

Pilot Project: The Elimination of Racial Prejudice and the Community Building Process

Charlotte NC, Nashville TN, Washington D.C.

Summary Report

Submitted by the Pilot Project Team
April 1, 2021

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Introduction

Our team was asked to create this report by the National Spiritual Assembly, and we have endeavored to prepare it with the utmost humility. We have attempted to share, openly and honestly, what we learned from the participant responses and what we observed working with the communities. Certainly it is impossible to remain completely objective, but we have done our best. We have tremendous respect for the participants in this process and for the institutions and agencies who collaborated with us in each of the communities. We have been encouraged by their support and by the quality of their documented responses.

This report contains many stories and concrete examples, and it might be tempting to go directly to that section. However, we urge you to read the entire summary first, as it provides necessary context and framing. In brief, it is important to understand that

- the report presents only a sampling of examples from a diverse group of project participants in the three pilot communities
- their examples represent their own experiences but not necessarily those of their entire community
- as you read what participants are learning, in many cases you will see that they describe effort, growth, and progress as well as the need to continue building capacity.

SECTION ONE: SUMMARY

Project goal

The goal of the pilot project was to gain a better understanding of what selected project participants in the three pilot communities are learning about addressing the elimination of racial prejudice within the framework for action of the Plan. Project materials and methods—including website content, focus questions, documentation procedures, and meeting structures—were continually evaluated and revised based on participant responses and consultation with NSA Secretary Ken Bowers, Counselor Farah Rosenberg, and the pilot communities' Assemblies and task forces. The pilot project was not intended to be a scientific study of community efforts, nor was its intention to capture the full range of initiatives in each of the three communities. Rather its objective was to collect a sampling from a cross-section of each community and to provide examples of the learning that is taking place, with the hope that these examples will inspire readers to further their own efforts.

Report overview

This report is an abridged summary of the one provided to the National Spiritual Assembly, which was quite extensive and comprised separate reports for the three pilot communities. In Section Two you will find examples of participants' efforts to address the elimination of racial prejudice within the broad range of their community building activities. These examples were

chosen from documentation collected over the course of the project. Every response included in this summary report was approved by the participant who wrote it. Careful effort was made to ensure the anonymity of the participants and any individuals or institutions whom they may have included in their responses. In many cases, where sensitive issues were involved, people referred to in the responses were contacted for permission. To further preserve anonymity, some details had to be removed from the original responses; this was done in collaboration with the respondents so the essence of the experience would still be captured. Some individuals and institutions were not concerned about anonymity, and their communities are clearly identified in their examples.

The themes that appear in Section Two emerged from the documentation but not necessarily in equal measure from all three communities.

Section Three of this report offers suggestions for future learning; these considerations attempt to capture some of the challenges that were gleaned from participant examples and our own observations.

Brief summary of project methods

All three pilot communities are Milestone 3 clusters; Nashville and Washington DC are single-assembly clusters, and the Charlotte LSA is one of three in its cluster. Team members met with project participants in person and virtually at various times over the course of the 18-month project to study the guidance on race and to explore what participants were learning. Each pilot community had a website where participants documented their learning, either in response to specific Focus Questions, which required respondents to enter their names, or as Random Reflections, which could be anonymous.* In all three communities, the respondents were of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. A total of 413 responses were posted, capturing the learning that was documented between December 2018 and August 2020. A sampling of responses is included in this report, organized by the themes they address and, when applicable, by the spaces where the learning occurred. Community activities, initiatives, and efforts described in these responses represent the perspective only of those who were able to participate in the project and document their learning.

(* to read Focus Questions, see Appendix 2 on p. 61)

What are we learning?

It is clear from the documentation that participants and institutions are at different stages of understanding and addressing racial prejudice. Nevertheless, the responses also indicate that project participants in all three communities are making efforts to learn “how the challenge of addressing racial prejudice is an integral part of three broad areas of activity in which the Baha’i

world is currently engaged: expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society.” (Universal House of Justice, April 10, 2011). To various degrees, efforts are accelerating; people from the wider community are being engaged; individuals, institutions, and agencies are continuing to develop their capacity to express what they are learning. At the same time, it is evident that addressing racial prejudice remains a struggle for some of these institutions, agencies, and individuals. Overall, it appears we are in the early stages of learning how the elimination of racial prejudice is integral to the three broad areas of the community-building process.

SECTION TWO: THEMES AND EXAMPLES OF LEARNING

Certain patterns and themes emerged repeatedly from the comments posted by participants in each of the three communities. Most of the participant responses included in this report could have been listed under several different themes. However, in order to avoid repetition and reduce the size of this document, it was decided to place each response under a single theme. Choosing the most relevant theme was a challenging process, especially with longer responses that covered a number of topics; therefore the placement of examples is somewhat subjective and not intended to be directive or limiting.

As you read what participants are learning, in many cases you will see that they describe effort, growth, and progress as well as the need to continue building capacity. This need is summarized in Section Three: Future Considerations.

INDEX OF PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

[Click on a theme to read participant responses](#)

1. Individuals, institutions, and agencies

- 1.1. Individuals, institutions, and agencies are building capacity to create spaces in which African Americans, whether Bahá'ís or members of the wider community, are nurtured, safeguarded, and encouraged. (p.9)
- 1.2. Individuals, institutions, and agencies are building capacity to engage race directly in the social spaces of the Plan and make the elimination of racial prejudice their watchword. (p.19)

1.3. Individuals, institutions, and agencies are building capacity to connect with like-minded organizations and people in the wider community. (p.25)

2. Individuals

2.1. Individual Bahá'ís are building capacity to put themselves in unfamiliar situations where there is racial diversity, to connect cross-racially, to engage honestly in difficult conversations about race, to deal with racial challenges and listen without defensiveness when there is frustration or anger. (p.28)

2.2. White and Persian Bahá'ís are building capacity to learn about race, to reflect on their experiences and on conscious and subconscious behaviors, to make necessary changes, and to identify what they're learning or need to learn. (p.33)

2.3. Individual Bahá'ís are building capacity to create bonds of friendship and trust through fellowship and service in racially diverse environments. (p.39)

3. Institutions and agencies

3.1. Institutions and agencies are building capacity to promote the elimination of racial prejudice in their communities and clusters in a sustainable way. (p.43)

4. General learning

4.1. Individual responses in general indicate that it is crucial for White and Persian Bahá'ís to learn about the history of racism and race relations. A few responses indicate this is crucial for people from other populations as well. African American/African descent Bahá'ís are feeling a need for greater sensitivity on the part of White and Persian/Persian-American community members. (p.53)

4.2. Respondents are developing understanding and building capacity to express how the community building process is the vehicle for eliminating prejudice and uprooting racism. (p.58)

SECTION THREE: FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The following considerations are based on the responses shared by the participants and our team's collective observations. Although they emerged from the three pilot communities, they may well be applicable to other communities around the country.

Individuals, institutions, and agencies are encouraged to continue

- assuming a “posture of humility” and adopting “learning as a mode of operation” (Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010), which appear to be effective means to build bonds of friendship, break down barriers, remove suspicions, and create environments for frank and loving consultation about race.

- finding practical ways to make freedom from racial prejudice the watchword in the social spaces for the activities of the Plan. “Here, the Guardian is calling for the friends to address the question of race unity as a part of life in all of the social spaces in which they are engaged, and, similarly, the House of Justice is now saying that freedom from racial prejudice must be the watchword of Bahá’ís in the social spaces in which they are engaged for the activities of the Plan.” (Universal House of Justice, August 6, 2018)
- pursuing education about racism and race relations, acknowledging that while this education is critical for everyone, the documentation suggests that it is particularly applicable to White and Persian Bahá’ís.
- studying the messages of the House of Justice and the National Assembly in order to 1) increase their understanding of how the community building process is the vehicle for the elimination of racial prejudice and the uprooting of racism and 2) build capacity to express and share that understanding in the wider community. It is important that study be combined with action and reflection: “We cannot too strongly emphasize that the need of the hour is action. Prayer, study, and reflection are all critical, to be sure—but the transforming effect of the Bahá’í revelation on ourselves and on the world can only be fully realized in the field of service.” (National Spiritual Assembly, January 2018)
- learning how to “nurture, safeguard and encourage” (Advent of Divine Justice) African Americans, Indigenous populations and immigrants, both within and outside the Bahá’í community, and to regularly share their learning with each other. “The House of Justice has previously indicated, in letters written to you on its behalf, the importance of giving due attention to historically significant populations in the United States. This imperative remains. Today, the remarkable phenomenon of immigration that has accelerated in recent decades must also claim a major share of your attention.” (Universal House of Justice, August 9, 2012)
- developing their capacity to identify and document what they are learning about the elimination of racial prejudice and the community building process. Attention can be given to exploring methods and approaches in a systematic and coherent manner in order to more efficiently build on successes and overcome challenges.

Institutions and agencies are encouraged to continue

- developing unity of thought and a common vision of how the friends can address the elimination of racial prejudice within the context of the community building process. This includes guiding the community with clear and consistent messaging related to issues of race.

- supporting the friends in building their capacity to address racial issues openly and honestly as they arise in the various social spaces of the Plan, reinforcing the understanding that these issues are not separate and apart from the Plan. Attention might be focused on normalizing conversations about race and building the capacity to have frank and loving consultation using language and expressing attitudes that, “while not ignoring the harsh realities that exist in the world, should appeal to the nobler aspirations of our fellow-citizens.” (National Spiritual Assembly, 25 February 2017). “In an environment of love and trust born of common belief, practice, and mission, individuals of different races will have the intimate connection of heart and mind upon which mutual understanding and change depend. As a result of their training and deepening, a growing number of believers will draw insights from the Writings to sensitively and effectively address issues of racial prejudice that arise within their personal lives and families, among community members, and in social settings and the workplace.” (Universal House of Justice, April 10, 2011)

APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

1.1. Individuals, institutions, and agencies are building capacity to create spaces in which African Americans, whether Bahá'ís or members of the wider community, are nurtured, safeguarded, and encouraged.

Examples: core activities and home visits

1. Core activities – African American male respondent

In [an African American] neighborhood, we have endeavored to put the decision making power into the hands of the extended nucleus. Decisions about outreach, about the planning of and regularity of devotional gatherings, about the number and variety of study circles, about the focus and location of junior youth groups and about the frequency of children's classes are made through the consultative efforts of folks who live in this and surrounding neighborhoods rather than solely by the members of our household. This long been one of the most compelling ideas to me in the community building / core activities framework, that people in their communities have the capacity, the knowledge and the drive to make fundamental changes towards unity in their communities.

2. Home visit - African American female respondent

Since the workshop, my 2-person team (myself African American Female, and the other Caucasian Female), we have monthly Home Visits with an African American female Baha'i. When we began we were making efforts to get to know each other on a more personal level, so much of the conversations were more of a social visit that lasted hours. We covered much of the day to day current events (especially political). At the visitee's request, we decided the focus of our Home Visit would be a review of Book 1 Ruhi, as the topics included were of particular interest to her. As we have delved into the subject matter (The Creative Word/Holy writings), as presented, I have witnessed the calming, more spiritual atmosphere of our meetings. We begin with prayers, and there is diminished discussion of all the negatives we see in the daily occurrences in the news, instead choosing to focus on a more positive and hopeful future of our Faith, as we follow the plan. When we do that we leave uplifted, renewed and positive.

3. Study Circle - African American male respondent

I participated in a Book 1 study circle that included four African Americans. All sessions began with prayer. Throughout the study circle, one of the African American women we will call Raven would comment on how much stronger this process made her, how it helped her maintain

a clearer focus on her reality/identity as a spiritual being in very difficult and challenging situations. Raven and another participant would frequently share very personal and painful challenges with the group. She often identified ways in which she wanted to improve and acknowledged clearly that studying together in Book 1 helped her in spiritual and practical ways. Often while reading prayers or the Creative Word, she would respond spontaneously with expressions that indicated how touched she was by what she was reading. I feel like I am developing the capacity to trust the process of the study circle, knowing that if we together can create the right spiritual environment, it will allow us and our brothers and sisters to further become our truest and noblest selves.

4. Study circle - White female respondent

I co-facilitated a study circle for a few years; the participants went through Book 1, 2 (mostly), and 3 together. Two of the participants were African American, over 60 years old, new Baha'is, and resource-constrained. One participant was over 60 years old, White, struggled with mental health issues, and lost their housing during the time we were doing the study circle together. Two other participants and myself were younger, White, and middle class. We frequently discussed race and class issues during the study circle. One of the African Americans became a Baha'i during the Book 1. When he first started coming, he did not have enough money to eat, so we made sure to have meals or heavy snacks available at every meeting, to enable him to be able to participate. The participants and facilitators rotated in providing food for the study circle. The Local Spiritual Assembly and several individuals in the community, including members of our study circle, accompanied him over time to find ways to become more stable financially so that after the first year or so, he was no longer food insecure. Genuine bonds of friendship formed among all of the participants, and we frequently contacted each other in between meetings. Different configurations of our group often supported each other with many serious life issues and over extended periods. This support continues. The White middle-class participants learned a lot from the other participants about how the Baha'i community was perceived by African Americans, gaps in social services, and the struggle of resource-constrained people to survive in the US.

The African American who joined the Faith during Book 1, I'll call him "C," calls me sometimes to thank me for introducing him to Baha'u'llah (I also introduced him to the Faith). "C" is habitually quite blunt about race and class relations, and he likes to tell the story about how, before he became a Baha'i, he never would have imagined becoming close friends with and hanging out in the home of a "rich White lady" (me). He also says now he has a White man whom he considers a best friend. He attributes the changes he has made to Baha'u'llah and to friends in the community. Unfortunately, he has also suffered racial microaggressions in his interactions with the Baha'i community, and he

often feels the burden of class differences as well. When he first started coming to the study circle, he was expressing a great deal of anger in our study circle and other Baha'i spaces particularly in terms of how he felt he was sometimes perceived and treated. He also met with the LSA to discuss his concerns. The Assembly and other individual Baha'is heard him and certainly acknowledged the validity of his concerns while at the same time demonstrating a great deal of love over an extended period of time. Issue of class became a more predominant source of discussion at Feasts and in core activities and social spaces, as the Baha'i community, while more diverse than some, is still dominated by middle class and upper middle class Whites and Persians. This process of learning and mutual advancement has extended over time and has not always been neat and clean. At times it has been a painful and messy process. At the same time the depth of understanding and sensitivity on the part of many community members have increased and genuine friendships from diverse racial and economic backgrounds have developed because of the challenges and the fact that they are faced. The journey and learning is not over, and the learning process continues. C's journey in the Faith has been a mutual growth process for both the community and him. I and other community members have become more sensitive to the challenges and micro-aggressions lower income Black men face in our society and have benefited from the unique capacities C's has brought to our community. Certainly he has enriched the community. The LSA has learned to more effectively accompany and support individuals with income challenges and to be more thoughtful about issues of access. In one case, drawing on the gifts and talents of C, they commissioned him (with payment) to do a project for the Assembly, which he continues to express his joy about and which continues to benefit the entire community. And from his own words it is clear that he has experienced significant transformation and grown in ability to draw on the Writings and prayer to deal with racial challenges in ways that uplift him and the community. He has also acknowledged that a few issues he raised in anger were related to personal areas of growth he needed to deal with and were not necessarily the result of how he was treated in the community. He has acknowledged that he, like everyone else, has tests he needs to deal with. Several people, both Black and White, continue to accompany him as true friends together on a spiritual journey.

I have learned so much from all of my study circle participants. The other White, middle-class participants were really great examples of showing true friendship and service, patience and understanding of the challenges of the older members of the study circle. I think I have learned about friendship and sacrifice, and I have learned a lot about the challenges of people who are struggling in our society. That part has been really hard, because it seems that the systems are so broken and beyond my ability to fix. I have learned the power of love, understanding, and patience to transform hearts. I have learned to be flexible as a study circle facilitator and to adjust to the various needs of the participants. I have learned that true bonds of friendship can be established across, racial,

class, age and gender lines and sincere change can take place as we keep unity and justice in the forefront.

5. Study circle – Persian/White female respondent

I have been a Baha'i for my whole life. Even though I'm so appreciative of the message of Baha'u'llah, I sometimes forget how empowering it truly is to learn this message, and then work to put it into practice. In particular, I thought of this in regards to the quick ownership of the message of Baha'u'llah by a few of my African American friends who have become Baha'is - and how they're putting the teaching into practice in their own lives and communities. These experiences have reinforced the emphasis for me of the importance of teaching African American friends, the reality of the designation pupil of the eye, the importance of friendship as we teach and accompany, how valuable the Ruhi Institute process is in fostering friendships, and the power of Divine assistance in all of our efforts. One small example is perhaps of my friend, let's call him "Joseph." He is 23 years old.

He first found out about the Faith by driving past the Baha'i Center for two days in a row – not near his usual daily route. A proactive seeker of knowledge, on the second day he drove by the Center, he decided to look up what was this strange name of "Baha'i" and find out what it was. Then he started reading about the Faith and never turned back. He was determined to go in person to learn more that week, after first reading about the Faith. (This was before the pandemic.) He learned that the soonest gathering near him was on that Sunday morning at the Baha'i Center, so he drove to the Baha'i Center that Sunday morning. He was welcomed by lots of loving friends!

I met Joseph at a fireside, to which he was invited after attending the devotional at the Baha'i Center. I was talking with Joseph, and another friend of the Faith, mentioned the Institute Process; upon Joseph's inquiry, I explained it a bit, and invited them to join a study circle. Joseph responded, "I'm down for anything Baha'i," and as the other friend was interested too, we agreed to message and find a time to begin the study circle. As Joseph describes it, once he read some of the talks of 'Abdu'l-Baha (shared with him by another Baha'i friend, he knew he "had found the right faith." Then we started Book 1, and using his own language, he "became obsessed."

We are currently at the beginning of Book 1, Unit 2. We generally have dinner first and all chat, then study. This social part has proved to be an important part of the process of building our group friendship. And in general, we've all become good friends – doing social things together outside of the study circle, as well as continuing to study together.

The first time we met for the study circle – they arrived around 7pm and didn't leave till around 11pm!

Already, Joseph is reading Baha'i books and Writings, striving to put into practice what we've studied so far in Book 1, and he's even seen the positive effects of doing this, on his life. Also, he helps to focus the discussion in the study circle, when it goes too off topic at times. Moreover, it's so beautiful to see His love for the Writings as he discovers all of the gems in them, as well as to see his love for the Writings continue to grow. From the beginning of the study circle, we talked about the study circle as a process for developing our capacity for our two-fold moral purpose – bettering ourselves and contributing to the community. After studying together a message from the Universal House of Justice, we began talking more about some of the different avenues of service, including the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program. Joseph expressed interest in becoming an Animator, and we consulted as a group about potentially jumping to Book 5 after finishing Book 1. Watching a clip on the junior youth groups in Toronto from the Frontiers of Learning video was also inspiring for the participants in the group. At this last study circle gathering, when Joseph was talking about how much he loved the Faith, I tried to ask nonchalantly, “so are you a Baha'i now?” He responded enthusiastically, saying something like, “oh, I'm going to declare. It's set. I'm just not quite sure when. Just need to take some time to pray and decide when. But I know it's going to happen, and will be soon.” He joked also about how he wanted to sign a card, not just click the button online to register as a Baha'i.

Both Joseph and the other study circle participant and other friends came to our neighborhood picnic celebration for a recent celebration. Actually, as an example of the bonds of friendships formed, Saturday morning, both of these study circle participants and other friends, before coming to the picnic, participated in a local service project together.

Family is very important to Joseph, and he had been wanting for some time to bring his mother and aunt to a Baha'i activity. So sweet - he had asked both me and the other study circle participant to be there when his mother and aunt came to the Baha'i Center for the first time. Unfortunately, they weren't able to come on the day planned, but he was so happy that they were coming to the holy day celebration.

Then, Joseph decided to declare yesterday, on the holy day!! He said that he decided to declare on that day because of the auspicious occasion, because his friends and family were all there, and because he didn't want to wait any longer! He even ended up registering online, and signed a card when he got home.

He told me that “the words of Baha’u’llah and Abdu’l-Baha have changed my life and eternity for my soul. I’m so excited and it meant everything that my family was there. I love you all and I can’t wait to help build our community and spread the word!”

6. Jr. Youth Program - African American female respondent

Those of us who are working for justice and opportunity in one neighborhood first had to recognize that it would take time to build trust. Four years after we started, trust has been established. Then, we recognized that we had to learn to communicate a vision that everyone could make a difference in the community, from the youngest to the oldest. We had to listen and humbly offer the vision of the educational imperatives, inspired by Baha'u'llah's Revelation, asking for adults and youth to join us as agents of change from the very beginning. That, however, is when the hard work really started, because for many of our friends in the community, life was full of many hardships and distractions that slowed the progress of training or interrupted the rhythm of activities. We had to persevere and recognize that the friendships and relationships with the families must be our priority. That meant that sometimes tutoring a Junior Youth who was struggling academically became the priority over the JY material. It meant that sometimes helping a youth in distress took precedence over studying Book 1, 3, or 5. It meant being a true friend as adults faced health and economic challenges and some of the young people faced the death of loved ones. We learned to connect our friends to resources. It also meant opening up our challenges and letting them be true friends to us when we went through life's ups and downs. We share our struggles, and all of us take great comfort in praying together. We celebrate birthdays, cheer on the youth at school concerts, have cookouts, celebrate the beginning and end of the school year, and so much more.

We are learning that the expanding group of families who are engaged are looked at as unique in the community because they welcome involvement by all. The neighborhood is primarily African American, but there are a few White and Latino families, and they see the spaces created for children's classes, devotionals, youth nights, and parents' devotionals as open to all. There are not other spaces like this in town where the churches are segregated as are most of the neighborhoods. Everyone is frustrated by the lack of green spaces where kids can play freely, the lack of a real community center with programming for the young, the high dropout rate among African American youth, the multi-generational poverty in the community, etc. The community recognizes that their spiritual strength, faith, resilience are some of their best qualities, and they enjoy opportunities to come together in fellowship and to consult upon next steps. Nurturing the devotional character of the community feels very natural in this neighborhood, and even though we have struggled to identify older youth and adults to serve as animators, the original African American Junior Youth that we began working with four years ago

are now serving as animators. Their transformation is powerful, and we have so much hope for the future of this neighborhood because they are becoming the change they want to see.

7. Jr. Youth Program - Persian and Latina female respondents

In what we perceived to be a failed effort to build relationships with the parents of our junior youth, my co-animator and I decided to consult with an African American Baha'i friend about some of the dynamics of building these connections. Here we were, two women of Persian heritage, young professionals with jobs downtown, trying to integrate with the life of our junior youth, all African American boys in an affordable housing building. Our Baha'i friend told us that trust is an important foundation in building a relationship with the parents, like with any other relationship, however, he emphasized that it was especially important amongst African Americans. We were unaware of this, but our friend further explained that suspicion, drawn from a history of oppression and injustice, characterizes the population in most initial encounters: "time and consistency is key, but also boldness", he said. He then offered to come with us to do a home visit, not only as an African American, but also as a parent of a junior youth aged child - on many levels he could connect with the parents. During the home visit, something clicked to me as I listened carefully to the conversation. While there was initial hesitation from the parents about the purpose of the visit, our friend spoke with no trace of paternalism, doubt nor was he apologetic in his approach. On the contrary, very quickly he spoke to the parents about the importance of the junior youth program. He said that it was not just an after-school program that was good for their son, but that this space was a safe environment for him to nurture his qualities, to find his true spiritual identity and most importantly, to be able to be a role model to other African American boys in the neighborhood. He also told them that we needed to work together, that there is no time to lose as the precious years of middle school will soon be gone, and other forces will be stronger. Our friend spoke with such directness, faith and boldness that the mother responded positively. She said that she was happy to know what we were really building together and felt like she also had an important role to play. It was just one visit that our Baha'i friend accompanied us to, and it was enough for the mother to trust us a little more, and for us to learn about what seeing capacity in others looks like in a sincere, direct and bold conversation.

Examples: other community-building activities and spaces

8. Neighborhood - African American male respondent

An African American woman, we will call Kim, has been part of the community building process in our neighborhood for a few years now. She saw us walking around the block shortly after we moved here. She came by and secretly left a gift for us. We eventually met her and we began to socialize and build a genuine friendship. We invited her and her daughter to a

devotional gathering and discussed various ways we could all serve our neighborhood. Her daughter suggested a small social action project so we all decided to do that though other things were suggested. It impressed Kim that we listened to her daughter and actually followed through to support her daughter's idea. Kim began further collaboration with our family. She started attending devotional gatherings and study circles and eventually hosted a devotional of her own and became a co-tutor of a study circle, among many other things. She has had some very rough tests during this time, particularly over a one-year period. Several of us were able to closely support and accompany her throughout this time only deepening the spiritual connections and friendship. Likewise, during this entire time, she also shared reciprocal support for many of us. This is part of the beauty of truly building community. She has commented on how the community building process enhances her already active spiritual life and says it has brought joy and more meaning to her life. We are learning how important it is to listen to the ideas of our newly found friends and sincerely consult, to build authentic bonds of friendship, and to be fully and genuinely engaged with our neighbors in a true learning process. We are developing the ability together, to tune in to each other's needs and be supportive in both practical and spiritual ways, as we learn to draw on each other's capacities. The journey continues.

9. Neighborhood - White female respondent

A few reflections on connecting with a young African-American man who has been taking classes in the community with my sister. As the Covid lockdown started, he was confined to his apartment. Without any family nearby, it became difficult to have such limited contact with others. My sister and classmates noted some despondency during classes. Soon after, realizing that he and I live in the same neighborhood, he and I met and went for a walk-- it was likely uncomfortable for him to meet up with a White woman much older than he, but knowing my sister was a bridge for the 2 of us. We expanded our walks to include another Baha'i, as well as one of my colleagues, as all 4 of us live in the same neighborhood. Although we are all older than he is by decades, these outings helped all of us begin to feel connected. It likely helped that the two women are African-American.

Over the past month, we have added dinners by Zoom, now including my sister and her family. And we added a visit to my brother's house, where the two men discussed music. He now feels welcomed to go to my brother's separately from me.

As the terrible murders of Black men and women brought national discussions around our shared heritage of violence, it was important to reach out to this young man. In one day, discussions over text of some Baha'i perspectives led to interest in "joining". He has now enrolled in youth camps. His reflection after the first 2 weeks is that the discussion on prayer is giving him energy and is the highlight of his days.

For me, one of my reflections is learning, in a very small measure, to see current issues through his eyes. Specifically, I realized that he might not feel safe taking walks in this predominantly White neighborhood—in fact, his mother explicitly told him to stay inside during this time of demonstrations. He was also a bit nervous about walking to my brother’s house alone, since the house is also in a majority White neighborhood. I have learned the strangeness and sadness of needing to walk with him for him to enjoy walking in the woods in our neighborhood, or of showing him how to get to my brother’s by staying on major streets. It has been an honor for me to support him in some small way. [Though not indicated in the documentation this young man enrolled in the Faith]

Example: institutions and agencies

10. Cluster agency - White female respondent

I am currently on a Baha’i committee where, in order to best fulfill our mandate, the Individuals have also committed to educating ourselves on matters of race and racism in America, and understanding how it relates to our imperative. We are regularly dialoguing about this most challenging issue. Discussing throughout the week about how race, culture and class impact our thinking, our decisions, our world view, our understanding, and consulting on how to make elimination of racial prejudice our watchword has been a regular question. Learnings: These regular dialogues combined with effort to educate ourselves has helped each of us to keep these matters at the forefront of our thinking, even though we have much to learn. We continue to try to understand the NSA’s statement “But it is not enough simply to believe this in our hearts. It creates the moral imperative to act, and to view all aspects of our personal, social, and institutional lives through the lens of justice.” The act of meditating on these statements, consulting on them, educating ourselves through reading books, watching films, deepening on messages from the Institutions, and trying to have a pulse on views in the wider society, as well as creating lines of action has expanded our understanding of the nature of the depth of the challenge itself. These exercises and studies are illuminating some of our own individual limitations, prejudices, ignorance and questions. Trying to understand how the community building activities address these matters has led us to reflect on how they are or are not yet addressing the elimination of racial prejudice, what concrete steps can be taken to advance our contribution to their efficacy, and what “bold” actions look like. Efforts to better familiarize ourselves with the current discourse in society, and having a humble attitude of learning has also led to thoughtful, honest reflection and deep, open conversations.

Another reflection is that I feel I have experienced cycles of grief over my own perceptions of myself in a sense. As a White person who desires to be free of prejudice and makes a daily effort to try to see my own subconscious sense of superiority and address it, who wants to grow and learn and tries to educate myself — but then to inevitably have experiences that show me yet

again how I still have so much work to do is hard on the ego. I think it's important for me to remember that removing the prejudices takes time and is a life-long process, and it's important to continue working to have a humble attitude of learning, move past any shame which hinders us, and recommit to action rather than feeling embarrassed or guilty and then retreating. I think accepting the discomfort White people like myself feel when encountering areas where we feel ignorant or that we still have to work on is important, and truthfully, is a small discomfort compared to the challenges our friends who are Black, Indigenous and other People of Color often face daily.

Honest sharing (without confession of course) has helped move past some of this White discomfort, I believe. Additionally, this committee is working on diversifying its membership to include more BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color]. Trying to engage all in activities as well, without perpetuating tokenism, is one area of challenge, and one we have not “figured out”, given the makeup of this community. One learning is that this also boils down to friendships and love amongst the wider community.

We are all trying to learn how to create environments that allow for voices to be heard and making adaptations based on the views of people of color. Learning how to ensure the spaces we co-create are not dictated by White/Persian cultural expectations is also a challenge. When community members of color challenge assumptions and patterned ways of doing things, White and Persian Baha'is are all still learning to act on these ideas and acknowledge the experiences and empowering others by humbly learning to listen first, creating spaces where everyone feels comfortable speaking, learning principles of true consultation. Additionally, when we as a community grow and encompass more styles of communication we learn about ourselves, our assumptions and discomforts. As we all interact more with people of varying and diverse backgrounds we rub up against our own assumptions and are able to see more clearly our own styles of communication that we perceive as “the norm”, and then adjust and grow and learn to love each other on a deeper level. More diverse voices and styles combined with the necessary qualities of love, respect, and a humble posture of learning creates transformation and growth. I think because there is love and closeness, everyone is creating space for each other, and learning to listen.

1.2. Individuals, institutions, and agencies are building capacity to engage race directly in the social spaces of the Plan and make the elimination of racial prejudice their watchword.

Examples: core activities and home visits

1. Devotional gatherings and study circles - Black female respondent

Capacities being explored and nurtured are in talking about racism in and outside the Faith in study circles and after devotionals, and increased study of the Guidance given us as well as learning or relearning how to be a better tutor and facilitator in light of the Teachings and Guidance and Tutor Gatherings.

2. Study circles/other activities - Black female respondent

Then came the Pupil of the Eye conferences that sparked more talk and my participation in a phone call devotional and listening in on a few of the discussions afterwards. As I both co-tutored and took Ruhi books (including Book 1 thought the lens of race), especially Book 8, I have learned and taken more to heart what my covenant with Baha'u'llah entails and have fallen hard for this Covenant of Baha'u'llah; more seriously, my oath and promise to Him and to our God! This is with special emphasis on the work of the Oneness of Humankind, racism and race amity and through studying the Guidance of the House of Justice, and letters from the NSA, Advent of Divine Justice, and participating in/co-facilitating (with a White Baha'i) in Baha'i summer school on race, and taking the Wilmette Institute Anti-Blackness course. I am learning to tie this new American history and racism and the Baha'i Faith together and beginning to see that there is a place for me in this work and exploring this idea still.

3. Devotional gatherings and study circles - Persian female respondent

During our devotional gatherings and study circles, we always include prayers and writings about oneness and racial unity. We also make an attempt to share stories of what we have done during the week to promote racial harmony. Also we recommend to each other the books or articles that we have read and found it appropriate for our current situations.

4. Devotional gathering - White female respondent

In Fall 2019, I started a devotional gathering with my coworkers to pray for ourselves and our students. The majority of my coworkers, as well as students, are African American. I hoped that the devotional would be a portal into deeper discussion and possibly into the institute process as well. Even the devotional itself, praying for the wellbeing of Black students who are furthest

from educational justice, and having elevated conversations with my coworkers is a step toward racial harmony. I have learned that having conversations about both racism and spirituality prior to starting the devotional made the conversation about praying together easier. I also allowed the devotional to be shaped by the participants rather than imposing a structure. We stood in a circle and held hands, I lead with a Baha'i prayer and then others share prayers from the heart. The devotional ended when schools closed due to COVID and has yet to restart, although we did have one virtual session. However, I went on to do a Bible study with one coworker from the devotional. I also feel that the conversations we started to have about race have impacted our school community.

5. Devotional gathering – Persian/White female respondent

This is perhaps a reflection that came out of different community building activities.

One thing I've been learning/reminded of is the wide spectrum of where people are at and what they're feeling, and not to assume anything. This is very hard because many people are hurting, and if we don't recognize that, they hurt more, but if you assume it, then you're also putting a burden on them in a different way. People generalize about all groups of people sometimes - but the difference is that generalizing can cause and does often cause lots of harm to Black people (which is a reflection from a different discussion of a while back).

I was reminded of this when one friend, say "Beth", who is Persian, was telling me about how she had a Black friend "Sara" who didn't want to come to a devotional, but Beth pushed Sara to come because Beth felt like she didn't have the knowledge to teach and talk about race (the subject of the devotional) - in the same way that Sara did, as a Black person. It worked out okay, and in the end Sara was very happy that she attended the devotional.

My first thought in hearing this story was "oh no! Beth is putting the burden of education onto Sara." And "is Beth almost forcing Sara to go to the devotional?" As Beth was sharing this experience with me and a couple of others, one person shared that Black people talk about racism all the time, so it's not that Sara didn't feel comfortable talking about it, but that she just may not have wanted to talk about it.

However, then, later, I was talking with another friend, "Rina," who is Black. Rina happened to bring up this same devotional. So, Rina was telling me about how she felt like Beth was the only person she knew taking action on racism because Beth had invited Sara to these spaces to talk about race with white friends.

Anyway, the whole thing was interesting and thought provoking for me, as a white person, and a further reminder of not assuming where people are at, nor generalizing Black people, nor that

one person speaks for everyone. I think each situation has to be weighed sensitively with knowledge of the overall racial situation in America and then being thoughtful about finding out where specific individuals are. I know some African Americans who definitely will engage with white people about race and others that are simply tired of it. Sometimes it also depends on friendships with the individuals involved.

6. Study circle - Persian female respondent

In our Book 1, we were discussing the quotes about commendable and seemly conduct, and we asked specifically what commendable conduct when we are engaged in anti-racist work, whether within ourselves or with communities/organizations. The participants discussed why being "nice" isn't enough, and discussed the question, "In whose eyes is that conduct commendable?" Sometimes White folks get so caught up that they are doing "nice things" and being nice that they do not see the impact of their actions, and how their subconscious biases are seeping out. In a similar vein, we discussed how alignment with our deeds and words, it is important to have humility. So many people "believe" in equality, but they don't act in ways that are consistent with those ideals. It is also important to have ideals so that you can recognize how long of a way there is to go to reach them. As a tutor, I think I am developing the capacity of drawing connections between the material and elimination of racism with more ease and in a more organic way. When we first started, partially because of my inexperience, I felt like sometimes it may look as though I am "shoehorning" questions about race into the conversation, but that is not at all what the result was. It is at the top of the mind of all the participants, and therefore flows naturally, and we get really profound insights on elimination of racial prejudice that are vulnerable and directly inspired from the quotes we are reading. In our participants, we are seeing much more engagement with the power of the Word. One of the participants mentioned to us that the conversations we have are circling in his mind the whole week until we meet again.

7. Study circle - White female respondent

In the summer of 2020, I participated in a virtual institute campaign that began across several regions to study the newly revised version of Book 1. The goal of the campaign was to start new study circles with friends from the wider society and tutor the courses in a way that addresses racial prejudice and other social ills. We studied parts of the NSA's "Statement to the American People on the Elimination of Racial Prejudice," released June 19, 2020, among other guidance, and learned to ask questions that draw connections between the Ruhi material and eliminating racial prejudice or participating in social action. As a result of the institute campaign, I began tutoring two Book 1 study circles in October. Both groups are interracial and include friends of the Faith and Baha'is. When I invited participants to join the study, I described the course by saying that the purpose

was to learn how to apply Baha'i teachings to contribute to the betterment of our communities, putting our ideals into action. We began the study by showing photos of study circles around the world and discussing the process, reflecting on a few passages about social transformation, and watching a video that showed an example of community building. Throughout our study, we regularly draw connections that show how the material could help us in eliminating racial prejudice. We collectively participated in a service project organized by one member, and we planned a virtual community art night as a service project, to create an uplifting space for people to come together and relieve stress. The group is now planning to host a regular art night, possibly with a devotional portion as we study the importance of prayer.

8. Study circle - White female respondent

As we study and consult together, the facilitators seek opportunities to interweave questions about racial issues to increase discussion of how the topic relates to and increases our awareness and sensitivity to our language and deeds which can bring increased unity and appreciation for diversity of culture.

9. Study circle – White female respondent

S. and I consider with each section of Book 8.1 the questions 1. How does this apply to the most vital and challenging issue? What did 'Abdu'l-Baha do/say that exemplified this principle of the oneness of humanity? Other questions of course come up but these are the mainstays.

Examples: other community-building activities and spaces

10. Bicentenary celebration – White female respondent

The Bicentenary was held in a predominantly Black, working class neighborhood in DC where few, if any events have been held that I am aware of. When I heard about the location, I wasn't thinking about the implications and wisdom of the location on race, class, culture, nor about populations we are meant to both safeguard and reach out to; I was thinking it was very far and I had a young child at home that my husband had to put down for me so I could leave in time to drive to the other side of town, and it was inconvenient.

The venue was, of course, perfect. The program was not only beautiful, moving, and powerful, but I believe very educational and transformative for the community, and an example for each of us and as a community for years to come.

One learning was that having mostly Black readers and musicians in a predominantly Black neighborhood was so different from my typical Baha'i experience that it highlighted how White/Persian our events always are. This is not something that is always evident to White Baha'is since we are breathing the same air all the time. I hadn't always noticed it until I saw the contrast and what the LSA was trying to demonstrate. It was powerful, beautiful, and so healing/transformative. One learning is how the LSA can lead the charge by such examples, and offer the whole community a model for future events. It also creates comfortability and awareness of diverse neighborhoods. I met individuals in attendance that I hadn't met before, and had some beautiful, uplifting conversations.

It was also a learning to see that we can still grow in the arena of having an outward oriented vision at the events. Many of us tend to gravitate towards those friends we already know, and still have some growth to do in terms of welcoming new faces, reaching out to folks we don't know at all, and bringing new folks into the community. I remember when I moved to this community feeling shy initially, and it can feel so nice to be welcomed in and made to feel at home by others. I also imagine that this community, which has so many strengths, can grow in our comfortability with connecting with folks from differing classes. This is a predominately middle and upper-class community, and that is reflected in who we invite and talk to. Each of us is doing our best and we are all learning and growing. I was still sad to see, however, that there were a few individuals standing alone for much of the event during the social portion. I went and reached out to one individual, but did not make it to the others, and I left wondering what their experience was and if they would return.

I think we are all learning as individuals and as a community where our areas of growth are, where our discomforts still lie, and what our community might look like to those who perceive themselves (or are perceived) as outsiders.

Interestingly, when Ayyam-I-Ha rolled around I volunteered to help. Brainstorming with another parent, who is also on the LSA, it became clear to me that I was, yet again, needing to focus my thinking on the implications of race, class and culture, and had not been. The learning here is that this is something that must be cultivated and that I needed accompaniment in. I was still thinking about my own neighborhood and needs. Watching the Frontiers of Learning on the Race Pilot Project website also broadened my vision and helped me understand more about what it can look like to really engage all of our community. I keep thinking about this event, and how the members of the LSA continue to be examples to this community in making freedom from racial

prejudice a watchword, and the implications of race, class and culture on decisions. The power of the LSA to lead by example and for its members to accompany others is so profound.

Examples: social action and public discourse

11. Public discourse - White respondent

I have been intentionally stopping on my runs through the city parks to stop and talk to African Americans. One recent run stopped and talked to four African American women. We had a beautiful talk about the pupil of the eye, ended with short prayer. One of the women had tears down her cheek. I realize more than ever the pent up emotions that persons of color live with every day. I have a lot of work to do.

12. Public discourse - Iranian female respondent

At work I engage my co-workers in a conversation about racial injustice. During our morning "huddles" I read quotations from the writings regarding the oneness of mankind. I have let my co-workers know that I'm involved in a workshop that is working toward race unity. I was approached by one White coworker who found my involvement with the workshop interesting and asked me to share my learning with her. A few days ago, during morning huddle at work I asked if I could share some thoughts. I said: in light of the recent racially motivated incidents, I have committed to doing something every day to promote race unity and I invite you all to do the same thing. I asked them to be kind to our Black brothers and sisters, to hear them out and to acknowledge their pain. Then I said this is from the Bahai writings and read the Hidden Words: Know ye not why We created thee from the same dust? After I finished, I could hear my White coworkers say, that was very nice, that was touching, that was beautiful. One White coworker came over and gave me a hug, another said thank you for sharing that beautiful writing that really meant a lot. I was also approached by two Black coworkers expressing their gratitude for speaking on the subject and sharing the writing.

1.3. Individuals, institutions, and agencies are building capacity to connect with like-minded organizations and people in the wider community.

Examples: social action and public discourse

1. Public discourse – Persian Female Respondent

In many interactions I've had (including one-on-one and group discussions, in various settings), I have noticed that, when presenting the idea of the oneness of humanity, it can be very helpful to frame it in both aspirational and practical terms. In other words, when someone says (or we read in a quotation) that we are one human family and one human race -- and, on a related note, when someone offers examples to illustrate this, such as climate change or the current global pandemic -- I find that it is often necessary to clarify that, even though the spiritual and biological reality is that we are one, the current social reality is that racism and economic oppression are pervasive, such that things like climate change and pandemics (and all kinds of other societal phenomena) disproportionately harm people of color and poor people. So we have much work to do to make oneness a social reality as well, and we must all strive towards that.

I find that this clarification is helpful because, if we don't make it, black people and other people of color often feel like their lived experience is not recognized or validated. And I find that, if we do make that clarification, you can often see and hear and feel the agreement and relief from people of color in the room. So, just a thought that, when we present the oneness of humanity, we should try to frame it as both real in a foundational sense but also aspirational in a practical sense -- lest we be perceived as naive, out of touch, or insensitive. I believe I once read in some ISGP materials that the oneness of humanity is both the organizing principle and the ultimate goal of the Baha'i Faith, so that might be one way to think about it.

2. Public discourse - White female respondent

The director of the Public Theology and Racial Justice Collaborative at Vanderbilt Divinity school had specifically asked the Bahá'ís to participate in their work. She already had personal relationships with a few Baha'is in our community and had attended some firesides and devotionals in people's homes. She met and starting interacting with the Baha'i community when Vanderbilt began the PTRJ project that consisted of a 5 year grant to begin a Nationwide, interfaith dialogue on the theological response to social change and action around race justice in America. Part of this initiative was the director setting up what she called "listening parties" with the various Faith communities in Nashville to see what each group was doing with regard to racial justice. She met with the Nashville Baha'i Community for one of those parties in Dec of 2018. She left with a copy of "The Pupil of the Eye" compilation and "The Advent of Divine Justice." Within a short time she reached out to our Assembly and offered 10 slots to the Baha'is to participate in the week-long PTRJ conference that summer because in her words, "The Baha'is

have the only working model of what this should look like" in Faith communities. Five of us were able to participate in that very informative conference. This May the Baha'i Choir was invited back to provide the majority of the musical arts offerings for the follow up PTRJ conference."

This last April, the PTRJ committee participated in a week-long event called "We Remember Nashville." This was a commemorative program put together by the city "to promote community awareness, education, and public reckoning around racial terror in Nashville, TN (Davidson County). This program ended with an interfaith devotional service in which the Baha'i Choir was again specifically invited to attend and the Baha'i Assembly was invited to give remarks as a Faith community surrounding Social Justice. The director gave the sermon for that service. In her remarks she a few times made the statement "The Baha'is are calling for the oneness of humanity... the Baha'is are calling for the Unity of Mankind... Are you going to show up?"

Following that event I approached the director to see if she thought it would be appropriate to set up and on-going interfaith devotional service to focus on the theme of Unity, racial justice, and oneness of humanity in which we would invite the local participants in the PTRJ effort to participate. She said she loved the idea and I have taken the idea to the local Assembly for approval to use the Baha'i Center as the host.

3. Social action - White female respondent

I am a teacher in a school that serves primarily students of color. Since 2016, I have supported a nonprofit literacy program, whose aim is to provide access to culturally relevant books, particularly in areas of town that are "book deserts." The organization is student-led and has greatly benefited my classes and shaped my teaching style. Along with reading and discussing books by authors of color, students design and carry out service projects such as building "little libraries" to put in community centers, reading to elementary school students, etc. They also have the opportunity to meet authors of color and connect with them through various events throughout the year. My students have LOVED getting to read books and connect with authors who reflect them and their experience. They feel seen and valued. Many students have come to see themselves as readers, getting passionate about books and characters. I have learned that many kids who "don't like to read" really just don't like to read boring books by dead White men. The nonprofit seeks to create a new canon and promotes reading choice and diversity.

4. Public discourse – White female respondent

In the summer of 2020, I participated in a virtual book study about White privilege and prejudice with other educators in my school district. I am learning more about why White people get defensive when talking about race and have been practicing having conversations with White

people about race without triggering this defensiveness. I participated in an anti-racist educator workshop over the summer as well and am learning how to become more anti-racist in my teaching practice. I am engaging in more conversations with other educators, parents, and community members about the systemic racism embedded in our educational system. In December 2020, several coworkers and I participated in a racial justice conference hosted by a local university. The learning and conversation from the conference has helped to shape the professional development sessions that we have participated in this spring. Through the conference, I also connected with a teacher from another school and have begun to collaborate with her. I was able to share some details about the institute process and the junior youth program.

In the wake of the George Floyd protests, I collaborated with an African American college student who is a friend of the Faith to create a virtual “Monday Motivation” youth night, to provide an uplifting space for meaningful conversation. It was small but successful. We prayed together, shared music, studied quotes on a theme, and discussed the “roses and thorns” of our week.

2.1. Individual Bahá'ís are building capacity

- **to put themselves in unfamiliar situations where there is racial diversity**
- **to connect cross-racially**
- **to engage honestly in difficult conversations about race**
- **to deal with racial challenges and listen without defensiveness when there is frustration or anger**

Examples: core activities and home visits

1. Study circle - African American female respondent

I am currently attending a Ruhi Book 1, with the majority of participants being African American. The tutor starts each meeting with check-in before prayers. I tried to open a space of safety where non-Baha'is felt comfortable to comment on what is happening right now around race in this country because I know this was on every Black person's mind. In the previous class, I read something on Shoghi Effendi from the Advent of Divine Justice about the elimination of racial prejudice should be the watchword. At some point during our study, the tutor stated this is not the time or place to talk about racial issues. I stated this is the exact time and place for this conversation. The tutor did not acknowledge what I said and kept on talking. I felt that this was dismissive to the group and me. So the next day I decided to call the tutor about this because I have known this person for a long time and love them dearly. I ask why they think Ruhi is not a place for conversations around race. This is not a conversation I wanted to have but there was a desire to be open and give my dear friend a glimpse behind the veil of what it means to be Black in this country. I took a chance because if we are all going to grow, we need to engage in uncomfortable conversations. My friend's response to my question was, "that is not what I meant" and said it was they did not want to talk about race as it related to White privilege or White fragility. I reminded my friend that not one Black person even mentioned that. So, then I tried to explain that to tell a group of mostly African American people that Ruhi is not a place to talk about race, an issue that dominates their life, does not create a true dialog with the Black people in the group around the race issue and limits the ability to build true bonds of friendship beyond the superficial. The reason I wanted to make space for the conversation about race is to give my friend an intimate look behind what most African Americans don't talk about in mixed company due to lack of trust. I also wanted to give my friend an idea of how to create bonds of friendship beyond what they could even imagine. I also wanted my friend to know as a tutor how they can let African Americans know it is a safe space for them to be themselves. We had a good talk. My friend agreed to be more open to what others are saying and I agreed not to give up on them.

2. Study circle - African American female respondent

My community building activity: We began by reading writings and then turned to focus on the letters about race Unity from the Universal House of Justice and NSA of the Baha'is of the United States. Our discussions and readings were extremely helpful in thinking about the causes and on-going manifestations of racial prejudice. In this instance, we were talking about race in general and not about anyone engaged in the activity. What I learned is that White Americans, even Baha'is of Persian descent were woefully lacking in an awareness of the corrosive nature of racism in the lives of African Americans, and that the general idea that the incidents of brutality and injustice against African Americans, systemic and institutional, were isolated, not that bad, if they did occur. They did not know the stories, widespread though they are, of the patterns of abuse that racism takes on all levels and in all spaces of life. This was shocking for both me and them, but the other Blacks in the study group were well schooled and we began to have a conversation that had been held in secret (a vestige of necessary the slaves' discretion and Jim Crow for survival?) Was this also, at the same time, a kind of glass ceiling? I had been talking to other African Americans and my family members for years, but the knowledge that came from these conversations hadn't resulted in upward mobility—economic or social—rather, it was felt, categorized, and stored in the memory in encyclopedic ways, and then formed the basis of a conversation among the group. Whites didn't know or didn't care it was happening. They did not need to know, or so they thought. I also learned that I had a Ph.D. in race dynamics, honed by survival. I was singing, though I didn't realize it at the time, the blues—no guitar or piano, and the structure of the blues—repeat the first two lines and then make an observation, often ironic, about the close nature of interactions and the limited deep knowledge we shared about the day to day life experiences African Americans live. I also learned that both groups were sad in some way. When we got to the real conversations, it was a road that felt so new that all seemed to move in slow motion, we were going to the heart of things, and that took time, explaining, and clarifying, and then telling an anecdote to help deepen understanding—it was a thorny road. But we wanted to get there together, and so we gave each other space and time to say, say whatever needed to be said without offering judgment. Eventually, hearts were opened and we felt a bond that had not been there before.

3. Devotional gathering - White female respondent

Our neighborhood has a weekly devotional gathering that rotates hosts every week. One time when it was our house's turn to host, we decided to focus the devotional on “racial healing,” as it was happening during the height of the protests following the murder of George Floyd by police. One thing I learned immediately was that it was a mistake to say the focus was on “racial healing” rather than racial justice. I shared the invitation with a couple neighbors. One African American neighbor responded that a devotional on “racial healing” was not going to be a safe space for them as an African American, and that in

their view, White people need to work on dismantling racism rather than focusing on healing at this time.

The devotional was held online, and we ended up being joined by three Baha'is of color from different parts of the country, whom I had not met before. This was in addition to myself (I am White), my African Baha'i husband, a Persian Baha'i who is very well-versed in racial justice, and a White male friend of the Faith who had come to my house for devotions a few times before. As we studied the quotations that we had assembled, the Baha'is of color that I did not know started sharing about the microaggressions they face within the Baha'i community. I let them talk and did not try to redirect the conversation. As we were winding down, the new folks asked when the next meeting was. I explained to them that this was a neighborhood devotional with rotating hosts, and I had just picked the topic of race because it was important to me, and it was timely. They asked me to facilitate again the following week, to keep the topic on race, and to invite the other hosts and neighborhood participants, so that they could see how I facilitated. They liked the fact that I did not shut them down or try to redirect the conversation to things that were "safe" and "nice."

Other than learning to be more careful with my language in invitations, I learned a few things from this experience. One was that sadly, Baha'is of color are still feeling quite alienated from their local Baha'i communities. One of the reasons they wanted to meet again was that they rarely had a chance to share their experiences with other Baha'is of color and White/Persian Baha'is who were sympathetic to their struggles within the community. The other thing that I learned is that I can facilitate these conversations. I don't have any training in facilitation, especially facilitating difficult conversations about race. And if you had told me what was going to happen during that devotional, I would have tried to find an experienced facilitator to handle it! I never would have agreed to put myself in that position. But not only was I successful, I was asked to show the other hosts how it is done.

4. Devotional gathering - Persian male respondent

After reading the quotes and prayers, we usually engage in meaningful discussion afterwards about the quotes. The participants were a mixed group of Baha'i and Non-Baha'i, African American and Persian. As we began reflecting and talking, the discussion turned to the issue of race given the recent incidents of killings of innocent African Americans including George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and the video of the White woman in central park calling the police on an innocent Black man asking her to leash her dog. The discussion raised a lot of emotions and a concern about how our current state of "normal" includes all these injustices against people of African

descent and how disheartening it was. We then began discussing how it is not enough to simply have Blacks in this country to speak up about this injustice but that everyone needs to speak up in order for things to change. So we began talking about the importance of non-Black people pushing and championing this issue and voicing their objection to this kind of continued injustice.

One of the key learnings from this discussion for me is I think it's important for those who are not Black in this country to have the opportunity to see and hear the hurt these injustices are causing by speaking with those who are Black in an environment where they feel safe to open up and share their feelings and honest reactions. That exposure to another person's feelings helps to build empathy and hopefully a desire to act on that empathy.

5. Devotional gathering – Persian/White female respondent

I, a white Baha'i, was in a gathering with a group of maybe 30 Baha'i friends. At one point during the meeting, someone was telling a story and referred to a family of "X" ethnicity - in the context of the struggle they were having with facilitating Book 1 with this family.

A good friend of mine, who is Black, wrote me privately in the chat (maybe because we had been messaging earlier?), asking "What was the relevance of them being from an 'X' background?" I responded, "Not sure - good point/question!"

And I knew I should say something to the group, but wasn't sure what. I could ask this same question directly about the relevance of mentioning the "X" background, but I wasn't sure if it made sense to ask in that way in front of everyone - I settled on saying something about my experience in another country and how the challenge wasn't limited to a culture, but in fact it was a great challenge to have because of x-y-z and here's some ideas for handling the challenge. This experience drew my awareness to the way we tell stories, and the importance of reflecting on if it makes sense to talk about people's race/ethnicity when we do. Also, even though I'm not sure it was a great way of addressing the issue, this experience reminded me that even if I don't know what to say in a situation, speaking up can be important/valuable - particularly when addressing what a Black friend identifies as important. And my friend was grateful that I had tried. A side reflection is also the continued importance of friendship and love.

6. Jr. Youth Program - White male respondent

While walking through the neighborhood gathering the junior youth the subject of the recent protests came up. Everybody expressed support for the fact that Black lives matter and that police brutality is a big issue in our country, and that Black and brown folk are overwhelmingly the victims of that brutality. But the question "but what's with the rioting?" Referring to the

property damage that sometimes is associated with protests. The animators were able to explain that there was evidence of some of that being the result of saboteurs that are trying to discredit the peaceful protesters. Later on we sat down in an area outside and shared prayers. Before starting our study of the text I thought it would be helpful to study a quote that a friend of mine posted on social media earlier that day from the Baha'i International Community's address to the UN in 1989...The animators were able to share that actually by participating right now in the institute process, of which the JYSEP is a part of, we will eventually (many, many, many years from now) bring about the oneness of humanity. Since that meeting we've been able to frame discussions about expanding the group around the idea of bringing more and more friends into this educational process in order to help others establish the "unshakable conviction of the oneness of the human race" and contribute to a new world order where that is a foundation.

2.2. White and Persian Bahá'ís are building capacity

- **to learn about race**
- **to reflect on their experiences and conscious and subconscious behaviors**
- **to make necessary changes**
- **to identify what they're learning or need to learn.**

Examples: core activities and home visits

1. Study circle – Black female respondent

[Ruhí Book] 8.1 is where we found some ways to try and incorporate the ideas from this Pilot Project into the study circle. We started it by sharing some of what we learned in the Pilot Program with the participants and that we would be looking through the lens of race at times and they agreed. We also asked how they would like to see the study circle become. And as we went further into the book, we did give scenarios related to material in the book and race, which did stimulate further discussion. The first time it was done the question was very specific in regards of the races of the people in it and what a White Baha'i said...this time seemed uncomfortable at first, but they pushed on thru that and engaged in it. The next time or two was in direct relation to the text and not a scenario so much and they more easily jumped into it. But there was a most amazing thing that I witnessed with this group and had Never seen before. These White women, all Bahá'ís, jumped into conversation about how White people need to address race in discussion together!!! It was the most touching thing! They were doing the work right there before my eyes. I did not enter into that discussion but waited to see where their ideas and support of each other in the effort would go, which was in part to White Baha'is duty and obligation to the Covenant to investigate, research and do their own inner work on racism. One of those persons I have known since we were children, and she had told me so many years ago that White people need to talk to White people about race and I agreed wholeheartedly because they most often listen to each other. Now, this person is working with another White female Baha'i with a group of White and Persian Baha'is, under the direction of the Assembly, on this topic of racism. The LSA had told them that a POTE* or 2 should also be asked to join this group as well, and I have come to see why. It is so that our White family members don't miss some things that they are saying, expressing or doing unconsciously.

* [The designation POTE refers to the “Pupil of the Eye,” the distinguishing station given to Black people by Bahá'u'lláh]

2. Devotional gathering – White female respondent

I have seen that the first thing I usually go to is to put the person in a “box” depending on their race or ethnicity. I am White so if the person I see is White there is no box or if I see someone I am familiar with there is no box. I know perfectly well that racial diversion is an erroneous conception and does not exist in reality but I also know that having lived in the South for almost 75 years this has become so ingrained that it is a huge struggle to eradicate it. Now that I have become aware of my “boxes” I need to work on how to open them up. I have a new neighbor across the street who is a 33 year old African American male. We had our first heartfelt conversation this morning and I shared with him what I am working on. I happily discovered that we think a lot alike and he remarked that we are going to be best friends. I am excited that perhaps we can work on this together. Another Baha’i who lives on my block and I have started a monthly devotional gathering for folks in our neighborhood. We are going to include race unity as a theme.

3. Devotional gathering – White female respondent

The Devotionals we have in our neighborhood is advancing the elimination of racial prejudice because it is bringing people together from different socio-economic and racial groups. There is an overlap with the Devotionals we offer and a city-sponsored neighborhood group we (Black and White couple) participate in. Some attendees at our Devotionals have been people we have met at this gathering which is about 98% African American and the majority of the people have low incomes. I’ve found it is important for me to be aware of what Shoghi Effendi refers to as an inherent sense of superiority and to not make assumptions about individual’s capacities based on how they may initially appear (for example, I realized, after having a conversation in a small group, that a somewhat older and quiet woman who is hooked up to oxygen most of the time was a very passionate and informed activist, who is probably is being underutilized). Within our Devotional gatherings, I’m learning that 1. It’s important to keep our devotionals simple – not too much fancy or relatively expensive food etc., so the friends of ours, who may have limited income, will not feel as if having their own devotional would not be feasible. At the same time it is important to realize that people with limited means find ways to offer very substantial food at their events. It is important to be thoughtful and open about these things without assumptions. Many people come to our gatherings with a deep spiritual life, so it’s important for us to not assume that it will be a one way sharing of faith. One of the most important capacities that I’m learning is that of reflection – reflection about how our actions and activities reflect freedom from prejudice and sincere friendship.

4. Devotional gathering - White male respondent

We have a very modest experience that we would like to share. When we (wife and myself) arrived in the community in September 2017, we attended the drum circle devotional that’s held

monthly at the Baha'i Center. We were very moved by it. To us, it felt like a gift that the African-American part of our community was giving to the wider community, both of Baha'is and everyone else in the group. The spirit is palpable. I am someone who is confident with singing and likes to perform music, and I felt like this could be a space in which my own musical gifts would be welcomed. (They welcomed others to be part of the circle) So shortly after attending my first drum circle, I made a commitment internally that, every time I was in town, I would attend the devotional and contribute—no exceptions or excuses. In my heart, this also felt like an opportunity to contribute to racial unity within our community. My participation has raised a number of interesting internal struggles. When the norms of a certain space are set by a culture apart from your own, how much participation is appropriate, and when does it cross the line into appropriation? How much should I be leading songs in such a space, and how much of a conscious effort should I make to simply participate? How can I nurture the spirit of such a space, without dominating it in any way? How can I receive a gift like the drum circle and honor it in the spirit in which it's given? I was very touched that after about two years of engaging in the drum circle (perhaps more like a year and a half) I was included in the celebrations for the Bicentenary. This felt like a very generous inclusion. The group is also part of my efforts to build friendships across racial divides. Relationships based in the arts often transcend some of the more stubborn barriers that are erected through differences of culture and race. I sing regularly with my friends at the drum circle and in one sense I feel that I know them deeply. I also make efforts after each to stay and speak with my brothers and sisters and get to know them better a little bit personally. That effort is still coming along but as my attendance continues I've noticed that certain barriers have started to come down, both within myself and within others.

5. Children's classes - White female respondent

I have been assisting with a children's class in my neighborhood. There was an altercation between an Hispanic child and an African American child that one of the teachers observed. There was an undertone of racism which we had not noticed. I was not aware of racist feelings between some Hispanics and African Americans and wish that we had addressed that before it got out of hand. We had tried to be respectful of each child in our class and should have been more aware of these types of potential interactions between children of different cultures. We probably should have focused on unity in our own community on a very basic level.

6. Jr. Youth Program – Persian/Latina woman

I have been facilitating a junior youth group of all African American boys for many years now. As a Latin-Persian woman I have had to learn a lot about the dynamics of racial issues in America, the history of oppression and its implications in our current reality. I can say that I was unaware of the extent of this struggle, thinking naively it was “in the past”, and that “we are all flowers of one garden”, so “why does color even matter?”. It is through service in the framework

of the Plan, and the intentional consciousness of my local Baha'i community that I started to see and understand the complexity of this issue and that the words of the Guardian in the Advent of Divine Justice are as relevant now as when they were written. Building relationships with the parents of my junior youth has been a challenge, full of tremendous opportunities for reflection, especially about my own prejudices. One of the earlier examples I remember happened within the first year of animating this junior youth group. One of our participants was turning 13 and he invited his animators to his birthday party. We thought this was an exciting opportunity, to build a relationship with his mother, or to get past the door of his house at least... Multiple times before that day, we had tried to connect with the mother, home visit her, invite ourselves to her home, and all had failed. From what we knew she was a single mother, worked two jobs and from my limited vantage point she seemed too busy to be engaged in her son's spiritual education. The day of the birthday party came, and here my inner prejudices were revealed to me as I walked into this junior youth's home. His mother greeted us solemnly and with gratitude. She said her son was excited for us to come. I walked into a pristine home, extremely organized, photographs of her sons everywhere, homemade tacos, a delicious looking birthday cake and many of his friends playing video games. In this moment, our host told us how much her son really enjoys the junior youth group, and that while she is often busy, she makes sure to catch up daily and learn about what he is learning. She told us that she works early in the morning and makes sure she can leave work before her son comes back from school, to support him in his homework. Her 'second' job was to take care of her newborn grandchild, every day after work. All the ideas or stories I had created in my mind, mainly based on assumptions, were clarified and proven wrong. This was one of the earliest moments that helped me see how much I had to learn about building relationships at a pace that made sense for these hard-working, dedicated parents. Not on my terms and timelines, but with time, trusting in their capacities and removing any taint of prejudice in my mind.

7. Home visit – White female respondent

Members of our ATC recently decided to visit devotional hosts to share learning from a recent visit from our Counselor regarding an expanding nucleus growing from our core activities and the link between worship and service. Two of us visited an African American devotional host in her home. Another African American friend (who also hosts a devotional) was there with her. After socializing and getting to know each other better, we shared what we had learned about the importance of combining worship with service. In the ensuing discussion, the two women very kindly and warmly shared with us (both of us White) that this is something that the African Americans practice naturally in their lives. The devotional group hosted by this woman (a diverse group, but primarily African Americans) have already started children's classes for their children and have been consulting on ways to reach out to a nearby area with great need.... This experience taught me to approach such experiences in my capacity as a member of an agency with a deeper posture of learning that involves more listening, asking, appreciating really for

anyone, but most especially for those of backgrounds and experiences different from my own. And the value of home visits for binding the hearts!

Examples: other community-building activities and spaces

8. Neighborhood – Persian Female respondent

One insight gained from our efforts in the neighborhood was a reflection that opened our eyes to how important it is that we constantly invite those from the neighborhood to participate in our planning of activities. We wanted to invite our youth to use a community center space and use that as a place to invite our friends and engage in service together. One of our participants brought to light that there are territorial divides within the neighborhood and that this is something that can vary block by block. Had we not received this feedback from the youth who felt comfortable enough to share, we would have potentially put others in a dangerous and uncomfortable circumstance. The experience was a reminder for us that because we did not grow up with the same context or experience within this neighborhood, it is important that we listen to those who have.

9. Devotional program for meeting - White female respondent

With heavy hearts, following the May 25th killing of George Floyd, a nucleus, which consisted of Persian and White members, was invited to create the devotions for a virtual community gathering. The nucleus wanted to create a devotional program that was inspiring, uplifting and empowering for people of all backgrounds, and the members were conscious that we have a culture in the U.S. that tends to be primarily White or Persian focused. As the members consulted, they started to uncover their own limitations and need for more education around what images, music and themes felt appropriate given the reality of the community. The team created many iterations of images and music that felt instructive to some. After prayer and consultation, another attempt was made that still felt off to the participants. The members felt unsure of whether they were culturally appropriating by showing certain images or music with African Americans even though they themselves were Persian and White. The process itself was challenging because all participants wanted to be respectful to BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color], but each had different understandings of what that meant, and all of them knew that they were likely unaware of many subtleties as well as in need of more voices and perspectives. Additionally, each participant wanted to be unified and not offend the other.

The team realized that it would have been good to have Black Baha'is as protagonists in the process, but didn't want to put the burden of work on other Black friends in the community at the last-minute, nor ask them to educate the team. Lots of prayers were said. After the prayers, IMMEDIATELY, a Black Baha'i friend happened to call one of the participants and expressed interest in collaborating. After hearing from the African American friend that they felt the images paired with quotes encouraging people to lift themselves up were inappropriate, all of the

team members were able to accept the feedback and move forward in unity. The friend suggested, however, that the team just “go with their gut,” not worry about trying to make it so focused on Black images or music, and worrying about whether it veered from the typical pattern of White/Persian cultural prayers/devotions. The team felt that going with their gut was how the original images were created by the White Baha’is, as it is difficult to change one’s ideas in a vacuum. After some consultation, it was agreed that creating uplifting devotions that are not White centric would be a different process for Whites than for Black Baha’is. It was an enlightening discussion. Also, ensuring the team had diverse voices was important, and also gave the White Baha’is confidence that they were helping to create something that would feel good and uplift all.

The final product ended up being uplifting, beautiful, and received much positive feedback from a diversity of people. One learning is that sometimes using recorded music allows for diversity, and helps avoid seeing the same faces and hearing the same music during devotions. We also found it was difficult to find Baha’i music created by African American Baha’is on the well-known platforms (though easier to find music created by Black Baha’is around the world). Other Learnings: Our world views and perspectives have such far-reaching impacts on our understanding of how art is perceived, what is appropriate, and having humility and a willingness to listen and consult are vital. One of the members felt the process was enlightening, helpful, and aided in her understanding of the sensitive nature of the issues. Another member thought the original art was fine (however, when hearing that an African American Baha’i agreed it was inappropriate, was accepting of the feedback). So many learnings here: importance of consultation, humility, importance of education on history of race in the US, importance of understanding and being educated on role of White Baha’is and what writings say about subconscious sense of superiority, relying on prayer, self-reflection, overcoming discomfort, being honest and loving, persevering when we know something is important, and thinking about the implications of race, class and culture, even when it takes more time, patience, and personal growth. A short slide presentation required a lot of time, energy and reflection, and it was worth every minute. Another learning is that the Report that National shared from the Washington, DC Baha’i community and their LSA’s example has had far-reaching effects on all of our communities. Also, having seen the stunning commemorations that the Canadian Baha’i Community created and many shared examples of beautiful devotions that magnified the nobility of African Americans and set an example of how devotions can be different and more inclusive has been an inspiration and engendered confidence.

10. Reflection - White respondent

While hiking in the mountains came upon two Forest Rangers, one White, the other African-American. When asking questions I noticed how I turned to the White man for answers. Quickly I focused my eyes on the man of color who offered answers and further assistance.

2.3. Individual Bahá'ís are building capacity to create bonds of friendship and trust through fellowship and service in racially diverse environments.

Examples: core activities and home visits

1. Devotional gatherings and study circle - African American female respondent

As a new Baha'i, most of my initial experiences have been through Study Circle participation and devotionals. I was introduced to the community by the beautiful mixed Black and Iranian couple. Since my introduction about 3 years ago now, I myself, as an African American woman who mostly surrounded myself with people in my race, now have friends and beautiful relationships with people of diverse backgrounds, including Iranian and Whites. I was able to also witness this profound connection flourish when I moved back home to Seattle and intentionally connected my family to the community through Study Circles, devotionals, and Firesides. My family, similarly to myself, typically did not connect, on a deep level, with races and communities outside of the African American community and culture. Now, my mother, nieces, cousins, and sisters share food and deep connections with Iranians, whites, etc. in the Baha'i community in the greater Seattle area. I have witnessed the breaking down of racial barriers and trust being built between races and cultures through these specific, very personal experiences.

2. Study circle - African descent female respondent

An essential aspect of community building is nurturing relationships with community members through Ruhi book 1. I can say that I have gained a new friendship, which I believe will be lasting. That friendship is based on mutual communication and exchanging ideas around some of the most fundamental questions that we face in society today. Exchange of ideas coupled with and personal reflections, have built a genuine connection on the foundations of principles of Ruhi book 1. The trust that has developed is now leading to an exploration of aspects of African spirituality, mental health, history, and, more recently, a deeper dive into the Baha'i writings through the study of Ruhi Book 2. The trust and friendship have even led to questions about how to increase spirituality in our local community. Reflecting on experiences from one's life and delving into discussions raised in Ruhi book 1 has allowed for deep understanding and reflection on Black people's reality in the United States as well as, opportunities for changing the trajectory of pain and suffering that are being experienced by Black people. Through conversations that are prompted from topics in Ruhi book 1, some capacities that are being developed include, enabling vulnerability, to listen discernibly, to freely but tactfully communicate about one's personal experiences or concerns about the community through the lens of tests, sacrifices, and capacity to grow. Engaging these capacities has built an environment where the participants feel trusting and

encouraged to share and go deeper into the materials. Another usable capacity is being mindful of one's veils that would prevent someone from being discerning in their communication with participants.

3. Home visit - African American female respondent

My partner and I have been visiting with this Caucasian Female, Baha'i, for several months (monthly). We let her know at the outset that our visits could be focused on topics that she wanted to explore from a spiritual perspective. She is very passionate about issues relative to climate change and the environmental effects. So, that's where we began our focus, and since then have moved on to racial unity. Our willingness and allowing her to decide topics from the beginning set the stage for mutual respect, trust and facilitated increasing intimacy of our meetings. We also do prayers and they set the tone for whatever follows.

4. Jr. Youth Program - African American female respondent

Several of the junior youth and the African American neighborhood youth, who are training to study as animators, mentioned that this is one of the few multiracial spaces where they have developed real friendships. The adults who help with activities are from different cultural and racial backgrounds. All live in the county, but not everyone lives in the neighborhood. They discuss with a degree of pride that they have such a diverse group of people that feel like family to them. At times the JY have mentioned that I guess all White people aren't racist.

5. Study circle – Persian female respondent

We are a group of racially diverse participants studying the Ruhi courses and serving together. After about a year, one of the participants of a study circle I tutor -- a friend of the Faith who is a Black man -- asked me and a few other Baha'is if he could ask us a question after a study circle session one day. He had heard from Baha'is living elsewhere that there was racism within the Baha'i community among Persians toward African Americans; how could this be, given the Faith's teachings on the elimination of racial prejudice? He wanted to know how I, as a Persian American Baha'i, and two other participants, African American Baha'is, felt about this and whether it was true. I noticed an initial discomfort in me, rooted in a desire to protect this individual, who was experiencing the Faith within a growing nucleus of friends, from something he said he heard was happening in other communities. I fretted that what he had heard would cause him to harbor suspicion about the transformative power of the Faith. But I quickly saw how the bonds of friendship developed within the context of studying the word of God, praying and service allowed for him to ask us this question, and for all of us to engage in this conversation, confident our hearts were seen. Each of us was able to share our own lived experience with this issue and our perspective. We had a deep, honest, real and loving

conversation. I came to see that rather than fretting about difficult conversations, I should put my trust in God and remember each soul is on his or her own walk. I can accompany or support others by being honest and loving, but it is not my place to micromanage other souls on their spiritual journeys.

6. Devotional gathering - White female respondent

Before coronavirus affected the community and limited our ability to gather together in my home for our regular monthly devotional gathering, a number of my neighbors who are Black had attended. One particular family, who live across the street from me, had been coming very regularly, including the wife, husband, and adult daughter.

The format of the devotional included dinner and games after the prayer and reading portion. The fellowship has deepened our bonds of friendship over time. My neighbors always bring their Bible and read passages from the Bible and they have also shared Christian music from their phones or from YouTube video that we pull up on my TV. On one particular evening, they brought a friend who was a minister who shared a short heartfelt sermon with us. It was beautiful. My neighbors have brought a very distinct, Black celebratory way of praying with heartfelt amens and praise Gods and hallelujahs. We've all learned together and expanded how we praise God together. All who have attended the devotional have enjoyed the readings from different religions. A very new Bahá'í from a Black/Latino background had also been attending very regularly and had shared so much of his exploration of different faiths including his dual Jewish and Christian upbringing. Our gatherings together helped us develop deeper bonds of friendship. We've had attendees who speak Spanish so we've had a variety of languages. Bahá'ís have also read passages from the Bible and we've also sung. We haven't met in a few months because of the virus. However, the bonds of friendship that we had already developed have continued as my neighbors across the street and I regularly talk together from a safe distance and we have developed a deeper friendship. I also began studying White Fragility in a Bahá'í study group in March and have discovered how White I am. :-). I thank God that I had started studying this book because with the death of George Floyd and the protests that have occurred across the nation I have been able to have heart to heart conversations with my neighbors about racism in this country. In these conversations and texts I have been able to mention that the Baha'i Faith had said 100 years ago that this country's greatest challenge is racism. The friendship we had already established through the devotional and the trust that we had already built from that plus my new learnings of my own White fragility and White privilege from reading the book, has allowed us to have honest and trusting conversations about racism. Friendship and trust had already been built up, the Word of God had already connected hearts, plus the new White Fragility learnings have combined and contributed to me being courageous enough to broach the subject of racism and given me a practical way to honestly speak with my neighbors and further advance our trust and understanding of each other. I've also been able to start a conversation on

racism with another Black neighbor of mine who had attended the devotional twice when we first started them. Even my husband, a White southern non-Bahai man (married a year now), has said that the devotional has allowed him to get to know our neighbors better. The Word of God is powerful and opens hearts. And the laughing and supporting each other through difficult times and praying together about these things has helped draw us closer together.

7. Jr. Youth Program – Persian female respondent

I was helping out with a junior group in a public housing complex where the residents were almost all Black which was surrounded by a very gentrified area. It felt very segregated- other than us, we never saw people who were not Black cross the road to this housing area. One day, as we were picking up the junior youth before going to group, someone who was sitting outside in the middle of the complex came up to me and my partner, and started speaking with us. We began to tell him about the junior youth spiritual empowerment program. He told us that at first, when he saw us, he thought we were trying to scope out the area for real estate purposes, and was happy to hear about what we were doing, and that he was glad that he came up and spoke to us to learn about the program. He grew up in the housing complex and had come back to visit his community. My learning from this experience was that I think it is really important to build trust when you are working in a community that you are not native in. That requires commitment, time, and real, genuine friendships. He was completely right to feel suspicious of us- we looked like just any other gentrifier in the outer community. But by being able to engage in a loving and open conversation, we were able to overcome that barrier.

3.1. Institutions and agencies are building capacity to promote the elimination of racial prejudice in their communities and clusters in a sustainable way.

1. Nashville LSA Secretary report – excerpts

Describing Abdu'l-Baha's role in the elimination of racism by consulting about the examples of his loving welcome of Louis Gregory, his connection with the Black children in the park, the Black rose, chocolate etc. opened the hearts and minds to creative ways the friends can follow his example. The Assembly's emphasis on Abdu'l Baha taking a personal role though he did not speak English seemed to touch the hearts of the Persian friends, connecting them with this reality that they can make a difference and contribute, and probably why they showed up at the Baha'i Center not only greeting the AA friends, but inviting them to please come to their homes to visit.

The specific focus for the Persian friends is to help them explore ways they think about themselves and their role in promoting racial justice. Because the Persian friends adore Abdu'l-Baha's, and want to please him, example of how he created bridges between the Black and White friends when he came to America in 1912 helps the Persian friends to be part of the solution. The Assembly called on their special gifts and experiences to explore their part as part of the solution of social justice.

[The designation POTE refers to the "Pupil of the Eye," the distinguishing station given to Black people by Bahá'u'lláh]

- the POTE friends also formed a Black women's group, meeting regularly. They met with the Counselor to discuss their hopes, and concerns, to seek guidance, and are receiving letters of encouragement from the Counselor to develop the relationship between themselves and move forward with their activities.
- This movement forward is creating BLACK BAHÁ'I ENGAGEMENT AGAIN. The African Americans know what to do within the framework of the plan and are successfully moving forward.
- Another learning – When we are doing the right activity with POTE, we see the POTE friends who have been quite or distant for some time are now stepping forward, arising and serving.

2. Local Spiritual Assembly – White female respondent

Our LSA is magical. They set aside most of the Feast agenda in order to create space for us to reflect together on racial justice June 6th. It was the first time I felt really united as a community in this endeavor. The conversations were deep and engaged—people actually answered the questions posed to them by the institution and share very thought provoking questions. . At Feast the conversation was very action oriented, which was wonderful.

3. Nashville Cluster Area Teaching Committee Secretary’s report – excerpts

Meeting with African Americans believers on Jan. 4, 2020

This was a meeting planned and coordinated by the ATC. We invited a number of African American believers in our community to join us to share their perspectives on creating a more supportive, welcoming community for people of color in all activities. We prepared a series of questions to facilitate discussion. An African American ATC member facilitated the discussion; the rest of us only listened. The attendance was very encouraging! More than twenty friends came, some of whom seldom attend Baha'i functions or activities. They were moved to see each other together in one room. The consultation was a huge learning for our committee and we felt, and were told by other African American friends who participated, that it was a heartening experience for the African American friends who were there.

Notes from Consultation

The facilitator shared how this meeting came about, from discussions on race and the Baha'i community at reflection gatherings. A discussion ensued of what a safe place is, including: an environment where different subjects can be discussed without harsh judgement; where we stand in the power of our own authenticity; the days of being shut down are over; have to care about other people; be the change you want to see and create safe spaces where one can do that; need the safe spaces where we can be uncomfortable sometimes...it's ok to be uncomfortable and work out things together.

ATC QUESTION: How can our community improve the spirit of inclusivity for African Americans?

- First: the question is from dominant culture's perspective. Better: How can we, as African Americans, move into the work of the Faith in a way we can understand? Filling up the soul. Need to change the way we are all thinking: How can we transform from what it's always been so there is space for African Americans to take their place; so they can step up to their place?
- “Can't heal in the same space/place from which you got sick.”
- The heart needs to be involved...leading from the heart. If it's not coming from the heart, one can't heal. More hugs!

- Dominant culture needs to ask why people are not participating, not make assumptions - and showing care for what and where they are.

ATC QUESTION: How can our community help African Americans feel more comfortable, welcomed, cared for and at home?

- Making experiences “fun” (joyful), especially for children; like starting a Youth Workshop again with those who have been in it before...has lots of energy, this attracts folks; all learn differently. Kids express things through music, dance, rap and parents come to see them in programs.
- Accommodating families and think about inter-generational experiences and how to facilitate participation. Think about this in how core activities are organized and offered. Example: An all-ages devotional!
- Need to increase our proximity with each other.
- Support activities, services initiated by individuals that are other than core activities.
- Our children will have more impact than this generation. Reach out to children, and they will bring their families –not just “our” children, but open to community.
- In interacting with other cultures: think and act in terms of what we can learn rather than what we can offer.
- Need to get back to discovering who we are (this has been repressed) and how we can step up. We’re just at the beginning of this. Need more spaces like this – consult together on how we can serve the Plan, not how we feel we’re told to do it.
- Reasons why we don’t have more coming to Baha’i activities: Abdu’l-Baha says to seek truth diligently...we need to tell the truth. Relationships are really important to us, and we need to increase our proximity to the Black community here. It’s about what we can learn from each other, valuing what we have to contribute, what can we learn in neighborhoods who are different from us. Take the 5 Year Plan; some may think we have to do it completely on our own but we don’t; It’s about mobilizing this group to take the lead; now more are awakening to our role and who we are...and we don’t have to be alone, but can learn and study together
- Language: use as much of the Divine language as possible, it transforms people; use the words of Baha’u’llah that describe us and remember to hold on to them; hold on because of what they can teach of Historical Cultures; we need to internalize that we are assets of God. We have to connect to the Word of God; we know how to engage in Spirit, confirmed as we go, foremost is to ground what we say and to ground it in the Word of God.

ATC QUESTION: What would you like to see come out of this consultation?

- When consulting together, try to call up as much of the Creative Word as possible.

- To be able to state plainly what our value is in the sight of God and attach our transformation to the Creative World. Not a “head game” – but how to call upon the Holy Spirit.
- Need more opportunities to replenish our spirit.
- There were several ideas about services that could be rendered to the African Americans in the area and so many great resources & skills among us. Seek to find intersectionality of these activities with the core activities.

4. **Washington DC: Discussion Notes from a Gathering on Refocusing and Refining Efforts to Reach African American Populations**

On Sunday, March 11, 2018 approximately 50 people joined a gathering in Washington, D.C. focused on strengthening collective and individual capacity to engage African Americans in the community building processes of the Five Year Plan. This first gathering was composed of teams engaged in neighborhood community building processes “with far-reaching implications for the spiritual and material life of a population.”¹ This is part of an ongoing, intentional institutional and community effort in Washington, D.C. to reach, teach, and engage African Americans and accompany them to take ownership of the institute process with a vision of transforming the Washington, D.C. Bahá’í Community and enabling its greater contributions to the elimination of racial prejudice.

The participants came primarily from the Washington, D.C. cluster as well as two others in the group of adjoining clusters, Baltimore City and Prince Georges County. Most of the participants were serving as part of a neighborhood team and/or members of cluster agencies, though many participants represented neither but are engaging African Americans in core activities through their networks. The gathering was planned and hosted by the two Auxiliary Board members serving Washington, D.C. who have been working together and with the cluster agencies and Local Spiritual Assembly for some time to increase efforts and learn about engaging African Americans in the community building process. The gathering was facilitated by an Auxiliary Board member, who herself is African American and a native Washingtonian.

The day was structured around three segments: study of relevant guidance specific to engaging African Americans and attitudes on race, home visits and outreach, and reflection on action, all infused with prayer and song.

¹ From a document prepared by the International Teaching Centre titled “Training Institutes: Attaining a Higher Level of Functioning”, Section 1.1, *Raising the Number and Enhancing the Capacity of Tutors*.

The material prepared by the facilitator, in consultation with the hosting Auxiliary Board members was titled “Fresh and Revitalized Efforts: Refocusing and Refining Efforts to Reach African American Populations”² The materials were excellent—incorporating art, history, song, and carefully selected guidance—and led the participants through the following sequence of themes:

1. Why are we refreshing and revitalizing our efforts to reach African Americans right now?
2. Qualities and Characteristics of People of African Descent.
3. Considering our own thoughts and attitudes about people of different races, classes, and cultures.
4. Content and Spirit of the Conversation.

The facilitator emphasized that when we think about and carry out this work it should always be addressing racism AND the Plan, rather than an approach of addressing racism OR the Plan; emphasizing a coherent rather than dichotomous approach. Overall, there was an incredibly positive response and a clear thirst among the participants to learn more effectively carry out this work, maintain focus on it, and see progress in ensuring that our community is able to welcome and embrace increasing numbers of African Americans.

To ground us, the program began with art and storytelling. Envelops were passed around that contained a spiritual quality. By opening them each participant was unlocking spiritual qualities that otherwise would have been hidden. This was symbolic of the spiritual forces we are unlocking when we allow more and more African Americans to take ownership of building the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. Portraits of significant African Americans in Bahá'í history and the history of America were passed around and their names called out invoking their spirits, honoring their lives, and reminding us of whose shoulders we stand on.

Two stories from the Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá were shared:

1. *On love and the power of attraction:* In 1909 Ethel Rosenberg made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Although He was free, the Master had not yet left ‘Akka to live in Haifa. Ethel asked Him what the friends could do to increase their numbers and to make their work more effective. He answered that ‘the members of the little groups should love each other very much and be devoted friends. The more they loved each other, the more the meetings would attract and draw others, and the more they loved, the more their influence would be felt . . . I say also in English, that you may understand how much I

² The title is referencing the January 31, 2018 message from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States titled “Teaching and the Quest for Justice”, where they note “[f]resh and revitalized efforts must be made to reach out to American Indians and African Americans” because of “the unique and vital contributions they will make to the creation of the new social order envisaged by the Blessed Beauty.”

mean it, that love is the foundation of everything . . .’ (Honnold, Annamarie, Vignettes from the Life of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 102)

2. *On the importance of humor in addressing serious matters:* Mrs. Tatum then remarked that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá always seemed to think of automobiles when He saw her, and she wished she might inspire a more spiritual thought. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá answered: One must often bring serious discussions through jokes, and then they will give happiness and rejoicing. Some people have frowns and are always serious. This is because of the narrowness of their thoughts. All should be openhearted and smiling.” (Earl Redman, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 160)

As we studied the materials many reflections were shared. Some of these include:

- As we commit to living and serving in neighborhoods that are experiencing material oppression as a consequence of racism and classism, how do we balance understanding these social forces while not losing focus on the power of the institute process and need to move forward?
 - This question called to mind the following statement of the Universal House of Justice in a letter dated August 28, 2011 to the participants of the Black Men’s Gathering: *“The experience of the last five years and the recent guidance of the House of Justice should make it evident that in the instruments of the Plan you now have within your grasp everything that is necessary to raise up a new people and eliminate racial prejudice as a force within your society, though the path ahead remains long and arduous. The institute process is the primary vehicle by which you can transform and empower your people, indeed all the peoples of your nation.”*
- We cannot judge or try to change or impose our understanding of what or how people should act. We need to ask more questions than we have answers. We are inviting people to participate in a process. We are not fixing, correcting, delivering knowledge etc.; we are inviting people to learn alongside us.
- The importance of being direct when we speak. Sometimes we can be timid or use lots of words and overwhelming presentations which can raise suspicion and, despite pure intention, seem as if we are hiding something in the cloak of language.
- Regarding how teams can approach addressing the effects of racism within their own team dynamics: As a team it’s important to reflect—in a spirit of open and frank consultation—on the ways in which their actions were influenced by race, class, and culture. This is not a “one and done” exercise or something we can simply read, learn and move on from; it takes sincere, ongoing, and sometimes hard effort to grow out of. A team that allows for a process of understanding to unfold is one that will reach greater unity and progress.

- Regarding the spiritual qualities especially gifted to black people, someone recalled Ruhiyyih Khanum’s reflection after traveling throughout the African continent: that the qualities of black people referred to by the Central Figures and the Guardian (such as their great capacity for faith, their loyalty and devotion to their religion, and their purity of heart) are inherent in the race, not, as perhaps often assumed, a result of their suffering.
- African Americans have a vital part to play in the transformation of our society and we need to have a conversation with them in a way that allows them to enter and contribute their share.
 - “But we do wish to call attention to a few essential concepts. First is the importance of reaching out to specific populations mentioned numerous times by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice for the unique and vital contributions they will make to the creation of the new social order envisaged by the Blessed Beauty.”

We listened to part of a talk of Hooper Dunbar on ego and how everything we do that’s good is because of Bahá’u’lláh’s assistance; when we turn to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, He will inspire us what to say.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wg8YX77o-_c

We reviewed a section in Book 6 and a section in Book 2. Section 30 of Unit 3 in Book 6 addressed the question of how, when teaching the Faith, to show respect for culture and customs. Section 1 of Unit 2 in Book 2 focused on both the good and the less desirable thoughts and attitudes we have when carrying out a home visit and the way in which they are subtly, and not so subtly influenced by prejudice. This laid the foundation to reflect on the following question: Based on sections what thoughts and attitudes stood out that we need to take into our outreach and teaching?

- Patience, humility, and detachment: Reflecting on these qualities influences the way we act and the way we describe things. How were we able to express humility or detachment?
- Wisdom, tact, and discretion. These qualities might manifest as not being nosy; asking questions about people’s relationships. We are there to talk about something very important and truly sacred and should not let this get conflated with interest in relationships and dynamics of the household that we have been welcomed into. We can let that part unfold naturally and organically as a part of our emerging friendship, and not make assumptions through our questioning.

This exercise served as a reminder that the institute materials are our toolkit to which we should constantly refer to, especially sections like these, when questions of race, class, culture, and our attitudes come up.

Conversation Training

The facilitator then introduced and let us explore in pairs the conversation about the Bahá'í approach to community building that took into account cultural nuances unique to African Americans though the integrity and essence of this conversation remained. Some of the cultural nuances included an emphasis on:

- Infusing the conversation with spirit and spiritual themes, in particular prayer and the Word of God.
- Being bold and direct.
- Embracing a posture where we see all as collaborators with swift accompaniment around service: as we went on our visits consider inviting those we are visiting to come with us to visit the next person.

Reflections on action

Following three hours of outreach and home visits, the group came back together to reflect. What follows are some of the insights gleaned:

Insights about the conversation & dynamics of community building:

- Being direct—about service and with a posture/approach of assuming people want to be a part of this process.
- Sharing directly about the role of African Americans in society and their critical role in the work of the Bahá'í community.
- Meeting and talking with family members—including the whole family in the home visit.
- Going into deep conversations—keeping in mind that love and connection built over time pays off
- Being in each other's lives helps relationships and increases connection with spiritual intentionality.
- Reengaging friends who we haven't seen for a while was confirmed as a good thing that opened up new conversations and possibilities.
- It's so important and practical to have things to invite people as it turns home visits into conversations with purpose and opportunities.
- Bring up and ask about how people perceive the strengths of the neighborhood
- Importance of asking questions and listening, over talking.

Addressing race, class, and culture within the neighborhood team:

- Calling out our assumptions and our judgements and being confirmed in doing so.
- Recognizing how you are perceived and being frank with people you are meeting from the neighborhood/community about these perceptions and associated social dynamics.

People respond to your wanting to be a part of the neighborhood and the spiritual perspective with which we are approaching our presence there and work, as well as our own awareness of who we are and how we might be perceived in the neighborhood if of a different race, class or culture.

- Importance of having a team that consults about the process. Example of a team that spoke to a few people and their experience and perception of the experience and what was shared and what was effective about what was shared was different and helped advanced the understanding of the individual members and the team
- Importance of diversity of the teaching team (in terms of age, race, gender, and class) to be able to connect with all different kinds of people.
- Importance of having a person from the neighborhood as part of the team as—among other things—they provide a fresh and sincere perspective. This also assumes that we are working for the friends from the neighborhood to be part of the vanguard of this process and an active member of the nucleus.

A spiritual foundation:

- The greatest impact in conversation was when a prayer and/or the Word of God was shared—especially when done through music and song.
- Relying on the power of divine assistance.
- People experienced the power of sharing stories of the Central Figures, especially ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and examples of how he upheld justice.
- There is a power released through teaching days as well as the preparation and intention that goes into them that draws confirmation and opens doors.

Next steps:

In terms of next steps, the teams were encouraged to keep the following learning objectives in mind:

- Learning about “swift accompaniment”³ of those African Americans connected to the community building process with who we are collaborating to varying extents.
- Balancing how to sustain momentum around their activities and building capacity while learning/exploring how the community building process is addressing things like trauma that affect many of the neighborhoods we are working in.
- African Americans from the community who are participating in the process and who are sustaining activities should be at the next gathering in six months.
- The Auxiliary Board members in Washington, DC will consult on and prepare for the next seminar and gathering.

³ From a letter of The Universal House of Justice dated 29 December 2015 to the Continental Boards of Counsellors

5. For additional documentation of learning by the Local Spiritual Assembly of Washington DC, see [“Addressing Race Class and Culture in DC”](#)

4.1. Individual responses indicate that

- **it is crucial for White and Persian Bahá'ís to learn about the history of racism and race relations. A few responses indicate this is crucial for people from other populations as well**
- **African American/African descent Bahá'ís are feeling a need for greater sensitivity on the part of White and Persian/Persian-American community members.**

Examples: core activities and home visits

1. Home visit - African American female respondent

I am African American, and together with my partner (Caucasian), had been doing monthly Home Visits with a likewise senior member of our community, who is also Caucasian, for several months. She has since died, in February. During our visits we had focused on assorted topics (spiritual perspective), generally letting her decide what was of interest, or met her need at the time. Many times she would have articles or printed materials on the topic to be addressed. She was very knowledgeable on environmental concerns, and I felt like she enjoyed sharing her knowledge with us. She would identify writings that related to the topic and we'd discuss them. My partner and I learned a lot from her. With so much related to racial issues in the forefront of society and media reporting, we had decided to make that a focus.

We had had approximately 3 months of racial related Home Visits discussions. They were rich and heartfelt conversations, in which she always expressed empathy of what the African Americans had to endure in these United States. She'd been reading books on racism, the last one "How To Be An Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi." It was about 2 weeks following one of our visits, when out of the blue, she phoned me, and told me the nature of her call. She simply wanted to offer a sincere apology to me, on behalf of White people, for the maltreatment and injustices wrought by them historically. She was "so very sorry" for it. I was taken aback by it, unprepared to respond. All I remember telling her was that I appreciated it. The conversation was brief, I hung up, and then reflected on what had transpired. Never in my life had any White person ever made any kind of conciliatory comment or acknowledgement of wrongdoing regarding the treatment of Blacks, personally to me. The realization of that, brought tears to my eyes, as I thought of my mother, and other ancestors, and the sufferings they endured at the hand of White society. It was a small but significant thing to me. Her eyes had been opened....she was Awake! If only such acknowledgement was widespread, and hearts truly were changed. That would be progress!!

2. Devotional gathering - Persian female respondent

It has been more than a month that I have chosen the topic of racism to be the focal point of the discussion in my weekly devotional/discussion gathering. I made sure that my African American friends (Baha'is as well as the friends of the Faith) would be able to attend and that there would be a mix of people in general. Although I felt some resistance from the friends of the Faith in the beginning, eventually through private exchange of ideas, they agreed to participate. The African American friends expressed that their main concern was not to be put on the spot during the discussion, especially during this particularly emotional and sensitive period of time. An African American friend shared a video of a talk by Robin DiAngelo with me and agreed to facilitate the discussion around this talk. It was an absolutely a wonderful and informative presentation. Now she attends the event regularly. Last night the video of a recent talk by Dr. Joy DeGruy on Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, was the point of discussion and it generated heartfelt and open exchange of ideas and comments.

I must confess that now I feel how ignorant I have been regarding the history of slavery and the tremendous horrific experience, which our Black community has gone through in centuries, which still continues. It has been a humbling experience of learning, which has created a stronger bonds of trust and friendship with my African American friends.

3. Home visits - Persian female respondent

Myself and another member of the ATC visited a Persian family who have done regular gatherings with other Persians in the area on the topic of race amity. They have also shown a short documentary about racism in America which has been translated in Persian. We asked the family to form a team where they would hold regular information gatherings in the county and discuss race amity issues with a focus on the Advent of Divine Justice, and show short documentaries about race in America. The family has agreed to do this. The family reported that some of the Persian participants were able to express their latent and unconscious racist beliefs held among Persian Baha'is.”

Examples: other community-building activities and spaces

4. Feast – White female respondent

When our LSA asked us to share our reflections at the Feast following the killing of George Floyd, I realized I didn't feel comfortable in that discussion to talk about how overwhelmed I felt or that although I was willing to act, I had no idea what to do. A few nights later a group of friends got together for a neighborhood study of the compilation on race. Everyone who attended was white and the conversation included a lot of things that hadn't come up at Feast. Folks talked

about feeling lost, embarrassed, guilty, overwhelmed, unsure of what to do, and I had the feeling there were probably other people in the same boat. Of course, addressing racial injustice is uncomfortable and dealing with that discomfort is definitely just part of it. At the same time, I thought it was important for the LSA and the NSA to know that some of the white Baha'i friends were at a loss at first. Since then, I personally feel much clearer and more empowered to take ownership over my contribution to work towards racial justice, but I can't speak for the others. In the months that followed, I immersed myself in the discourse and reflections on racial justice, attending multiple events every week, learning from scholars and activists like Ibram X. Kendi, Robin DiAngelo, and Bryan Stevenson, and friends and community members across the country. I found my voice in this conversation and, galvanized to act, I promoted racial justice more explicitly in my curriculum as a teacher and in the professional development I offered my staff."

5. Education – Persian male respondent

The ... Baha'i community has been hosting multiple online venues for discussions on racism and racial justice. Some have been devotionals focused on the theme of racial justice, others have been discussion groups and others deepenings on the various letters from the NSA, UHJ and Shoghi Effendi. Although I have found all these efforts to be useful, I have a couple of concerns: 1) Discussion Exhaustion - there are so many discussions and devotionals being held on this topic and I am worried folks are getting tired of attending and talking about it over and over again. Obviously a couple of sessions and deepenings or devotionals on the topic is not going to get us to where we need to be. So I'm wondering how long community members can keep this up. 2) Although it's great to get insights and learnings by participating in and listening to different experiences and points of view at these sessions, I do not believe it will give the community members the proper education we need on this topic. The recent letter from the NSA says: "An essential element of the process will be honest and truthful discourse about the current conditions and their causes, and understanding, in particular, the deeply entrenched notions of anti-Blackness that pervade our society." If we really want our community to truly understand the history and roots of structural and institutional racism in this country, its impact on the Black population, on American society in general, and how it permeates everything we do, I don't believe the kinds of discussions we are having are sufficient. In the context of these two concerns, I'm wondering if it may be more effective to arrange sessions given by professionals who truly understand the history and dynamics of racism in this country and have the community go through a more in-depth training that creates a much deeper level of understanding that can help them articulate the issues more effectively in discourses that they have separately on the issue of racism. It doesn't even have to be a live training. It could be a collection of pre-recorded trainings, such as the one given by Joy DeGruy on Post-Traumatic Slave syndrome, and others. This type of more formalized program can help arm the community with the tools they need to more effectively enter into discourse on these issues. Otherwise, I think most community members, although well-intentioned, have too basic of an understanding of these issues.

6. Education – Iranian-American female respondent

My main reflection was that I felt engaged but also ill-equipped. Despite decades of academic and community involvement in racism discussions, repeated readings of the Advent of Divine Justice and whatever other efforts I've made in my life to stay engaged on this most vital and challenging issue, I didn't feel confident leading such a discussion, so [name omitted] led the way. And if I feel ill-equipped, then how do others feel? How scary it must feel to enter this arena if you're brand new to it. It will take nudging and creating a warm environment so folks will feel welcome to come and discuss and feel inept and confused and angry and whatever feelings need to come up to get through it.

7. Education – White female respondent

After experiencing the White Fragility study group, I feel more prepared to consider and identify institutionalized racism, internalized racism, and unaware racism in all aspects of life, including Bahai interactions and activities. I think White Fragility has given many of us a common basis and a lexicon from which we can speak, challenge, learn, and grow. I would really like for us to adopt this as part of our education, and community-building focus, especially because so many Baha'is don't think they can be racist. Just understanding the definition of racism (pulling the power dynamic from moral/character/motivation labels) has lowered my resistance to being called racist. It is simultaneously liberating and mind blowing. It really brings home to me my complicity and where I need to be a better ally and an anti-racist.

8. Education - White female respondent

Through the study and attendance of many workshops, books, articles and media available on the subject, and through the close and intimate relationships I have formed with my Baha'i Brothers and Sisters of color in my community, it is my firm opinion that we cannot address the issue of race in our community building processes effectively in the US without first considering the education of White and Persian believers about their designed place in the very systems we are trying to eradicate. ... I believe that along with our study of the writings there needs to be a very deliberate undertaking to provide White and Persian Baha'is with some basic training in the historical basis of White superiority.

9. Observation – African American female respondent

As the issue of race & equity has evolved, there needs to be a more institutional, organized effort to address it. The leaders of this race equity movement in the Faith have always been POC. There's a sense of pride in that but we can't do it all. We're tired and we need spiritual support from our institutions to keep going.

10. Observation – Black male respondent

So encouraging to receive the statement from the NSA on race last week. Noted the courage of the NSA to accurately ID the 'Anti-Black racism' that pervades the US. Hoping that we can begin to address issues of race that pervade our community- namely the default anti-Blackness that all of us carry - and begin to deconstruct racist ideologies and practices in the Baha'i community. Interestingly, it feels like Black community members pursuing excellence can seem to engender a range of responses from white people who have gone decades in the community without having their racist ideas and practices challenged. I hope that Black Baha'is can be part of a community free from the a feeling of being treated as second class citizen, being treated as "extra-ordinary", and having everyone else be compared to you and even sometimes overlooked for committees or other appointments. Sometimes it seems we are disproportionately seen as "a problem" in the community. Despite the guidance from the National Assembly I am also still sensing a lot of resistance to study of the guidance/compilation by the institutions.

11. Observation – Black male respondent

When it comes to issues of race, much is left to be learned. I sense a resistance to deepening on the beautiful compilations provided by the UHJ and our NSA. And this in the wake of the recent killings and subsequent uprising. Though I am confident that we'll eventually get to it. As an African-American I tend to be selective when it comes to challenging my fellow community members on the issue of race, knowing that there is resistance.

4.2. Respondents are developing understanding and building capacity to express how the community building process is the vehicle for eliminating prejudice and uprooting racism.

Examples: core activities and home visits

1. Core activities - White female respondent

June 2019: I am feeling very discouraged by a lack of understanding on my part about the Institute process and social justice work. There seems to me to be a false dichotomy like never the twain shall meet. Is it correct that we have to keep separate the core activities and social justice or social discourse activities? ... Can Ruhi not coexist with work on bridging this divide caused by the most challenging issue?

March 2021 update: I am now seeing more clearly how the Institute process melds or blends perfectly with social justice work. Ruhi can not only coexist with the most vital and challenging issue, but it also provides a healing space among friends to address it in a very powerful way. I now see this to be true of the whole framework for action. I am thankful for the Pilot Project on Race because it brought these issues to the fore and encouraged deep examination and thought. It has taken me years but I finally see that it is through the grassroots efforts and the relationships that we build where they can be worked through in a natural way like a family would do. Still painful, still a thorny road beset with pitfalls but less so due to the love that we build in our hearts for each other. It will continue increasingly so to be the watchword for any service that the Blessed Beauty allows me to offer.

2. Study circle - White female respondent

Discussion with members of the community about how the community building activities, specifically study circles, allow for transformation and bold action. Tutors grappling with how much to introduce concepts not expressly mentioned in ruhi books (like American anti-Black racism), verses allowing participants to bring it up naturally. I have seen examples of tutors in our community and in others around the U.S striving to be “anxiously concerned of the needs of the age” we live in and learning how to bring matters of race, justice (and other subjects as well) in that context. Also, learning the importance of love and thoughtfulness as a tutor - and how it requires all of us to be better tutors... I and others are also learning more about how to get to know the participants of study circles and read our reality --for example, when to be direct, asking questions of participants that bring the question of race and class to mind when reading the writings, or looking at the study circles from a “race lens.” In our community and in others, I’ve heard examples of tutors sharing educational videos of African Americans in history, asking participants to discuss what they are seeing on the news and guiding the

participants naturally to discuss what's on their heart around matters of race and justice. I have also heard some folks (of various races) who seem concerned that that would be too much of a diversion from the materials, or focuses solely on race, rather than sexism, for example, or other societal ills on the hearts of the participants. It seems to me that sometimes to understand what is indeed on the hearts of the participants it can be helpful to bring up different topics, such as race, justice, or sexism, and we will hopefully get better at accompanying participants when we get to know them deeply. Also, the race of the tutor and the race of the participants is a factor in what is discussed, and we're all trying to learn and grow and listen and reflect, as well as understand how these community building activities do indeed address this spiritual ill, as the House of Justice states. We are all seeking a balance and learning when to allow participants to bring up whatever is naturally on their heart, or when to guide the conversation towards implications of race, class or culture. I think we as an American community are striving to have a culture of planning, action, and reflection so we hope to learn from the bold actions being taken, and see what the fruits of all the efforts are!

3. Children's classes/family devotionals – White female respondent

Although the Stay-at-Home practices of Covid-19 have impacted our community building activities, we have been carrying on. Living in a neighborhood that is majority African American and lower income challenged (low income does not equate or translate into low capacity), I am able to practice reflection about my attitude and conduct almost every time I leave the house or interact by phone or virtual gatherings. Children's class: We are learning that it is critical to view all the parents as part of the decision-making process of the classes, and that if we don't focus on the capacity of the broader community members, the classes will only operate if we initiate them. Because all the families are African American, we are given the opportunity to reflect on the implications of race and class. Family Devotionals: Our nation is constantly bombarded with reminders of the pervasiveness of racism and how it shapes so much that happens to people. Sharing a house with teenagers who feel so deeply the injustice that vulnerable populations suffer, highlights how critical the need is for us to fully embrace the process of community building, and be clear how it addresses prejudice if we are to help these young people understand the relevance of this work. While there is a place for tearing down the old system, we have another mandate. I think I'm building the capacity to understand how urgent this problem is. We don't have time to waver.

4. Jr. Youth Program – White male respondent

Realizing through this process and study of the guidance that the instruments of the Plan are actual means by which we will disable one by one every instrument used now and in humanity's past to exalt one people over another. Understanding this, I'm realizing this is not just the core activities themselves but all the additional cultures, attitudes, qualities,

etc. which the core activities help us to develop as we participate in them and take initiative to carry them out ourselves. Yet, what's interesting is that as the work progresses, it seems to be that the core activities themselves are not the end but the means to building our capacity and that of our community to release society-building powers in the Faith. As I engage more and more with my own junior youth program and at the same time try to learn the process and strategy of engaging youth to study the institute process and in turn start their own groups, I'm being drawn into a number of discourses in my city regarding refugees, affordable housing, immigration, historical urban redevelopment and disinvestment in state-created historically African American neighborhoods now experiencing gentrification. My engagement in these discourses takes on new meaning because I'm not just someone interested but someone who is doing something about it by working with youth and trying to learn about working with youth within these communities.

* Appendix 2: Focus Questions used on project participants' documentation websites

The Focus Questions were designed to guide participants in the direction of the learning we hoped to collect. They were evaluated and modified several times based on participant and task force feedback; following are the final versions along with the Random Reflections heading, which stayed the same throughout the duration of the project. Examples were provided to help participants understand the purpose of each question.

FOCUS QUESTION #1:

Describe how a community building activity (expansion and consolidation, social action and public discourse) you're engaged in is advancing the elimination of racial prejudice. Share your personal experiences. What do you feel you are learning from these experiences? What capacities do you think you are developing?

FOCUS QUESTION #2:

How have you endeavored to make freedom from racial prejudice the watchword in your activities for the Plan? Describe your experiences, including any times you may have used a reflection question such as "What are the racial, class, or cultural implications of this decision/action?" Did your efforts make any difference in your decision or action? If so, please explain.

RANDOM REFLECTIONS

Random Reflections may be any observations, insights, and experiences around race. A random reflection could be as simple as something that comes up regarding race in the course of your day that does not relate directly to any of the questions on the response form. It may be an experience interacting with someone around issues of race, or an insight you have about eliminating racial prejudice, or an issue you struggle with and how you try to handle it, etc.