues in a fun way... Some of the things *Brilliant Star* has taught me are patience, forgiveness, and honesty.” —Rafaella, age 12
- “It is really interesting, educational, and fun. It helps me with discovering who I am. I have learned lots of stories of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Bahá’u’lláh.” —Matin, age 9
- One parent wrote: “It provides (external from our family) content for our voraciously reading eight-year-old who might not otherwise choose to read articles about the history of the Faith or other Bahá'í subjects. He loves the comics and the craft/game ideas too. For children's classes, the game ideas have been very useful.” —Cora



*Brilliant Star Online* and several issues of the magazine (Vol. 52, No. 2 through Vol. 53, No. 1) earned two Mom's Choice Gold Awards, a global sign of excellence in family-friendly materials. Other awards received include the DeRose-Hinkhouse Best of Class award for *Brilliant Star's* “Better Together” cover art by C. Aaron Kreader and Lisa Blecker and Best of Category honors for the 2022 magazines and for *Brilliant Star Online*.

*Brilliant Star Online* is essential for nurturing relationships with the community of children, parents, and teachers. The Luminous Library, the searchable and printable PDF database, offers nearly 60 full magazine issues. *Brilliant Star's* audience is also consistently engaged through social and other digital media, and significant potential exists to reach more families with *Brilliant Star's* teaching materials through focused marketing endeavors.



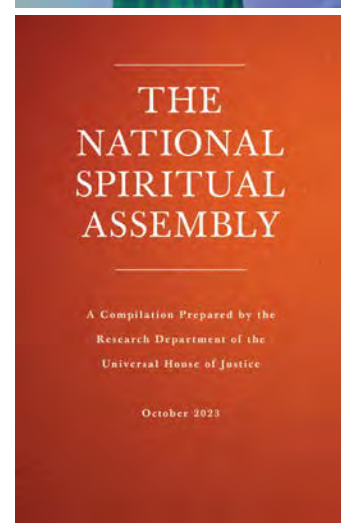
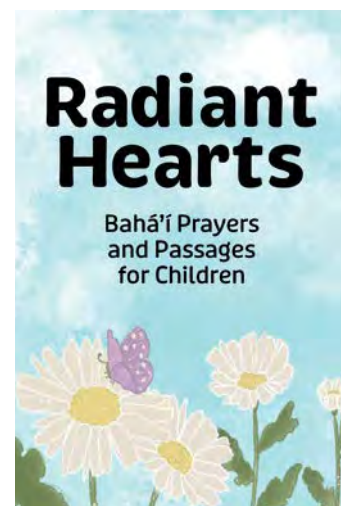
# Bahá'í Publishing Trust and Distribution Service

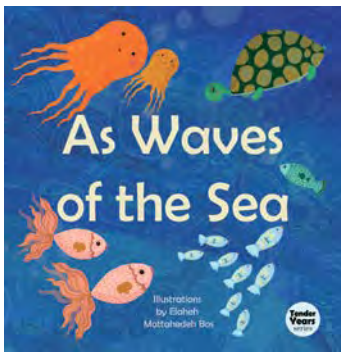
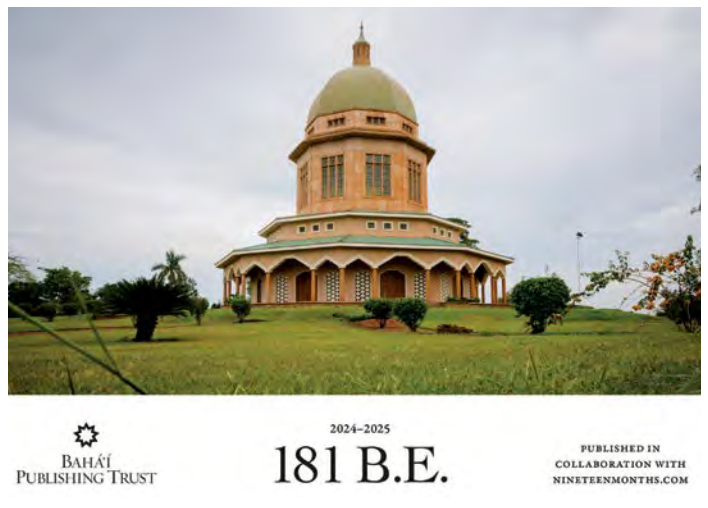
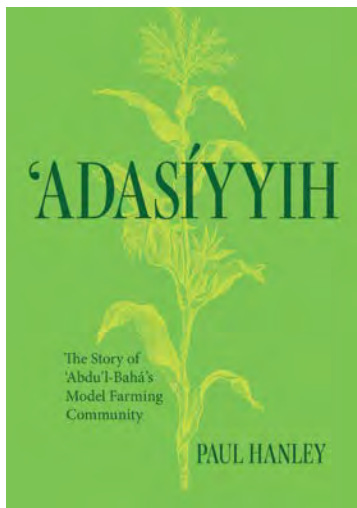
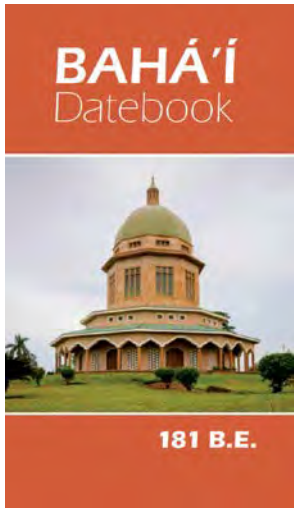
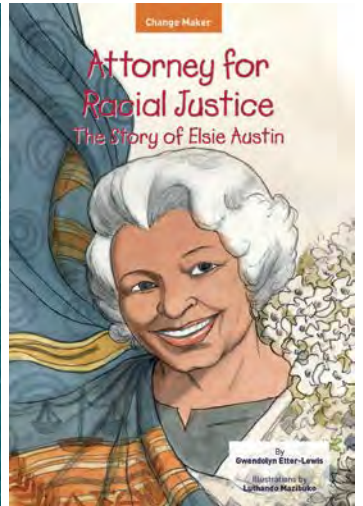
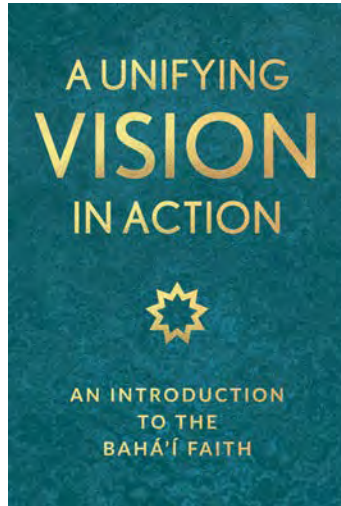
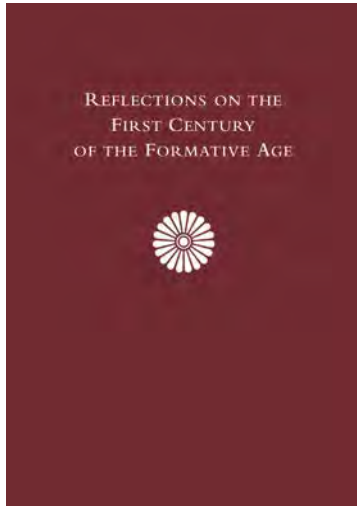
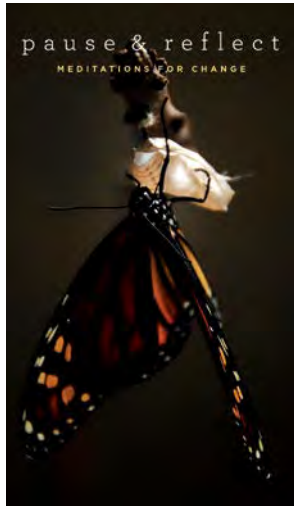
In the 2023–24 fiscal year, the Bahá'í Publishing Trust made its primary objective to read the reality at the grass roots of the community-building process throughout the country and to identify publication needs. At the core of these efforts was a process of team building, consultation, and action. After consulting with a range of individuals, institutions, and agencies, several needs were identified and swiftly acted upon. A children's prayer book titled *Radiant Hearts: Bahá'í Prayers and Passages for Children*, containing all of the prayers and quotations from the Ruhi Institute's grade 1 children's class materials, was produced and distributed throughout the country. Further consultation and reflection resulted in the conclusion that a Spanish/English dual-language version would be of great benefit in many communities, and production began for such an edition in the early months of 2024.

Another publication produced as a direct result of these consultations was a new edition of *The Hidden Words*, bundled with a small prayer book titled *Words of Light*, which could be presented to participants in Ruhi Book 1. Consultation with an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly also highlighted the need for a small, updated, general introductory booklet about the Faith. The resulting project was developed and published in late 2023 with the title *A Unifying*

*Vision in Action: An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith*. Other projects currently in development, in response to the consultations concerning publication needs, include an introduction to the Faith for teenagers, titled *Can I Really Change the World: An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith in Seventy Questions*, and an illustrated book about the soul and identity for youth and young adults.

Throughout the year, several other titles were produced and published in collaboration with a growing roster of authors, illustrators, agencies, and institutions. Titles include *Servant to the Servants: Roy C. Wilhelm, Hand of the Cause of God* by Joel Nizin, Kathryn Jewett Hogenson, and Gary Hogenson; *Point of Adoration: The Story of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, 1873–1892* by Michael V. Day; *As Waves of the Sea, The Tree of Life*, and *A Brilliant Star* illustrated by Elaheh Mottahedeh Bos; and *Your Family*, compiled and curated by Saman Maydani and Carlos Esparza. Two ongoing series saw new titles published—*Meditations for Change* in the Pause & Reflect series and *Attorney for Racial Justice: The Story of Elsie Austin*, by Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis with illustrations by Luthando Mazibuko, in the Change Maker series. New compilations prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice—*To Set the World in Order: Building and Preserving Strong Marriages* and *The National Spiritual Assembly*—were published, as was *Reflections on the First Century*





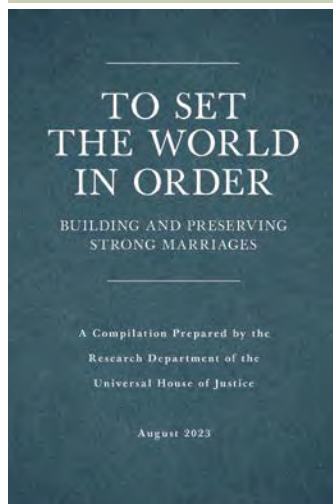
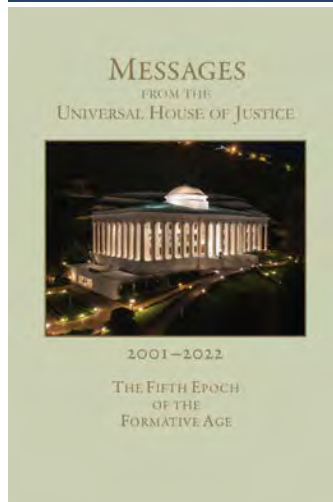
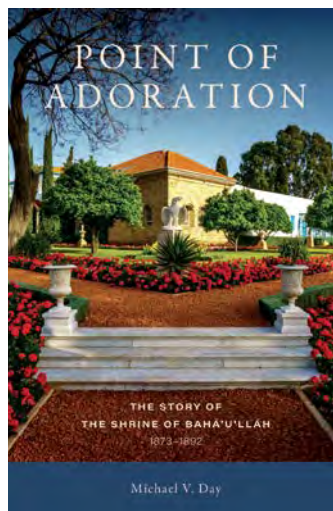
of the Formative Age, which is the November 28, 2023, letter of the Universal House of Justice in booklet form.

The first quarter of 2024 also saw the much-anticipated publication of *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 2001–2022: The Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age*; the Bahá'í wall calendar and datebook for the year 181 BE were published as well. Other works currently being prepared for publication in 2024 include *'Adasíyyih: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Model Farming Community* by Paul Hanley and *Sparks of Fire: Unknown Poetry of Ṭáhirih* by John S. Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat.

Another key area of focus has been the enhancement of digital accessibility. The expansion of e-book and audiobook offerings has made a wide range of titles more affordable and accessible to customers all over the world. There are currently 107 e-books for purchase and 181 free e-books with 17 languages represented. Audiobook offerings have grown as well with several new titles, along with sacred texts, now available at both [Bahaibookstore.com](http://Bahaibookstore.com) and [Audible.com](http://Audible.com). A revamped website, launched in February, along with ongoing marketing campaigns, an email newsletter distributed twice a week, and an evolving relationship with trade distribution partner IPG have made the Publishing Trust catalog available and accessible to a larger audience than ever before.

Customers are engaging with the website and mobile app, and many are finding Publishing Trust titles at online retailers such as Amazon, where sacred texts and introductory materials continue to sell. Over the past 12 months, several prominent titles such as the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, *Prayers and Meditations*, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, and *Bahá'í Basics* have demonstrated robust sales, underscoring the continued relevance and demand for these titles.

The Publishing Trust has also been involved in executing and planning several webinars, from author events to writing workshops, in collaboration with the Wilmette Institute. The Publishing Trust has also convened a consultative group to explore literature for young readers and writers. One outcome of these consultations is the development of an online literary arts journal for youth. The initiative is currently in its early stages.





*Research Services*

12



# National Bahá'í Archives

The National Bahá'í Archives acquires, preserves, and provides access to materials documenting the history and activities of the National Spiritual Assembly and the United States Bahá'í community, in accordance with Shoghi Effendi's guidance that "[t]he importance of the institution of Bahá'í Archives...is essentially to be found in the vast amount of historical data and information it offers both to the present-day administrators of the Cause, and to the Bahá'í historians of the future." The most cherished possessions of the Archives are its collections of original Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and letters from Shoghi Effendi. The Archives also holds the permanent records of the National Spiritual Assembly and other Bahá'í institutions and assists Local Assemblies to manage their records, supporting the development of their administrative systems.

The Archives welcomes donations of the personal papers of Bahá'ís, as well as materials documenting



Marian Anderson at the rose planting ceremony in 1964

all elements of this diverse and ever-changing community. Since Rídván 2023, the Archives has received more than 90 collections of records, personal papers, photographs, and audiovisual materials, including three original letters by the Guardian, 28 collections or additions to the archival papers of individuals, many historical audio and video recordings, and historical photographs. The Archives received four transfers of Bahá'í National Center records and six transfers of the records

of Bahá'í organizations and communities. Archives staff arranged and described some 40 linear feet of records and personal papers, and 2,454 historical photographs were added to the photograph collection. The National Bahá'í Library, a special library of publications related to the Faith containing more than 20,000 items, was augmented by several donated personal and institutional library collections, as well as by purchase; however, cataloging these new resources has been suspended for the time being.

During the past year, Archives staff responded to more than 240 reference requests from individuals, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and offices of the National Center. The Archives hosted 22 visiting researchers during the year. About 570 visitors from 32 states and 15 countries visited to view the permanent exhibit of relics and original Bahá'í Writings. Archives staff also assisted researchers remotely by producing digital copies

of historical documents, audio recordings, and moving images. The Archives provided historical images and documents for several academic books and articles, websites, and other projects for individuals and Spiritual Assemblies.

Following the choice of a more suitable location, construction of the new Archives facility is expected to begin soon and to be completed in 2024. The storage area in the newly chosen facility is more than twice the size of the one previously proposed and will feature custom-

designed mobile shelving cabinets to maximize efficiency, security, and convenience. The building will be fitted with modern high-quality climate control, fire protection, and security systems. The generosity of the friends in contributing to the special Archives Fund set up to support the construction of this much-needed new building is acknowledged with deep appreciation.

Archives staff are continuing to study how best to preserve and provide access to digital



National Inter-racial Committee, 1955

materials and audiovisual (AV) recordings. A significant achievement during the past year was the implementation of a new digital asset management system for managing and cataloging AV and other digital resources of historical importance—a collaborative line of action between the Archives and Bahá'í Media Services. At the same time, digitization of legacy audiovisual recordings has continued, with the primary focus on videotapes in obsolete formats, which, as the most endangered physical media, must be quickly saved as digital files or lost. To date, more than 10,000 archival video recordings have been digitized, including historical interviews and talks, scenes from National Conventions, and footage from Bahá'í activities around the world. The asset management system also holds thousands of audio recordings.

Part of the mission of the Archives is to assist Bahá'í agencies and Local Spiritual Assemblies to manage their own records. Good

recordkeeping helps institutions to carry out their responsibilities on behalf of a growing community. Because the records of today become the archives of the future, investment in recordkeeping practices brings both near-term and future benefits. However, maintaining trustworthy digital records for a long time can be challenging, especially in circumstances with inconsistent staffing, so the Archives advises Spiritual Assemblies to retain copies of their most important documents on paper whenever possible. Guidelines for Spiritual Assembly and community archives can be found in chapter 4 of *Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*, which is available online ([bahai.us/community/resources/assembly-references](http://bahai.us/community/resources/assembly-references)). A supplement related to archives is available on the same website or upon email request ([archives@usbnc.org](mailto:archives@usbnc.org)).

# Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project

The proposal to produce a well-researched, comprehensive reference work on the Bahá'í Faith began in the mid-1980s. In the preinternet era, published information about the Faith was scattered, inadequate, and often inaccurate, even as the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran was generating unprecedented worldwide attention. The exertions of a farsighted group of scholars and publishers led to the establishment of the Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project. An international effort under the aegis of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, the project evolved through a resolute process of consultation, planning, reflection, and modification. A central concern, among many that had to be considered, was the range of transformative changes in the fields of publishing and information technology that accelerated during the late twentieth century.

In December 2006, the Universal House of Justice approved a plan to publish an interim selection of articles online while work on an A-Z encyclopedia proceeded. The Encyclopedia Project's website ([www.bahai-encyclopedia-project.org](http://www.bahai-encyclopedia-project.org)) is the product of that decision, subsequently modified when the National Spiritual Assembly downsized the project in late 2008 as a cost-saving measure during the world economic crisis. The website offers a limited selection of detailed, signed articles on Bahá'í teachings and institutions, history, and biography suitable for an audience that includes both Bahá'ís and the wider public. The selection of articles includes much information not available elsewhere, especially in English-language sources. Participants in study circles have noted that several articles are especially useful in their learning process. Although additional entries and updates have been deferred due to the limitations of the current website, the project has amassed a huge amount of material from which to draw in the future.

Traffic has remained strong since the website was launched in April 2009. The site continues to attract thousands of users from around the world. For many years, new users have accounted for approximately 80 percent of the total. In mid-2023, website activity monitoring changed from one company to another, resulting in data being reported in new ways. One consequence is that every visitor from July 2023 onward was initially recognized as a new user, making an accurate count for the year impossible. However, the previous 80/20 percentages are probably still valid. In the past year, most users have come from the United States and Canada, the third-largest percentage from Australia, and the fourth from China,



May Bolles and Edith Sanderson MacKaye, Paris 1902

representing a significant increase in the number of users from that country in the past two years. The fifth-largest number comes from the United Kingdom. Other countries with large percentages include India, Germany, Malaysia, and New Zealand.

“Hands of the Cause of God” by Eunice Braun and the editors has consistently been among the most widely read articles on the website, including in 2023. The article with the next largest number of readers during the past two years was “Children” by Nancy A. Davis and the editors. “Yahya, Mirza” by Moojan Momen has risen steadily in readers during this period, no doubt reflecting increased study of the Covenant by people engaged in Ruhi Institute courses. Growing interest in environmental issues appears to have led to greater interest in the biography of the noted environmentalist Richard St. Barbe Baker, written by Wendi Momen and Anthony A. Voykovic, making it the fourth most widely read article in the past year. The next most read articles are “Administration, Bahá'í” by Glenford E. Mitchell, “‘Abdu'l-Bahá ‘Abbas” by Firuz Kazemzadeh, “Mashriqu'l-Adhkár” by Julie Badiée and the editors, “Chase, Thornton” by Robert H. Stockman, and “Letters of the Living” by the editors.

Development and maintenance of this unique reference compilation rests on the generosity of individual Bahá'ís. At present the Encyclopedia Project has neither office space nor paid staff.



Martha Root's passport, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Hawaii

Instead, it depends on volunteer administrative and editorial service. Earmarked contributions help to support its minimal expenses.

Such support aligns with the objectives of the Universal House of Justice. During the previous

series of Plans, the intellectual life of the Bahá'í world thrived, as the House of Justice noted in its Riḍván 2021 message. As an April 24, 2008, letter written on the House of Justice's behalf states, "Far from being a diversion from the worldwide effort to advance the process of entry by troops, Bahá'í scholarship can be a powerful reinforcement to that endeavour and a valuable source of new enquirers." The House of Justice wrote further in its December 30, 2021, letter to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counselors: "It will be up to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to provide, in a world of ideas, the intellectual rigor and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds."

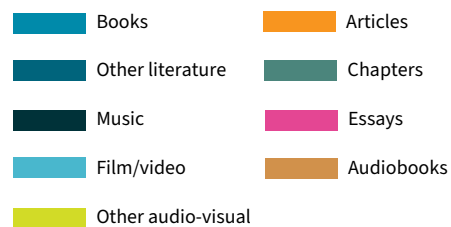
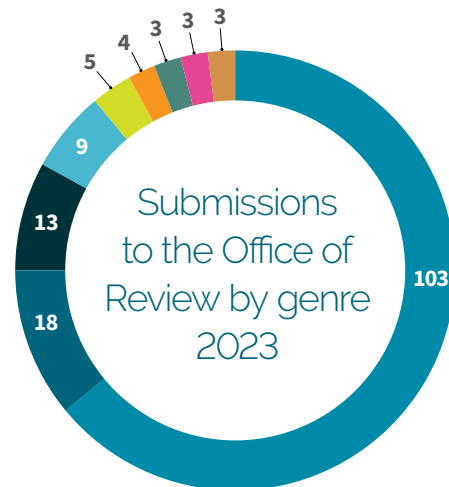
The Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project welcomes comments and inquiries by email ([encyclopedia@usbnc.org](mailto:encyclopedia@usbnc.org)) and strives to continue serving as a resource throughout the Nine Year Plan.

## Office of Review

The literature review process was initiated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a temporary measure to protect the Bahá'í Faith while in its early stages of development. This requirement has been continued to date by the Guardian and by the Universal House of Justice, which, in a letter dated December 29, 1988, wrote: "[F]ar from adopting a carefree attitude, the community must be conscious of the necessity to present a correct view of itself and an accurate understanding of its purpose to a largely skeptical public." In 2023, the Office of Review continued to collaborate extensively with authors, artists, musicians, and filmmakers.

While still a temporary measure, prepublication review continues to ensure that works produced by Bahá'í authors and artists represent the Bahá'í Faith accurately and with dignity. A third criterion is timeliness—whether a work may endanger the friends or be unwise to distribute for another reason.

The review of literature and audiovisual materials, including films and music, is done on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly by the Office of Review, collaborating with a network of volunteer reviewers around the country. Publication of certain translations and historical documents is subject to additional protective approval requirements at the international level.



The Bahá'í literature review process applies to all works written or created by Bahá'ís and which have specific Bahá'í content—such as quotes from the Writings, explicit references to the teachings, Central Figures, history, and so on. A work that incorporates Bahá'í principles but in such a way that they are not

expressly identified with the Faith is not subject to Bahá'í review.

In general, the policy of review does not apply to the medium of the internet, particularly personal web pages and blogs, where content is amenable to easy change and revision, individual initiative is strongly encouraged, and learning through multiple experiences is valued. In the case of more formal online undertakings, such as e-books or articles in online journals with institutional sponsorship, the policy of review does apply.

### **A learning process**

The Review Office aims to nurture a consultative approach to review, to educate authors and artists new to the process about review standards and purposes, and to foster a spirit of collaboration among all involved. As the Universal House of Justice wrote in a letter dated December 10, 1992, Bahá'ís should look upon review “in this early stage in the development of the Faith [as] a species of peer review which they welcome, since it is primarily among their fellow Bahá'ís that they would find at this time those who would have sufficiently wide and deep understanding of the Faith and its Teachings to raise issues of importance which they would want to consider before publication.”

The open-ended network of reviewers consists primarily of authors and artists who have themselves submitted materials for review, which contributes to the continual building of the community's collective capacity to uphold the review standards for accuracy and dignity across a wide diversity of fields. Authors are frequently asked to recommend reviewers, and in some cases reviewers and authors may choose to consult with each other directly. The Review Office fosters this

learning process both as it carries out its daily work and as it addresses newly emerging review questions in consultation with authors, artists, and reviewers in accordance with the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly.

### **Systems and statistics**

All submissions are received in electronic form. The Review Office received 161 submissions this past year, down from 180 the previous year, but similar to the average before that. Approximately 81 percent of submissions were literature, and 19 percent were audiovisual materials. The wide variety of items reviewed includes articles, chapters, non-fiction books, novels, memoirs, compilations, poetry, audiobooks, educational material, essays, children's materials, booklets, scripts, films, songs, CDs, and artwork.

Authors and artists are generally asked to allow three to four months for review of a book, eight weeks for an article, and four weeks for a CD. Many reviews are completed more quickly than this and some require longer, depending on the length and complexity of the work and the availability of reviewers. In addition to reviewing new cases, the Review Office responds to a steady stream of general correspondence, specific inquiries, and resubmissions.

In their diversity, range, and depth, the materials being created by Bahá'í authors and artists include work intended to contribute directly or indirectly to community building, to spiritual transformation, to public and academic discourse, and to new approaches to social action. It is a privilege to witness the creativity and devotion inspired by the Message of Bahá'u'lláh as expressed by the talented and dedicated friends with which the US Bahá'í community is blessed.

*Operations*



# Office of Human Resources

The Office of Human Resources handles wide-ranging responsibilities on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly, including the development and support of staff at the national and regional levels. The Office's work is organized around these broad areas: enhancing the process of capacity building, advancing understanding, and increasing close collaboration among those serving the institutions and agencies.

In efforts to advance the process of learning, the Office draws insights from the messages of the Universal House of Justice and the National Spiritual Assembly and strives to implement elements of the Nine Year Plan in its work. It also seeks to advance understanding of what it means to release “the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures.” In pursuit of this goal the Office endeavors to gain a fuller conception of how Bahá'ís' individual and collective contributions further this aim in administrative and community fields of service.

In response to the needs of the Plan, more service opportunities have become available in various national offices and within the regions. The Office is focused on identifying diverse individuals with specific qualities, attitudes, and skills necessary for the roles. This approach has allowed an opportunity for close collaboration with Bahá'í National Organization (BNO) office managers and regional institutions regarding the onboarding process.

The Office has continued its collaboration with the Regional Bahá'í Councils regarding processes related to the engagement of human resources in the field of service within the regions. The Office, through regular consultation, supports the national clearance process of individuals who dedicate their time to serving minors and implements the Policy for the Protection of Children, Junior Youth, and Youth. It also collaborates regularly with the individuals serving as clearance officers in the regions to address questions and issues that arise.

The Office supports the efforts of the Learning Group, an interdepartmental team comprised of BNO staff that is focused on capacity building

and promoting greater coherence between the operations of the BNO and the framework of the community-building process. The Office also supports the efforts of Group 31, a Bahá'í National Center group of African Americans focused on promoting the oneness of humanity and addressing the issue of race. Group 31 works within the BNO and also undertakes collaboration with friends in the wider society who share a “yearning to revitalize the material and spiritual foundations of the social order.” Office team members are actively engaged in both groups.

The BNO staff orientation, which was held over Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic, has now transitioned back to an in-person program. This shift allows for deeper conversations as we continue to explore and advance our understanding of what it means to serve our institutions at the national level in light of guidance. We have also observed that being in person enriches the experience and strengthens relationships through visits to the House of Worship, the National Bahá'í Archives, and departments in the Evanston and Wilmette area. The Office, through collaboration with BNO staff, also seeks to create spaces that support a devotional character and encourage a mode of operation characterized by study, consultation, action, and reflection. Staff at the BNO are invited to weekly virtual devotions that focus on elevating conversations around the application of principles and values in our service to the National Spiritual Assembly.

As the work becomes more complex, the Office has been implementing strategies to enhance efficiency and align service with the Faith's principles and continues to refine its processes and systems related to staff recruitment, orientation, and training material content. The process to advance our consultation as a team and share pertinent information related to our area of service has enabled the Office to work more effectively and allow for greater consistency. The Office engages in regular study and reflection, aims to emphasize the capacities and qualities necessary for service, and strives to attain higher levels of functioning.



# Office of Information Technology

The Office of Information Technology (IT) is comprised of five sections, each with dedicated roles and responsibilities that support the technical infrastructure and applications of the Bahá'í National Organization (BNO) and its agencies. The sections are analytics and reporting, applications support, program management, helpdesk, and infrastructure and security.

## **Analytics and reporting**

This team supports BNO offices, Regional Councils, and other institutions by providing automated reports, analytical applications, and geographic information mapping. The team's goal is to increase overall efficiency and improve access to information related to learning about advancing the goals of the Nine Year Plan. It focuses on increasing access between datasets, developing new tools and applications, and expanding the reach of the national Bahá'í GIS portal.

## **Applications support**

This team of software developers supports and enhances applications used daily by BNO offices and the community. Several of the enterprise-level applications are mentioned below.

## **Program management**

The architecture review team and Program Management Office were established in the second half of 2023. These teams' operations and capacity to support IT projects have advanced significantly, increasing program efficiency by providing oversight, leadership, and resources.

## **Helpdesk**

Throughout 2023, the Helpdesk prioritized cybersecurity measures to protect the BNO's digital infrastructure. This included regular monitoring and updates of antivirus software, implementing multi-factor authentication, conducting employee training on best practices for online security, and upgrading numerous hardware devices. These efforts have resulted in enhanced protection against potential cyber threats.

## **Infrastructure and security**

In close collaboration with other IT sections, this team has diligently ensured that essential hardware, networking components, and applications are secure by applying security solutions, replacing obsolete servers, and upgrading software. It is increasingly important to expand the BNO's cloud footprint beyond the Microsoft Azure Cloud environment. A team of professionals has been established to guide the BNO in developing a cloud infrastructure that will comply with industry standards and security practices ensuring resilience, scalability, and security.

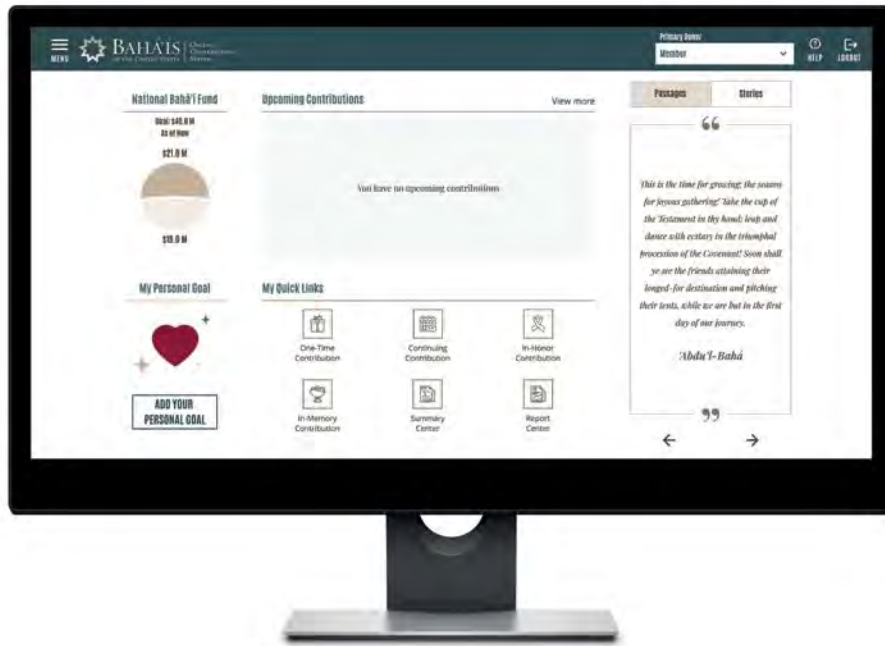
## **Enterprise applications update**

**Case management system.** Currently the Case Management Solution (renamed ARK) is being expanded as a more comprehensive application.

**Finance system.** The finance information technology leader plays a critical role in supporting the Office of the Treasurer's primary general ledger system, as well as other integrated systems such as bookstores and retail management systems. In 2023, the team upgraded fusion merchant accounts to accept credit card payments from other countries.

**US Bahá'í community site.** One major enhancement to this site is the implementation of the Progressive Web App (PWA) application software. This results in a single codebase that will work on any desktop or mobile device.

**Online Balloting System.** The Online Balloting System (OBS), in use since 2021, continued its enhancements for online voters and elections. OBS, for the first time, is available to communities conducting two-stage elections. Election data collected through OBS automatically transfers to the existing membership database for most elections. Work continues to integrate OBS with other legacy systems.



**Online Contribution System (OCS).** OCS is a custom-developed application that offers a complete set of functionalities for accepting and managing online contributions. OCS 5+ is the most significant upgrade since the system’s introduction in 2010. The redesign benefits individual users as well as local treasurers and internal staff. OCS is partially redesigned with Java (Spring) and JS Angular technologies. The Ḥuqúqu’lláh Payment System was developed for those paying Ḥuqúqu’lláh.

**Online Audit System.** To assist local and BNO treasurers in the audit process, the system offers an electronic audit form using predefined steps to cover the full cycle of the audit from creation to approval.

**Inquiry Management System.** This new application uses a contact relationship management (CRM) toolset from Microsoft Dynamics to expand on the previous seeker response system. More adaptable to communities’ growing needs, this new platform fosters relationships between those making requests and Bahá’í resources that meet their needs, regardless of the nature of their inquiries.

**Fund Development.** The Fund Development CRM is developed on a comprehensive platform that streamlines donor management, enhances communication, and improves overall fundraising efficiency. This CRM (Microsoft Dynamics) enables the fund development team to effectively track donor interactions, manage relationships,

and cultivate long-term support. Key benefits of the CRM include centralized donor information, meaningful and personalized relationship building, event and campaign management, data analysis, and reporting.

**Accessibility feature.** IT is adapting its approach to the design and development of future systems and applications in accordance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.2. These guidelines help make content more accessible to a wider range of people with disabilities including blindness and low vision, deafness and hearing loss, limited movement, speech disabilities, photosensitivity, and combinations of disability. They also provide some accommodation for people with learning disabilities and cognitive limitations. These guidelines address accessibility of web content on desktops, laptops, tablets, and mobile devices.

In addition, IT also played a pivotal role in establishing a centralized organizational document site using SharePoint. This dedicated platform serves as a comprehensive repository for essential BNO staff documents. These documents encompass a range of critical information, including organizational policies, standards and procedures, the organizational chart, and workflow details. This compilation plays a crucial role in fostering deeper understandings of organizational guidelines and policies among BNO staff.

# Office of Membership and Records

The Office of Membership and Records is responsible for maintaining the official records for all Bahá'ís, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and registered groups in the US Bahá'í community. In this capacity, the Office performs a number of important functions:

- processing enrollments, child registrations, and international transfers into and out of the United States
- providing UnityWeb access to Auxiliary Board members and to individuals designated by Regional Bahá'í Councils
- providing access to UnityWeb and the national website ([bahai.us/community](http://bahai.us/community)) for approved foreign Bahá'ís
- making changes to the database when locality boundaries change
- entering results for Ridván elections, Spiritual Assembly officer elections, and by-elections
- recording contact information and postal addresses, marriages, and records of decease for members of the Bahá'í community
- providing marriage and birth certificates
- issuing digital welcome letters and instructions on how to access virtual Bahá'í identification cards on the [bahai.us](http://bahai.us) mobile app for all new enrollees and new arrivals to the US Bahá'í community
- issuing hard copy welcome packages to registered Bahá'í youths turning 15, which include a welcome letter, a Bahá'í ID card, a booklet of prayers titled *Strive*, and instructions for creating a Bahá'í Online Services Account (BOSA) and downloading the [bahai.us](http://bahai.us) mobile app
- capturing and digitizing correspondence sent to and from individuals and institutions to the National Spiritual Assembly and its offices and agencies

This year the Office uploaded 29,818 items into the national database. Team members uploaded 19,248, while 10,570 were uploaded through an automated process.

Over the past year 13,998 external email inquiries were received by the Office. This, plus answers to incoming phone inquiries, generated 18,911 outbound emails to individuals and institutions. (For other membership statistics, see pp. 21–22 of the annual report.)

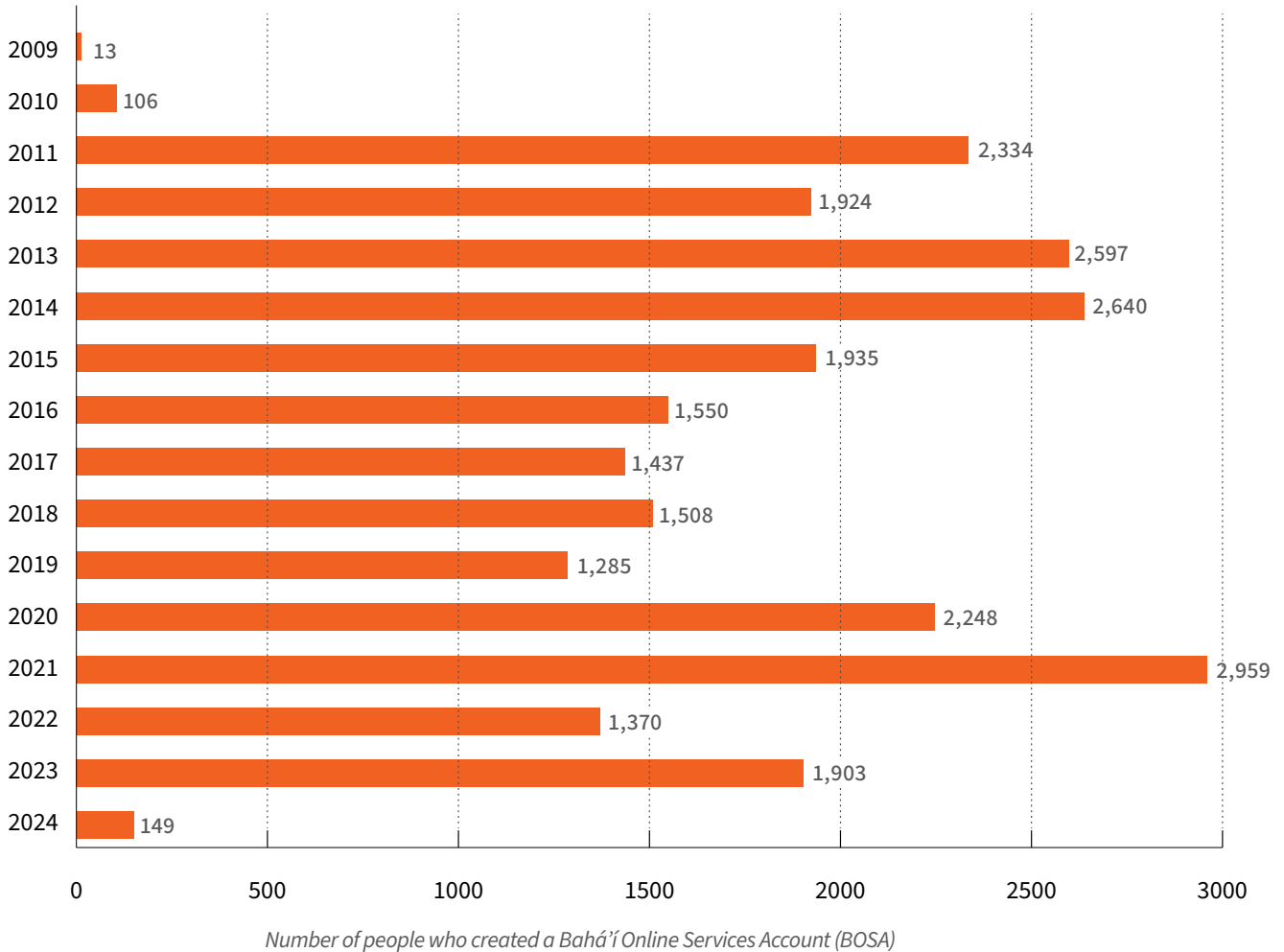
## **Improving the accuracy of addresses in the National Spiritual Assembly's database**

An ongoing task is to improve the accuracy of individual addresses stored in the national membership database by using National Change of Address reports produced by the US Postal Service. During 2023–24, the Office updated 1,972 personal addresses using this report. Team members in this Office also made 5,569 address or name changes that were reported through phone calls and emails. The Office is pleased to receive any notice of an individual Bahá'í's change of address, whether physical or mailing.

## **Support for BNO applications**

The Office of Membership and Records is the first line of support for most of the applications maintained by the Bahá'í National Organization including the BOSA, the Online Balloting System (OBS), and eMembership2. Significant strides are being made in its mission to provide accompaniment to communities in the use of these applications. Through educational webinars, data collection, and collaboration with program developers, the Office enhances its understanding and strives to meet the evolving needs of the US Bahá'í community.

## 25,958 BOSAs created from 2009 to 2024



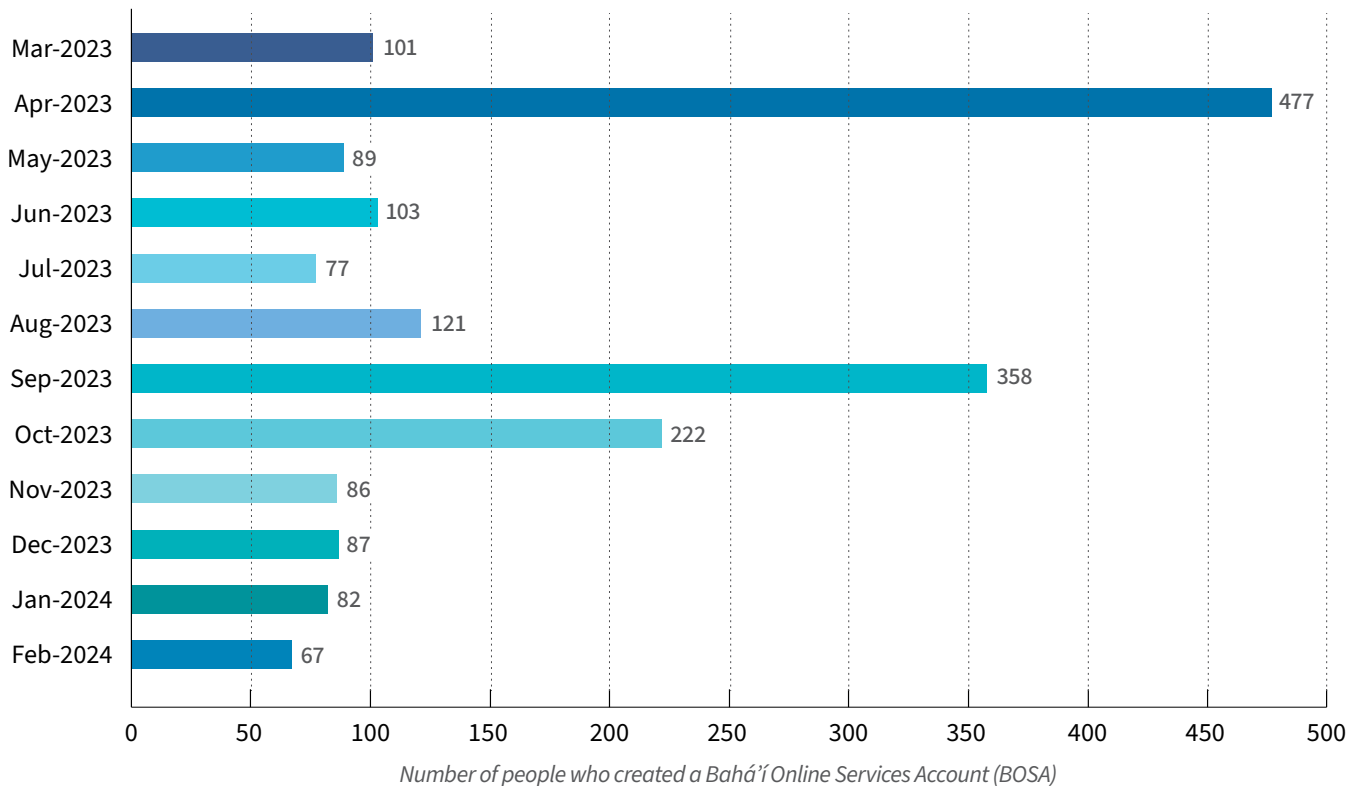
### Community accompaniment through webinars

One of the highlights of the past year was organizing and offering several series of educational webinars about eMembership2, the Bahá'í Online Services Account, the Online Balloting System, and the bahai.us mobile app. One series was also done in collaboration with the Office of the Treasurer. These webinars, attended by some 2,193 friends, were designed to cater to both community and individual needs

for their respective service to the Cause. Of the 22 webinars presented, half were offered on weekends to accommodate the friends' various schedules. Webinars touched on topics ranging from community development to personal growth and empowerment. By offering these webinars, the Office aimed to empower individuals and equip communities with the necessary tools for progress.

# Number of BOSAs created by month/year

March 1, 2023 – February 29, 2024



## Feedback collection and analysis

Central to the Office's efforts is the collection, study, and incorporation of feedback received from webinar participants and the end users of system applications. Through post-webinar surveys, incoming correspondence, and phone call inquiries, the Office diligently gathered valuable insights into the realities and needs of individuals and communities. (Team members often walked the friends step-by-step through application features over the phone or by email.) This meticulous analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and aspirations of individuals and the various communities.

## Collaboration with program developers

The Office recognizes the importance of aligning tools and resources provided by the National Spiritual Assembly with the realities of the communities. To achieve this, the Office has actively shared the feedback and information it gathered with program developers. This collaboration has enabled the tailoring and design of tools to better align with the needs identified, ensuring greater efficacy and relevance.

# Office of Operations *with Public Safety*

The Office of Operations strives to promote, sustain, and drive coherence in operations within the Bahá'í National Organization (BNO). Aiming toward greater efficiency and effective cost management, it consolidates and coordinates resources, especially among BNO departments that provide support services. These efforts are coordinated by the director of operations.

The Office oversees the Public Safety Department, mailroom services, meetings and events, centralized purchasing, office furniture inventory, and front desk operations. The Office has continued to streamline procurement functions across the BNO, which entails coordinating numerous lines of action—in collaboration with other BNO offices—to more efficiently disseminate information and facilitate transactions. Research into new ways to improve purchasing systems at the Bahá'í National Center and, incrementally, across the entire BNO, continues. This includes efforts to create a national procurement office with the goal of achieving concentrated purchasing power at lower cost.

## **Meetings and events**

Those in the Office responsible for meetings and events typically manage logistical details pertaining to gatherings that occur multiple times a year. These include National Spiritual Assembly meetings and BNO staff reflection gatherings; annual events, including the Bahá'í National Convention, the Bahá'í Choral Festival, and the Arab American Conference; board meetings and other gatherings serving the Huqúqu'lláh Trust, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, the Wilmette Institute, Persian Bahá'í Media Services, and regional training institutes; and fundraising events for the Office of the Treasurer.

## **Mailroom services**

The mailroom has continued to facilitate routine mailings including daily seeker-response packets

and other bulk mail projects. The mailroom also performs custom print jobs for various departments, where feasible, rather than sending them to off-site printers, resulting in lower costs for the BNO.

## **Front desk**

The front desk switchboard position continues to be shared by Operations staff in a spirit of collaboration. The Office cross-trains staff to serve in multiple areas of endeavor: purchasing, meetings and events, mailroom, and front desk duties. In this spirit of service, staff members support the Office to meet the needs of the National Spiritual Assembly and its offices and agencies.

## **Public Safety**

The Public Safety Department is staffed by 10 full-time public safety officers, including a coordinator who assists in the Department's day-to-day operations and administration. The officers are responsible for the safety of all staff and visitors on BNO properties located in Wilmette and Evanston, Illinois.

Public Safety provides around-the-clock security. Officers' duties include vehicle and foot patrols of all properties, several times a day. The Department continues to collaborate closely with the House of Worship activities staff to ensure a pleasant and secure environment for all visitors to the Temple and its grounds.

Public Safety provides transportation services and security for National Center meetings and events, including the Bahá'í National Convention and National Spiritual Assembly meetings. During the previous year, the Department also provided security for the 2023 Choral Festival and the July 3, 2023, fireworks celebration in nearby Gillson Park. In the coming year, it will increase the number of full-time staff to enhance its services.

# Properties Office

The Properties Office is responsible for the stewardship of all properties in the United States owned by the National Spiritual Assembly.

Properties managers and staff are experienced in overseeing construction, repairs, historic restoration, maintenance, custodial work, and groundskeeping. They have set as an overall goal to continually introduce new technology and management strategies to reduce operating costs while enhancing the quality and beauty of Bahá'í properties.

## **Developing capacity and unity**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while many facilities were closed, the Office began encouraging existing staff to obtain education and training to become qualified and certified to

perform special maintenance and repairs. Now, in addition to their regular tasks, staff have the skills to do work that used to require outside vendors, including electrical, plumbing, heating and air conditioning, flooring, painting, and carpentry, resulting in a huge cost savings. Recent examples include the renovation of the Bahá'í National Center offices in Evanston, the complete refurbishment of the Bahá'í House of Worship Auditorium's historic upholstered seating, and the installation of new lighting and an audio sound system.

## **New strategies for cost reductions**

Every year those serving in the Properties Office actively seek opportunities to reduce operating costs in order to conserve the Bahá'í Funds. Recently, landscape staff introduced more





perennial floral displays in the Temple gardens and other properties so that the yearly purchase cost of annual flowers could be reduced in 2024 by almost 25 percent. Staff now maintain the 13 complicated Temple fountains themselves instead of using an outside company, at a cost savings of \$33,000. Staff voted to wash their uniforms themselves instead of sending them to a commercial laundry, for an annual cost savings of almost \$15,000.

#### **Staff embracing the Faith and creating additional opportunities for service**

Although most Properties staff are not registered Bahá'ís, 2023 saw three team members embrace the Bahá'í Faith. They are now leading ongoing deepening activities for the entire staff. The Properties Office is also working with the Temple Board to expand opportunities for volunteers to work with Properties staff and acquire skills that enable them to offer service at the House of Worship. The goal is that after volunteers serve at the Temple and in the gardens, they would take their newly acquired skills back to the community both for professional advancement and for additional service at regional properties.

#### **Some significant ongoing projects**

***Bosch Bahá'í School reconstruction.*** Plans were submitted in early 2024 to various governmental agencies to obtain permission to replace the cabins and structures burned by wildfires in 2020 with modern, comfortable, fireproof structures. Plans for the repairs and refurbishment of some of the structures that received minimal damage will, if approved, be initiated as well.

***Northern shoreline revetment construction.*** The valuable 5.5-acre lakefront property adjacent to the House of Worship is the location of the Ḥaḏíratu'l-Quds and will, over time, include additional structures and uses associated with the Temple and Bahá'í National Center.

A second permit has been obtained to complete revetment of the property's remaining shoreline. The first phase of the project, finished in 2019, stopped erosion from rising lake levels on the south end of the property. The remaining northern revetment will permanently establish a complete waterfront boundary and secure the opportunity for future development.





Artist's rendering of bunkhouses at Bosch, courtesy of One World Architecture

***National Bahá'í Archives construction projects.***

Plans are almost complete to reconstruct a nearby existing structure for use as the new National Bahá'í Archives. This facility, which is considerably larger than the one previously selected, will provide enhanced security, safety from fire and other damage, and modern air filtration that will help preserve the collection. It will have offices and spaces for research as well as for preservation and documentation tasks. Plans are also being developed for an archival visitation space in the lower level of the Temple, where

sacred artifacts and historic items would be on display for permitted guests.

***Reconstruction of the Bahá'í Home into a multi-purpose meeting and service facility.***

In early summer 2024, plans will be submitted to governmental agencies to approve the redesign of the Bahá'í Home, at the intersection of Greenleaf and 4th Street in Wilmette. After it is finished, the Home will be available for service and meeting spaces for the area's community-building activities.





***Master plan for needed repairs of House of Worship property.*** In 2024, the Properties Office will work with architects, engineers, and restoration consultants to assess existing conditions and propose a plan for the many projects and repairs needed within the next five years to protect and preserve the historic fabric of the House of Worship. There are several areas of focus:

- steel repair of the Temple's dome and the application of a new rust-inhibiting membrane
- window repairs and replacement
- exterior Temple lighting
- replacement of outdated heating and air conditioning equipment
- new fencing and a gateway to secure the property, which will help preserve the sacred environment and enhance visitors' experiences
- refurbishment of the Temple's lower level, including Foundation Hall, the restrooms, and other spaces

*Affiliated Organizations*

**14**



# Association for Bahá'í Studies— North America

The Association for Bahá'í Studies plays a role in helping to enable participants of varying backgrounds and academic interests to effectively explore how to “provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.”



## Reflection and approach to learning

A preeminent objective this year was to reflect on and document ten years of developments and learning since receiving the July 24, 2013, message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada. This message concerns the Association's role with respect to “the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society.” The Association produced a [Ten Year Retrospective](#), which reports on developments in several related areas:

- fostering evolving conversations within collaborative settings—such as reading groups, writing groups, and seminars—about contributing to professional and academic discourses from a Bahá'í perspective
- reimagining the annual conference
- advancing the Association's publishing endeavors
- strengthening its capacity to operate systematically in a mode of learning

A prevalent theme is how to strengthen capacity to further expand and consolidate the Association's endeavors in alignment with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan.

The report also highlights key objects of learning that are informed by the Plan's conceptual framework:

- multiply the number of spaces—including seminars, reading groups, writing groups, and conferences—in which participants can collaborate, generate collective insights, and share learning about how to “explicate the principles” the Bahá'í community advocates and “demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity”
- enable growing numbers of diverse participants, intent “on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation,” to assist each other to “contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of [spiritual and material] progress”
- develop an outward-looking culture in which participants in different Association spaces understand themselves to be actively cultivating a collective learning process with the wider society that is concurrently aligned with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan
- help young people to view participating in professional and academic discourses as a core dimension of service that is coherent with the imperatives of community building and social action, the training institute's objectives, and the programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity
- assist a growing number of authors to publish articles and books that contribute to “the volume of high-quality literature” exploring various themes “in the light of the teachings” and the insights emerging from the community's experiences
- draw, where appropriate, on the arts as a means of “disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding”

## Committee for Collaborative Initiatives

The Association has fostered a still-evolving set of activities that aim to promote learning about participation in a variety of society's academic, professional, and thematic discourses. The Committee for Collaborative Initiatives coordinates this effort,



which, as it develops, increasingly contributes to the evolution of the annual conference and the publications work. These activities include:

**Reading groups.** These small groups form to read a book or a set of texts from a given field or theme, and to thoughtfully explore the content in a collaborative environment. To date, some 40 reading groups with over 320 participants have formed for various durations this year.

**Writing groups.** The Association has also been exploring how to create consultative environments that enhance individual and collective research, writing, and review.

**Working groups.** These larger groups ideally consist of growing networks of sustained collaborative initiatives. Currently, working groups continue at various stages of development in the areas of Africana Studies, agriculture, built environments (urbanism), economies, health, media, and technology and society.

**Seminars.** The past year has seen 16 thematic seminars on various themes. Ten were in association with the ABS conference in Atlanta, including some aimed specifically at undergraduate students. Additional seminars have been online; others have been in person on college campuses.

**Workshops.** The Association occasionally offers workshops, which are typically half-day sessions that help familiarize participants with the Association's aims.

### Evolution of the annual conference

The Association returned to an in-person conference in Atlanta on the weekend of

August 4–6, 2023. Over 1,900 individuals participated. The conference's overarching objective was to provide an uplifting, welcoming space for participants to explore learning about contributing to academic and professional discourses that are essential to the generation of knowledge and humanity's progress. A few steps were taken in view of this vision: holding 10 seminars aimed at encouraging deeper engagement with a range of themes; holding both seminars and breakout sessions that built upon learning generated throughout the year in reading groups, writing groups, and other smaller settings; and ensuring that experience from the region in which the conference took place was highlighted. Plenary sessions provided key insights into how to enhance the community's intellectual life in view of the provisions of the Nine Year Plan.

### Publications

The Association published two issues of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*: Volumes 32.3–4 and 33.1–2. In keeping with an emphasis on collaborative scholarship, 2023 saw the *Journal* accompany a collaborative project on science and religion that will see publication in early 2024. The *Journal* also gained some initial experience with collaborative review processes. The Association's publishing committee, meanwhile, steadily advanced a number of projects, with a book on the arts nearing publication and two others on theological discourses and on translation proceeding apace.

### Finances

The Association's annual budget is \$393,126 CAD. It has been primarily supported through conference fees and by the National Bahá'í Funds of Canada and the United States.

# Association of the Friends of Persian Culture

“

YOU LEARN BY READING BUT UNDERSTAND BY LOVE.

SHAMS TABRIZI”

The Association of the Friends of Persian Culture is a nonprofit organization operating under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly. Since its inception, its main activity has been the planning and management of annual conferences, initially intended for the benefit of Bahá'ís of Persian descent. As the vision of the Association expanded, its goals and objectives also evolved to include discourse and dialogue with Persian-speaking scholars of various backgrounds.

The objectives of the Association are based on its long-term vision statement and include the following:

## **Discourse and dialogue**

- Make the annual conferences unique spaces for dialogue and substantive discourse on matters of importance to the future of Iran and the welfare of humanity. Discourse participants include like-minded Iranian individuals, groups, and organizations, as well as people of capacity at every level of the Iranian diaspora.
- Attract Iranians of every background to experience unity in diversity and an alternative vision for Iranian society and humanity in general.
- Help dissipate misconceptions about the Bahá'í Faith, including the alleged lack of love and concern of Persian Bahá'ís for Iran and its future.

- Build a bridge of love, understanding, and trust with Iranians of every religious, ethnic, and ideological background and inspire genuine conversation among them on some of the most challenging issues facing Iran and the world. These include the equality of women and men, human rights, elimination of prejudice, social justice, unity in diversity, education, the environment, and the role of religion in society.

## **Celebration of Iranian culture**

- Promote and celebrate the diverse aspects of Persian arts and culture.
- Provide an opportunity for artists, whether Bahá'í or not, to share their talents with a diverse Iranian audience connected by deep love and common respect for the cultural and literary heritage of Iran.
- Provide an opportunity for Bahá'í children and youth of Iranian descent to familiarize themselves with and enjoy their cultural heritage.

## **Community building and social action**

- Create an opportunity for conference participants to familiarize themselves with the practical aspects of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

- Provide information about the community-building activities and social action initiatives of Bahá'ís in their communities.
- Provide an opportunity for conference participants to experience the joyous, courteous, friendly, and inspiring atmosphere of Bahá'í gatherings.
- Further enhance the transformative and unifying spirit of the conference by continually improving the quality of its devotional gatherings.

### 2023 Annual Conference

For the fourth consecutive year, the Association's Board of Directors decided to host the 33rd annual conference virtually, due to health concerns related to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States. The event was broadcast from September 1–3, 2023, on a variety of online platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, Zoom, Facebook, GLWiz, and Andisheh satellite TV. The conference continues to dedicate a substantial portion of its programming to discourse topics that are both relevant to Iran and on which the Bahá'í community has practical and principled insights to offer.

Although virtual conferences, by nature, lack the social dimension of face-to-face gatherings, the conference was well served by two unique qualities: a diversity of programs and presenters, and access to a worldwide audience. Viewers from more than 18 countries watched this year's broadcasts, and the conference has so far had over 24,900 views on YouTube and Facebook. There have also been 3,005 views of individual presentations. The entire conference was broadcast to Iran via Andisheh satellite TV, which estimates that it has over five million household viewers. The initial broadcast occurred during local evening prime time, followed by a rebroadcast the next day.

The conference opened with welcoming remarks by a National Spiritual Assembly member, followed by presentations by a group of eminent Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í Iranian scholars on the general theme of "Glimpses of Persian Culture" and the subtheme of "Foundations of the Prosperity of Mankind." Dr. Firaydoun Javaheri, Ms. Simin Fahandej, Mr. Aryan Yazdani, Mr. Pooya Movahed, Ms. Sovaida Maani, Dr. Mina Yazdani, Dr. Payam Akhavan, and Mr. Hamid Rahmanian were among the conference speakers.

Artistic programs included shadow play, dance, stories behind popular Persian proverbs, and musical performances by Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í artists. Also included were interviews with prominent musicians, including Grammy Award winner Sahba Motallebi.

Most Bahá'ís and friends of the Faith who watched the programs have praised the broadcasts as being well-balanced, highly informative, moving, and hope-inspiring. Video recordings of the entire program are available under YouTube/FOPCA and on the Association's website: [www.fopca.com/en/archives/video](http://www.fopca.com/en/archives/video).

### Finances

Consistent with its status as a nonprofit organization, the Association's main source of income is derived from registration fees, sales of materials, and individual contributions. For many years, the Association was financially self-sufficient. In recent years, however, it has also received financial assistance from the National Assembly to allow maintenance of high quality programming, specifically in the years when the conferences were held virtually with no income from registration fees. In 2023, the Association held its second fundraiser to help meet conference expenses.

“

YOU YOURSELF ARE YOUR OWN OBSTACLE, RISE ABOVE  
YOURSELF...

HAFEZ

”

# Bahá'í Center Assistance Corporation

The Bahá'í Center Assistance Corporation (BCA) is a nonprofit agency established by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States. Since 2005, its mission has been to support the growth and development of the Faith by providing a systematic program of education, training, and technical assistance to communities whose goal is to lease, purchase, or build Bahá'í centers and maintain Bahá'í facilities.

BCA continues to offer its assistance to communities, consulting either in person or by conference call. Board members have skills in areas such as property acquisition, fundraising, design and construction, facilities management, financing, accounting, architecture, conflict resolution, and nonprofit management. BCA assists communities to realize the full potential of their Bahá'í centers and other properties in support of advancing the goals of the Nine Year Plan.

BCA has the capacity to provide energy-related improvements and safety-related renovation loans. Applications are sent to BCA for processing and are reviewed by offices at the Bahá'í National Center for approval and funding by the National Spiritual Assembly. Two new loans were processed and approved this year.

BCA works with offices of the National Assembly to update and maintain data related to all Bahá'í properties requested by the Office for the Development of Administrative Systems at the Bahá'í World Center. BCA also worked with the IT department at the Bahá'í National Center to ensure that all relevant data requested by that office could be included in the properties database. This year, database fields were updated and modified so that the data spreadsheet could be populated by a query of the database. This includes all properties owned or rented by the National Assembly, Regional Bahá'í Councils, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and registered Bahá'í



groups. National and regional offices can add to and update this information through UnityWeb, and Local Assemblies and registered groups can add or update properties through eMembership2.

BCA consulted with 11 Local Assemblies and visited four centers this year. In addition to visiting sites that explicitly request assistance, BCA has reestablished the practice of regularly visiting Local Assemblies and centers to demonstrate support and to learn about their activities and concerns.

BCA meets monthly via Zoom to review and consult on various items. BCA also consults with the Office of Community Administration and the Desk for the Development of Properties and is increasingly collaborating with Regional Bahá'í Councils and Auxiliary Board members in relation to its work. BCA held its annual in-person meeting at the Bahá'í National Center and consulted with the National Spiritual Assembly's Office of the Treasurer.



# Bahá'í Service for the Blind

During the past year, the Service for the Blind has continued with its primary responsibility of providing the literature of the Faith in various media to those who are Blind or visually impaired. The three media currently available are Braille, audio recordings in MP3 format, and large print.

This year, the Service added five audio recordings, 32 titles in Braille, and six items in large print to its collections. It also provided for sale or free upload 16 large print books, 13 audio books, and 55 Braille books.

The Service makes a lending library of audio and Braille materials available to Bahá'ís and friends of the Faith and was able to provide 77 books on loan this year. The Service also makes available *The American Bahá'í* in MP3 format to those who need it at no charge.

The work of the Service is done entirely by volunteers. The Service's website ([www.BahaiServiceForTheBlind.org](http://www.BahaiServiceForTheBlind.org)) provides information about its work and an up-to-date listing of its materials.



# Corinne True Center for Bahá'í History

The Corinne True Center for Bahá'í History was established by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States in January 2024. Its purpose is to foster the study of Bahá'í history, Bahá'í sacred texts, Bahá'í philosophical and theological concepts, and world religions from a Bahá'í and comparative perspective.

The Center accomplishes this through the offering of online noncredit courses, web presentations and interviews, online seminars, online conferences, in-person conferences, and the publication of some of the resulting research. To provide comprehensive support to Bahá'í culture and Bahá'í scholarship, these activities will be designed to be of service at three levels: an introductory level to inform the generality of believers and their friends and encourage them to carry out basic scholarship in these subjects; a more advanced level for Bahá'ís and others who wish to study and do research in greater depth; and graduate and postgraduate level offerings that will include seminars and academic conferences.

At the end of January, the Center began a 16-week course—An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith—for six people. It also issued a call for proposals for presentations that, by the end of February, had received 26 responses. It held its first webinars in February and March. It plans to hold 24 online events in the next year, in addition to offering 6–12 online courses. For more information, you may visit the Center's website (<http://corinnetruecenter.org>) or contact it by email ([info@corinnetruecenter.org](mailto:info@corinnetruecenter.org)).



# Deaf and Hard of Hearing Task Force

This has been an exciting year of planning and outreach for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Task Force. Much of the year has been spent planning a three-day in-person conference at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, with Deaf Bahá'ís from all over the United States. Conference participants will use American Sign Language (ASL) to deepen on the role of the institutions, engage in teaching with Chicago's Deaf community, invite the local Deaf to an ASL prayer service in the House of Worship, have in-person meetings to study and pray, and build community.

## Developing capacity

During the past year, a Task Force member who is Deaf has developed the capacity to host monthly online socials from the West Coast and contribute to the translation of Ruhi Book 1 into ASL. After learning to use a computer, he has gradually and fully assumed his Task Force duties and has asked his local Bahá'í community to provide the accommodations he needs to be able to participate in its affairs.

## Progress toward inclusion

Bahá'í society is progressing toward inclusion of Deaf community members. One Local Spiritual Assembly hired two interpreters for a Deaf Bahá'í in their community so he could attend Unit Convention. It was the first time since declaring in 2014 that this friend could fully participate and understand that there was a Convention chairman and secretary. The friend finally grasped the purpose and significance of this annual meeting, and the joy that resulted from being part of the process that leads to the election of the National Spiritual Assembly cannot be understated. It was a milestone for all.

In another community, a Deaf seeker who decided to investigate the Faith told herself, "If it is not accessible for me, then I don't want to continue with my investigation." She reached



out to local Bahá'í community members, who introduced her to the Task Force. This seeker has now become an active participant in the study of Ruhi Book 1 in ASL. Being able to attend national Zoom meetings of Deaf community members—paired with the inclusive efforts of the seeker's local community—has motivated her to continue investigating, including by meeting one of the Book 1 tutors, who was able to answer questions about the Faith in ASL. The seeker also met with a New York City Bahá'í and attended the Birth of the Báb celebration in Philadelphia, where she met a Bahá'í who had a Deaf parent. The Bahá'í spontaneously showed up for the Holy Day celebration and waited outside the meeting place as if aware that an honored guest would be arriving.

In Port St. Lucie, Florida, the Local Spiritual Assembly became aware of a family in which the hearing children of Deaf parents identified as Bahá'í. A member of the Assembly made a home visit, and he and the Deaf father bonded like brothers. The youngest daughters in both families also became very close. The children, who lived part of the year in Port St. Lucie, attended Feasts while in town, and there was talk about starting a junior youth group. As relationships developed, three Deaf friends of the Faith attended a Holy Day celebration where the hearing Bahá'ís communicated by texting. Community members have continued using printed materials at Feasts and other events to accommodate hard-of-hearing members.

### **Strengthening the institute process**

The first gathering of Deaf Bahá'ís is being planned for June 2024 in Chicago at the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*. The friends there will strengthen their connection with the institute process, while further developing community-building activities that have begun online. It will be the first time many who are served by the Task Force will meet in person. With the assistance of a representative from the Bahá'í National Center, plans are being made to begin outreach to the Chicago area's Deaf community.

Besides the visit, the Task Force makes regular use of social media outlets, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, to build community with a focus on creating in-person gatherings. There are three online socials, one fireside, and two Ruhi Book 1 study circles. The socials have participants from 17 states, plus Canada, Spain, and one participant from Iran. A relative of a Deaf Bahá'í joined a few times and translated American Sign Language into Farsi Sign Language. The goal is to make the courses of the Ruhi Institute available in ASL so

the Deaf can benefit from the strengths of the institute process. Leaders are emerging from this process, developing capacities for expanded endeavors.

The translation working group has merged with study circle participants, and provisional translations are organically emerging from the collaboration. Translations also provide the foundations for ASL devotionals. As Deaf Bahá'ís become more knowledgeable about the Faith, they will become better teachers, and as the world sees the growing status of the Deaf in the Bahá'í community, the community will be setting an example of accessibility for all. This vision motivates the Task Force.



# Health for Humanity



Health for Humanity (HH) seeks to inspire and motivate local communities and global resources to improve health through the execution, in various settings, of medical service, clinical training, and health education projects. The organization continues to be inspired and assisted by Bahá'í World Center guidance on the most effective methods of social and economic development, and aims to serve as an instrument through which the health of people everywhere can ultimately be improved.

Now in its 32nd year, Health for Humanity continues its efforts to advance discourse in the broader health community on health and—with medical service and health education initiatives—on social action and public discourse. Board and staff members strive to strengthen institutional capacity via a number of routes:

- administrative and financial development
- improved web and social media presence
- systematic contact with members and like-minded organizations
- exploration of strategic support to health-related Bahá'í community youth projects
- contribution to discourse on health for current and future generations
- development of potential pathways for HH members to conduct service in the health care arena

Over the past four years, Health for Humanity has focused energies on exploring practicable ways to serve as a catalyst to strategic grassroots health care and health-promotion projects, especially among BIPOC and refugee communities. To this end, HH has invested in



multi-year collaborations with two partners: Abundant LLC, based in Chicago, Illinois, and Oceti Wakan, based on the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota.

Abundant, an organization focused on learning how to invite communities, individuals, and health care providers to build a shared understanding and practice around individual and collective health, followed three primary lines of action in 2023:

- providing families with sleep health and nutrition training so they can think and act together systematically in efforts to optimize health
- helping health institutions implement a training program that allows prehealth students to gain experience and mentorship while working closely with physicians as volunteer health navigators
- creating spaces for health professionals to learn together about important questions such as access to care, utilization management, and interdisciplinary collaboration

Oceti Wakan (“Sacred Fireplace”), a nonprofit organization working to preserve Lakota culture and language and promote the healing of Lakota people, continued focused efforts to improve overall health on the Pine Ridge and other South Dakota reservations in 2023. This led to many notable accomplishments:

- expanding curriculum adoption to 5,100 K–12 students across 40 South Dakota schools
- completing the 10th volume of the *Life Skills for the Young Lakota* series—*Life Skills for Teens*, a daily curriculum that teaches students to nurture, develop, and educate their physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental bodies
- completing a *Lakota & Dakota Ancestor Stories and Activities* coloring book, which helps lay a strong foundation for positive cultural identity for kindergarten and 1st-grade students through storytelling and activities
- revising an edition of *Learning Prevention Using Lakota Values*, a spiritually based alcohol/drug prevention program for youth
- partnering with the Give to Give Foundation to offer the “Change Your Mind... Create New Results” workshop to inmates at the Pine Ridge Oglala Sioux Tribe Jail, helping them move from a state of stress and survival to one of creation and holistic life change
- hosting the first annual Cultural Exchange Summer Camp in July 2023, serving eight young girls from New York and 16 from Pine Ridge (This seven-day camp included visiting Black Hills sacred sites, horseback riding, making ribbon skirts, cooking and eating traditional Lakota foods, participating in a Lakota spiritual Inipi ceremony, and volunteering to support, as well as preparing to participate in, a traditional Sun Dance ceremony.)

*Appendices*

# 15



# Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland



The Bahá'í Chair for World Peace continues its exploration and discourse on the major tenets of peace and the prerequisites for its emergence as explained in the Bahá'í teachings. The Chair promotes the vision for world peace through an academic interdisciplinary study of five central themes: structural racism and the root causes of prejudice; human nature; empowerment of women and peace; global governance leadership; and challenges in the globalization of the environment. The Chair invites like-minded scholars and practitioners from throughout the world to share their best ideas and solutions related to the five central themes. The invited speakers are requested to submit written forms of their presentations, which are published in edited volumes by the Chair through various academic presses. Since 2012, the Chair has published eight books related to the five themes.

This year, the Bahá'í Chair at the University of Maryland continued with a hybrid format for many events, allowing it to engage with both the community on campus and an audience further afield.

In 2023, the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace held four lectures, three discussions, and one symposium. These events were attended by more than 1,000 individuals at the University of Maryland and online. They have been viewed on the Chair's YouTube channel by 4,500 viewers around the world. Since 2013, Chair events have been attended by more than 10,000 individuals and viewed online by over 91,000 people.

The Bahá'í Chair hosted the following lectures and symposia during the academic year 2023–2024. Event videos are posted online on the Bahá'í Chair's website (<http://bahaichair.umd.edu/>):

- October 3, 2023 (virtual)—hosted a symposium on “Disturbing the Peace: Placing Public Discourse”





- October 19, 2023 (in-person and virtual)—Amanda Ripley gave the Bahá'í Chair Annual Lecture: “Breaking the Spell of High Conflict”
- November 6, 2023 (virtual)—hosted a book discussion on *Fundamental Challenges to Global Peace and Security* (published by the Bahá'í Chair)
- November 16, 2023 (virtual)—hosted a discussion on “Academic Discourse and Dialogue: The Israel–Palestine Crisis”



- February 13, 2024 (in-person and virtual)—Professor Robert O’Meally gave a lecture on “Love, Jazz and Antagonistic Cooperation”
- February 27, 2024 (in-person and virtual)—Provost Jennifer King Rice gave a lecture on “Education as the ‘Great Equalizer’? Renewing our Commitment to the Balance Wheel”
- March 28, 2024 (in-person and virtual)—Professor Zeena Zakharia gave a lecture on “Ordinary Solidarities: Toward an Anticolonial and Antiracist Agenda in Global Education Governance”
- April 15, 2024 (virtual)—hosted a book discussion on *Infrastructure, Wellbeing and the Measurement of Happiness*, edited by Professor Hoda Mahmoudi, Professor Jenny Roe, and Dr. Kate Seaman and published by the Bahá'í Chair, featuring Professor June Thomas and Professor Carol Ryff

In 2023, the Chair published one volume entitled *Women and Inequality in a Changing World: Exploring New Paradigms for Peace*, edited by Professor Hoda Mahmoudi, Professor Jane Parpart, and Dr. Kate Seaman. It is available



open access and free for download. In the past year, the Chair also published one journal article, “What can be learned from looking for gender differences in peace education data? Lessons from a Bahá’í-inspired undergraduate course,” by Dr. Tiffany Betts Razavi and Professor Hoda Mahmoudi in the *Journal of Peace Education*, Vol. 20.

In February 2023, Professor Hoda Mahmoudi was a panelist in an online event on “Healing a Wounded World: Voices from the Bahá’í Tradition,” hosted by the Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion and cosponsored by the University of Notre Dame’s Klau Institute for Civil and Human Rights, Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies, and Department of American Studies.

In March 2023, Professor Mahmoudi taught an online class as part of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Bahá’í Studies Program. The class was on *The Spiritual Struggle for Global Peace*. In April 2023, Professor Mahmoudi visited the University of Georgia–Athens and participated in a number of events, including a number of classes and

lectures on themes such as human rights, global peace, the Iranian women’s movement, and institutional and personal investment in the fight against racial prejudice. During that same month, Professor Mahmoudi spoke at “Flagship’s Finest: An Evening of Gratitude,” an event that brought together some of the University of Maryland’s most dedicated donors and university leadership. At the invitation of the provost, Professor Mahmoudi was invited to be the faculty speaker on the theme “determined women.”

In April 2024, at the International Studies Association’s annual conference in San Francisco, the Chair hosted a book launch roundtable for *Women and Inequality in a Changing World: Exploring New Paradigms for Peace*.

# National Center for Race Amity

The National Center for Race Amity (NCRA), a Bahá'í-inspired nonprofit organization based in Boston, works to advance the national race amity movement, which traces its inspiration to the first National Race Amity Convention organized in 1921 with the encouragement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Now in its 15th year, NCRA's overarching mission is to move public discourse on race beyond the blame-grievance-rejection framework to one that recognizes and celebrates the collective ability to overcome racial prejudice and advance access and equity through association, amity, and collaborative action.

## National Race Amity Conference

NCRA's flagship initiative, the annual National Race Amity Conference, was held in person from November 9–11, 2023, in Atlanta, on the theme of "Race Amity: Moving from Concept to Action." Some 200 participants enjoyed keynote presentations, discussion groups, and film and art breakouts, including a dance performance by the Floor Lords, a Boston-based hip hop dance group that exemplified race amity and youth mentoring through the arts. In addition, two intensive workshops were offered: "The Reality of Race," organized by UnityWorks founder Dr. Randie Gottlieb; and "Race to Speak up Against Bullying," with anti-bullying author and activist Devin Moore, a University of Maryland sophomore.

## National Race Amity Institute

A groundbreaking celebration was held on July 11, 2023, for the National Race Amity Institute (NRAI) in Atlanta. Envisioned as a center for research, education, training, youth outreach, and the arts, NRAI will be housed in the "Be on Edgewood" community center in Atlanta's historic Sweet Auburn District. The facility is two blocks from the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Park and the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church. The groundbreaking was attended by Fulton County Commission Chairman Rob Pitts, representatives of Invest Atlanta, and dozens of community leaders. Atlanta-based Yavari Development LLC, a Bahá'í-founded organization, is providing philanthropic support to the project along with individual donors. The city of Atlanta's Invest Atlanta office provided a \$1.45 million grant for renovation and construction of the site. The 8,000 square-foot facility will open in the fall of 2024. NRAI will occupy 3,000 square feet of the facility, including a seminar room and exhibit hall for year-round programs. Be on Edgewood will also have a 180-seat auditorium and office space for local minority and women-owned businesses and nonprofits. Members of the Bahá'í community are invited to support the NRAI launch by purchasing commemorative bricks in the facility's entrance plaza through this website: <https://donate.brickmarkers.com/ncra>.





### Plans to create local NCRA chapters

NCRA continues to develop a legal framework for the formation of local chapters of the National Center for Race Amity. This framework will provide a greater measure of resources, stability, and support for the many groups of race amity activists across the country. The formation of chapters will be publicly announced in the fall of 2024. Communities interested in being considered should contact [localchapters@raceamity.org](mailto:localchapters@raceamity.org).

### Race Amity Day

NCRA continued its long-standing effort to establish Race Amity Day as a national commemorative day on the second Sunday in June. The Race Amity Day initiative seeks to expand the number of state, county, and municipal proclamations of Race Amity Day and encourage a wide range of grassroots celebrations and observances. NCRA hosted a series of virtual workshops leading up to the 2023 Race Amity Day, where local activists from around the country shared their experience and learning in planning local observances and pursuing state and local-level proclamations. More than 100 local observances took place in nearly every state of the union.

### 2023 Boston Race Amity Arts and Music Festival

The second annual Boston Race Amity Arts and Music Festival—BRAAM Fest—was held on Saturday, July 29, 2023, in Boston’s famed Faneuil Hall Marketplace. The festival celebrated and promoted cross-racial friendship with live music, an interactive, community art project, and free ice cream from festival cosponsor Boston Scoops.

### Race Amity Leadership Symposium

The inaugural Race Amity Leadership Symposium was held on June 11, 2023, at the Lenox Hotel in Boston. NCRA board member Howard Ross engaged more than 50 corporate, educational, and nonprofit leaders in a stimulating presentation and discussion on how the science of implicit bias can inform efforts to change organizational culture.

### Race Amity Leadership Academy

The Race Amity Leadership Academy (RALA) provides high-school sophomores, juniors, and seniors with powerful interracial and inter-cultural experiences—including field trips, speakers, media experiences, and service projects—on Saturdays during the school year. They are mentored by college students who serve as Dwight W. Allen Race Amity Fellows, named for famed Bahá’í educator Dwight W. Allen. The program was piloted this year with fellows from Roxbury Community College in Boston and youth connected to the Greater Boston Boys and Girls Clubs. Experience gained through the pilot will be used in formulating a RALA model that will be offered nationwide through the National Race Amity Institute in Atlanta.

### Retirement of NCRA founding executive director

The founder and executive director of the National Center for Race Amity, Dr. William H. “Smitty” Smith, has announced his retirement. Smith will continue to serve on the NCRA Board of Directors.



# Appendix:

## Membership of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 2023–2024

Muin Afnani  
Fariba Aghdasi  
Kenneth E. Bowers, *Secretary*  
Nanabah Kahn Foguth  
Robert C. Henderson, *Treasurer*

Rabi Musah, *Vice Chair*  
June Manning Thomas  
Kevin Trotter  
David F. Young, *Chair*

## Membership of the Regional Bahá'í Councils in the United States

### Appalachian States

Ntianu Bullock  
Aram Ferdowsi, *Chair*  
Thaddeus Herman, *Recording Secretary*  
Niaz Khadem, *Secretary*  
Bitra Rahmanian, *Treasurer*  
Holley Seals-Lizarraga, *Vice Chair*  
Stephen Tabe

### Atlantic States

Taraneh Akhavan, *Treasurer*  
Jerome (Jay) Allen Green  
Eric Johnson, *Chair*  
K.Lynne Loving  
Behzad Mazloom  
Kavian Milani  
Lauren Quddus Nasser  
Chahine Rassekh, *Vice Chair*  
Tod Rutstein, *Secretary*

### State of California

Cynthia Adlparvar, *Vice Chair*  
Payam Adlparvar  
Farzin Aghdasi, *Secretary*  
Jeffrey Albert  
Randolph Dobbs  
Tanees (Tina) Edraki  
Badi Jeffers  
Sana Rezai, *Treasurer*  
Mark Sisson, *Chair*

### State of Florida

Beverly Azizi, *Chair*  
William Derry, *Secretary*  
Na'im Fanaian, *Recording Secretary*  
Hooman Rafiee, *Treasurer*  
Josefina Santa-Ramos, *Vice Chair*

### Four Corners States

Pegah Ayoubzadeh  
Christopher Jolyon Clarke, *Chair*  
Amalia Giebitz, *Recording Secretary*  
Gregory Hatayama, *Treasurer*  
Gwendolyn Kramer  
Esther Kumi  
Mahrooz Maddela  
Jennifer North Morris, *Secretary*  
Shahab Saeed

### Heartland States

Marianne Geula, *Vice Chair*  
Joseph Kopke  
Lisa Lang, *Recording Secretary*  
Mathlida Mola, *Treasurer*  
Rebecca Rice, *Secretary*  
Erfan Taefi  
Jordan van Rijn, *Chair*

### Midwestern States

William Baker  
David Douglas, *Treasurer*  
Paul Harrison  
Marylou Miller, *Secretary*  
Lisa Smits, *Vice Chair*  
Jose Uribe, *Chair*  
Brian Wittman

### Northeastern States

Tabassom Anvari  
Luke Bolton, *Recording Secretary*  
Carey Corea  
Nina Dini, *Vice Chair*  
Marie McNair, *Secretary*  
Joel Nizin, *Treasurer*  
Vickie Nizin  
Samson Osoro  
Frank Robinson Jr., *Chair*

### Northern Plains States

Stacey Firestone, *Secretary*  
Margaret Dru Hanich  
Mondana Heern, *Treasurer*  
Jon Paisano  
Serge van Neck, *Chair*

### Northwestern States

Laura Baerwolf  
Henri Cross  
Nima Fazilat, *Recording Secretary*  
Shawn Javid, *Secretary*  
Parisa Larson  
Omid Meshkin, *Treasurer*  
Beverly Moore, *Chair*  
David Simmons  
Elahe Vahdat Young, *Vice Chair*

### Prairie States

Vicki Abel, *Recording Secretary*  
Susan Bishop, *Vice Chair*  
Alexander Clarke  
Marcia Gitchell, *Treasurer*  
Sahba Jalali  
Portia Lyle, *Chair*  
Kenneth (Clif) Mason  
Mark Scheffer, *Secretary*  
Avalan Wilson

### South Central States

Allison Ashley  
Susan Hansen, *Chair*  
Fereidoun Homayoun  
Sandy Huening  
Bahram Jalalizadeh  
Nadia Moayyad, *Recording Secretary*  
Regina Rafrat, *Secretary*  
Sina Sabet Sarvestani, *Vice Chair*  
Mark Sherrill, *Treasurer*

### Southeastern States

James Abercrombie Jr., *Treasurer*  
Linda Ahdieh Grant  
Danita Brown, *Chair*  
Reginald Colbert, *Vice Chair*  
Gregory Kintz  
Virginia Kintz, *Secretary*  
Nabil Kleinhenz  
Andrea Perkins, *Recording Secretary*  
Farhad Vojdani

## Membership of key consultative and directorial bodies

### Investment Committee

Emily Chew  
Douglas Henck  
Grant Kvalheim  
Adam Ludwin  
Cary M. Maguire Jr.  
Stephen Vaccaro

### National Properties Advisory Task Force

George Davis  
Brad La Rue  
Marcus Reese McKerley

### Temple Board

#### (for the Wilmette Bahá'í House of Worship)

Danika Amusin  
Matthew Cotton  
George E. Davis, *Temple Director*  
Janette Eghrari  
Mark Eghrari  
Elizabeth Franco  
Henry Warren

### Wilmette Institute

#### Executive Committee

Jeffrey Albert  
Chitra Golestani-Maghzi, *Associate Director*  
Derik Smith, *Acting Director*

#### Academic Advisory Board

Erin Murphy Graham  
Esperanza Ochoa  
Michael L. Penn  
June Manning Thomas

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## Affiliates' boards and executive committees

### Association of the Friends of Persian Culture

#### Board of Directors

Nooshin Agahi  
Mehran Bashiri  
Gitty Ejtemai  
Hermien Hoveydai  
Jaleh Joubine-Khadem  
Omid Milani  
Kambiz Mobini  
Gita Nabili  
Fuad Ziai

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Carl D. Clingenpeel, *Secretary*  
Sharon Dixon-Peay  
Farzad Ferdowsi  
Ronald Lillejord, *Treasurer*  
Clifford A. Luxion  
Kerry L. Jones Mogharebi  
Lee Ratcliff, *Chair*

### Bahá'í Service for the Blind

Robert Dickson  
Bill Peary  
Margaret Tash

### Corinne True Center for Bahá'í History Executive Committee

William Collins  
Nima Alexander Rafiei  
Omid Rastegar-Ghaemmaghami  
Robert H. Stockman, *Director*  
Mina Yazdani

### Deaf and Hard of Hearing Task Force

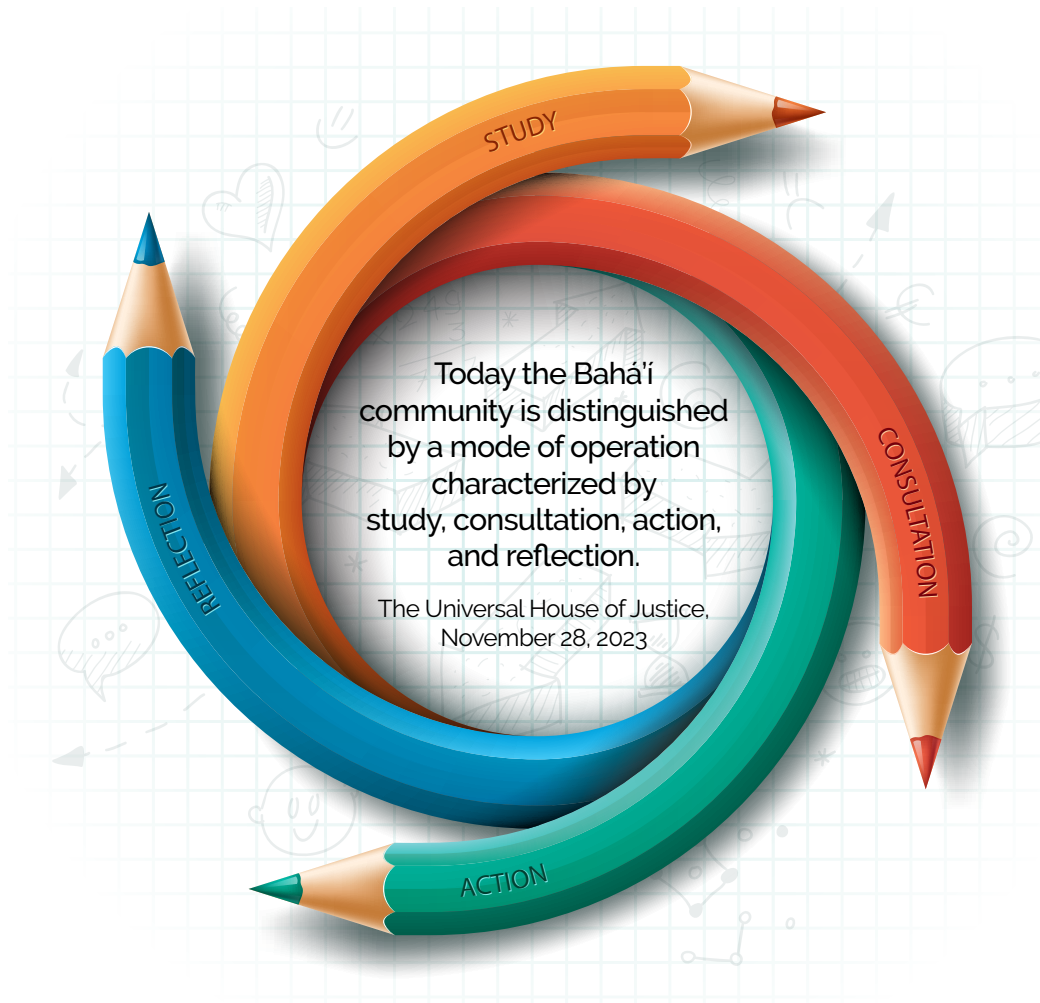
Caroline Marie Browning Hess  
Tavoria Rae Kellam-Lawrence  
V. Naledi Rasperry, *Convener*  
Erin Perry Salmon  
Stephen L. Stockman

### Health for Humanity Board of Directors

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Babak Etemad  
Gity Etemad  
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Geoffrey Wilson, *Chair and Treasurer*

### Persian Bahá'í Media Service Fund Development Group

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Taraneh Darabi  
Fariba Talebi Eghaneyan  
Foad Haghghi  
Neda Najibi  
Sana Rouhani



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